



2 Saudi ambassador to Qatar takes up post



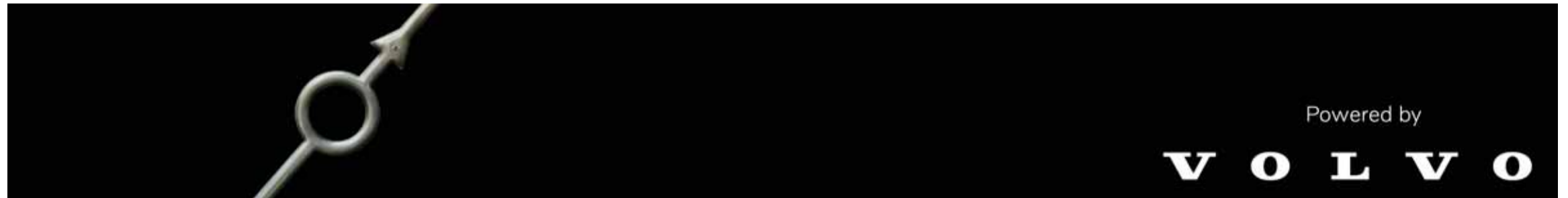
3 Residents stranded abroad fret over unauthorized jobs



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Crown Prince meets opposition MPs ahead of crucial session

Opposition bloc won't allow session, warns against imposition of taxes, fees

Kuwait reports record 1,935 COVID-19 cases, 7 deaths

KUWAIT: The health ministry yesterday reported 1,935 new COVID-19 cases - its highest daily count - and seven related deaths in the past 24 hours. Ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said total cases reached 340,967 and the death toll 1,877. He announced 1,408 recoveries in the same period, taking total recoveries to 321,293, noting the

proportion of recoveries to total cases stands at 94.23 percent. The number of patients receiving treatment in intensive care units reached 227 out of 17,797 cases undergoing treatment. Dr Sanad said 13,536 PCR swab tests were conducted in the past 24 hours, taking total tests to 2,851,002, with the infection-to-test ratio at 14.30 percent. — KUNA

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday received a group of opposition lawmakers and discussed local developments with them, MPs who attended the meeting said. MP Osama Al-Munawer said on Twitter the meeting came after the bloc of 31 opposition MPs had requested a meeting with HH the Amir, who asked HH the Crown Prince to hold the meeting with a group of MPs.

Munawer thanked HH the Crown Prince for hosting the lawmakers, but provided no details on the issues discussed. MP Saifi Al-Saifi said the "discussion was frank and

aimed at serving the interests of Kuwait". He added that "we have listened to his guidance and ideas. He is a reformist, a decision-maker and a good listener". Saifi also did not provide any further details.

A third opposition MP who attended the meeting, Ahmad Al-Azemi, said on Twitter that MPs listened to HH the Crown Prince's wise guidance and "we exchanged talks on public issues". He also gave no more information. The meeting had been arranged before Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem called on Sunday for special Assembly sessions today and tomorrow to approve the budget, a move that infuriated opposition MPs, who vowed to prevent the meeting

from taking place.

The opposition bloc, consisting of 31 MPs, vowed following a late night meeting on Sunday to prevent the session from taking place, saying the speaker has no right to call the special session instead of holding regular Assembly sessions.

The Assembly has held only a few sessions since it was elected in December as a result of lingering disputes between the government backed by Ghanem and a few lawmakers and the opposition bloc.

Opposition MPs have resorted to occupying seats reserved for Cabinet ministers, prompting the cancellation of several sessions.

