

**3** Cuban medical team completes COVID-19 mission to Kuwait



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# Health minister briefs panel on coronavirus, travel curbs

Students tested as protest held against written exams • Panel rejects taxes, fees



KUWAIT: (Left) A high school student undergoes a COVID-19 PCR test ahead of exams at a school yesterday. (Right) Students protest outside the health ministry yesterday against the holding of written exams. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## News in brief

### Shots fired in air in Jordan

AMMAN: Gunmen fired shots in the air in an Amman suburb yesterday after parliament voted to expel a Jordanian lawmaker who had railed against power cuts and called for protests. The early evening unrest came a day after four police officers were wounded in clashes with supporters of MP Oussama Al-Ajarma in the Naour suburb in southern Amman. The unrest came after parliament voted yesterday to exclude Ajarma, 40. — AFP

### 'Delta' 40% more transmissible

LONDON: The Delta variant of the coronavirus - previously known as the Indian variant - is estimated to be 40 percent more transmissible than the Alpha variant - previously known as the Kent variant - that caused the last wave of infections in the UK, Britain's health minister said yesterday. But people who have received two doses of vaccine, should be equally protected against either variant, Matt Hancock added. — AFP

### Harry, Markle announce birth

LOS ANGELES: Prince Harry and Meghan Markle announced yesterday the birth of their daughter Lilibet Diana, who was born in California after a year of turmoil in Britain's royal family. "Lili is named after her great-grandmother, Her Majesty the Queen, whose family nickname is Lilibet. Her middle name, Diana, was chosen to honor her beloved late grandmother, The Princess of Wales," said a statement from the couple. The child - the couple's second - was born Friday in Santa Barbara and was now out of the hospital and at home. — AFP

### Bitcoin eyed as legal tender

SAN SALVADOR: El Salvador may become the first country to make bitcoin legal tender, President Nayib Bukele announced Saturday, saying he would soon propose a bill that could transform the remittance-dependent economy. The move would make the nation the first in the world to formally accept the cryptocurrency as legal money and would "allow the financial inclusion of thousands of people who are outside the legal economy," Bukele said. — AFP (See Page 10)

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah yesterday briefed the National Assembly's health committee about the latest developments on the coronavirus pandemic and the issue

of travel by Kuwaitis and expats, the rapporteur of the committee said. MP Saadoun Hammad said the discussions also tackled the so-called Indian variant and its spread in some countries and the arrival of some Indian nationals to the country.

"We have heard all the details from the minister and other top officials," Hammad said after the meeting, but provided no further details on the responses of the minister or any new decision in the pipeline. The lawmaker also said the panel discussed the issue

of travel by Kuwaitis and expats, but provided no details on what the minister said. It was expected that the minister would inform the panel about when Kuwait will allow the entry of expats into Kuwait.

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## Electricity usage hits record high

KUWAIT: The ministry of electricity, water and renewable energy announced the electricity load reached a record high of 15,070 megawatts yesterday, amid soaring summer heat that has hit temperatures of 50 degrees Celsius. The ministry said in a press statement that yesterday's record power consumption is 16.8 percent higher than the electricity load recorded on the same day last year, noting that the rate of reserve electrical power in the network is 15 percent.

The ministry predicted that the



electricity load will keep rising in the coming days due to rising temperatures. The ministry called on citizens and residents to reduce electricity consumption after registering record high electricity loads, which puts great pressure on the electricity system in the country. —KUNA



KUWAIT: People visit the beach on a scorching summer day yesterday. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

## Activist twins detained in Sheikh Jarrah

JERUSALEM: Zionist police yesterday detained the prominent activist El-Kurd twins, whose campaign against the threatened expulsion of Palestinian families from homes in the Zionist-annexed east Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah has found a global audience. Yesterday morning police arrested Mona El-Kurd, 23, at her home in Sheikh Jarrah, where a legal battle between Zionist settlers and several Palestinian families has crystallized anger over the Zionist entity's settlement movement.

They also left a summons for her twin brother, Muhammad, their father told AFP. Zionist police told AFP that Mona was "suspected of having participated in riots and other recent incidents in Sheikh Jarrah". She was later released. Police did not give details on the status of Mohammad, who had handed himself in after the summons, but family lawyer Nasser Odeh indicated that the 23-year-old remained under investigation.



JERUSALEM: Zionist security officers transfer Palestinian activist Mona El-Kurd out of a police station in Zionist-annexed east Jerusalem yesterday. — AFP

Protesters had gathered outside the east Jerusalem police station, where their father, Nabil El-Kurd, told AFP said his daughter's arrest was part of "an operation to terrorize the parents, because the voice that emerged from the neighborhood was thanks to its youth". Protests in Sheikh Jarrah spread early last month into the city's Al-Aqsa mosque compound, sparking a crackdown by Zionist security forces against Palestinians there that further inflamed tensions.

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## Egypt academics, researchers caught in state crosshairs

CAIRO: Clutching his passport and ticket to Seattle, Waleed Salem had a sinking feeling he would be prevented from boarding his flight from Cairo because of his academic research. His hunch proved right. The political science doctoral candidate at the University of Washington had already tried to fly out in May last year to see his 13-year-old daughter but authorities confiscated his passport and he missed the flight.

Last month, "I went with the knowledge that I might be turned back ... I was optimistic but without any certainty, I've done nothing wrong so I shouldn't be worried," Salem told AFP, after he was stopped again. Salem, who was doing fieldwork on how courts have tried to resolve political disputes in Egypt and Pakistan since the 1950s, was arrested, blindfolded and handcuffed for five days in May 2018. He was later accused of "joining a terror group" among other charges.

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## Local

# Amir congratulates Kuwait's Musallam on being named FINA's chairperson



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — Amiri Diwan photos



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Speaker of the National Assembly Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah has cabled Dr Hussein Ali Al-Musallam on his appointment as chairman of FINA, the international swimming governing body. His Highness the Amir expressed heartfelt facilitations to Dr Musallam after he was picked by FINA's general assembly, wishing him success for serving Kuwait at the regional and international sports quarters. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah addressed a cable of identical content to Dr Musallam. His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent a similar cable.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday at Seif Palace His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir also received the Speaker of the National Assembly Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. His Highness also received Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah and Deputy

Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Nazaha Enhancement Abdullah Youssef Al-Roumi. In the meantime, His Highness the Crown Prince received Ghanem, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled, Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali, Roumi and Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah yesterday at Seif Palace.

Kuwait's Information Minister and Minister of State for Youth Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi had congratulated Dr Musallam on Saturday on his new post. Dr Musallam became the first Asian representative to have ever won FINA's top position since its inception in 1908. He previously competed for Kuwait at the World Championships, Asian Games and Pan-Arab Championships in the 1970s. In a press release, Minister Mutairi described the achievement as "unique" to the history of Kuwaiti sports, expressing his sincere wishes that the new president's tenure be a successful one. FINA is responsible for six main water sport events, including swimming, diving, high diving, synchronized swimming, water polo and open water swimming. — KUNA

## Kuwaiti Foreign Minister heads delegation at joint council meeting in Saudi Arabia

RIYADH: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah yesterday headed the State of Kuwait delegation partaking in the first meeting of the Kuwaiti-Saudi Coordination Council, hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi delegation was headed by the Kingdom's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal Bin Farhan. The meeting was held in line with guidelines by Kuwait's late Amir His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, with the blessings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, as well as Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz — depicting the deep-rooted ties between the two brotherly countries and peoples.

The Council, establishment minutes of which were inked in July 1981, aims at working out a joint vision for rendering the relations between the two countries stronger and sustainable in tandem with the GCC objectives, boosting the GCC integrated economic system, finding solutions for optimum use of national resources, consolidating cooperation and integration among the member states in all spheres, ensuring effective execution for the cooperation and partnership, promoting

the two states' status in the economic, human resources development, integration at the security and political levels and others.

Participants in the meeting explored various key cooperation spheres bonding the two brotherly countries, namely in the economic, investment, security and development sectors. They discussed in particular means of boosting the coordination at these levels. The council embodies desire of the Kuwaiti and Saudi leaders to lay the multilateral action by the two sides within an institutionalized framework that contributes to the approach toward progress and prosperity.

The Kuwaiti foreign minister addressed the session, expressing gratitude for the warm hospitality, noting that the meeting was held, for the first time at this level, upon instructions by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf and King Salman bin Abdulaziz. He shed light on the historic ties between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, noting that this relationship is unique worldwide, affirming that the session was held in line with the mutual desire to elevate the relations to higher and wider scopes; also for sake of consolidating the integration on diverse arenas as well as for devising an objective mechanism to measure the aspired progress at the economic and

investments levels. He noted that the meeting was held following the visit paid by His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to the Kingdom on June 1. He noted that during the visit, the Crown Prince held cordial talks with Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the Kingdom's Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. The two sides had affirmed necessity of joint action for consolidating the bilateral relations in the economic and investment spheres.

Sheikh Dr Ahmad noted the 30th anniversary of the liberation of the State of Kuwait from the flagrant Iraqi occupation, recalling that the Kingdom had played a pivotal role in freeing the country and reinstating the legitimacy. The Kingdom, he continued, had put all its potentials at the disposal of liberating the State of Kuwait. Also in this respect, he brought into recollections the leading role of the late Saudi King Fahad bin Abdulaziz. He also underscored the role, during the occupation, of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, who was serving, at the time of the crisis, as the Prince of Riyadh. The Kuwaiti foreign minister praised the great achievements in the Kingdom in various spheres, lauding the success of the G20 Summit that had been chaired by the Kingdom. He also lauded the Saudi "green initiative and the green Middle East initiative," as pioneering solutions to face climatic change at the regional and international levels, in addition to the chain of accomplishments for attaining the promising Vision 2030. "We also praise the Kingdom's balanced role for stability of



RIYADH: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah (left) and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal Bin Farhan sign a memorandum of understanding between the two countries in Riyadh yesterday. — KUNA

oil prices and maintaining energy supplies to the world," he stated.

Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad has noted that Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have been bonded with a number of agreements and memos in diverse fields particularly at the economic and trade levels, noting that the Kingdom ranks as the top commercial partner with Kuwait in terms of Kuwaiti exports, at a value exceeding \$670 million in 2020. Last year, the Kuwaiti-Saudi trade exchanges amounted in value to nearly \$2 billion, Sheikh Dr Ahmad said, affirming the growing cooperation at this level. He noted the role of the private Kuwaiti sector in the Kingdom.

"Moreover, encouraging direct investments will contribute to cementing the bilateral economic and investment relations between our two brotherly countries, where volume of the Kuwaiti businesses in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has exceeded \$2.5 billion."

The foreign minister also noted that some highlights of the meeting is the inking of six accords, memos and cooperation programs in the spheres of youth affairs, direct investments, education and teaching, higher education, scientific research, sports and diverse standardization — raising the tally to 27 agreements and memos. He noted that the second meeting at this level would be hosted by Kuwait next year. — KUNA

## Egypt academics, researchers...

Continued from Page 1

"At the national security prosecution, I was asked about the intricacies of the thesis. Who was my supervisor? What were the chapter titles? Who did you meet? They told me basically: 'You're saying the judiciary is politicized,'" he explained. He had already

spent over six months in Egypt's notorious Tora prison before being released in Dec 2018 on probation, having to report to a police station twice a week. "I cannot wrap my mind around the unspeakable cruelty of preventing me from seeing my daughter for over three years for no reason. No one ever has given me a reason for all of this," Ilyas Saliba, a research fellow at the Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute, said academics were vulnerable. "In a country in which the security services aim to control public debate on political issues, scholars who contradict the official state narrative can quickly find themselves on the target list," he said. — AFP

education said in a press statement that this measure comes in cooperation with the ministry of health. The students were tested yesterday and today from 8 am to 8 pm in a number of schools in each educational area in the country. The statement said that the move aims to ensure the highest standards of health and safety for the students and to reduce the risks of COVID-19 infection. Students taking the exams will require a presentation of a vaccination certificate issued or a negative result of a PCR test, it said. Any student who suffers from COVID-19 infection or has been in contact with an infected person should not come to school for exams, it added.

But dozens of students supported by a number of MPs staged a protest yesterday to urge the education ministry to hold online exams instead of written exams. The ministry however asked all students to undergo PCR tests ahead of the exams starting on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, Hammad said yesterday that the financial and economic affairs committee has rejected government plans to impose any form of taxes or increase fees for public services. He said the committee rejected what the five-year development plan stipulates - to impose selective taxes and value added tax, in addition to raising fees on some public services. Hammad said the committee will not approve any draft law to impose taxes or fees on citizens.

## Activist twins detained in...

Continued from Page 1

Hamas, the Islamist group that controls the Palestinian enclave of Gaza, responded by launching volleys of rockets towards the Zionist entity on May 10, triggering an 11-day war between the Zionist entity and Palestinians. While Palestinians and their backers see the issue as a microcosm of Zionist efforts to push them out of the highly contested city, Jewish settlers and their supporters have labelled it a property dispute to be decided by Zionist courts.

Last month, the Zionist entity's foreign ministry accused Palestinian "terror" groups of "presenting a real-estate dispute between private parties, as a nationalistic cause" to incite violence. The El-Kurd twins, from one of the families that faces being ousted from their home, have led an active protest movement on the streets and online.

They have gained hundreds of thousands of followers on platforms including Twitter and Instagram, using the hashtags #SheikhJarrah and #SaveSheikhJarrah to bring their neighborhood's plight global attention. Video posted online yesterday showed Mona being led away in handcuffs.

Speaking to journalists outside the police station, their father said that Palestinian residents would stay in Sheikh Jarrah to "document the facts and show the terrorism practiced by the (Zionist) government". "Our weapon is the tongue and the camera," he said. "Muhammad and Mona made the whole world turn around for our cause."

Last month, as tensions in Jerusalem mounted during the build-up to the Gaza fighting, the Zionist supreme court postponed a hearing in the Sheikh Jarrah cases until further notice. Under Zionist law, if

Jews can prove that their families lived in east Jerusalem before the 1948 Arab-Zionist war that created the Zionist state, they can request the "return" of their property, even if Palestinian families have been living there for decades.

Palestinians whose ancestors became refugees in the 1948 war have no means to retrieve their homes or land in the modern-day Zionist entity. Rights group Ir Amim says up to 1,000 Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah and the nearby Silwan district face being displaced.

Sheikh Jarrah has also drawn the attention of press freedom watchdogs, as journalists say they have been targeted by police while trying to report on demonstrations there. On Saturday Zionist forces arrested Al Jazeera reporter Givara Budeiri "in a brutal manner", the network said in a statement, adding that authorities had destroyed a videographer's camera as he was trying to work. Budeiri was released from custody several hours after her arrest.

Al Jazeera television's acting director-general, Mostefa Souag, decried "the systematic targeting of our journalists", dubbing it "in total violation of all international conventions". The Paris-headquartered Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has voiced concern over the Zionist entity's "disproportionate use of force against journalists".

It criticized "attacks" on reporters filming in Sheikh Jarrah, the detention of Palestinian reporters, and the Zionist state's demolition of a tower in the besieged Gaza Strip where news outlets operated. During their military campaign in Gaza, the Zionist entity levelled the 13-storey building that housed the Qatar-based Al Jazeera television along with the US news agency The Associated Press after warning the structure's owner to evacuate. The Zionist entity defended the strike, alleging the building also hosted a Palestinian "terrorist" intelligence office. Al Jazeera's Jerusalem bureau chief, Walid Al-Omari, accused the Zionist entity of trying "to silence media that are witnessing, documenting and reporting the truth". — AFP

## Health minister briefs panel...

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Expats have been barred from entering Kuwait for more than three months. Hammad said the committee discussed with the minister losses suffered by Kuwait Airways because of the measures taken against travel, but Sheikh Basel insisted that it was not the health ministry which banned KAC from flying, but the Civil Aviation Authority.

The committee also discussed with the minister the higher secondary exams which the education ministry insists to hold at schools, while many lawmakers are urging it to conduct them online. The ministry officials informed the committee that only 27,000 students have been vaccinated out of 50,000 who will appear for the exams, said Hammad, adding that the minister said the education ministry is responsible for the exams and not the health ministry.

Kuwait yesterday launched free PCR tests for unvaccinated students of grade 12 to ensure their safety during the upcoming school exams. The ministry of



Local

# Cuban medical team completes COVID-19 mission to Kuwait

By Ben Garcia

**KUWAIT:** A contingent of Cuban medics - doctors and nurses - are leaving after completing a year of service in Kuwait. The last group of 60 medical workers who filled roles at the Mishref coronavirus field hospital are wrapping up their work and heading home. Several members of the larger mission, which comprised of more than 300 Cuban medical workers who served six-month terms in the last year and half, were infected with the coronavirus while working in Kuwait.

A small ceremony to mark the departure of the medical workers was held at the Mishref field hospital, attended by Dr Muhamad Al-Humaidan and Jose Luis Noriega Sanchez, Ambassador of Cuba to Kuwait. The Cuban medical workers were initially hired by Kuwait's ministry of health to support the country's pandemic efforts from June 5, 2020 for a six-month term. But the team's stay was later extended for another six months due to the high number of COVID-19 cases in Kuwait.

"We've handled more than 100,000 patients at our assigned hospitals, mostly COVID-19 patients," said Rody Cervantes Silva, family medicine specialist and head of the Cuban medical team to Kuwait. "The number of cases are now down and cases in ICUs are also dropping," he said.

On June 5, 2020, the team arrived with 298 doctors and nurses, and requested an additional 37 doctors in August 2020. "We were a total of 337 medics (198 nurses and 137 doctors); some left after six months, some left after 10 months, while the remaining 60 doctors and nurses are here for the past one year. We are all going back on June 7 (today) and will return to our families after the successful completion of our medical mission," Silva added.

**COVID-19 hospitals**

Cuban doctors and nurses were deployed specifically to COVID-19 hospitals designated by the Kuwaiti government, including Jaber Hospital, Amiri Hospital, Adan Hospital, Farwaniya Hospital, Ibn Sina Hospital, Mubarak Hospital, Jarrah Hospital and the Mishref Field Hospital.

It's definitely a mission worth remembering - even our team was infected, as 12 of us contracted the virus. We were able to help both locals and expats of all nationalities. At the beginning we were also assisting in some other medical cases, but the coronavirus was our main concern. Some of us would even be at the hospital for 24 hours, especially during the onset of the pandemic. We all want our patients to recover and not die. We are racing against time and want everyone to be healed and go back to their families. Many of our patients returned with letters of encouragement and thanks," Silva told Kuwait Times.

The Cuban ambassador thanked Kuwait for trusting Cuban doctors and nurses for the dangerous mission, saying they did so in solidarity with Kuwait. Sanchez pointed out that Cuba has sent more than 13,000 doctors and other medical professionals around the world since the outbreak of the pandemic.

"Last year, we helped fight the coronavirus in Italy. The medics received medals from the president of Italy himself for helping them. But this is not about medals or propaganda - it's about humanity. We helped people regardless of nationality and showed them our human side," the envoy said. "We sent 13,000 Cuban doctors and nurses all over the world to specifically deal with the coronavirus. This is apart from the 28,000 doctors from Cuba present in 57 countries around the world. In Kuwait we have around 38 doctors working in various hospitals and private clinics," he added.

**Rumors refuted**

Sanchez refuted reports in some newspapers last year that Cuban doctors receive a monthly salary of



**KUWAIT:** Members of the Cuban medical team in a group photo yesterday. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KD 2,500. "Not at all - it's a big lie, it's fake news. They get a salary (from the ministry of health in Kuwait), but not the full salary because they are on a solidarity mission. The most important issue here is how many lives they have saved; how many people they have given another chance to live. The human side of our mission is most important. They left their families in Cuba and came here despite the danger to their own lives. They didn't even consider the language barrier they might face here; they just came to help and they did that - mission accomplished," he said.

Kuwait Times asked Sanchez how Cuba is able to

send doctors and nurses abroad. "Because our government gives priority to people who want to study medicine. They are educated free of charge. Being a doctor is the most difficult career in Cuba. But they work hard on it and are very successful. It completely depends on our students' capabilities, as young people in Cuba can choose their career path," he said.

"That is why we can help and can send many doctors and nurses all over the world to help. For example, in Africa, we have many medics that are paid by our government. Not a single dollar is paid by those countries," Sanchez added.

## Health Ministry denies reports of vaccine smuggling



**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Ministry of Health confirmed yesterday there was a daily inventory of COVID-19 vaccines being received and actually used, therefore the whole quantity was accounted for. The Ministry was reacting to social media reports suggesting coronavirus vaccines had been smuggled from Kuwait to an Arab country. It called for verifying the reports and get the information from the official sources.

Meanwhile, the health ministry began yesterday carrying out COVID-19 Antigen Rapid Tests for non-vaccinated students ahead of the grade 12 final exams. The end-of-year paper graduation tests for high school students in public and Arabic private schools are set to start on Wednesday under strict health precautionary measures. In the meantime, health ministry field workers are set to begin this week offering COVID-19 vaccines to workers at Mubarakiya and Safat markets in Kuwait City, according to local reports. In another note, Al-Qabas Arabic daily reported yesterday quoting health ministry sources that around 93 percent of COVID-19 patients in hospitals in Kuwait were not vaccinated against the disease.

Kuwait had reported on Saturday 1,331 new COVID-19 infections in addition to seven deaths, taking the total up to 315,900 and 1,794 respectively. The figures were slightly up from 1,280 infections on Friday and down from 1,443 on Thursday, whereas Kuwait had reported four deaths on each of



**KUWAIT:** Students undergo the COVID-19 Antigen Rapid Test ahead of their graduation exams at a school in Kuwait City yesterday. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

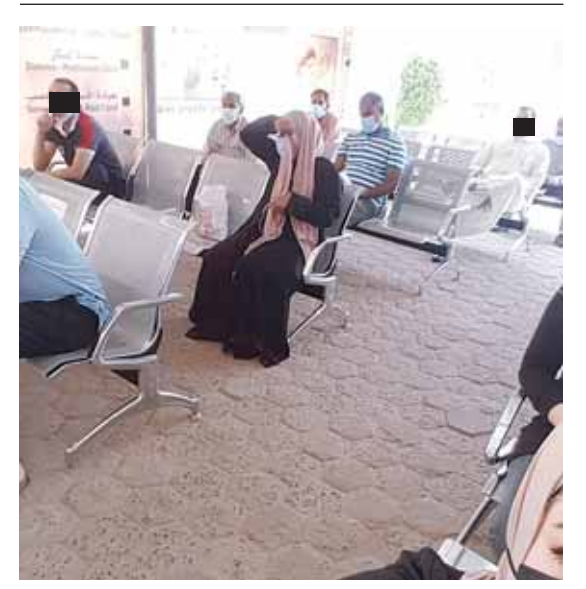
Friday and Thursday. Meanwhile, the health ministry registered 1,310 recoveries on Saturday, compared to 156 on Friday and 1,087 on Thursday, raising the total to 299,795.

The number of people hospitalized with the virus

currently stood at 14,311 as of Saturday; up from 14,297 on Friday, with 149 of them in intensive care units; down from 151 a day before. The number of patients had stood at 14,177 on Thursday, including 146 in ICUs. —KUNA

## Education Minister underlines need for qualified graduates

**KUWAIT:** Minister of Education Dr Mohammad Al-Fares yesterday affirmed necessity of equipping academic studies' graduates with curricula that enable them to meet requirements of the local labor market. The minister, also the minister of oil, who was addressing a meeting of the board at the national apparatus for academic accreditation, lauded the department for its pivotal role in backing up the local labor market with qualified would-be personnel in line with Kuwait Vision 2035. Sound quality of education must be secured from teaching institutions that adopt international criteria, minister Fares said. Dr Hamad Al-Adwani, the apparatus director general, indicated in a statement following the board session that the meeting examined new academic criterion, assessment rules and regulations of accredited universities abroad. —KUNA



**KUWAIT:** Patients visiting the West Salmiya Policlinic are seated outside the building waiting in the heat for their turn to get to see the doctor. An AC unit is placed at the outdoor waiting area, although patients have complained that it was not working or "making any difference" under the extreme heat.



**KUWAIT:** Firemen battle a blaze in the doctors' break room on the ground floor of Mubarak Hospital yesterday.



**Firemen rescued two teenagers stuck in mud in Sulaibikhat beach yesterday.**

## Doctors' break room fire under control

**KUWAIT:** The health ministry said a fire started in the doctors' break room on the ground floor of Mubarak Hospital yesterday morning. It said the incident did not disrupt normal work. Meanwhile, a statement by Kuwait Fire Force said there were no injuries as Hawally, Salmiya and Shuhada responded and carried out the necessary ventilation. Deputy Fire Force Chief for Fighting Affairs Maj Gen Jamal Nasser inspected the site in the presence of Health Ministry Undersecretary Dr Mustafa Redha.

Meanwhile, firemen rescued two Kuwaiti teenagers after they were stuck in a muddy area in Sulaibikhat beach yesterday. Shuwaikh and Sea Rescue Fire Stations' men responded to an emergency call reporting that two persons were stuck in mud when they were walking on the beach, while a third person was able to free himself. The two were freed successfully and are in good health, Kuwait Fire Force said.



Local

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Picture shows the sun setting behind clouds in Kuwait City. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

News in brief

**Kuwait world's hottest city**

KUWAIT: Kuwait City and Doha recorded the highest temperature among 143 capitals around the world on Saturday at 50 C degrees, according to timeanddate.com.

**Deputy FM meets UAE envoy**

KUWAIT: Kuwait Deputy Foreign Minister Majdi Al-Dhefeeri met yesterday with UAE's Ambassador to Kuwait Dr Matar Al-Neyadi and discussed bilateral ties, as well as regional and international developments. Assistant Foreign Minister for the Deputy Foreign Minister's Office Ayham Al-Omar attended the meeting.

**GCC 'march'**

DOHA: Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Dr Nayef Al-Hajraf held talks yesterday with Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani addressing the GCC "march." The official Qatari news agency said the two sides exchanged views regarding the council march in addition to regional issues.

**US Dollar at KD 0.300**

KUWAIT: The US dollar was stable at KD 0.300 yesterday, while the Euro went down to KD 0.366, compared to Thursday's rates. The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) said in its daily bulletin that the British sterling pound went down to KD 0.425, same as the Swiss Franc to KD 0.334, while the Japanese Yen remained at KD 0.003. The CBK is publishing daily average exchange rates, which do not necessarily reflect actual prices of the currencies' trade for the day.

**Kuwait's military offices play key role: Deputy FM**

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Majdi Al-Dhefeeri yesterday underlined importance of coordination between Military offices abroad and countries they are based. Dhefeeri made the remarks while visiting Sheikh Saud Nasser Al-Sabah Diplomatic Institute, which was offering a training course for heads of military offices at Kuwait's diplomatic missions abroad. He also visited another training course of the diplomatic attaches, urging them to have maximum benefits from the training. Dhefeeri was accompanied by Ambassador Abdulaziz Al-Sharekh, Director General of the Institute, and Assistant Foreign Minister for the Deputy Foreign Minister's Office Ayham Al-Omar. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Majdi Al-Dhefeeri (center) is seen during his visit to Sheikh Saud Nasser Al-Sabah Diplomatic Institute. —KUNA

**Romania, Kuwait discuss latest on missing businessman**

BUCHAREST: Romanian State Secretary for Global Affairs and Diplomatic Strategies Cornel Feruta stressed yesterday his country's keenness to enhance cooperation with Kuwait in various fields. This came during his meeting with Kuwait's Ambassador to Romania Talal Al-Hajri. Following a letter received from Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah to Romanian Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu, Feruta said relations between Kuwait are constantly developing in many fields. Meanwhile, Ambassador Hajri said that they discussed issues of common interest, in addition to the latest developments regarding the case of Kuwaiti businessman Mohammad Al-Baghli, who has been missing in Romania since August 2015, and urged the relevant Romanian authorities to exert more efforts to reveal his fate. Baghli had disappeared in mysterious circumstances in Kiya village in the Brahova district, north of the capital Bucharest in 2015. —KUNA



BUCHAREST: Kuwait's Ambassador to Romania Talal Al-Hajri (left) with Romanian State Secretary for Global Affairs and Diplomatic Strategies Cornel Feruta. —KUNA

**Kuwait hosts inter-council speed networking event**

KUWAIT: ABCK-AmCham Kuwait, Australian Business Group Kuwait, British Business Forum Kuwait, Canadian Business Council, German Business Council- Kuwait, and Portuguese Business Council - Kuwait held their first Inter-Council networking event for 2021, to foster new relationships among member companies throughout the network of chambers and councils in the State of Kuwait.

The inter-council networking event facilitated fast-moving networking sessions for business owners and executives. Attendees were placed into rooms with a few other individuals, and each attendee got to interact with several professionals in the State of Kuwait, as they shared their own business profiles with other attendees. The councils, forums and chambers represent together over 1,000 member companies and millions of dollars of foreign investment in the State of Kuwait. They are the go-to organizations in the country for anything trade-related. As partners for their respective countries, the councils and chambers are devoted to supporting the development of commercial relations between Kuwait and their representative countries, but also focus heavily on networking Kuwait's business community through unique events and programs year-round.



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Peruvians to choose between Fujimori and leftist Castillo

## 'Butcher of Bosnia' Mladic faces final genocide verdict



DORI: File photograph shows, a Burkina Faso soldier patrols at a camp sheltering Internally Displaced People (IDP) from northern Burkina Faso in Dori. Suspected jihadists have massacred at least 160 civilians in Burkina Faso's volatile north in the deadliest attacks since Islamist violence erupted in the west African country in 2015, officials said yesterday. —AFP

# 160 killed in deadliest Burkina Faso attacks

## Kabore condemns massacre in Solhan as 'barbaric and despicable'

**OUAGADOUGOU:** Suspected jihadists have massacred at least 160 civilians in Burkina Faso's volatile north in the deadliest attacks since Islamist violence erupted in the west African country in 2015, officials said. President Roch Marc Christian Kabore denounced an attack near the borders with Mali and Niger, where jihadists linked to Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have been targeting civilians and soldiers. "Several injured have succumbed to their wounds and new bodies have been discovered. The still provisional toll is 160 deaths," one local official said Saturday evening.

"The bodies were buried in mass graves," the official said, adding that "there are dozens of injured" after the overnight attack by armed assailants. "We must remain united and solid against these obscurantist forces," Kabore said, condemning the massacre in the village of Solhan as "barbaric" and "despicable." Declaring three days of national mourning, ending

today night at 11:59 pm, the government stated that "terrorists," a term for jihadists, killed civilians of all ages and set fire to homes and the main market.

A security source lamented "the heavy human toll, the worst recorded to date," while warning it could still increase. Meanwhile, United Nations chief Antonio Guterres' spokesman said that he was "outraged" over the massacre. Guterres "strongly condemns the heinous attack and underscores the urgent need for the international community to redouble support to Member States in the fight against violent extremism and its unacceptable human toll," Stephane Dujarric said in a statement, offering Burkinabe authorities the UN's "full support".

The assailants struck around 2:00 am (0200 GMT) against a position of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Motherland (VDP), an anti-jihadist civilian defence force which backs the national army, before attacking homes and carrying out "execu-

tions," a local source said. Opposition leader Eddie Komboigo demanded that "the massacre of our people, we never tire of repeating, must stop unconditionally. Every measure must be taken to protect the Burkinabe" people.

The VDP was set up in December 2019 to help Burkina's poorly-equipped military fight jihadists but it has suffered more than 200 fatalities, according to an AFP tally. The volunteers are given two weeks' military training before working alongside the security forces, typically carrying out surveillance, information-gathering or escort duties.

### 'Neutralise these terrorists'

The government said that "the defence and security forces are at work to neutralise these terrorists and restore calm to populated areas." A security forces official said that men were deployed to secure populated areas and to remove and bury bodies. Solhan, a

small community around 15 kilometres from Sebba, the main city in Yagha province, has suffered numerous attacks in recent years. On May 14, Defence Minister Chérif Sy and military top brass visited Sebba to assure people that life had returned to normal, following a number of military operations.

The massive attack by suspected jihadists came hours after another attack Friday evening on Tadaryat village in the same region in which 14 people were killed, including an armed volunteer who had come to help them. Since 2015, Burkina Faso has struggled to fight back against increasingly frequent and deadly jihadist attacks from groups including the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The attacks first started in the north near the Mali border, but have since spread to other regions, particularly in the east. Around 1,400 people have died and more than a million have fled their homes. —AFP

## Back on stage, Trump flirts with 2024 run

**WASHINGTON:** Former US president Donald Trump returned to the spotlight Saturday for his first speech in months, framing next year's midterm elections as a battle for the "survival of America"—but keeping followers guessing on his own plans for 2024. Trump lapped up applause from Republican supporters as he described the United States as "being destroyed before our very own eyes" since he was voted out, and launched bitter criticism of his victorious rival President Joe Biden.

"The survival of America depends upon our ability to elect Republicans at every level, starting with the midterms next year," Trump said. "We have to get it done. We have no choice actually. We're going to defend our freedoms." Trump described 2024, the year of the next presidential election, as "a year that I look very much forward to"—drawing loud cheers from the audience in Greenville, North Carolina at the state's Republican Party convention.

Addressing a sold-out crowd of about 1,250 for his first major speech since February, Trump, 74, appeared to lack much of the raw energy and enthusiasm that he often brought to his raucous, larger campaign rallies. Verbal attacks against his favorite targets, including Biden's border policy, China, "radical left Democrats," and "critical race theory," all triggered

wild cheers. In contrast, the crowd fell largely silent during his claims of successfully tackling Covid-19 and of developing the vaccines that have helped quell the pandemic.

Banished from social networks but no less influential among the party faithful, Trump has remained politically active since he left the White House in January. On Saturday, he dismissed Facebook's recent announcement his ban would be for two years for violating its rules over the deadly attack by his supporters on the US Capitol. "I'm not too interested in that they may allow me back in two years... so unfair," he said.

### 'Trump won'

Again airing his false claims that election fraud denied him rightful victory last year, he said that "there's no better example of the Democrat and media corruption than the 2020 election hoax... That election will go down as the crime of the century. "If you think people don't see it, People see it," he told the crowd, which included at least one woman wearing a "Trump won" cap. Out of office and off social media, Trump now fires out a stream of incendiary statements by email-supporting chosen Republican candidates, launching vitriolic attacks on perceived enemies and relishing the role of kingmaker when meeting with allies and party leaders.

During the speech, his daughter-in-law Lara Trump came on stage to announce she would not be running for a Senate seat after speculation of political ambitions that could still establish a political dynasty. "I am saying 'no for now,' not 'no forever,'"

said Lara Trump, who is married to Eric Trump.

Trump, a billionaire businessman, has openly floated the idea of running for president again, but he is not expected to make any definitive announcement soon. Only a handful of Republicans have dared break with him, despite the January 6 assault on the Capitol by supporters mobilized by his baseless allegations of election fraud. Many Republicans still see him as a valuable asset ahead of the midterms in November 2022, when the party hopes to wrest back control of Congress from the Democrats.

The Democrats responded to Trump's appearance by saying "more than 400,000 dead Americans (from COVID-19), millions of jobs lost, and recklessly dangerous rhetoric is apparently not enough for Republicans to break with a loser president." His enduring influence further adds to his unique political journey, considering that he was defeated after a single term—and was twice impeached.

Trump spoke for about 90 minutes on Saturday and, in coming months, is expected to again hold the big election rallies that he thrives on. For many Republicans, the party's focus in the midterm campaigns should be a sharp critique of Biden. But Trump seems unable to let go of his theory-debunked by scores of judges and state officials—that the last election was stolen from him. Nearly five months after leaving the presidency, and now comfortably installed at his Bedminster golf resort near New York, Trump has yet to explicitly acknowledge his defeat. —AFP



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## International

# Mexicans vote with president's 'transformation' at stake

## Voters choosing between two competing visions of Mexico and its future

**MEXICO CITY:** Mexicans began voting yesterday in elections seen as pivotal to President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's promised "transformation" of a country shaken by the coronavirus pandemic, a deep recession and drug-related violence. The midterm polls will elect the 500 members of the lower house of Congress, 15 of 32 state governors and thousands of local politicians.

The vote is viewed as critical to the prospects of Lopez Obrador-known by his initials AMLO-pushing through reforms under his so-called "Fourth Transformation" plan. "What's at stake is nothing less than the future of Mexico," Pamela Starr, professor at the University of Southern California, said in a panel discussion about the elections. "Voters are choosing really between two competing visions of Mexico and its future-between Lopez Obrador's Fourth Transformation and to a certain extent a return to the policies that preceded it." Polling stations opened at 08:00 am (1300 GMT) and are due to close at 6:00 pm.

### 'Referendum on AMLO'

Lopez Obrador was elected in 2018 for a term of six years, vowing to overhaul Mexico's "neoliberal" economic model, root out corruption and end profligacy by a privileged elite. The future of the left-wing populist's reform agenda-such as seeking greater energy independence-hinges on whether voters punish him for issues including the pandemic and a deadly Mexico City rail accident. "The election is widely

seen as a referendum on AMLO and strong support for the ruling coalition could embolden the president to pursue more interventionist policies," said analysts at the Capital Economics consultancy firm.

Mexico's economy, the second-largest in Latin America, plunged by 8.5 percent in 2020 in the worst slump in decades, although the government predicts a rebound this year. Lopez Obrador has refrained from trying to pump up the economy with fiscal stimulus, saying it would be imprudent to increase the national debt. Despite more than a quarter of a million coronavirus deaths-one of the world's highest tolls-the 67-year-old continues to enjoy public approval ratings above 60 percent. The collapse of an elevated metro line in the capital on May 3 that left 26 people dead does not appear to have had a significant impact on his support levels.

### Supermajority at stake

Lopez Obrador owes much of his popularity to his social welfare programs aimed at helping the elderly and disadvantaged Mexicans. His supporters say he is their first president to put the interests of the Mexican majority, many of whom live in poverty, before those of the wealthy elite. His critics accuse him of a dangerous tilt towards authoritarianism with attacks on the judiciary and the National Electoral Institute that they say undermine democratic checks and balances. The ruling coalition currently has a two-thirds supermajority in the lower house of Congress that enables Lopez Obrador to amend the



**GUERRERO:** People queue to cast their votes at a polling station in Nahuat community of Atzacolaoya, Guerrero state, Mexico, yesterday. — AFP

constitution without negotiating with his opponents.

But midterm elections in Mexico typically see the ruling party lose seats and there are signs that history is likely to repeat itself. The president's Morena party and its allies are projected to see their majority in the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, shrink slightly from 333 seats to 322, according to a poll of polls by the Oraculus firm.

While the main opposition parties — the centrist PRI, the conservative PAN and the left-wing PRD-have formed an alliance, they remain weakened by Lopez Obrador's 2018 landslide victory. Yesterday's vote has been marred by a wave of political bloodshed that has seen more than 90 politicians murdered since the electoral process began in September. — AFP

## Nicaragua detains another opposition presidential hopeful

**MANAGUA:** Police in Nicaragua on Saturday took opposition politician Arturo Cruz into custody, detaining a second presidential hopeful in less than a week. Cruz was seized at the Managua airport upon return from the United States, on accusations of acting "against Nicaraguan society and the rights of the people," prosecutors said.

His detention came three days after opposition figure Cristiana Chamorro—a possible challenger to leftist President Daniel Ortega in November elections—was placed under house arrest, after government claims that she was guilty of money laundering. Cruz, 67, announced his candidacy two months ago, running with the conservative Citizen Alliance for Freedom.

The National Police said it would "refer the person under investigation to the competent authorities for prosecution and to determine criminal responsibilities." The Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights called Cruz's detention a "perverse strategy" on the part of Ortega's government to silence people he considers political enemies.

"These are not criminal investigations, this is political persecution," it said. The United States called for Cruz's "immediate release." "The international community has spoken: under Ortega, Nicaragua is becoming an international pariah and moving farther away from democracy," acting under-secretary of the US State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs Julie Chung said on Twitter.

### 'Dance of suppression'

Cruz served as Nicaragua's ambassador to the United States between 2007 and 2009, under Ortega's government. His detention followed that of Chamorro, a 67-year-old journalist not aligned to any party. The daughter of former president Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, a recent poll showed her to be the favorite to beat Ortega in November, though he has not confirmed he will seek a fourth term. But Chamorro has for weeks been the subject of a judicial investigation into money-laundering, which she has denounced as a "macabre farce" set up to prevent her from standing as a candidate.

A day before his arrest, Cruz had warned via Twitter that he was considering withdrawing from the race. If Nicaraguan authorities "continue the dance of suppression and we are left without other candidates, the logical thing is that this servant does not participate in this process," he said on Twitter. "We must seriously consider participating in this spurious exercise."