Continued on Page 2

CONDOLENCES



Bader Naser Al-Kharafi

conveys his deepest condolences to

Al-Asousi Family

on the sad demise of

Khalifa Abdulaziz Al-Asousi

May Allah Almighty bestow His mercy on him

Local

Kuwait's Crown Prince receives ministers at Bayan Palace



KUWAIT: (From left) His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Sabah and Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah — KUNA photos



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Nazaha Enhancement Abdullah Al-Roumi. — KUNA

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday Deputy Prime Minister and

Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah. His Highness also received Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr

Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah, and Minister of Interior Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Sabah. Furthermore, His Highness the Crown Prince

received Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Nazaha (Integrity) Enhancement Abdullah Yousef Al-Roumi. — KUNA

Speaker Ghanem meets EU Ambassador

KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem received at his office yesterday the Ambassador of the European Union to Kuwait Cristian Tudor. During the meeting, both sides discussed Ghanem's visit later this month to the Belgium capital, Brussels, where he is expected to meet with the President of the European Union David Sassoli, the 'Dustoor' news network reported. Ghanem's meeting with the top European lawmaker would focus on issues of mutual concern, mainly the situation in Palestine.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Majdi Al-Dhafiri held talks yesterday with US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski on bilateral relations, and regional and international affairs. The meeting was attended by Assistant Foreign Minister for the Deputy Foreign Minister's office Ayham Al-Omar, the ministry added in a statement. — KUNA



KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem meets Ambassador of the European Union to Kuwait Cristian Tudor. — KUNA photos



Deputy Foreign Minister Majdi Al-Dhafiri meets US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski. — KUNA

VO Creative Hub helps young talents meet professionals

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Talented and creative youth can now practice and improve their talents at the VO Creative Hub, which was launched on Sunday. They will get a chance to meet professionals from different fields to gain experience and support.

VO, the first Kuwait-based integrated youth platform for incubating young talents, launched the first all-inclusive, fully equipped and high-tech creative hub in Kuwait to provide young talents with innovative avenues to unleash their gifts and export their talents to the global market through their creations.

The launch of the creative hub is the first stage of executing VO's integrated platform that constitutes three projects: 1) VO Academy, an academic program for Kuwaiti youth to identify and nurture their talents. 2) VO Creative Hub, all-inclusive studios, laboratories and avenues to provide a space for Kuwaiti youth to express and develop their talents by practice. 3) VO App, a 'smart' app to unleash their creative talents on a seamless, high-tech and efficient digital platform.

"VO is not only a space for youth to expose their talents to the world in media and entertainment. We have conducted a comprehensive research on Kuwaiti talents that are gaining momentum, demand and interest on social media from regional and international audiences. The talents were filtered, assessed and categorized into various programs. Our research has



KUWAIT: Riham Al-Ayyar, CEO of VO (left) with veteran Kuwaiti actor Mohammad Al-Mansour at the launch of the VO Creative Hub. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

shown that Kuwaiti youth are talented in many areas, and Kuwait's first creative hub will accordingly support the country's under-looked resources in those areas of talents," said Riham Al-Ayyar, CEO of VO.

Ayyar explained that the VO Creative Hub includes all the facilities that support Kuwaiti talents in media and film production, e-sports and gaming, tech and innovations, sports and athletics, entrepreneurship, culinary arts, art and culture, and fashion design. "Kuwait's VO Creative Hub will include studios, laboratories, networking spaces, creative offices and facilities that serve the talents of Kuwait in those areas," she added. The launch ceremony was attended by many celebrities including actors, social media influencers

and others. The guests went on tour of the VO Creative Hub in groups, and had the chance to enjoy a music performance.

VO Kuwait was founded in July 2020 as a result of a collaboration between Sheikha Ohoud Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah and Riham Al-Ayyar to empower local talents and position them in the global market. The platform's mission is to support Kuwait's efforts in positioning the country globally and diversifying its economy through its young talents.

Under the patronage of Sheikha Ohoud, the soft launch of Kuwait's VO Creative Hub was supported by Alina L Romanowski, US Ambassador to Kuwait, where her visit to the hub included an exclusive tour of



A young talent plays the saxophone at the launch of the VO Creative Hub.

the hub's studios and a meeting between VO's team and the US Embassy's commercial officer, deputy counselor for economic affairs and staff members.