Last month, Nicaragua's legislature appointed a majority of governing party-aligned magistrates to the election body that will oversee the elections. It has since disqualified two parties. In December the legislature approved a law critics say is aimed at preventing opposition politicians from standing in the election. Sponsored by Ortega, it bars "those who ask for, celebrate and applaud the imposition of sanctions against the Nicaraguan state." Ortega, an ex-guerrilla who governed from 1979 to 1990, returned to power in 2007 and won two successive reelections. — AFP

## Biden says will stand with European allies ahead of Putin summit

**WASHINGTON:** The United States will stand with its European allies against Russia, President Joe Biden has promised ahead of the first face-to-face meeting with Vladimir Putin of his administration. Biden will head to Europe Wednesday, and is set to attend both the G-7 and NATO summits as well as holding a high-stakes meeting with the Russian leader in Geneva on June 16. The summit 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.

In an op-ed for the Washington Post published Saturday, the US president promised to shore up Washington's "democratic alliances" in the face of

multiple crises and mounting threats from Moscow and Beijing. "We are standing united to address Russia's challenges to European security, starting with its aggression in Ukraine, and there will be no doubt about the resolve of the United States to defend our democratic values, which we cannot separate from our interests," he wrote.

"President Putin knows that I will not hesitate to respond to future harmful activities," he said. "When we meet, I will again underscore the commitment of the United States, Europe and like-minded democracies to stand up for human rights and dignity." 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.

But both leaders have expressed hopes that relations can improve, with the Russian president saying Friday he expected a "positive" result from the talks. Biden in his weekend op-ed also stressed that Washington "does not seek conflict" — pointing to his recent extension of the New START arms reduction treaty as proof of his desire to reduce tensions.



**WASHINGTON:** This combination of pictures created on March 17, 2021 shows US President Joe Biden (L) and Russian President Vladimir Putin. — AFP

"We want a stable and predictable relationship where we can work with Russia on issues like strategic stability and arms control," he wrote. — AFP

## Kamala to bring message of 'hope' to Guatemala, Mexico

**WASHINGTON:** US Vice President Kamala Harris will visit Guatemala and Mexico next week, bringing a message of hope to a region hammered by COVID-19 and which is the source of most of the undocumented migrants seeking entry in the US. Harris is taking her first trip abroad as President Joe Biden's deputy with an eye towards tackling the root causes of migration from the region-one of the thorniest issues facing the White House. "We have to give people a sense of hope, a sense of hope that help is on the way, a sense of hope that if they stay, things will get better," Harris has said, after Biden tasked her with leading diplomatic efforts on the issue in March.

She is set to fly tonight to Guatemala, where she will meet with President Alejandro Giammattei before setting off to meet with Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador tomorrow. Harris also has plans to meet with community, labor and business leaders, according to her team. Harris said she hopes to have "very frank and honest discussions" about corruption, crime and violence. Detentions of undocumented travelers, including unaccompanied minors, along the US-Mexico border hit a 15-year record high in April, with nearly 180,000 people intercepted-more than 80% of them coming from Mexico or the so-called Northern Triangle of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

## Death toll rises to 88 in attack in northwest Nigeria

**KANO:** Police in northwest Nigeria's Kebbi state told AFP yesterday that the death toll from an attack by a gang of cattle thieves on seven villages Thursday had risen to 88. The region has struggled with decades-long communal clashes over resources but more recently some groups have become more violent, looting, killing and kidnapping for ransom. "Initially 66 bodies were recovered but 22 more have been found," Kebbi state police spokesman Nafiu Abubakar said, adding that the search for more bodies was ongoing.

Dozens of assailants on motorcycles attacked seven neighbouring villages in Danko-Wasagu district on Thursday, Abubakar said. The gunmen targeted the villages of Koro, Kimpi, Gaya, Dimi, Zutu, Rafin Gora and Iguenge, he said. Many people were still unaccounted for yesterday after fleeing the attacks.



**US Vice President Kamala Harris**

### Vaccines, TPS, Title 42

Donation of coronavirus vaccines by the United States to the region is also expected to be up for discussion. Harris already addressed the subject over the phone with Giammattei and Lopez Obrador on Thursday, just before Biden announced the shipment of a first batch of six million doses to be distributed in Central America and the Caribbean through the global Covax program, plus others to be sent directly from Washington to partner countries such as Mexico.

For security and democracy expert Rebecca Bill Chavez, "a real commitment" on the number of doses destined for the Northern Triangle would be "one very positive outcome" of Harris's trip. Another potential topic is the possibility of granting Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Guatemalans living in the United States, allowing them to work legally. And there could be talk in Mexico of the end of "Title 42," a Trump-era coronavirus policy allowing the immediate deportation of undocumented migrants-even those who arrive seeking asylum.

"The search is still going on and more bodies could be found. So, the toll is not conclusive yet," said Abubakar. Policemen were deployed to the area over the weekend to forestall further attacks, he said.

The assailants were believed to have launched the attacks from neighbouring Zamfara or Niger states where criminals are known to maintain camps. In April, nine policemen were killed in the area in a shootout with gunmen who invaded a village in nearby Sakaba district to steal livestock, Abubakar told AFP at the time.

### Security forces stretched thin

Northwest and central Nigeria are a hub of criminal gangs known locally as bandits, who raid villages, harass residents and burn down homes. The gangs maintain camps in Rugu forest which straddles Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna and Niger states. Nigeria's security forces, who are also battling a more than decade-long jihadist insurgency in the northeast of the country, are being stretched thin. Gangs in the northwest have recently stepped up attacks on schools, kidnapping hundreds of students to squeeze ransoms from authorities and parents. More than 700 children and students have already been kid-

### 'A lot tougher'

The vice president's trip to Central America is part of the Biden administration's promise of a more humane immigration policy-in contrast to the hard-line approach taken by his predecessor Donald Trump. But Harris faces challenges even more complicated than the ones Biden dealt with as vice president under Barack Obama, when he himself was charged with handling the same matter. "The conditions have deteriorated dramatically since 2014," said Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue think tank, referring to a worsening economic situation and an increase in violence, both exacerbated by the pandemic.

Harris's work is therefore "a lot tougher," Shifter said, "because the (country) partners are far more problematic." The relationship between Washington and El Salvador has been tense since the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly, led by the ruling party, fired judges and the attorney general May 1, and after the US labeled members of President Nayib Bukele's government as corrupt.

And Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez was implicated of cocaine trafficking in a New York court earlier this year. A group of 18 US Democratic senators wrote a letter to Harris ahead of her trip. "Ensuring stability in Central America directly supports the national interests of the United States," said the group, led by Foreign Relations Committee head Bob Menendez.

The Republican opposition, on the other hand, has accused Biden of creating a "crisis" on the country's southern border. Congress must still decide whether to approve the \$861 million Biden has asked for next year as part of his \$4 billion plan to take on the issue of illegal immigration. — AFP

napped by gunmen for ransom since December, often from schools in remote areas, where pupils live in dormitories with little security protection.

State authorities in Niger state said they were negotiating with gunmen who seized 136 children from an Islamic seminary last weekend. The attackers released 11 of the pupils who were "too small and couldn't walk" very far, the authorities previously said. Nearly 700,000 people have been internally displaced in northwest and north central Nigeria in February, according to the UN's migration agency IOM, as a result of violence.

In Zamfara, Doctors without Borders (MSF) said it was struggling to respond to growing needs. Between January and April, MSF said it treated 10,300 children in Zamfara for severe acute malnutrition, measles, malaria and other conditions. "This is 54 percent higher than in the same period last year," said an MSF doctor, Godwin Emudano. "People here need food, safe water and vaccinations now," said Emudano in a statement. "What is happening here is a humanitarian emergency that needs urgent attention and a fast and proper response," said Froukje Pelsma, MSF head of mission in Nigeria. — AFP



## International

# 'Butcher of Bosnia' Mladic faces final genocide verdict

## Verdict will be viewable on a livestream

**THE HAGUE:** Former Bosnian Serb military chief Ratko Mladic will tomorrow hear the decision on his appeal against his genocide conviction, in a Hague tribunal's final verdict on the 1995 Srebrenica massacre. The ruling will be the closing chapter in the case against the man dubbed the "Butcher of the Balkans", who was sentenced to life imprisonment by a UN war crimes tribunal in 2017.

Now an ailing 78-year-old, the once-burly military strongman of the 1992-1995 Bosnian war is expected to be in court, where he has previously delivered angry outbursts against the West. Mothers of some of the 8,000 men and boys killed in the worst act of bloodshed on European soil since World War II will be outside the court where they have long campaigned for justice.

"We will go to The Hague to look the executioner in the eye once again as he is finally sentenced," Munira Subasic, president of one of the "Mothers of Srebrenica" associations, told AFP. The verdict will be handed down at 1300 GMT, viewable on a livestream with a half hour delay because the courtroom is closed to journalists due to coronavirus restrictions, at the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals.

Its prosecutor Serge Brammertz said he was "cautiously optimistic" about the verdict, telling reporters this week he "can't imagine another outcome than confirmation". The mechanism deals with cases left over from the now-closed UN war crimes court for the former Yugoslavia, which brought justice for crimes in the bloody break-up of the country in the 1990s.

### 'Future of our children'

Mladic, who spent a decade on the run before his capture in 2011, was convicted of one count of genocide over Srebrenica as well as for war crimes and crimes against humanity in general during the Bosnian war.

Judges found him guilty of orchestrating a campaign of "ethnic cleansing" to drive Muslims and Bosnians out of key areas to create a Greater Serbia as Yugoslavia tore itself apart after the fall of communism. The war left around 100,000 people dead and 2.2 million displaced.

Prosecutors said he personally oversaw the massacre at the supposedly UN-protected enclave of Srebrenica as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing to drive out Muslims. Footage from the time showed him handing out sweets to children before they and the women of Srebrenica were taken away by bus, while the men of the town were marched into a forest and executed.

Relatives of the victims also hoped that the court would also overturn Mladic's acquittal in 2017 on wider genocide convictions, saying it was necessary for reconciliation between still-divided communities.

"This verdict is not only important for the victims and survivors. It is very important for the future of our children, of all of us," said Subasic, who planned to be at the court with around a dozen supporters.

### 'Everyone is proud'

But for many Bosnian Serbs, Mladic and Karadzic remain heroes. "Everyone is proud that he



**MOUNT IGMAN:** File photo taken in Sarajevo on August 10, 1993 shows Commander of Serbian forces in Bosnia General Ratko Mladic (C) arriving at the airport of Sarajevo in order to negotiate the withdrawal of his troops from Mount Igman. —AFP

is from here," said Radosav Zmukic, head of a local veterans' group in Mladic's hometown of Kalinovik. He recalled meeting Mladic two or three times during the war and being impressed by his "boldness". During a long legal process delayed repeatedly after Mladic needed surgery to remove a polyp, and then because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mladic appealed all the convictions and his life sentence.

The frail-looking former general raged during the

two-day appeal hearing in August 2020 that he had been "pushed into war" and dismissed the court as a "child of western powers". He was the military face of a trio led on the political side by ex-Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic and former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. Milosevic died of a heart attack in his cell in The Hague in 2006 before his trial had finished while Karadzic is serving a life sentence for genocide in Srebrenica. —AFP

## S Lanka recovers black box from sinking ship

**COLOMBO:** A black box from a ship loaded with chemical and plastic that is sinking off Sri Lanka has been located, officials said yesterday, as investigators probe what caused the vessel to catch fire. The Voyage Data Recorder, also known as a maritime "black box", enables investigators to review procedures and instructions ahead of an accident.

Sri Lankan authorities said they hope it will provide details of the ship's movements and its communications with the harbour in the capital Colombo, where it had been due to dock. "The navy facilitated technicians to remove the VDR from the bridge which is still above the waterline," navy spokesman Indika de Silva told AFP.

The Singapore-registered MV X-Press Pearl has been slowly sinking into the Indian Ocean since Wednesday after a fire that raged for nearly two weeks within sight of the coast. The ship, carrying 25 tonnes of nitric acid and a huge amount of plastic raw materials, was heading to Colombo from Gujarat, India.

Sri Lankan officials have said an acid leak since May 11 may have sparked the blaze. Ports in Qatar and India had refused to offload the leaking nitric



**COLOMBO:** File photo taken on June 02, 2021 shows a tugboat (R) from the Dutch salvage firm SMIT tows the fire-stricken Singapore-registered container ship MV X-Press Pearl away from the coast of Colombo, following Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's order to move the ship to deeper water. —AFP

acid, they added. Police on the island nation launched a criminal investigation, interviewing the vessel's skipper and chief engineer—both Russians—and its chief officer, an Indian, and seizing their passports.

Authorities are bracing for a possible oil spill after the stern submerged. There has been no sign of any leaks so far, they added. Tonnes of

microplastic granules from the ship swamped an 80-kilometre (50-mile) stretch of beach declared off-limits for residents. Fishing in the area was also banned.

Sri Lankan environmentalists on Friday sued the government and the ship's operators for allegedly failing to prevent what they called the "worst marine disaster" in the country's history. —AFP

## Peruvians to choose between Fujimori and leftist Castillo

**LIMA:** Peruvians face a polarising choice between right-wing populist Keiko Fujimori and radical leftist Pedro Castillo when they elect a new president, in a country desperate for a return to normalcy after years of political turbulence. The new leader will need to tackle a country in crisis, suffering from recession and with the worst coronavirus death rate in the world after recording 184,000 mortalities among the 33 million population. And after four presidents in the last three years and with seven of the last 10 of the country's leaders either having been convicted of or investigated for corruption, Peruvians will look to their next leader to bring an end to the recent turbulence.

At the height of the political storm in November last year, Peru had three different presidents in just five days. Two million Peruvians have lost their jobs during the pandemic and nearly a third of the country now live in poverty, according to official figures. Fujimori, 46, and Castillo, 51, caused a surprise when taking the top two spots in April's first round of voting.

Now voters must decide between their polar opposite economic and political programs. In the most recent poll, Castillo had a narrow two percentage points edge but 18 percent of people remained undecided in a country where voting is obligatory. Fujimori, the daughter of disgraced and jailed former president Alberto Fujimori, represents the neoliberal economic model of tax cuts and boosting private activity to generate jobs.

Trade unionist schoolteacher Castillo has pledged to nationalize vital industries, raise taxes, eliminate tax exemptions and increase state regulation. Fujimori's bastion is the capital Lima, while Castillo's bulwark is the rural deep interior.

"We're fed up with always being governed by the same people, we want Peru to change," Martha Huaman, 27, a fruit seller in Tacabamba, in the Cajamarca region where Castillo lives, told AFP. "For us it's a dream, it's an awakening, we're really happy to be with" Castillo, said evangelical priest Victor Cieza Rivera, whose church is attended by the presidential candidate's wife Lilia Paredes. Tacabamba and other villages in Cajamarca are full of posters for Castillo, who topped the first round of voting.



**MADRID:** A Peruvian resident walks with Spanish and Peruvian flags after casting her vote for the presidential election runoff in a polling station at the Ifema congress center in Madrid yesterday. —AFP

### 'I don't want to vote'

Favored by the business sector and middle classes, Fujimori has tried to portray Castillo as a communist threat, warning that Peru would become a new Venezuela or North Korea should he win. Castillo has pointed to the Fujimori family's history of corruption scandals. Keiko Fujimori is under investigation for accepting illegal campaign funding in her 2011 and 2016 presidential bids and has already spent 16 months in pre-trial detention.

Her father is serving a 25-year sentence for crimes against humanity and corruption. For many in Peru this election is about the "lesser of evils." "I don't even want to vote, neither of them deserve it, but Castillo panics me so I'm going to vote for Fujimori," said trucker Johnny Samaniego, 51, who lives in Lima. Whoever wins will have a hard time governing as Congress is fragmented. Castillo's Free Peru is the largest single party, just ahead of Fujimori's Popular Force, but without a majority.

If Fujimori wins "it won't be easy given the mistrust her name and that of her family generates in many sectors. She'll have to quickly calm the markets and generate ways to reactivate them," political scientist Jessica Smith told AFP. If Castillo triumphs, he'll have to "consolidate a parliamentary majority that will allow him to deliver his ambitious program," added Smith. —AFP

## Eleven civilians killed as bomb hits Afghan bus

**HERAT:** At least 11 civilians including four women and three children were killed when a roadside bomb struck a bus in Afghanistan, officials said yesterday, in the latest attack targeting passenger vehicles in the violence-wracked country. The attack occurred on Saturday evening in the western province of Badghis, raising fears of fresh violence in the months ahead as the US military continues to pull out its last remaining troops from the country.

No group has claimed responsibility for the blast but Badghis governor Hessesamuddin Shams accused the Taliban of planting the bomb. Another official from the province, Khodadad Tayeb, confirmed the toll and said that the bus fell into a valley after it was hit by the bomb.

Saturday's attack came after a series of blasts targeted passenger buses in Kabul this week. The jihadist Islamic State claimed two back-to-back attacks on buses in Kabul. Violence has soared in recent weeks as government forces and the Taliban clash in near-daily battles across the rugged countryside, with the militants appearing to focus on capturing new territory and battering checkpoints and bases near Kabul.

The Taliban said on Saturday that they have "captured the district of Deh Yak" in the province of Ghazni, about 150 kilometres south of Kabul. The authorities said they had only "relocated" their forces from the area. Ghazni is strategically located on the main road from Kabul to Kandahar, the former bastion of the Taliban in the south. The province sees regular fighting between the two warring sides. In 2018, the Taliban briefly seized the provincial capital Ghazni, which has the same name as the province, in an all-out attack that left several government buildings torched and destroyed. The surge in violence across Afghanistan comes as the US military continues to withdraw its remaining 2,500 troops from Afghanistan.

President Joe Biden has ordered the military to complete the pullout by the 20th anniversary of the September 11 attacks. But as the Americans pack up, experts fear Afghanistan will remain home to a number of jihadist groups. —AFP

### News in brief

#### 13 wedding guests drown

**KANO:** Thirteen people died in northwest Nigeria's Sokoto state when a boat ferrying wedding guests capsized, officials said, a week after 150 people went missing in another boat accident. The boat was conveying 18 people returning from a wedding in Shagari district when it overturned on Friday. "Thirteen people travelling from Dorowa to Ginga village died in the boat mishap," Sokoto state government spokesman Muhammad Bello said. The passengers were all members of the same family heading home after attending the wedding ceremony, local lawmaker Maidawa Kajiji said. "It was a small boat loaded with 18 passengers but only five survived and were rescued," Kajiji said. —AFP

#### Man with knife kills six

**BEIJING:** A man armed with a knife killed six people and wounded 14 others in a city in eastern China, state media reported yesterday. The attack occurred Saturday afternoon in the streets of Anqing, Anhui province, 430 kilometres (270 miles) west of Shanghai, state television CCTV said. The suspect was arrested and an investigation was under way to determine the circumstances of the attack that unfolded in a pedestrian shopping street, Anqing Public Security Bureau said in a statement released on the Weibo social network. Quoting the bureau, CCTV said the suspect was 25 years old, unemployed and "angry". —AFP

#### US leak probes

**WASHINGTON:** The US government said Saturday it would stop secretly obtaining reporters' phone and email records during investigations into political leaks, ending a practice that was often criticized as undermining press freedom. The New York Times this week reported that under Donald Trump's administration and continuing under President Joe Biden, the Justice Department fought a covert legal battle to access email logs of four of its reporters in a hunt for leak sources. The Department of Justice said in a statement that "in a change to its longstanding practice — (it) will not seek compulsory legal process in leak investigations to obtain source information from members of the news media." It added that it had "completed a review to determine all instances in which the Department had pending compulsory requests from reporters in leak investigations." —AFP

#### Passenger tries to break into cockpit

**LOS ANGELES:** A passenger on a US airplane tried to smash his way into the cockpit until another traveler and members of the air crew tackled him and pinned him down, witnesses said. The Delta Air flight from Los Angeles to Nashville made an emergency landing in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where the man was dragged off the plane with his hands and feet secured by zip ties. He had repeatedly screamed "Stop this plane" as he was wrestled to the floor at the front of the cabin, according to a phone camera footage of the incident on Friday. An unnamed passenger told CNN that the man "seemingly unprovoked, just got up and rushed the pilot's cabin and began banging on the doors." Another passenger, Jessica Robertson, described the scene as "terrifying" but praised flight attendants for acting quickly. —AFP



# Business

MONDAY, JUNE 7, 2021

## Small Sri Lanka harbors big maritime ambitions

### Colombo Port hopes to double its annual handling capacity

**COLOMBO:** The dramatic recent fire on a container ship off Sri Lanka highlighted the risks involved in the island nation's ambitions to become one of the world's busiest maritime transport hubs.

The MV X-Press Pearl burned for 13 days, releasing tons of chemicals and plastics. The sinking ship's nearly 300 tons of fuel oil may now leak into the Indian Ocean.