The platform has already broken a record in supporting multiple Kuwaiti talents, including the production of a song bringing Kuwait talents and prominent celebrities together, called 'BRAVO', that crossed above 20 million views on YouTube in less than a month. VO provides an academic program for Kuwaiti youth to identify and nurture their talents, an all-inclusive creative hub to empower and express their ideas, and a 'smart' app to promote their creative productions on a seamless, high-tech and efficient digital platform.

Crown Prince meets opposition...

Continued from Page 1

They are protesting against a decision taken by the Assembly to delay grillings of HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah until the end of 2022, which the opposition says is illegal and violates the constitution.

Opposition MPs also claimed that the government in collaboration with Ghanem wants to approve the budget and then end the Assembly term, because the term cannot be closed before approving the budget. MP Hasan Jowhar said during the summer recess, the government plans to issue what is known as emergency decrees to allow the government to borrow billions of dinars, which the Assembly has stalled.

He said the government also plans to issue other decrees to impose value added tax and other forms of taxes, in addition to reducing public subsidies to raise charges on state-run services. Ghanem said on Sunday that 15 lawmakers, all of

them pro-government, submitted a motion demanding the special session to approve the state budget for the 2021/2022 fiscal year. Opposition MP Obaid Al-Wasmi said it is unconstitutional to hold special sessions in place of regular sessions.

For the Assembly to convene, it needs the attendance of at least 33 members to secure a quorum in the house, which has 66 MPs and Cabinet members. The government and its supporters are certain of the support of all the 16 Cabinet ministers and another 16 MPs including the speaker, which is just one member short of the required quorum. But that one spot can be filled by MP Adnan Abdulsamad, who has not yet declared his position but is normally a supporter of the government.

Leading opposition MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri said that the opposition will not allow any session to be held unless the prime minister accepts to be grilled. He expected that Cabinet ministers will attend today's session regardless if they sit in the front seats or not. He also warned that pro-government MPs could intimidate opposition lawmakers and may even assault them. A number of opposition lawmakers said they plan to sit in the seats reserved for ministers in today's session.

Saudi ambassador to Qatar takes up post

DOHA: Saudi Arabia's new ambassador to Qatar took up his post yesterday, presenting his credentials after the two Gulf countries re-established ties in January following a bitter three-year feud. Saudi envoy Prince Mansour bin Khalid bin Farhan Al-Saud was received by Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani in the capital Doha, according to Qatar's ministry of foreign affairs.

Sheikh Mohammed "wished the new ambassador success in his duties, assuring him of all support to advance bilateral relations between the two countries to achieve closer cooperation in various fields", it said in a statement. Saudi Arabia and its allies - the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt - severed all ties with Qatar in June 2017 over claims it was too close to Iran and backed radical Islamist groups, allegations Doha has always denied.

But in January of this year, the boycotting coun-



DOHA: Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani (right) receives a copy of the credentials of Saudi Ambassador Prince Mansour bin Khalid bin Farhan Al-Saud yesterday. — AFP

tries agreed to restore relations with Qatar following a flurry of diplomatic activity by the United States, an ally of all nations involved in the dispute. The quartet agreed to lift the restrictions at a summit for Gulf Arab nations in January in the Saudi desert city of Al-Ula. Since the reconciliation there have been cautious steps towards normality, including the resumption of air travel between the former adversaries and the reopening of Qatar's sole land border with Saudi Arabia. — AFP

Local

Sinovac, Covishield vaccine takers await their fate on return to Kuwait

Thousands of affected residents hope for solution before August 1

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Residents with valid residencies can return to Kuwait from August 1, but only if they are fully vaccinated against COVID-19. The Ministry of Health in Kuwait only recognizes the Oxford-AstraZeneca, Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson COVID vaccines. Thousands of residents stranded abroad are hoping to return, but there are some outstanding questions that may hinder this process, including whether Kuwait will eventually recognize Chinese, Indian and Russian vaccines given to residents abroad in places like the Philippines, India and Egypt, among others.

Secondly, will Kuwait equate the Covishield vaccine given in India with the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, which is already approved by the Ministry of Health? With no clarity on these issues, residents hoping to return have only one option: To register on a health ministry platform and wait.