#### How important is Sri Lanka?

Thanks to its geographical location, around 200 container ships and oil tankers sail past every day on the busy routes between Asia, the Middle East and Europe. But Sri Lanka is also the biggest so-called transshipment hub in South Asia, meaning that some of the world's biggest ships dock in Sri Lanka to load and unload containers.

Colombo, four days by ship from Singapore and four and a half to Dubai, is the only port between those two places deep enough to handle ships with more than 18,000 containers.

#### What are its plans?

Colombo Port now hopes to double its annual handling capacity of 7.2 million containers in four years. "We are strategically located and we are strategically important," Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) chairman Daya Ratnayake told AFP. "But, we have a serious problem here, the problem is (lack of) capacity."

India is developing a deep-water port at Vizhinjam on its southwest tip and is planning

another in the Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal, both of which may steal some of Colombo's trade.

#### What do other countries think?

Two-thirds of the transshipment cargo going through Sri Lanka is goods going from or to India, and New Delhi has traditionally seen Colombo as an ally. However, since a big chunk of what passes through the Indian Ocean is Chinese-made, Beijing has also shown a keen interest in developing Sri Lanka as a key link on its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since 2014, Colombo Port has been home to a \$500-million Chinese-run deep sea terminal. To pacify New Delhi, Sri Lanka this year allowed India to build another new terminal right next door.

"This is how we are balancing," Ratnayake said. "We as a country must take all this competition to our advantage."

#### What else is China doing?

Sri Lanka has also built a second deep-sea port at Hambantota on its southern tip, even closer to the ships steaming between the Malacca Strait and the Suez Canal. After Sri Lanka failed to service its debts to build the port, Hambantota has since 2017 been leased to China, alarming Western countries as well as India.

China wants Hambantota one day to resemble Shanghai, and aims to develop it as a container port able to service and refuel monster container ships 400 meters (1,300 feet) long. Currently the port does a lucrative business as a transshipment center



**COLOMBO:** In this photograph taken on June 4, 2021 a container vessel is being offloaded at the East Terminal of the Colombo port. —AFP

for hundreds of thousands of cars every year made in India and South Korea on their way elsewhere.

#### What about the environment?

Plastic pellets that escaped the MV X-Press Pearl have blanketed beaches on Sri Lanka. Fishing in the area has been suspended, hitting the local

economy hard. Hemantha Withanage from the Centre for Environmental Justice (CEJ) has petitioned the Supreme Court to force the government to get ready for more disasters as the ports get busier. "We don't have the equipment and the skills to deal with another catastrophe like this," Withanage said. —AFP

## France probes Lebanese central bank chief's wealth

**PARIS:** France has opened a probe into the personal wealth of Riad Salameh, central bank chief in crisis-hit Lebanon, sources said yesterday. Paris financial prosecutors have opened a preliminary probe into criminal association and money laundering by Salameh, a source close to the investigation and a judicial source said, following a similar move by Switzerland.

Its findings could shed light onto the origins of the 70-year-old former Merrill Lynch banker's wealth. In post since 1993 and once hailed by political and business leaders, Salameh has been repeatedly accused by the government of caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab of being responsible for the collapse of the Lebanese pound.

The Lebanese public suspect him and other high officials of transferring money abroad during a 2019 uprising, when ordinary people were prevented from doing so. Lebanon has since been hit by an economic crisis which the World Bank says is one of the worst anywhere since the 19th century.

Close to the powerful Hariri family, Salameh has been under investigation for months in Switzerland on suspicion of serious money laundering and embezzlement from the Bank of Lebanon. He also

owns several properties in France and may have transferred money via the country. One of the criminal complaints that prompted French prosecutors to get involved came from Swiss foundation Accountability Now, daily Le Monde reported.

Another was filed by anti-financial crime group Sherpa and by the Collective of Victims of Fraudulent and Criminal Practices in Lebanon, set up by savers devastated by the post-2019 crisis. The French move signals the start of "a universal mega-investigation across Europe", said William Bourdon and Amelie Lefebvre, lawyers for Sherpa and the savers' collective.

"Enormous money laundering operations will be examined, which ought to open every nook and cranny of the mafia that has brought Lebanon to its knees," they hope. Their criminal complaint, seen by AFP, accuses Salameh and people close to him—his brother Raja, his son Nadi, a nephew and an aide at the central bank—of fraudulently building a vast fortune in Europe.

The groups urge the judiciary to investigate massive capital flight from Lebanon since the crisis began, as well as property purchases out of all proportion to the buyers' income and the roles played by financial intermediaries, tax havens and strawmen. Based especially on reports by Lebanese website Daraj.com and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, the plaintiffs believe that Salameh's worldwide total wealth amounts to more than \$2 billion.

He contests that figure, saying his holdings stem from inheritances, his banking career and legitimate



**BEIRUT:** In this file handout photo picture provided by the Lebanese photo agency Dalati and Nohra shows Lebanon's Central Bank Chief Riad Salameh addressing the media after a meeting with the Lebanese president at the Baabda presidential palace. —AFP

investments since taking office in 1993.

The French prosecutors' investigation is the latest in a string of probes into "ill-gotten gains" of foreign leaders—especially from Africa or the Middle East. —AFP

## Swiss mired in poisonous row over pesticides

**ZURICH:** The idyllic image of peaceful Swiss Alpine pastures is being shattered by upcoming votes on pesticides which have sharply divided opinion in rural Switzerland. The Swiss will vote on June 13 on a proposal which, if it passes, would make Switzerland the first country in the world to ban synthetic pesticides.

Proponents seek to ban pesticides with non-naturally occurring chemicals—and not only for agriculture but also for public green spaces, private gardens, and even for killing the weeds on railway tracks. The initiative, entitled "For a Switzerland free from synthetic pesticides", would also ban the import of foodstuffs produced with synthetic pesticides, so as not to put Swiss farmers at a disadvantage.

A campaign marked by heated debates boiled over in the western Vaud region when arsonists torched a trailer in a field displaying banners calling for a "No" vote, infuriating farmers. Meanwhile farmers in the "Yes" campaign say they have been the victims of insults, threats and intimidation.

#### Slurry on the ballot

Under Switzerland's direct democracy system, referendums and popular votes occur every few months at national, regional and local levels. Any topic can be put to a national vote as long as it gathers 100,000 signatures in the wealthy nation of 8.6 million people.

Launched by a committee headed up by a winegrower and a soil biology professor from Neuchatel University, the pesticides initiative gathered 121,307 signatures. A parallel vote on a second initiative is also being held, on an initiative entitled "For clean drinking water and healthy food".

Under the proposal, government subsidies to farms would be limited only to those that do not use pesticides, and to those that do not use antibiotics as a preventative measure, but only to treat sick animals. To limit the amount of slurry being used on fields—and thereby potentially entering the water system—it would also limit subsidies to only farms that can feed animals with the fodder they produce themselves.

Supporters of the initiative, which garnered 113,979 signatures, say taxpayers' money must not be used to subsidize damage to public health and the environment.

#### Agriculture groups split

Large agricultural organizations, including the Swiss Farmers' Union



**OLLON, Switzerland:** This file photo taken in Ollon, western Switzerland shows an electoral poster surrounded by cows reading in French: "Two times No to the extreme phytosanitary initiatives", ahead of a vote of two people's initiatives trying to ban the use of pesticides for the Swiss agriculture. —FP

and the Association of Swiss Vegetable Producers, have called for a double "No" vote, deeming the measures too extreme.

"We feed you, we get punished," runs their slogan. Beekeepers want a double "Yes" vote, while the Bio Suisse group of organic producers and gardeners—in a country where organic farming accounts for 15 percent of all farms—wants a "Yes" vote on pesticides and a "No" vote on the second initiative.

It says that despite the second initiative's good intentions, the fodder limits would make the work of organic farmers all the harder, without resolv-

ing the issue of intensive farming—as large farms could simply renounce subsidies and keep big herds. The Swiss government recommends a double "No" vote, warning of the risks to food supply that could see prices soar, to the detriment of lower-income households in a country where the cost of living is already high.

"Agriculture must change, we agree on that," Francis Egger, deputy director of the Swiss Farmers' Union, said. "There are two times 100,000 people who have signed, so there is a clear message from consumers," he admitted, adding up the two separate petitions. —AFP

## US, EU slam Nigeria's Twitter ban

**ABUJA:** The US and the European Union voiced concern over Nigeria's decision to indefinitely ban Twitter after the US social media giant deleted a tweet from the president's account for violating its rules. International human rights groups have also condemned the move, which followed previous attempts by the government of Africa's most populous country to regulate social media.

Nigerian telecoms operators complied with a government directive Friday to suspend access to Twitter indefinitely. The diplomatic missions of the EU, US, Britain, Canada and Ireland issued a joint statement late Saturday condemning the ban. "Banning systems of expression is not the answer," it said.

"Precisely the moment when Nigeria needs to foster inclusive dialogue and expression of opinions, as well as share vital information in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic." "The path to a more secure Nigeria lies in more, not less, communication," it added. More than 39 million Nigerians have a Twitter account, according to NOI polls, a public opinion and research organization based in Nigeria.

The platform has played an important role in public discourse in the country, with hashtags #BringBackOurGirls after Boko Haram kidnapped 276 schoolgirls in 2014, and #EndSARS during anti-police brutality protests last year. The government's suspension came after Twitter on Wednesday deleted a remark on President Muhammadu Buhari's account in which he referred to the country's civil war four decades ago in a warning about recent unrest.

The 78-year-old president, a former general, referred to "those misbehaving" in recent violence in the southeast, where officials blame a proscribed separatist group IPOB for attacks on police and election offices.

#### 'Misinformation'

"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.

The presidency denied late on Saturday that the Twitter suspension was a response to the removal of that post. "There has been a litany of problems with the social media platform in Nigeria, where misinformation and fake news spread through it have had real world violent consequences," a presidency spokesman Garba Shehu said in a statement.

Shehu said the removal of Buhari's tweet was "disappointing" and said "major tech companies must be alive to their responsibilities." Twitter said it was "deeply concerned by the blocking of Twitter in Nigeria." —AFP



## Business

# G7 steps toward making firms disclose climate risks

## Some NGOs voice doubts amid lack of global consensus

**LONDON:** The wealthy G7 countries on Saturday moved closer to mandatory disclosure of companies' climate impact despite a lack of global agreement and doubts from some NGOs. "We support moving towards mandatory climate-related financial disclosures," their finance ministers said in a statement released after two days of meetings, adding that this would "provide consistent and decision-useful information for market participants".

The idea backed by the UK, the US, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan would make it mandatory for all major companies to come clean on, for example, their carbon dioxide emissions—a crucial aspect of the transition towards cleaner energy.

Such regulations would help companies assess the financial impact of the climate crisis and make necessary changes as their countries set ambitious targets such as becoming carbon neutral by 2050. It would also help investors who offer financing to large groups and take an ever closer interest in the impact of the climate on businesses, both in terms of performance and reputation.

The G7 says it is following the recom-

mendations of the taskforce on climate-related financial disclosures (TCFD), put in place in 2017 with members from across the G20. The finance ministers went even further by hailing the creation of a taskforce on nature-related financial disclosures, which covers not only the climate but also nature and biodiversity. The challenge is that every country takes responsibility and imposes measures on its own companies and so there has to be agreement on accounting rules.

Britain already plans to force companies to go public on their environmental impact from 2025 — with the government claiming this makes it the most progressive country in the G20. Nevertheless, disclosing such information will not be mandatory at first, and businesses in the country are only required to either publish the data or to explain why they are not doing so.

### 'Proper disclosure'

The governor of the Bank of France, Francois Villeroy de Galhau, said in an interview with *The Financial Times* on Wednesday that a global agreement could emerge from the COP26 climate change summit in Glasgow in November.

"Proper disclosure should become mandatory—I would expect this as a first step," Villeroy told the newspaper. "Nobody expected six months ago for us to go as quickly as we did and to say perhaps we could have a positive conclusion on mandatory disclosure at the COP26."

Investors are also pushing G7 countries to do more, such as Britain's IA (Investment Association), which is urging financial regulators to make the publication of climate risks mandatory. "Ensuring high-quality and comparable data on the impact of climate change lies at the heart of this," said Chris Cummings, CEO of the IA.

For their part, NGOs warn that the latest measure is no guarantee that the business world will play its part in energy transition. "Disclosures should have been mandatory a long time ago, but at this stage of the climate and ecological crisis, calling for better data is a dangerous distraction," said David Barmes, an economist at Positive Money.

"Markets will not save the day," he said, adding that in his view the G7 governments should mainly work with central banks and regulators to "actively



**LONDON:** US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen starts to gather her notes at the end of a press conference at Winfield House in London Saturday after attending the G7 Finance Ministers meeting. — AFP

shift finance out of fossil fuels and other environmentally harmful activities."

NGOs said Wednesday in a report that G7 countries had missed a chance

to become greener during the pandemic by massively subsidizing polluting sectors such as air travel, despite their climate commitments. — AFP

## Main points agreed by G7 finance ministers in London

**LONDON:** The finance ministers of the G7 wealthy nations in a "historic" commitment Saturday agreed to impose a global minimum tax on large corporations such as tech giants. They also made commitments on disclosure of climate impact, support for poorer countries and post-pandemic recovery. Here are the main points of the statement released at the end of the two-day meeting.

### Minimum tax rate for giants

The main point of the meeting between the ministers from the G7 — Britain, France, Italy, Canada, Japan, Germany and the United States—was to agree a minimum corporate tax of 15 percent for the largest and most profitable multinationals. It will have to be paid in every country they operate in.

The idea is that such companies, including tech giants, should pay taxes where they earn their profits, not just where they are headquartered, which currently is often in countries with low taxes. The measure is particularly aimed at the digital economy and US tech companies which have profited enormously during the pandemic.

The statement does not make it clear whether countries that already have a tax on digital services, such as the UK, will now drop these once the tax reform is implemented. But British finance minister Rishi Sunak said after the meeting that the UK's digital services tax would be removed.

While the ministers made a landmark commitment, the reforms are not yet final-



**LONDON:** Japan's Finance Minister Taro Aso (left) and Eurogroup President Paschal Donohoe bump elbows as they pose for a photograph during their meeting on the second day of the G7 Finance Ministers Meeting, at Lancaster House in London. — AFP

ized and the G7 finance chiefs will push for an agreement at a meeting of the broader G20 in Italy in July.

### Climate risks

The ministers also discussed making companies disclose their impact on climate change to investors. This comes as the G7 summit in Cornwall next week will focus on tackling climate change. The G7 finance ministers supported "moving towards mandatory climate-related financial disclosures", agreeing that investors need "high quality" and reliable information on companies' exposure to climate risk, which is currently done on a voluntary basis.

This would particularly concern companies' transition to clean energy. The COP26 global climate summit to be held in Scotland in November could agree a global framework on this. The G7 countries said they were determined to help "low-income and vulnerable countries" dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. They supported

the allocation of \$650 billion of special drawing rights to help these countries. These are international reserve assets created by the International Monetary Fund that provide these countries with extra liquidity.

The ministers also urged the World Bank to step up its efforts and use of its "financial firepower" to improve vaccine access for developing countries, including through the Covax scheme.

The statement says G7 members will continue to support their economies to recover as they reopen from COVID-related lockdowns. "Once the recovery is firmly established, we need to ensure the long-term sustainability of public finances to enable us to respond to future crises," it said.

The pandemic can be overcome only when it is under control everywhere, requiring equitable access to vaccines and tests, the statement added. The G7 health ministers on Friday committed to share their vaccine doses through Covax "when domestic situations permit". — AFP

## Bangladesh cuts taxes for firms hiring transgender people

**DHAKA:** Companies that hire transgender people will be given tax breaks, Bangladesh announced, the latest in a series of measures to boost support for the minority group in the conservative Muslim-majority nation. Bangladesh is home to an estimated 1.5 million transgender people, who face rampant discrimination and violence and are often forced to live by begging, the sex trade or crime.

Bullying and abuse have prompted many to flee their homes for communes, making it harder for them to secure jobs. "I propose to enact special tax incentives with a view to providing employment and ensuring a rise in living standards and social and economic integration of the members of the third gender," finance minister A.H.M. Mustafa Kamal announced in the annual national budget. He said firms would be given a five percent tax cut, or be reimbursed with 75 percent of the salaries of transgender people, if they hire 100 workers or 10 percent of their workforce from the community.

The minimum tax threshold for transgender people was also increased. "Absolutely, it is very good news for us," said Anonnya Banik, president of transgender rights group Sadakalo Hijra Unnayan Sangha.

"But we don't want it to be political propaganda," Banik called for further measures including tax breaks for businesses run by transgender people. "We are massively hit by the coronavirus crisis. We should be given tax breaks and interest-free loans," Banik said.

The chief executive of leading Bangladeshi denim maker Smart Group, which employs 26,000 people, welcomed the move. "It is going to prompt a lot of business groups to employ Hijra (transgender) people. It will keep Hijras off the streets," Mostafizur Rahman told AFP. The LGBTQ community faces widespread discrimination in Bangladesh, with a colonial-era law still in place that punishes gay sex with prison, though enforcement is rare. — AFP

## Italy expects 20% tourism hike on 2020 as curbs eased

**ROME:** Italy expects a 20-percent increase in summer tourist numbers this year over 2020 as the country progressively eases COVID-19 restrictions, the Italian tourism federation said Saturday.

"The 2021 summer season is showing the first signs of a sector recovery. Between June and August 33 million arrivals are forecast along with 140 million nights spent in official (tourist) structures—a 20.8 percent rise on 2020," Assoturismo said after surveying 2,185 tourism firms.

The federation added that would net the sector around 12.8 billion euros (\$15.6 billion) in tourism receipts—around three-quarters from fellow Italians visiting other regions. Even so, Assoturismo said the rise "would not be enough to return to pre-COVID levels" as summer 2019, the last before the pandemic, saw an additional 73.5 million nights spent in the country.

Before the pandemic, tourism accounted for 14 percent of GDP in Italy—the EU's third largest economy—and coronavirus fallout helped tip Italy into its worst recession since World War II.

Despite the reopening of numerous air links the sector is pinning its hopes on



**VENICE:** Tourists take selfie pictures on the Ponte dell'Accademia bridge over the grand canal in Venice. — AFP

short-hop tourism this summer as locals eye coastal breaks as well as major city draws Rome, Florence and Venice.

Such shorter trips are expected to rise by a quarter on last year, helped not least by price drops of up to a third.

Italy hopes to welcome 6.7 million more foreign tourists this year than in 2020, but arrivals will still be well down, by around two-thirds, on 2019 when the 100-million mark was passed.

"After 12 terrible months Italian tourism finally can detect concrete signs of recovery. But it is still a slow recovery, above all where foreign demand is concerned which will not be enough to pull back what was lost with the pandemic," said Assoturismo president

Vittorio Messina.

"Our hope is that end of season sales give us better results thanks to the European health passport," Messina added. She said she regretted that uncertainty regarding dates for easing restrictions and curfew limitations had turned some foreign visitors to other destinations.

Italian authorities have progressively been lifting restrictions as virus data improves. The current curfew which previously ran from 11 pm to 5 am will from Monday be pushed back an hour to begin at midnight. Bars and restaurants will also be allowed to serve indoors at tables limited to a maximum four customers. — AFP

## Former boss to pay Volkswagen record sum over Dieselgate

**FRANKFURT:** Former Volkswagen chief executive Martin Winterkorn will pay the auto giant a record multimillion sum to settle a negligence claim surrounding the "Dieselgate" emissions scandal, informed sources said yesterday. "The supervisory board validated in its meeting Saturday the main points of amicable agreements" to settle the claim, a spokesman said without giving details.

Winterkorn, who resigned in 2015, a week after the diesel emissions scandal broke, will pay around 11 million euros (\$13.4 million) in damages and interest in a deal shareholders will need to endorse at a July annual general meeting, according to the sources.

The spokesman said the deal, which concerns several other senior VW figures caught up in the fallout from the scandal, would be settled and announced "in the coming days."

According to German media, Volkswagen is seeking a total of more than a billion euros in damages from its former executives with insurance covering between 200 and 500 million euros towards the fallout. The automaker admitted in 2015 to using

illegal software 'cheat devices' to rig the results of diesel engine tests in around 11 million cars.

Volkswagen indicated in late March it intended to seek damages without giving a figure following a legal investigation which found Winterkorn breached a duty of care over the use of the software cheating device designed to manipulate the level of polluting emissions in lab tests.

Including fines, legal fees and vehicle refits and recalls the scandal has cost the company some 32 billion euros. The former CEO of VW subsidiary Audi, Rupert Stadler, who was dismissed in 2019, last September became the first former top executive to stand trial in connection with the scandal.

The affair, brought to light by US authorities, dealt a shattering blow to VW's reputation and to that of the auto industry in Germany from which it is still recovering. Looking to turn the page Volkswagen is now heavily invested in the switch to electric vehicles. Volkswagen has always insisted that the diesel trickery was the work of a handful of lower-level employees acting without the knowledge of their superiors. Prosecutors dispute that, saying senior figures know about the scam.

Assuming shareholders sign off on the proposed fines they will outstrip those paid by former Siemens executives Heinrich von Pierer and Klaus Kleinfeld in 2010 following a bribery scandal which cost them respectively five million and two million euros. — AFP



## Business

# stc marks a milestone, receives PCI data security standard certification

## Certification to ensure secure and safe online transaction in line with global standards

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced that it is now compliant with the Payment Card Industry (PCI) - Data Security Standard (DSS) after receiving its version 3.2.1 certification.

In a statement released by stc, the company indicated that to obtain the PCI-DSS, it went through a comprehensive and rigorous auditing review of existing processes that involved the acts of securing current customer data. Although protecting customer data comes as an ongoing initiative for the company, it was able to effectively comply with the technical and operational requirements due to the diligent efforts made by the stc team. stc marks the achievement as a standard that will reinforce its ongoing commitment to provide its customers with pioneering solutions, backed by a secure online payment portal protected against cyber threats and privacy data breaches.

The PCI-DSS is one of the most stringent and comprehensive global industry standards for pay-

ment security. Vendors and businesses in compliance with PCI-DSS are required to conform to a set of prerequisites issued by the PCI Security Standards Council to ensure the protection of sensitive cardholder data and aid in the prevention of credit card fraud. Moving forward, the company will be more equipped and protected against breaches, while possessing a competitive advantage in global security practices. Data breaches can not only lead to financial loss and distress but can also harm the brand and reputation that institutions spent years to build. Ensuring the protection of sensitive customer data from possible cyber-attacks is not a matter stc takes lightly, especially during times where such attacks are occurring more often, exposing sensitive informa-



Fahad Abdul Rahman Al-Ali

tion due to data breaches.

Commenting on the achievement, engineer Fahad Abdul Rahman Al-Ali, Chief Technology Officer at stc said, "The certification is a testament to stc's diligent and effective cyber security strategy to establish and maintain a reliable and secure payment processing environment for its customers. On behalf of the stc Cyber Security team and myself, I would like to congratulate stc for achieving another major milestone in attaining the PCI-DSS 3.2.1 for its CDE in Kuwait. Considering the unprecedented magnitude of the pandemic, I wish to emphasize that this achievement would have not been possible without high level of commitment witnessed by stc's management. Their guidance and support enabled the project team to apply their knowledge and experience both effectively and efficiently which led to this success."

Al-Ali added, "Complying with PCI-DSS 3.2.1 is essential for entities that wish to protect their customers' card data and provide customers with the confidence to execute transactions online securely. The prerequisites set in place to obtain the certifi-



certification enhances data security, which in return helps retain loyal customers and provides all stakeholders with peace of mind. At stc, we believe in the importance of investing in a solid cyber-security infrastructure that will reduce cyber-attack vulnerability for both our customers and employees, keeping their data safe and protected from potential threats."

## El Salvador plans to make bitcoin legal tender

**SAN SALVADOR:** El Salvador may become the first country to make bitcoin legal tender, President Nayid Bukele announced Saturday, saying he would soon propose a bill that could transform the remittance-dependent economy. The move would make the Central American nation the first in the world to formally accept the cryptocurrency as legal money and would "allow the financial inclusion of thousands of people who are outside the legal economy," Bukele said.

"Next week, I will send to Congress a bill that makes Bitcoin legal money," the populist leader said during a video message to the Bitcoin 2021 conference in Miami, Florida.

The bill aims to create jobs, he said, in a country where "70 percent of the population does not have a bank account and works in the informal economy." The El Salvador government is yet to give details of the bill, which will require approval from a parliament dominated by the president's allies.

Remittances from Salvadorans working overseas represent a major chunk of the economy-equivalent to roughly 22 percent of Gross Domestic Product. In 2020, remittances to the country totaled \$5.9 billion, according to official reports.

According to Bukele, bitcoin represented "the fastest growing way to transfer" those billions of dollars in remittances and to prevent millions from



MIAMI, Florida: People enjoy themselves at the Bitcoin 2021 Convention, a crypto-currency conference held at the Mana Convention Center in Wynwood in Miami, Florida. — AFP

being lost to intermediaries. "Thanks to the use of bitcoin, the amount received by more than a million low-income families increases by several billion dollars every year," said the president.

"This improves life and the future of millions of people." The cryptocurrency market grew to more than \$2.5 trillion in mid-May 2020, according to

the Coinmarketcap page, driven by interest from increasingly serious investors from Wall Street to Silicon Valley.

But the volatility of bitcoin—currently priced at \$36,127 — and its murky legal status has raised questions about whether it could ever replace fiat currency in day-to-day transactions. — AFP

## NBK Money Markets Report

## US non-farm payrolls miss expectations

**KUWAIT:** The US dollar rallied at the end of last week on signs of an improving labor market. The unemployment claims figure, released on Thursday, sparked the rebound when it showed Americans filing new claims for unemployment benefits dropped below 400,000 for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic started more than a year ago. It was also supported by other data on Thursday showing private payrolls increased by the most in 11 months in May, fueled by robust demand amid a rapidly reopening economy.

The data supported expectations that job growth accelerated last month, though shortages of workers and raw materials continue to loom over the labor market recovery. Market optimism on the data saw the dollar rally even before the release of Friday's Non-Farm payrolls. The dollar index rose further above last month's low of 89.209 and closer to the 90.500-level, and had its largest daily percentage increase since the middle of May. Dollar gains were broad-based but most evident against the commodity-related currencies - the Australia and New Zealand dollars which both declined by just over 1 percent.

The dollar reversed course however, and lost most of its gains after the non-farm payroll report failed to meet expectations. Friday's report showed 559K new jobs in May following last month's dismal 277K jobs. The report was also less than economists' expectations for a 645K increase. The unemployment rate fell to 5.8 percent from 6.1 percent and was better than the estimate of 5.9 percent. The increased hiring came as the easing pandemic, helped by vaccinations, pulled more people back into the labor force, offering assurance that the economy's recovery from the COVID-19 recession remained on track. Heading into May, the US economy had recovered about 14.3 million of the 22 million jobs lost in the early days of the pandemic.

### ECB policy

Market focus will now shift to the European Central Bank monetary policy meeting taking place this week. In particular, the focus will be on the guidance of the pandemic emergency purchase program. According to a Reuters' poll, the ECB will

## Rates - 06<sup>th</sup> May, 2021

Currencies	Previous Week Levels				This Week's Expected Range		3-Month
	Open	High	Low	Close	Minimum	Maximum	Forward
EUR	1.2190	1.2254	1.2102	1.2165	1.2060	1.2360	1.2186
GBP	1.4178	1.4248	1.4081	1.4154	1.4055	1.4370	1.4152
JPY	109.82	110.33	109.31	109.49	107.50	111.50	109.41
CHF	0.8999	0.9053	0.8945	0.8992	0.8795	0.9095	0.8970

not change the total size of its asset purchase program at its June 10 meeting but will start tapering its PEPP later in the year. With an economic recovery underway and price pressures rising, calls for winding down the emergency purchases have increased in recent weeks. But several ECB members have said a decision to reduce purchases at the June 10 policy meeting was unlikely.

Still, since the last meeting, the flow of economic data has been positive and that flow of data is likely to mean some modest upward revision to the real GDP estimate for 2021 from the current 4.0 percent. Euro zone business activity also surged in May as the easing of some coronavirus related restrictions drove a recovery in the services industry. The data comes soon after factories also had their best month on record. That meant IHS Markit's final composite PMI jumped to 57.1 last month from April's 53.8, its highest level since February 2018. Separately, Germany's final composite PMI rose to 56.2 in May from 55.8 in the previous month.

### UK Composite PMI

Meanwhile, Britain's services sector recorded the biggest jump in activity in 24 years last month. Resurgent business and consumer spending in response to looser pandemic restrictions led the rebound. Service providers indicated a sharp and accelerated rise in new order volumes during May, with the speed of recovery the fastest since October 2013. This reflected a swift turnaround in domestic demand due to the reopening of the UK economy. The IHS Markit/CIPS PMI rose to 62.9 in May from 61.0 in April.

### Reserve Bank of Australia

The RBA decided to maintain the current policy settings with the official cash rate at the historic low of 0.10 percent. The board reiterated that it had no plans to increase the cash rate until the actual infla-

tion rate is sustainably within the 2 percent-3 percent range, which it again said was not likely to occur until 2024 at the earliest.

Still, RBA Governor Philip Lowe said the global economy was continuing to recover from the pandemic and the outlook for the remainder of this year and 2022 was for strong growth. He said that global trade in goods has picked up strongly, and commodity prices are mostly higher than at the start of the year, but noted inflation in underlying terms remained low and below central bank targets.

### China Services PMI

China's Caixin services PMI fell to 55.1, as the momentum in services activity softened in May. The gauge remains at a healthy level of expansion, and is higher than the pre-pandemic average of 52. This shows that the services recovery is continuing, though the pace is more gradual now. This echoes the softer reading in the official National Bureau of Statistics services PMI released earlier last week. To support a continued recovery the People's Bank of China will likely keep its policies accommodative.

### Oil prices supported

Oil rose towards \$72 a barrel last week, trading close to a two-year high as OPEC+ supply discipline and recovering demand countered concerns about slow COVID-19 vaccination rollouts around the globe. OPEC and its allies said they would stick to their agreed supply restraints just as the weekly supply report showed US crude inventories dropped more than expected last week. Further boosting oil was a slowdown in talks between the United States and Iran over Tehran's nuclear program which reduced expectations for a rapid increase in supply of Iranian oil to the market.

### Kuwaiti dinar

USD/KWD closed last week at 0.30075.

## Engine No 1 converts tiny ExxonMobil stake into big win

**NEW YORK:** ExxonMobil has spent more than two decades sparring with activists over climate change, turning back virtually every shareholder challenge at its annual meeting each spring.

But late last month, the oil giant, which has shunned renewable energy investments embraced by some rivals, suffered a landmark defeat when upstart investment fund Engine No. 1 successfully won election of three of its four board candidates, overcoming fierce campaigning from management.

A newly formed San Francisco-based investment group, Engine No. 1 is a relative minnow in the world of finance, but now stands poised to steer the iconic US petroleum heavyweight in a new direction.

Its victory points to the increased vulnerability of incumbent energy players to insurgent investors as public concern mounts over climate change. Engine No. 1's stake in ExxonMobil amounts to 0.02 percent of total shares, a pittance that may have led the Texas company to underestimate the broader investor frustration it faces after it was kicked out of the prestigious Dow index last year.

"It's ironic that an entity with such a small stake was able to effect such change," said CFRA Research analyst Stewart Glickman, who noted that BlackRock and other funds with large stakes sided with Engine No.1 and played a critical role in its victory.

"They used institutional investors that are more climate change-focused to get this done," Glickman added. Andrew Logan, a veteran of shareholder campaigns at ExxonMobil as director of the oil and gas program at activist investor group Ceres, said Engine No.1's newness was an advantage. "With Exxon, everyone has a history," Logan said. "Having a new face without that baggage led them to open doors."

Engine No. 1's board nominees were not environmentalists, but longtime corporate executives with energy industry experience. The group was skillful in tying ExxonMobil's carbon policy to a broader corporate strategy that struck investors as out-of-touch, Logan said. Engine No. 1 "struck a powerful balance of nodding to climate change, but they focused on the core issue of Exxon's capital plan and its strategy," he said.

Named for San Francisco's first firehouse, Engine No. 1 was founded last year by Christopher James, a wealthy technology investor.

Another key player in the ExxonMobil campaign was Charlie Penner, a former partner with activist hedge fund Janus who is well known to key asset managers. The firm currently has \$240 million under management and just 22 employees, according to a securities filing. — AFP



In this file photo taken on September 20, 2008, an Exxon sign is seen at a station in Manassas, Virginia. Activist investor fund Engine No. 1 stands poised to fill three board seats at ExxonMobil following a hotly-contested shareholder vote, the company said.—AFP



## Business

# Burgan Bank holds its 55th ordinary Annual General Assembly meeting

## Shareholders approve distribution of 5 fils cash dividend and 5% stock dividend

**KUWAIT:** Burgan Bank held its 55th Ordinary Annual General Assembly meeting yesterday at KIPCO Tower, with a quorum of 84.5 percent.

The Board of Directors of the bank submitted to its shareholders the financial results achieved for the past year ending on December 31, 2020, which reflected the bank's ability to maintain resilient revenues while delivering on its strategic initiatives despite the unprecedented challenges. The bank's shareholders approved the distribution of dividend of 5 fils per share and 5 percent stock dividend. During the General Assembly, two non-independent Board Members were elected for this year, Entisar Al-Suwaidi and Abdullah Mohammed Al-Mansour.

During the meeting, Majed Essa Al-Ajeel, Burgan Bank's Chairman highlighted that the bank has proved its resilience throughout these difficult times. The bank posted FY '20 Revenues of KD 212.8 million with stable levels of non-interest income of

KD 72.8 million and expenses of KD 97.2 million falling by 5 percent and leading to operating profit of KD 115.5 million. Customer loans and advances grew by 1.4 percent to KD 4.3 billion and customer deposits grew by 2.5 percent to KD 4.1 billion. He also highlighted the Q4 successful issue of \$500 million Tier 2 Capital securities, further strengthening the bank's capital adequacy ratio to 18.3 percent.

In a year of unprecedented change, Al-Ajeel touched upon Burgan Bank's efforts to actively support its customers, employees and the community through a host of measures. These included postponement of loan installments for six months for retail clients and SME clients, deferral of interest servicing for corporate and private banking customers on a case-by-case basis and a smooth functioning of all client channels including 24/7 access to contact centers. Burgan has also established and committed to the highest level of health and safety standards throughout its net-



Majed Essa Al-Ajeel

Masoud M J Hayat

Raed Al-Haqhaq

work of branches, ATMs and offices.

Commenting on the bank's focus on its strategy throughout 2020, Masoud M J Hayat, Burgan Bank's Vice Chairman and Group CEO, highlighted the bank's strategic key pillars which include human development, sustainability, digital transformation, and asset reallocation. He stressed on the

bank's long-term sustainability efforts and pointed out how the past year emphasized the utmost importance of sustainability in the way we do business. In implementing these goals, we have prioritized the focus on developing our human element that we consider the main pillar in putting our strategy in practice. We have therefore

concentrated on reinforcing and empowering our talent pool by providing specialized learning and development opportunities.

Raed Al-Haqhaq, Deputy Group Chief Executive Officer & CEO- Kuwait of Burgan Bank, continued to highlight the bank's strategic initiatives by focusing on its digital transformation journey. During 2020, Burgan's online portal and mobile banking application underwent a major upgrade that was received with very positive clients' feedback. Burgan pursued its efforts to boost the Cybersecurity Framework given the increased usage of online channels, and to enhance the user access management with threat intelligence and monitoring. The bank has also launched the first of its kind merchant-only application in the region - Tijarati, and a new improved WhatsApp business service. Moving forward, many more important milestones are planned this year for our digital journey.

### Kamco GCC Banking Sector Report

## GCC banks slash cash dividends due to COVID

**KUWAIT:** The impact of COVID-19 was apparent on the GCC banking sector that recorded record high provisions during Q4-2020. As an ongoing effect of the pandemic, banks also slashed cash dividend payments by almost half, from \$14.6 billion as cash dividend for FY-2019 to \$8.0 billion for FY-2020. This was also the second consecutive year of dividend cuts, one of the first since the financial crisis, after FY-2019 dividends were cut by \$3.9 billion. The cuts also came as a result of restrictions from regulators in exchange for relaxations on the capital front.

On the business side, lending growth continued for the fourth consecutive quarter in Q1-2021. Gross loans (excluding Kuwaiti banks) reached \$1.43 trillion at the end of Q1-2021, registering a q-o-q growth of 3.5 percent. However, aggregate net loans (including Kuwaiti banks) grew at much slower pace of 1.8 percent q-o-q to reach \$1.52 trillion. UAE was the only country in the region that reported a decline in net loans by 0.7 percent, whereas the rest of the GCC reported q-o-q growth.

Meanwhile, customer deposits showed growth across the board reaching \$1.89 trillion at the end of the quarter with a q-o-q growth of 2.3 percent. The faster pace of growth in customer deposits vs. net loans resulted in a lower loan-to-deposit ratio that reached 80.2 percent.

Total banking sector assets continued to climb for the fourth consecutive quarter reaching a new record high of \$2.51 trillion. Growth was seen across the board with Omani banks reporting the biggest q-o-q percentage increase in total assets at 3.2 percent, although the Sultanate remains the smallest banking industry in terms of listed bank total assets of \$81 billion at the end of Q1-2021. UAE banks continued to account for the biggest share of regional banking balance sheet with total assets of \$818 billion followed by Saudi Arabia at \$673 billion.

Meanwhile, the stability in oil prices at over the \$65/b level has somewhat alleviated

concerns related to government revenues and estimates now point to a much lower funding requirements. That said, government's spending plans remains intact and as a result break even oil prices are above the current oil price for all the GCC countries, barring Qatar, according to the IMF. Sovereigns are also looking for private participation in the economic activity as seen from a number of PPP projects awarded recently. This, according to us, would augurs well for GCC banks, especially given the unutilized lending capacity with one of the lowest loan-to-deposit ratio of 80.2 percent. Nevertheless, the unwinding of banking related COVID-19 relaxations would present new challenges for the sector during 2H-2021.

### Net profits reach pre-COVID levels

GCC banking sector net profits witnessed remarkable recovery during Q1-2021 backed by growth seen across the region. Profits reached \$8.4 billion during the quarter, up 62 percent y-o-y and 14.2 percent sequentially. Out of 59 banks in the region, merely 6 reported a q-o-q decline in profits during Q1-2021 while 17 banks reported a y-o-y decline. The improvement was mainly led by a 41 percent or \$2.5 billion q-o-q drop in loan loss provisions (LLP) that reached a six-quarter low level of \$3.6 billion in Q1-2021. This was partially offset by a decline in the top line as banks continue to deal with the low interest rate environment. At the country level, aggregate profits for banks in Kuwait, UAE and Bahrain more than doubled q-o-q, whereas Saudi Arabian banks reported a profit growth of 34.0 percent.

### Cash dividend payments affected

Shareholders of banks in the GCC received significantly less cash dividends for FY-2020 as banks in the region were either virtually barred from paying dividends due to the regulatory relaxations for COVID-19 or made a much smaller

dividend payment. Aggregate dividend payments for FY-2020 dropped by \$6.6 billion to \$8.0 billion as compared to payments of \$14.6 billion as cash dividends for FY-2019. The decline came after 17 banks in the region cancelled FY-2020 dividend payments with the bulk of them due to COVID-19 related issues. Dividend for the year FY-2019 had also declined as some banks slashed dividends even last year. Dividend payments for FY-2019 dropped by 21 percent from \$18.5 billion as dividend payments for FY-2018.

### Marginal recovery

Aggregate return on equity (ROE) for the GCC banking sector showed marginal improvement for the first time in six quarters. However, the ratio remained relatively low as compared to historical levels at around 8.2 percent for the aggregate GCC banking sector, recovering 10 bps from its bottom at the end of 2020. In terms of y-o-y performance, the ratio has contracted 370 bps mainly due to the decline in aggregate profitability. Total shareholder equity remained above the \$300 billion mark at \$311.1 billion, declining marginally by 0.5 percent from the previous quarter. This was also a seasonal decline in equity in Q1-2021 mainly led by dividend declarations by banks during the first quarter. At the country level, Qatari banks continue to boast the highest average ROE of 11.6 percent despite seeing a decline of 20 bps sequentially and 220 bps as compared to Q1-2020. Saudi Arabian banks were next with an average ROE of 9.2 percent (+30 bps q-o-q) followed by UAE banks at 7.2 percent (+20 bps q-o-q). On the other hand, Kuwaiti banks reported the lowest average ROE of 4.6 percent after declining by 440 bps as compared to Q1-2020.

### Topline declines

Total bank revenue for the GCC banks declined marginally by 0.6 percent q-o-q during Q1-2021 after seeing a healthy growth of 5.7 percent during the previous quarter. The decline in Q1-2021 was mainly

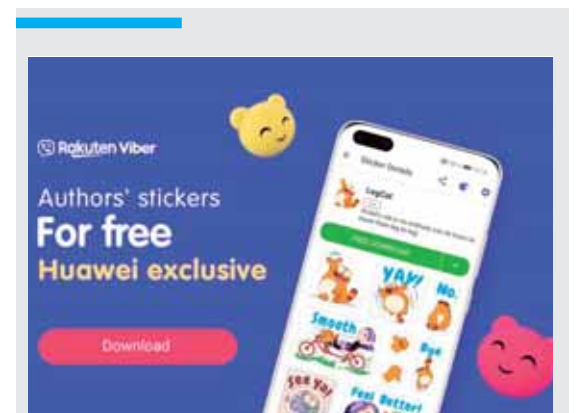
led by a fall in net interest income that was partially offset by an increase in non-interest income. Non-interest income grew for the third consecutive quarter during Q1-2021 increasing by 2.3 percent q-o-q to reach \$6.7 billion. The increase was led by higher non-interest income reported by banks in UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman that was partially offset by declines reported by banks in Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. On the other hand, after seeing growth during the previous two quarters, aggregate net interest income declined by 1.9 percent q-o-q during Q1-2021 to reach \$14.4 billion. The q-o-q decline came after higher net interest income reported by Qatari and Bahraini banks were more than offset by a decline reported by banks in the rest of the GCC countries.

### Provisions almost halve

Loan loss provisions (LLP) in Q1-2021 declined across the board in the GCC banking sector as compared to Q4-2020. Total provisions recorded during the quarter stood at a six-quarter low level of \$3.6 billion as compared \$6.1 billion during Q4-2020. UAE banks reported the biggest absolute sequential decline in LLP at \$0.9 billion to reach \$1.5 billion, still the highest in the GCC. Qatari banks were next with an LLP of \$0.7 billion during the quarter, with a q-o-q decline of \$ 0.3 billion followed by Kuwaiti banks that booked provisions of \$0.64 billion, registering a q-o-q decline of 34.4 percent.

### Oil prices provide a much need breather

The oil market has remained resilient since the start of the year backed by a demand revival as economies recover from the pandemic aided by vaccinations as well as restrained oil supplies. Crude prices have traded comfortably around the \$65/b recently, thereby lowering the borrowing requirements for GCC governments. In addition, the prioritization of government spending program since the start of the pandemic further lowered the need to raise funds by GCC governments.



## Huawei and Viber expand partnership

**KUWAIT:** Huawei, one of the leading global technology company, announced it is expanding its long-term brand cooperation with Viber following a successful consumer response to the company's international call and messaging app on AppGallery. The service, which has hundreds of millions users in 190 countries, was one of the first major brands to join AppGallery and is one of the most popular.

Viber enables voice and video calls, messaging, and group chats, has achieved a strong global presence with 62m app distributions through AppGallery in many regions. The two companies are now working together to deliver deeper engagement with the growing user-base.

Part of Viber's success on AppGallery has been its ability to embrace Huawei's "Global +Local" strategy, which focuses on developing relationships with app providers whose solutions are designed to give high quality, locally oriented services to people. As part of the business partnership, Viber has released a customized app update, in which all Viber-owned sticker packs are exclusively free for users with the latest version of Viber app downloaded from AppGallery.

## NBK offers discounts for customers on purchases from Eureka

**KUWAIT:** National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is keen to provide rewards to its customers all year round, according to their different lifestyles and segments. In this context, the bank provides Exclusive Monthly Offers for two days in partnership with Eureka for Thahabi Package, Privilege and Private Banking Customers. These monthly offers are available for NBK Customers when making purchases on Eureka website or app using eligible NBK Visa Credit Cards including NBK Visa Infinite Privilege Credit Card, NBK Visa Infinite Credit Card, NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Infinite Credit Card, and NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Signature Credit Card.

The discounts include a select of products every month for two days. The bank provides a range of offers including the following products:

- 15% discount on Samsung Galaxy S21 Ultra



Mohammed Akram Hashim

- Pre-booking for PS5 (bundled with accessories)
- 10% discount on Arzum Turkish coffee Machine
- 5% discount on Sony TV 85" 4K

On this occasion, Mohammed Akram Hashim, (Head of Segments, Consumer Banking Group) at National Bank of Kuwait said: "We strive to launch rewarding campaigns for our customers from NBK Credit/Prepaid Card holders all year round, by providing exceptional offers that meet their needs and reflect NBK's leadership as a provider of integrated banking experience.

Hashim accentuated the importance of NBK's close partnerships with leading brands in Kuwait, which always translates into exclusive and exquisite offers and services provided to its customers.

We are committed to provide exclusive and unique offers to our customers, in line with our strategy to give them an integrated banking experience top-notch banking services and rewards that match their lifestyles and meet their expectations." NBK Visa Credit Cards are the best payment experience for the convenience they provide to customers, in addition to the various benefits when using their cards for shopping, including NBK Rewards Program, NBK Miles Program, Purchase Protection and Extended Warranty. Additionally, NBK Visa Credit Cards provide a unique lifestyle, and eligibility for exceptional campaigns all year round, which are always gain customers' satisfaction and interaction.

## Burgan Bank winners of Yawmi draw

**KUWAIT:** Burgan Bank announced yesterday the names of the daily draw winners of its Yawmi account draw, each taking home a cash-prize of KD 5,000.

### The lucky winners are:

1. Hassan Salah Elsadek
2. Ali Sayed Ali
3. Ahmad Ramzi Mohammad
4. Amer Abdulqader Al-Awadhi
5. Bashayer Mohamad Al-Shatti

## CBK announces winners of Al-Najma draws

**KUWAIT:** Commercial Bank conducted the weekly and monthly draws on Al-Najma Account and salary transfer campaign yesterday. The draws were conducted in the presence of Ministry of Commerce and Industry representative Ahmed Al-Basman.

### The results of the draws were as follows:

- 1) Al-Najma monthly draw - the prize of KD 20,000 went to the winner Anwar Mujahed Hamzah Khoursheed.
- 2) Al-Najma weekly draw - the prize of KD 5,000 went to the winner Mohammad Gulam Ahmad.
- 3) Salary account campaign - the prize of up to KD 1,000 went to the winner Fahad Salem Saad Aber Saad.

The bank stated that the salary campaign is aimed at customers who transfer their salaries of KD 500 or more to the bank, especially Kuwaiti employees and residents working in the government, oil sectors and companies listed with the bank

In addition to the daily draw, Burgan Bank also offers a quarterly draw with more chances to win higher rewards, offering the chance to one lucky customer to win KD 125,000 every three months. The Yawmi Account offers daily and quarterly draws, wherein the quarterly draw requires customers to maintain a minimum amount of KD 500 in their account for two months prior to the draw date. Additionally, every KD 10 in the account will entitle customers to one chance of winning. If the account balance is KD 500 and above, the account holder will be qualified for both the quarterly and daily draws.

Burgan Bank encourages everyone to open a Yawmi account and/or increase their deposit to maximize their chances of becoming a winner. The higher the level of the deposit, the higher the likelihood to win.

as well as retirees, and take advantage of the benefits of this campaign and get an instant cash gift from KD 250 to KD 500 or an interest-free loan of 5 times the salary and a maximum of KD 10,000, Kuwaiti pensioner, along with expatriate customers who transfer their debt amounting to KD 10,000 or above to the bank will receive an instant cash gift of 1 percent from their transferred debt.

The Bank stated that Al-Najma Account prizes are distinguished by the highest cash prize and diversity of prizes throughout the year clarifying that the account offers weekly prize of KD 5,000, monthly prize of KD 20,000 and a semi-annual prize of KD 500,000 in addition to the largest prize - linked bank account payout of KD 1,500,000.

Al-Najma Account can be opened by depositing KD 100, and customer should maintain a minimum amount of KD 500 to be eligible to enter all draws on Al-Najma Account prizes. As for the chances of winning, the more balance a customer maintains in Al-Najma Account, the more chances the account holder will get to win, the account also offers additional benefits like the ATM card, a credit card against customer's account and all CBK banking services that customer can enjoy.

The bank revealed that Al-Najma account is available to everyone, and anyone can open Al-Najma account through CBK mobile application in simple steps from anywhere and at any time.



## Lifestyle | Features

## CHINA'S DISENCHANTED YOUTH 'LIE FLAT' TO COPE WITH MODERN LIFE



The photo taken on May 29, 2021 shows a woman taking photos during a Pepe the Frog exhibition at a shopping mall in Beijing. —AFP photos



A man sits in front of a poster of Pepe the Frog.

Ground down by the sapping realities of modern city life, China's youth are "lying flat", the latest buzzword for those tapping out of a culture of endless work with little reward. With growing inequality and rising costs of living nudging traditional markers of success out of reach, some young people are choosing to do the bare minimum at work, dialing back the go-getting aspirations their parents once harbored. "Tang ping" - or "lying flat" - has emerged as the latest Internet-crafted principle to navigate the pains of finding a job among thousands of applicants, plodding through long days and then paying exorbitant rents in China's oversubscribed cities.

After a four-month trawl for work Wang, 24, said "lying flat" chimed with him when he realized his college classmate had been given a leg-up into his family business. "Sending resumes was like fishing for a needle in the ocean," Wang, a lab technician, said giving only one name. "You're beaten up by society and just want a more relaxed life... 'lying flat' is not waiting to die. I still work, but just don't overstretch." Percolating through social media and harvested from all areas of culture, China's youth finds near-weekly expression in new terms, memes and anti-heroes.

"Lying flat" appears to have emerged from a now-deleted post on Chinese forum Tieba after an anonymous poster wrote "lying flat is my wise men's movement". A debate on the meaning has attracted hundreds of millions of hits on Weibo, while the term has provoked admonishments from academics and state media.

For 24-year-old human resources worker Lin, "lying flat" has caught the mood as "young people can't become 'winners in life'

who buy cars, apartments, get married and have children". "So they choose to lower their goals and reduce their desires," she added, giving only a surname. Others praise the concept of reclaiming more attainable goals while stopping to smell the roses. "Isn't it wonderful if basic needs are met and people live in a more relaxed way?" said 47-year-old freelancer Lucy Lu.

#### 'Sang Culture'

Last year's buzzword for the burgeoning ranks of dispossessed was "involution" - a tag describing a student at Tsinghua University who was videoed riding a bicycle while using his laptop. It is now part of the daily vernacular covering the treadmill of modern life, especially in hyper-competitive cities. The average recruitment salary for fresh graduates is around \$1,000 a month, yet rent in Beijing can easily exceed half that amount.

The mood of disenchantment is covered by an umbrella term - "Sang culture" - which began as a self-deprecating subculture for post-90s youth expressing a sense of defeatism. It has entered the mainstream with millennials increasingly aware of a "glass ceiling obstructing their upward mobility", according to K Cohen Tan, an academic at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China.

An early Sang icon was Pepe the Frog, called "sad frog" in China, whose memes conveyed their disillusionment - unlike its adoption as an alt-right symbol in the US. By April, a new Sang culture anti-hero emerged from a boyband reality show. Russian Vladislav Ivanov, 27, joined the show by accident and made it to the finals despite pleading with fans to vote him off.

Unable to leave without breaching his contract, he performed limply in contrast to the fame-getting format, telling fans: "Don't love me, you'll get no results."

But his on-screen persona captured the widespread feeling of wage-slavery - and brought fame and endorsements. Tan believes the malaise sweeping across the urban youth ultimately ties back to an age-old search for value in life. "The difference lies in whether one feels they are grist to the corporate mill by creating value for others," he said.

#### 'Roll up your sleeves'

'Lying flat' seemingly runs counter to the dynamic society cajoled in the rhetoric of President Xi Jinping, whose mantra for society is to "roll up your sleeves and work hard". The connotations of defeatism or docility also clash with generational values in a country whose elders have experienced extremes of poverty, hunger and violence and have often clawed their way up the social ladder. The 'lying flat' concept is "an extremely irresponsible attitude that not only disappoints one's parents but also hundreds and millions of taxpayers," said Tsinghua University professor Li Fengliang.

He argued that people can still achieve social mobility through competition. A widely circulated clip showed host Bai Yansong questioning if young people just wanted "very low property prices, to find work anyhow, and to have no stress whatsoever". "Surely not?" he asked. State-run Xinhua news agency took a swing at "tang ping" culture, publishing a video of a scientist's 12-hour workday, accompanied by a now-removed hashtag "the 86-year-old scientist who rejects lying flat". —AFP



This photo taken on June 3, 2021 shows people cycling along a street during rush hour in Beijing.



This photo taken on June 2, 2021 shows commuters at the subway during rush hour in Beijing.

## Sex attack survivors praise Bafta-tipped 'I May Destroy You'

The hard-hitting British television series "I May Destroy You", which depicts the impact of a sexual assault on a young woman, has won praise from real-life survivors of sexual violence. The show, nominated for several of the UK's prestigious Bafta TV awards handed out yesterday, chronicles a successful young black blogger and novelist piecing together details of the attack she suffered while at a London bar with friends.

The series "changed my life", said Karan Tripathi, a 25-year-old Indian man who was sexually harassed at work. It was only after watching the show that he acknowledged he was a victim, Tripathi said. The series, which aired on the BBC and HBO in 2020, was written and directed by Michaela Coel, who also stars as the heroine Arabella. It is largely based on Coel's own life experiences.

In a dozen intense episodes, Coel spares no blushes with her frank depiction of banal yet violent encounters. The show raises questions about the notion of sexual consent, particularly in the LGBTQ community, and strikes a powerful chord with survivors of violence. Tripathi said the show helped him see he was a victim after a superior at work sexually harassed him and demanded favors from him.

"In my head I was like: 'Okay, does it even qualify... Because at that moment I froze. I just couldn't do anything. I couldn't resist,'" recalled Tripathi, who is gay. "The show's helped me to answer that question," he added, noting in India there is no legal recognition that a man can suffer sexual harassment. The show "gave me the courage to, you know, own up to things that I felt would make me vulnerable," he said. "It gave me a voice, it gave me a language, it gave me the grammar to talk about sexual harassment."

#### 'Demanding justice'

Tripathi learnt of the show from discussion in social media when it failed to win any nominations for the US Golden Globes awarded in March, despite calls for greater diversity. However, the Bafta TV ceremony saw the show nominated in six categories - Coel for best actress, while Paapa Essiedu for best actor for his performance as Arabella's gay best friend who himself has experienced sexual assault by a Grindr date.

The acclaim for the show is well-deserved, said Marie Albert, a 26-year-old French journalist and feminist. "I don't remember ever seeing anything so empowering before," she said, adding that it made her "feel really justified in demanding justice" over sexual attacks against her. Albert said that after watching the show, she gathered up the courage to report the assaults in February, realizing she "could not go back to life as it was before". Albert said she reported incidents of domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment at work. She also reported she had been raped, something she only acknowledged while watching an episode of the show about "stealthling".

#### 'Cathartic'

While sexual violence is "far too often... used as a plot device to elicit drama", this show is "helpful and inspiring for survivors", said a spokesman for The Survivors' Trust, a British umbrella agency for rape and sexual abuse services. The show portrays its heroine Arabella as "flawed and realistic", he added, rather than making her "the typical victim stereotype". The show's finale is a "cathartic experience", according to the spokesman, sending the message that "although we cannot change the events that happen to us, we can move past them in our own way".

Albert said: "These aren't stereotypical situations of assault, but the banal situations that I've been in," stressing that these are shown "with a lot of nuance, so that an attacker can in turn be assaulted." Tripathi also praised the series for depicting events in a way that is "authentic" and "just the way it is". The show "transcends cultures", he added. —AFP

## London's cabbies hope to fare better after COVID



London taxi driver Barry Ivens, 53, poses for a photograph next to his cab in central London on May 27, 2021. —AFP photos



Barry Ivens, who has been driving London's iconic black taxi cabs for a quarter of a century, has never experienced anything like the past tumultuous year in the British capital. As waves of coronavirus swept the country and lockdowns wrought havoc on his industry, the 53-year-old said the financial and mental anguish had "taken its toll".

"It's been really hard," Ivens told AFP from behind the wheel, as he plied the still-quiet streets of central London looking for customers. He has relied on everything from repayment holidays on his mortgage and cab to government financial support schemes, and feels lucky to be alive given COVID-19 has caused nearly 128,000 deaths in Britain.

However, Ivens - one of 15 members of Black Taxi Tour London, a collective offering bespoke guided tours alongside regular rides - has also sorely missed the social side of his work. "You're almost a showman for London," he said. "You miss that all the time, so your mental health has really gone through it. 'All I keep thinking is: I'm still here, I'm still driving the cab, my family's alright, let's keep going. It's like the wartime attitude that my nan (grandmother) used to have.'"

#### 'Green shoots'

As Britain gradually eases its restrictions and customers slowly return, London's thousands of cabbies are praying the worst is finally behind them. Ivens believes business is back at around two-thirds of pre-pandemic levels, but notes that is barely sustainable. "That's my profit margin - that top one-third pays for life, basically," he said.

Steve McNamara, of the Licensed Taxi Drivers' Association (LTDA), said the industry is "hopeful" and can see "the green shoots". But drivers have drained any savings to survive the

past year, he said. "Any slack's gone," he added. "And any slack's gone for (Prime Minister) Boris (Johnson) as well. If he tries to lock us down again, I think he's going to be looking for a different job."

Official statistics show the number of black cab licenses dropped nearly 5,000 over the past year, to around 13,700. Newspaper pictures published worldwide last year showed a sea of abandoned cabs parked up in a field east of London. "A lot of guys have scrapped vehicles, sold vehicles, de-licensed vehicles," McNamara said. "We've heard awful stories:



Vehicles being repossessed, bailiffs knocking at doors."

The figures are fueling fears of a future shortfall in cabs if the return to normality proceeds as planned. "As and when things start to pick up eventually, and I think that'll be September... there's going to be a massive shortage of cabs, undoubtedly," McNamara added. But some drivers worry that work-from-home arrangements could be largely here to stay. "They're coming back in dribs and drabs but the biggest concern for cab drivers is that people are only going to work two to three days," said 59-year-old Paul, a

20-year black taxi veteran. "You can't count your chickens in this job."

#### 'Londoners at heart'

Another major ingredient still missing for black cab drivers' income is foreign visitors. Tourists are currently hard to find in Britain, which requires 10 days of quarantine from most destinations, in hotels for people from countries with the worst rates of coronavirus infection. "The only bit of tourism you get is someone who's a bit bored up in Leicestershire (central England), who will come down and have a weekend here," said Ivens.

"London needs people from abroad - this is an international city," he added, driving through the once-bustling district of Covent Garden. "Look at these coffee shops here," Ivens added, gesturing at a largely deserted cafe. "I've seen it (with queues) out the door at lunchtime." McNamara, of the LTDA, believes the eventual return of tourists will make "a massive difference" to his members, and in the meantime "things will continue to pick up".

But after years of being undercut by cheaper ride-hailing apps such as Uber, and now hit by the pandemic, some fear for the future of London's black taxi industry. Famed globally, drivers of the bulbous cabs - which were originally designed to accommodate a passenger in a top hat - have all had to pass a fiendishly difficult exam called "The Knowledge".

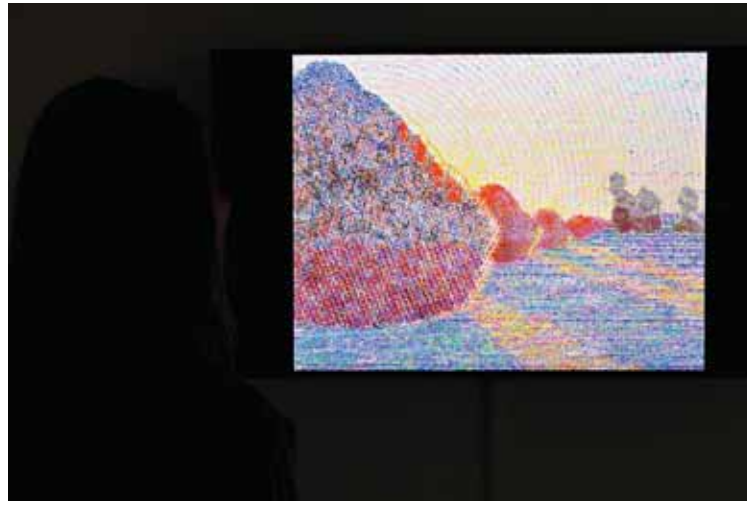
Testing their recall of streets, routes and landmarks purely from memory, it is seen as giving the capital uniquely qualified drivers, but takes years of study, effort and money. "You have to keep these professions going - that's what London was built on," said Ivens, who comes from a family of cabbies. "We are Londoners, and we have Londoners at heart." —AFP



Lifestyle | Features



NFTs are on display during a press preview of the upcoming Natively Digital: A Curated NFT Sale at Sotheby's on June 4, 2021 in New York City.



An NFT titled 'Meules after Claude Monet' by Matt Kane is on display.



A woman looks at a NFT by Robert Alice x Alethea AI titled 'iNFT // To The Young Artists of Cyberspace' during a media preview. —AFP photos

# Collectors of digital NFTs see a 'Wild West' market worth the risk

They are technology enthusiasts on the hunt for opportunities in the Wild West market surrounding NFTs: the popular certified digital objects that have spawned a new generation of collectors convinced of their huge potential. Brandon Kang, a 25-year-old videographer from California, started buying NFTs in December, and already owns more than 500. In February he spent \$50,000 for "Reflection", a digital work by electronic music artist Feed Me.

His collection includes digital images of simian heads (Bored Ape), a beverage can and a cube, as well as an animation of a car driving down a road, all of them created by artists little-known by the general public. He displays them on screens in his house and with few exceptions - has no plans to sell them.

Kang has made believers of some of his friends and family members. "One thing that they thought was cool is the way to verify ownership of these digital NFTs. It is truly a unique experience," he said. NFTs - "Non-Fungible Tokens" - are digital objects such as drawings, animations, pieces of music, photos or videos, whose authenticity is confirmed by blockchain technology, preventing forgeries or manipulation.

NFTs have generated nearly \$2.5 billion in sales over the first five months of 2021, based on numbers

from the specialized NonFungible website. The big auction houses now regularly sell them, as Sotheby's is doing through June 10 with its "Natively Digital" sale. The ability to prove the authenticity of NFTs was decisive for Kang, long an investor in cryptocurrencies, which rely on the same blockchain technology. Before, he said, "there was no way to prove and show ownership of digital assets cryptographically."

**'Not easy to digest'**

It was that same guarantee of authenticity that drove Devan Mitchem, a Singapore-based cloud engineer, to begin collecting digital objects, after at first being skeptical because of the "inconsistent formats, marketplaces and storage options". But the emergence of websites like OpenSea and Nifty Gateway allowed artists to sell their works directly while enabling collectors to buy, store and resell them, making the NFT world almost as accessible as the stock market.

Mitchem, a blockchain specialist with Google Cloud, now owns more than 200 NFTs. Like Kang, he has no plans to sell them. "It's risky, but I feel works created from 2017 through the lockdowns of 2021 will be remembered as the defining moment of this new category," he said. "This era will hold a special place in future portfolios."

Pankaj Patil, a computer engineer, last year sold some of the 150 digital objects he had acquired, fearing for the future of the NFT market. Today, this New Jersey resident said, "I definitely regret selling some of them," even as he acknowledges that "this space is not easy to digest for everyone." Devan Mitchem said he can see why some people might have doubts. "I can absolutely understand any skepticism," he said. "There are several things to unpack" about how NFTs work.

For anyone interested in exploring this new market, Mitchem offers this advice: "Read up on the philosophies behind blockchains like Bitcoin." That should make it clear, he added, that "these are global computers not owned by a single entity." "It's still very much the Wild West," he said, "but also a land of opportunity."

**Love of art, or money?**

Kang, too, urged anyone intrigued by NFTs to do their homework before plunging in. Those who "flood in the market without doing their research and not even making an effort to understand NFTs," he said, "will be the ones who will most likely be burned." He adds that a recent market correction that saw a drop in both average prices and the number of transactions does not in any way threaten the future of NFTs.

"We are seeing the space mature, and I strongly believe it is good in the long term to remove the people who are purely trying to make profits" and are not motivated by love of art, he said. Mitchem, like many others, insists he is drawn by the artistic value of many young digital creators, even if the public image of the NFT is largely that of a fad, if not an outright fraud.

He speaks passionately about "Picasso's Bull", a cubist depiction of a bull by visual artist Trevor Jones and which he purchased for \$23,000. He calls it a "seminal piece". NFT collectors, many of them computer programmers and most of them men, say they are also drawn by the constant innovation in the market.

They foresee a world in which NFTs can move between platforms, sites and virtual universes, unbound by the constraints of the physical world. They also insist that the field is reducing its currently catastrophic carbon footprint - due to the huge energy demands of underlying cryptocurrencies - as it adopts new protocols for NFT creation and as less energy-intensive cryptocurrencies are developed. Mitchem is such a firm believer in NFTs that he believes the term itself will disappear as the technology becomes commonplace. "It simply becomes digital media and digital assets," he said. —AFP

# CRUISE SHIPS' RETURN TO VENICE REIGNITES TENSIONS



Environmental protesters from the "No Grandi Navi" group demonstrate aboard small boats against the presence of cruise ships in the lagoon, as the MSC Orchestra cruise ship (rear) leaves Venice on Saturday. —AFP photos



The MSC Orchestra cruise ship sails across the basin as it leaves Venice.

Saturday saw the first cruise ship cast off from Venice after almost one and a half years' suspension due to the coronavirus pandemic, reigniting a war of words between supporters and opponents of the massive floating hotels. With the MSC Orchestra looming over Saint Mark's square, demonstrators in small motorboats waved banners reading "no to cruise ships". "Cruise ships bring a hit and run tourism that actually brings little benefit to Venice," demonstrator Lucia Tedesco, 57, told AFP.

Concerned for the environment and the city's cultural heritage, opponents of the ships say they cause large waves that undermine Venice's foundations and harm fragile ecosystem of its lagoon. But the UNESCO World Heritage site is also home to fans of the massive vessels, many organized in the "Venice at work" movement.

They say stop-offs by tourist cruises create jobs in a city dependent on tourism - itself massively undermined by the pandemic. Around 650 people boarded the MSC Orchestra in Venice after showing a negative coronavirus test less than four days old and passing another on the spot. None showed any sign of annoyance at the strict hygiene measures designed to prevent the

intense outbreaks that hit some cruise ships at the pandemic's height. Just half the MSC Orchestra's 3,000 places will be filled for its tour taking in destinations in southern Italy, Greece and Croatia.

**Celebrity appeal**

The ship's crew took on supplies and tightened up safety protocols during their time in Venice. Venice's economy had lost "around one billion euros" (\$1.2 billion) in the space of a year from the 800,000 fewer cruise passengers visiting, Cruise Lines International Association director Francesco Galietti told AFP - calling the Orchestra's stop "our contribution to the restart of this city".

As one of the world's best-known tourist destinations, Venice's cruise ship debate always resonates beyond Italy's borders. On Tuesday, a slew of international artists - from Mick Jagger to Wes Anderson and Tilda Swinton - wrote to Italian President Sergio Mattarella, Prime Minister Draghi and the mayor of Venice. They called for a "final stop" to visits by cruise ships as well as better management of tourist flows, protection of the lagoon ecosystem and limits on property speculation to protect the city's "physical integrity but also cultural identity". —AFP



Tugboats escort the MSC Orchestra cruise ship across the basin past the Bell Tower and Doge's Palace as it leaves Venice.



Tugboats escort the MSC Orchestra cruise ship.

## Costa del Sol braces for tourists' return

The beach at Torremolinos is nearly empty but this southern Spanish resort is gearing up for what it hopes will be a busy summer and a return of "normality". Spain will tomorrow reopen its borders to travelers who have been vaccinated against COVID-19 and all along the city's promenade, hotels and restaurants are reopening or racing to refurbish in anticipation.

"We are already seeing something of a recovery with national clients," said Orlando Perez, assistant manager of the seafont Melia Costa del Sol hotel which opened its doors on

Tuesday after being closed for nine months. With bookings on the rise, this 540-room hotel will next week see its occupancy rate rising to 35 percent. It's a long way from the 90 percent occupancy rate of the summer before the pandemic, but like other Spanish hoteliers, Perez is betting the numbers will soar as vaccination programs in key markets take hold and travel restrictions are further eased. And the fact that the EU's vaccine passport will be in place by July 1, further freeing up travel within the bloc, has added to the sense of optimism.

As the world's second-most popular tourist destination, Spain is expecting to welcome 45 million foreign tourists this year - more than twice the 19 million who visited in 2020 when the global tourism sector was battered by the pandemic. For Spain, it was the lowest figure since the late 1960s. And the impact can be clearly seen in neighborhoods further from the beachfront where

it's easier to find boarded-up shops and hotels.

As the "tourist hub" of Spain's southern Costa del Sol, Torremolinos "totally depends on the sector", city mayor Jose Ortiz told AFP. Although the pandemic delivered the "harsh blow the city has ever experienced", Ortiz is hoping tourism activity could reach half of its pre-pandemic levels in June and July. Domestic tourists have already started coming back since the state of emergency which restricted inter-regional travel was lifted in early May. Before the pandemic, Spaniards accounted for half of the million or so annual visitors to Torremolinos, a city of around 68,000 people. But one key reason for concern remains. Tourists from Britain, who normally make up a third of visitors to Torremolinos, are still required to quarantine and take PCR tests on their return home from visiting Spain, which puts many off. —AFP



This screen grab from video posted on April 14, 2021 and received courtesy of an anonymous source via Facebook on Friday shows protesters making the three-finger salute during a poetry reading as part of a demonstration against the military coup in Shwebo. —AFP

## Myanmar poets square off against junta's war on words

Before he was killed, Khet Thi's poems railed eloquently against Myanmar's sudden coup, joining a deluge of protest verse celebrating democracy demonstrators and defying the military's brutal war on words. As soldiers unleashed a violent crackdown on resistance to the army takeover, he inspired the public to stand firm against what he saw as an existential threat to the country's future. "We have to fight to win this battle," he wrote. "If we lose: North Korea. If we win: South Korea."

Last month, scores of police and soldiers surrounded the home he shared with his wife and family in the central city of Shwebo. They accused the poet - who baked cakes and made ice cream to support his family - of planning a series of bomb blasts, and demanded he give himself up. The next day his wife Chaw Su was summoned to a hospital in Monywa around 80 km away. "I thought I would be able to (bring) him some clothes," she told AFP.

But there was no need, according to a police officer, who told Chaw Su her husband was dead. "I got only the dead body back," she told AFP. Myanmar has been in uproar since the February coup ended a 10-year experiment with democracy that had loosened the fetters of censorship and allowed for greater self-expression.

As some protesters picked up hunting rifles and slingshots, poets like Khet Thi joined a fight against the coup staged by a population unwilling to surrender hard-won democratic freedoms. Along with violence in the streets, the junta has tried to stifle dissent with internet blackouts and by rounding up celebrities and civil servants who have called for rebellion.

A video uploaded to Facebook soon in the weeks after the putsch showed a collage of defiant protesters reciting poems against the military. "With what conscience can you go to work while everyone goes out and protests?" asked one man, referring to a mass strike campaign launched to pressure the junta.

**'Overwhelmed with rage'**

Poetry played a prominent role in Burma's struggle for independence against colonial power Britain and the decades of military rule that followed, when scores of writers were locked up as political prisoners. UK-based poet Ko Ko Thett believes the medium has struck a chord with ordinary people "overwhelmed with rage, disbelief and grief" at the junta's takeover.

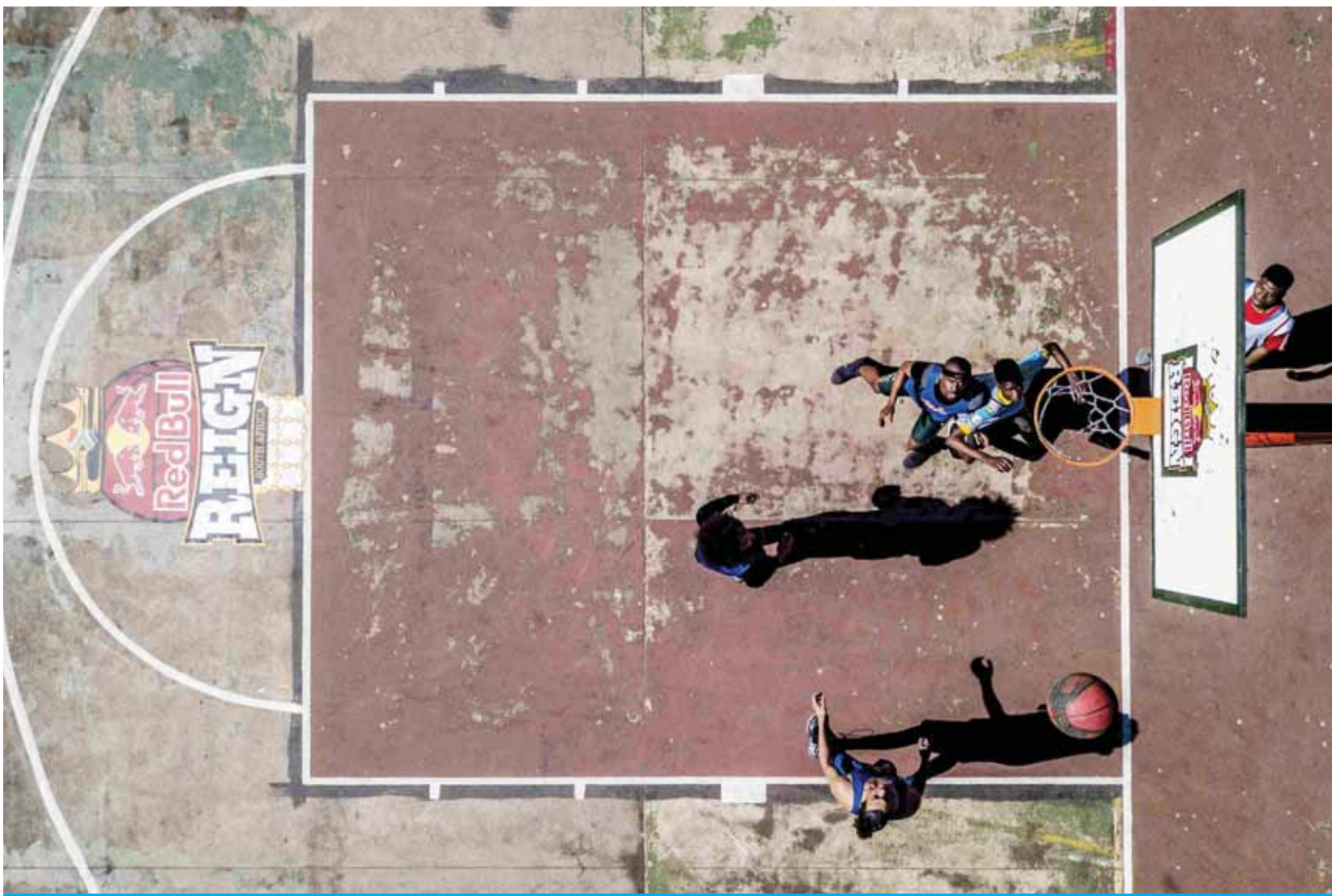
He put his own writing on the back burner in order to concentrate on translating works by fellow poets writing from post-coup Myanmar - some of whom, like Khet Thi, have since been killed. Among them were Myint Myint Zin and K Za Win, both teachers, who died during a ferocious military assault on protesters in Monywa. Footage of security forces dragging away the body of K Za Win later went viral on social media.

The transition to democracy "liberated" Burmese poetry, said Ko Ko Thett, making it "more diverse in form and content, also more openly political". Many have mobilised online in their battle against the junta, including an underground collective of 30 bards from across the country spreading their verse on Facebook. "There is so much crime against humanity (in Myanmar). Poets in such situations live with tears in every single breath," one poet, who asked to remain anonymous for security concerns, told AFP. "Our poems are hordes of screaming children." —AFP



## Sports

## Photo of the Day



Players compete at Red Bull Reign National Finals in Johannesburg, South Africa. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

## Durant scores 29 as Nets roll over Bucks in NBA series opener

LOS ANGELES: Kevin Durant had 29 points and 10 rebounds as the Brooklyn Nets withstood Giannis Antetokounmpo's 34-point performance to beat the Milwaukee Bucks 115-107 in the opening game of their second round series.

The Nets won the battle between two of the NBA's most potent offenses on Saturday night despite losing James Harden to a nagging hamstring injury in the first minute of the game. Harden was forced out just 43 seconds in, pulling up and grabbing the back of his leg after a drive. He did not return.

Kyrie Irving had 25 points and eight assists, Blake Griffin tallied 18 points and a team-high 14 rebounds for the Nets, who beat the Bucks in six games in 2003, the last time they met in the playoffs. Journeyman Mike James came off the bench to score 12 points in the win.

"You never want to lose a guy like James but we have been in this situation before," said Griffin. "I trust these guys. Everyone had to step up. We played like that most of the season. We got guys that step up and Kevin and Kyrie do what they do."

Game two is today in Brooklyn. "Our defense was good, we didn't give them too many wide open looks. We cleaned up some things as the game went on," said head coach Steve Nash.

Antetokounmpo, the two time reigning NBA Most Valuable Player, played 35 minutes, shooting 16 of 24 from the floor and grabbing 11 rebounds for the underdog Bucks, who led the league by averaging 120.1 points per game in the regular season.

"It was a little bit of everything. Shots didn't go in. We did not compete as hard as we wanted to defensively," said Antetokounmpo. Both clubs came into the second round of the postseason after cruising through their opening series.

Milwaukee completed a four-game sweep of Miami last Saturday to reach the second round for the third straight season. Brooklyn, who averaged 118.6 points during the regular season, needed five games to get past the Boston Celtics thanks in large part to the trio of Durant, Irving and Harden.

Due to injuries and rest, the trio had played just eight games together during the regular season.



BROOKLYN: Blake Griffin #2 of the Brooklyn Nets high-fives teammate Kevin Durant #7 during the game against the Milwaukee Bucks during Round 2, Game 1 of the 2021 NBA Playoffs on Saturday at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York. — AFP

Brooklyn had hoped to have the big three healthy for the playoffs but have hit another injury snag with Harden going down in front of a crowd of 15,700 at Barclays Center arena.

The Nets announced later in the first half that Harden would undergo an MRI to determine the extent of the injury. "It has happened to us all year that someone goes down," said Nash. "We made a few plays. We hustled. It was great to see guys who hadn't been in the rotation step up."

The 31-year-old Harden has had hamstring problems before, missing 21 games in April and May. The Nets are 20-17 without Harden and 29-7 with him in the lineup. Harden averaged 27.8 points and 10.6

assists in the first round against the Celtics.

Antetokounmpo scored 10 points in the first quarter as the Bucks led 32-30 at the end of 12 minutes. Antetokounmpo said it didn't change things when Harden got hurt. "We still had our game plan. We still had a game plan for Kyrie and KD and Joe (Harris)," he said.

In the second quarter the teams exchanged runs as Brooklyn went on a 20-8 blitz to take a 59-48 lead but the Bucks clawed their way back with a 13-4 run of their own to get within two, 63-61, at the half. The Nets went on another 12-4 run to end the third to take a commanding 98-84 lead into the fourth quarter. — AFP

## McLaren 'devastated' by death of Saudi stakeholder Ojeh

BAKU: Saudi billionaire Mansour Ojeh, a major force behind the McLaren team's success in Formula One, has died aged 68, the British team announced yesterday. Born in Paris, Ojeh bought into McLaren in 1984 and with former partner Ron Dennis established it as one of the major forces in F1.

"It is with deep sadness that McLaren Racing announces the death of Mansour Ojeh, shareholder of McLaren since 1984," McLaren announced ahead of yesterday's Azerbaijan Grand Prix. "Mr Ojeh passed away peacefully this morning in Geneva, aged 68, surrounded by his family, to whom the team sends its most heartfelt condolences."

McLaren chief executive Zak Brown said his death "had devastated everyone" at the team. "Mansour has been etched into the heart and soul of this team for nearly 40 years and was intrinsic to its success," Brown added. "He was a true racer in every sense. Ultra-competitive, determined, passionate and, above all, perhaps his defining characteristic: sporting. No matter the intensity of the battle, Mansour always put sport first."

With Mansour on board McLaren won seven of their eight constructors world titles since 1984 and 10 of their 12 drivers' crowns. Lewis Hamilton, who won the first of his seven world titles at McLaren, said before the start of Sunday's grand prix in Baku: "I carry a heavy heart into the race after the loss of a close friend, Mansour Ojeh. He had the biggest heart and always carried the biggest smile. I am so grateful to have known such a man. This man loved unconditionally. Rest in peace brother, love you always." — AFP

## Rahm forced out of Memorial while leading by positive COVID test

WASHINGTON: Defending champion Jon Rahm was forced to withdraw from the US PGA Memorial tournament following a positive COVID-19 test on Saturday after having seized a six-stroke lead with a stunning third round at Muirfield Village.

Rahm had tested negative for four consecutive days only to return a positive test from a sample collected Saturday morning, after he made an ace at the par-3 16th in concluding his darkness-halted second round with a two-shot lead.

World number three Rahm fired an impressive eight-under par 64 in Saturday's third round, matching all-time records with an 18-under 198 score for 54 holes and a six-stroke lead at the famed Dublin, Ohio, layout.

Instead, Rahm was withdrawn and left Americans Patrick Cantlay, the 2019 Memorial winner, and Collin Morikawa, the 2020 PGA Championship winner, sharing the lead on 204. Rahm, ranked second in the world, was given the news by PGA Tour medical personnel as he walked off the 18th green at Muirfield Village Golf Club, where he is the defending champion.

"I'm very disappointed in having to withdraw from the Memorial Tournament," Rahm said in a statement posted on Twitter. "This is one of those things that happens in life, one of those moments where how we respond to a setback defines us as people. I'm very thankful that my family and I are all OK. I will take all of the necessary precautions to be safe and healthy, and I look forward to returning to the golf course as soon as possible." Unexpected co-leader Cantlay called it "the worst situation."

"He played awesome today and it's just really a shame," Cantlay said. The US PGA Tour said in a statement it had informed Rahm last week he had been in close contact with someone confirmed with COVID-19 and the 26-year-old Spaniard, who was asymptomatic, chose to compete under tighter virus safety protocols, including daily testing and restricted access to facilities.

Rahm's Saturday test was returned as positive while Rahm was on the course in his third round, the tour said, and a second test requested by a PGA medical advisor also came back positive just before Rahm finished the third round. When told of the result just off the 18th green, Rahm bent forward, his head in his hands and at his knees, then rose and yelled, "Not again."

Rahm had dazzled on the back nine with a stretch of six birdies in seven holes to stand on 18-under 198 after 54 holes and six strokes ahead in Dublin, Ohio. Rahm had matched Tiger Woods from 2000 for the largest 54-hole lead in Memorial history. He was hoping to match Woods as the event's only back-to-back winners. His 198 matched Scott Hoch's 54-hole tournament record from 1987.

American Scottie Scheffler, who played alongside Rahm and Cantlay in the third round, and South African Brenden Grace shared third on 207. "My heart, it just sinks for him," Scheffler said. "I just feel awful."

Scheffler was confused by Rahm's frustrated expression as they signed their cards, saying that when Rahm explained why "my heart just sank. It's terrible that that happened," Scheffler said. "I think it's terrible they told him in front of the cameras." Cantlay said he has not been vaccinated for COVID-19. "I've already had COVID, so I got to imagine I have antibodies, so I don't feel too concerned," Cantlay said. — AFP

## Oliveira holds off Zarco to win Catalonia MotoGP

MONTMELO: Portuguese rider Miguel Oliveira held off a late surge from Frenchman Johann Zarco to win the Catalonia MotoGP yesterday. Australian Jack Miller took third after championship leader Fabio Quartararo was hit with a three-second penalty for straying off the track a few laps from the end.

"Everything was so hard: tyre management, keeping cool when Fabio was putting the pressure on me for so many laps," said Oliveira, who rides for KTM. "I kept it really cool when he overtook me. I saw my chance on the straight and overtook him back. It was the perfect race."

Both Quartararo and Miller led briefly, but both had problems on a warm Catalan afternoon. Frenchman Quartararo was penalized three sec-

onds for going way off the track on his Yamaha at the chicane four laps from the end. The rider from Nice also finished the race barechested, after unzipping his jacket, pulling out his chest protector and discarding it.

Quartararo remains top of the rider standings but Zarco, of the Ducati satellite team Pramac, cut the gap to just 17 points. Miller climbed to third, overtaking his factor Ducati teammate, Italian Francesco Bagnaia, who was seventh yesterday. Spanish title holder Joan Mir (Suzuki), who started 10th on the grid, finished fifth, while multiple world champions Marc Marquez (Honda) and Italian Valentino Rossi (Yamaha-SRT) retired after crashes.

Zarco, who has still to win in the MotoGP class, moved through the pack late in the race but was not quite able to catch the smooth-riding Oliveira. "The last two laps I tried to catch Miguel," said Zarco. "But he just told me was also controlling well. I was not close enough to try to attack him."

The race was the first this season to allow fans, with a crowd of 24,000, 20 percent of capacity permitted. After crossing the line, Oliveira raced



MONTMELO: KTM Portuguese rider Miguel Oliveira celebrates on the podium after winning the MotoGP race of the Moto Grand Prix de Catalunya at the Circuit de Catalunya yesterday in Montmelo on the outskirts of Barcelona. — AFP

to the stands to collect a Portuguese flag. "Thank you to all the fans here everything has been amazing this

weekend with the public back in the grandstand and it feels good to be back to normal," said Oliveira. — AFP



## Sports

# 'Radio' Mueller, Hummels turn up volume for Germany's Euro 2020 bid

**BERLIN:** After a two-year exile from international football, 2014 World Cup winners Thomas Mueller and Mats Hummels are set to crank up the volume on the pitch for Germany's bid to win Euro 2020. Germany head into the European Championship low on confidence after a shock home defeat to North Macedonia in March in the wake of an historic 6-0 thrashing by Spain last November, the Germans heaviest defeat in more than 80 years.

On both occasions, shell-shocked faces in the stunned German ranks exposed a lack of leadership with captain Manuel Neuer helplessly watching the crisis unfold from his goal. Germany's under-fire head coach Joachim Loew, who will step down later this summer, has reacted by reversing his 2019 decision to axe Hummels and Mueller, recalling the experienced pair to help lead on the pitch at the Euro.

"It's certainly true that Mats Hummels or myself are players who dare to speak up," said Mueller, who made his 101st international appearance on Wednesday after a two-year hiatus. Loew is desperate to sign off after 15 years in charge by winning the Euro to mend his reputation,

tarnished by the Germans' 2018 World Cup debacle, and needs Mueller, 31, and Hummels, 32, to give his squad a boost.

As Germany left-back Robin Gosens admits "both have a special aura. You notice immediately that you can rely on these guys. And that feeling is enormously important for a football team." Equally, a poll of German fans by AFP subsidiary SID showed more than 80 percent are pleased to see Mueller and Hummels back on Germany duty.

"Radio Mueller", as he is nicknamed, was the loudest German voice on the pitch in Wednesday's 1-1 draw with Denmark while Hummels marshaled the German defense, but his last-gasp tackle could not stop Yussuf Poulsen's equalizer. "It's not about roaring or volume per se," explained Mueller. "The point is to distribute information so that every player can react as quickly as possible to game situations. I am what I am."

"When I see the quality that is in the team, I want to wake up German football," he added. There is no way of hitting the snooze button on Mueller, who wants to fire up Germany's bid to be crowned European champions for the fourth time. However, the Germans will have to be

wide awake to survive Group F.

They start against world champions France on June 15 in Munich, then face holders Portugal four days later before hosting Hungary on June 23. "We will have moments of suffering — the group won't be a walk in the park," Mueller admits.

Likewise, Hummels only wants to enhance Germany's leadership group and is wary of disturbing the fragile harmony within the team. "Thomas and I bring additional support. We don't want to take a (leadership) role away from anyone. It's not a problem, because we all want to win."

The veterans have earned their recalls on merit. Hummels was the defensive cornerstone of a Dortmund team which won all of their last eight games to qualify for the Champions League and lift the German Cup.

Mueller has not looked back since Hansi Flick recalled the attacking midfielder to the Bayern Munich starting side in November 2019. "Hansi gave me responsibility and you have to back that up with performances," said Mueller.

His eye for space in the penalty area helped create many a goal as Bayern



**SEEFELD:** Germany's forward Thomas Mueller waves prior to a training session yesterday, in Seefeld, Austria, where the German national football team attends a training camp ahead of the European football championship. —AFP

swept up the 2019/20 treble of Champions League, Bundesliga and German Cup titles. His form this season has also made a mockery of Loew's deci-

sion to axe him and despite 926 days in exile, Mueller and Hummels looked like they had never been away against the Danes. —AFP

## Puskas Arena hosts Hungary's Euro 2020 revival dreams

**BUDAPEST:** Towering over eastern Budapest, Euro 2020 venue the Puskas Arena is both a monument to Prime Minister Viktor Orban's football fanaticism and a budding revival in once powerful Hungary's fortunes.

Named after Ferenc Puskas, the mercurial lynchpin of Hungary's fabled 'Magical Magyars' team of the 1950s, the 68,000-capacity stadium will host four games at the tournament which begins June 11. Hungary's group matches against title holders Portugal (June 15), and world champions France (June 19) will be played there, as well as France's clash with Portugal (June 23), and a last-16 tie (June 27).

The only Euro 2020 venue without a spectator limit, the ground was opened in 2019 as part of a nationwide stadium-building program under Orban since he came to power in 2010. "The rebuilding project of Hungarian football is a decade-old story of actual physical reconstruction begun by Orban," Gyorgy Szollosi, editor-in-chief of the Nemzeti Sport newspaper, told AFP.

### Building boom

Hungary's football infrastructure development has been "unprecedented in Europe" Sandor Csanyi, head of the Hungarian Football Association (MLSZ), said last month. Every stadium in the country's top two divisions has been rebuilt, with the Puskas Arena the jewel in the crown of the building boom.

Mostly silent since it opened due to coronavirus fan restrictions, the impressive arena was built on the same spot and partly from the rubble of the communist-era "Nepstadion" (People's Stadium). That vast monolith was erected in 1954 a year after Hungary, considered the best side in the world at the time, famously thrashed England 6-3 at Wembley in the so-called "Match of the Century".

The Nepstadion, intended as a monument to Hungarian glory, was never fully completed after hot favorites Hungary lost the 1954 World Cup final to West Germany. Then after the country's failed



**BUDAPEST:** In this file photo taken on May 3, 2021 spectators watch the Hungarian cup final between FC MOL Fehervar and FC Ujpest in the Puskas Arena of Budapest. —AFP

1956 revolution against Soviet rule its biggest stars including Puskas left the country.

Hungary's race to the bottom from the heyday of the Magical Magyars was unparalleled in football. UEFA statistics produced for the organization's 50-year-anniversary in 2004 showed Hungary was the only European country whose vital signs of football life — number of players, pitches, clubs, and coaches — had regressed since 1954. Since then, particularly since the end of communism in 1989, factors including low levels of investment or TV money, decrepit grounds, and corruption contributed to the rot.

Failure to produce world-class players since Puskas, 1950s Barcelona legend Laszlo Kubala, and 1967 Ballon d'Or winner Florian Albert has also kept Hungary trailing far behind neighbors like Croatia who reached the 2018 World Cup final. "I would like to see Hungary reach the same heights in football as before, that is the World Cup final," Orban, 58, a former amateur player and regular match-goer, said last December.

### 'Concrete results'

Orban's critics complain that several of the new stadia are oversized, often saw price over-runs, and are typically expensive long-term burdens for taxpayers. Most clubs in the top two Hungarian league divisions are also owned by or linked to figures close to or members of Orban's ruling party Fidesz, fuelling concerns about cronyism.

But with the national team steadily improving under Italian coach Marco Rossi, success-starved fans are focusing instead on Hungary's second successive qualification for the European Championships. Euro 2016 in France was the Magyars' first participation at a major tournament since the World Cup in 1986. "One qualification might have been a one-off, but two-in-a-row signals that the team is also on the right track," Gergely Marosi, a football journalist, told AFP. "By getting to Euro 2020 a government that spends a lot on sport and treats it as a priority can show that there are concrete results now on the pitch, not just the new stadia." —AFP

## Portugal's new wave of talent waiting in wings behind Ronaldo

**LISBON:** Portugal begin the defense of their European title at Euro 2020 this month boasting a wealth of young attacking talent lining up behind veteran superstar Cristiano Ronaldo. Bernardo Silva, Diogo Jota, Joao Felix and Andre Silva are part of a new wave of attack-minded players who will be pushing for the Portuguese to become the second nation to retain the European Championship after neighbors Spain.

After missing Euro 2016 through injury, 26-year-old Bernardo Silva has become a fixture in Portugal's starting XI, scoring seven goals in 54 appearances and providing the same dynamic, forward-thinking presence as for his club Manchester City. Another of Portugal's Premier League stars Diogo Jota has recovered from



**MADRID:** In this file photo taken on June 4, 2021 Portugal's forward Joao Felix warms up before the international friendly football match between Spain and Portugal at the Wanda Metropolitano stadium in Madrid. —AFP

injury just in time to take part in the Euro and played in Friday's goalless draw with Spain.

With six goals in 12 international appearances, the 24-year-old Liverpool forward has shown that he could replace Ronaldo up front just as easily as he can develop alongside the five-time Ballon d'Or winner. Despite his average height (5ft 10in or 1.78m), he also managed to score three headed goals in 2022 World Cup qualifying matches against Serbia and Luxembourg in March.

### Felix's 'talent evolving'

Touted as the successor to Ronaldo, Joao Felix has so far failed to fulfill his obvious potential, ending this season out of the Atletico Madrid starting line-up and at just 21 with the air of a player lost. Breaks away from the Spanish capital with the national team have changed little, with Felix starting on the bench against Azerbaijan and Serbia in World Cup qualifying before being substituted before half-time by coach Fernando Santos against Luxembourg following a distracted performance.

He also made little impact in the 0-0 draw with Spain, which was played at Atletico's Wanda Metropolitano stadium. "I don't think I've lost my talent. Talent tends to evolve and as a team player I believe I'm continuing to evolve," Felix said during preparation for the Euro. Andre Silva meanwhile comes into the tournament off the back of his best ever season that put him in some exalted company in the goalscoring charts. The 25-year-old scored 28 Bundesliga goals this term as Eintracht Frankfurt missed out on Champions League football by just a point, and he was fourth in the chase for the European Golden Shoe behind Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and Robert Lewandowski. —AFP

## South Korea trounce Turkmenistan but Lebanon keep pace

**DOHA:** Hwang Ui-jo scored a brace as South Korea thumped Turkmenistan 5-0 on Saturday to regain first place in Group H in the second phase of the Asian World Cup qualifiers. It was South Korea's third win in four matches, the only blip being a goalless draw against Lebanon in November 2019 before Covid-19 played havoc with the competition.

The Lebanese had taken first place by beating Sri Lanka 3-2 in the first part of a double-header in Goyang, South Korea. Victory in the second match allowed the hosts to retake top spot with a far superior goal difference.

The Turkmens spent the game chasing shadows as they crashed to their third defeat in five group matches to stay third, four points behind the top two. Paulo Bento's South Korea took the lead when Hwang headed home from a long cross from Hong Chul in the 10th minute.

The floodgates didn't open immediately, as Turkmenistan kept South Korea at bay for more than 35 minutes with goalkeeper Rasul Charyyev playing a key role. In first-half stoppage time, however, Charyyev could only parry an effort from Kwon Chang-hoon into the path of the Qatar-based Nam Tae-hee who tapped in.

When Kim Young-gwon found the net in the 57th minute from a corner by Son Heung-min which was headed down by Jung Woo-young, the outcome was more or less sealed. Kwon Chang-hoon increased the tally in the 63rd minute and Hwang added his second in the 73rd to complete an impressive display for the Taegug Warriors.

Earlier, Lebanon bounced back from a goal



**GOYANG:** South Korea's Hwang Ui-jo (left) celebrates his goal against Turkmenistan during their Asian zone qualification football match for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 in Goyang on Saturday. —AFP

down to beat spirited Sri Lanka with Joan Oumari finding the net twice. Berlin-born Waseem Razeek gave Sri Lanka a shock lead in the 10th minute after taking advantage of a defense-splitting pass by Kavindu Ishan and finishing past Lebanon goalkeeper Mehdi Khalil.

Sri Lankan joy lasted barely a minute. Oumari found the equaliser immediately after the restart as he headed in an excellent free-kick taken by Mohamed Haider. Mohamed Kdouh then put Lebanon ahead in the 17th minute, rising above the defence to head home another great cross from the right by Hussain Zein.

The Cedars took a two-goal lead into the break after Oumari struck from six yards in the 44th minute when the Sri Lankan defence failed to clear a corner. Sri Lanka started strongly after resump-

tion and could have pulled one back but Razeek's free-kick was deflected onto the post by goalkeeper Khalil. Razeek netted his second goal of the day, firing into the roof of the net from the penalty spot after he was brought down by Hassan Chaitou. Sri Lanka remain pointless after their fifth defeat.

Elsewhere, Saudi Arabia beat Yemen against a backdrop of a civil war which has pushed the latter nation to the brink of famine. The Saudis won Saturday's match 3-0 with Fahad al-Muwallad scoring a first half brace in Riyadh. Salem Al-Dawsari had opened the scoring in the fourth minute before al-Muwallad's double gave unbeaten Saudi Arabia their fourth win in six Group D matches. The Saudis, who drew two of their games earlier lead the group with 14 points while Uzbekistan are second on nine. —AFP



## Federer set for French Open pullout and end four-decade Paris stretch

PARIS: Roger Federer could end his French Open career which has stretched over four decades with an injury-enforced withdrawal today as the 39-year-old rests his weary bones for an assault on his primary objective, a ninth Wimbledon title.

The 20-time Grand Slam title winner, who will be 40 in two months' time, battled over three and a half hours until 12:45 yesterday morning to reach the last 16 in Paris. He is due back on court today to tackle Matteo Berrettini for a place in the quarter-finals.

However, having undergone two knee surgeries in 2020, the Swiss star admitted there are doubts he'll make it. "I don't know if I am going to play," said Federer who is likely to be playing his last French Open.

"I have to decide whether or not to continue. Is it too risky to keep putting pressure on the knee? Is it a good time to rest? Every match I have to reassess the situation and see the next morning in what state I wake up and how my knee is doing.

"It may be even more true after a match as long as the one tonight." If his knife-edge 7-6 (7/5), 6-7 (3/7), 7-6 (7/4), 7-5 win over 59th-ranked Dominik Koepfer was his last match in Paris, it will be remembered as a gripping affair on the court, but soulless off it.

### Wimbledon target

Due to a government-imposed COVID-19 curfew, Court Philippe Chatrier was devoid of fans and atmosphere. Federer is playing only his third tournament since last year's Australian

Open and has always said Wimbledon is his main goal. He is chasing a ninth title at Wimbledon which starts on June 28. He is also scheduled to play the warm-up grass court tournament in Halle beginning on June 14, the day after the French Open ends.

Federer, who made his Roland Garros debut in 1999 and was champion in 2009, was playing a night session for the first time. However, the almost empty 15,000-capacity court was eerily silent. "I might have been more nervous if the stadium had been full," added Federer. "All the matches I've played since the injury are information for the rest of the season.

"It gives me real pleasure to be able to play 3hr 30min at a high level against a very good player. It shows that I'm on the right track." As Federer weighs up leaving a tournament where Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic were always the title favorites, fellow veteran Serena Williams resumes her bid for a historic 24th Grand Slam title.

### Serena eyes history

Seeded seventh, the 39-year-old Williams is the second-highest ranked player left in the women's draw. After Naomi Osaka's shock withdrawal, Simona Halep missing the event 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 at the 2017 Australian Open are still in the competition.

The former world number one, still just one short of Margaret Court's all-



PARIS: Switzerland's Roger Federer returns the ball to Germany's Dominik Koepfer during their men's singles third round tennis match on Day 7 of The Roland Garros 2021 French Open tennis tournament in Paris yesterday. — AFP

time record of major trophies, takes on Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina for a spot in the quarter-finals. Williams has not gone beyond the fourth round in Paris since losing the 2016 final to Garbine Muguruza.

She arrived at this year's French Open with just one win on clay this term. "I've had a rough clay court season thus far, so I'm happy to get some

wins on the clay," Williams said after beating fellow American Danielle Collins in round three.

Tamara Zidansek yesterday became the first Slovenian woman to reach the quarter-finals of a Grand Slam when she defeated Romania's Sorana Cirstea 7-6 (7/4), 6-1. The world number 85, who knocked out former US Open champion Andreescu in round one, will

face either 2019 Roland Garros runner-up Marketa Vondrousova or Paula Badosa for a place in the semi-finals.

The 23-year-old had never previously got beyond the second round of a major. Greek star Stefanos Tsitsipas is seen as a favorite to reach his first Grand Slam final, with Nadal, Djokovic and Federer all in the other half of the men's draw. — AFP

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