Jen, a Filipina who works as nurse at a private clinic in Kuwait, had her visa renewed by her sponsor while she was on vacation in the Philippines during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. "I got two doses of the Chinese Sinovac vaccine," said Jen, who is from Davao City. "I want to join my husband who is also working in Kuwait, but it looks like I will have to wait for some more time because Kuwait does not recognize the Sinovac jab," she said.

Philippines has administered around 8 million doses in a country of more than 100 million people. Most of those who have been vaccinated have

received the Sinovac vaccine. The World Health Organization (WHO) has approved China's Sinovac-CoronaVac and Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccines, which are now being used in over 40 countries around the world, including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

"We overseas workers are prioritized for vaccination in the Philippines. Many OFWs have received Chinese vaccines and I am one of those people," Jen told Kuwait Times. "I hope Kuwait will reconsider recognizing Chinese vaccines since WHO recognized them recently. If not, I don't know if we can come back to Kuwait."

Christian, who works as a chef at a restaurant in Kuwait City, also had his visa renewed when he was out of Kuwait. Christian said his bags are packed and he is ready to come by August 1. "I was told by my boss to stand by and keep my spirits high. He said maybe Kuwait will reconsider approving Chinese vaccines soon since there are countries in the GCC that also use these vaccines for their citizens. I will wait for any new development. I've been here for a year now, and it's difficult counting the days without a regular income," he told Kuwait Times.

Two issues

Indian residents stuck in India face a similar challenge. They have two issues at hand - whether Kuwait will allow those who received jabs of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine manufactured in India under the brand name Covishield, and if Kuwait will certify the locally-made Covaxin vaccine. "I got the

Covishield vaccine. I received the first dose on May 30, and my second dose will be on June 30. I heard it is not yet recognized by Kuwait, so we are now worried," said Anthony, an Indian resident of Kuwait who is stuck in India.

Early indications suggest that the health ministry in Kuwait will consider Covishield the same as the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, which it has approved. But the name Covishield has not been mentioned directly, and so this has worried some Indian residents who've received it abroad. The Covishield vaccine has also been administered in more than 90 countries around the world.

"I hope and pray that the Indian Embassy intervenes and convinces the ministry of health in Kuwait to accept Covishield, or else our return will be jeopardized again," said Anthony, an accountant who was stranded in India with his family after flying there when his father-in-law died in December.

"When Kuwait allowed foreigners to enter Kuwait in February 2021 via a third country, we rushed to Dubai. But Kuwait then totally banned foreigners from entering Kuwait, so we were stranded in Dubai for over 40 days before we finally decided to go back to India. Now we are hoping to come back in August. I am ready to book the ticket to fly back to Kuwait, but many of us Kuwait-based workers have doubts whether we will be allowed to enter, since our vaccine has not been mentioned by Kuwait," he said.

"There are 40 days to go before August 1; hopefully in period we will get the good news from Kuwait. I am positive the ministry will approve the



KUALA LUMPUR: A medical staff member shows a bottle of the Sinovac COVID-19 coronavirus vaccine on a mobile vaccine truck in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. —AFP

Covishield jab. The Indian Embassy is aware of our predicament and we hope they exert extra efforts to convince Kuwait to allow us to return to Kuwait," Anthony said. India has administered more than 280 million doses, in a country of more than 1.3 billion people. Two vaccines received approval for emergency use in India at the onset of the program - Covishield and Covaxin.

The Kuwait ministry of health has set up a website where residents stuck abroad who are planning to return to Kuwait can register to have their vaccinations certified: https://vaxcert.moh.gov.kw/SPCMS/PH/CVD_19_Vaccine_External_Registration.aspx

Ten-member family rescued off Kubbar Island



KUWAIT: Firemen rescued 10 people after water leaked into their boat near Kubbar Island, Kuwait Fire Force said yesterday. Firemen and coastguard

personnel headed to the scene after receiving a call about a leak in a 40-foot boat carrying a family of 10 members. They managed to secure the family

members and transport them to a safe place while stopping the leak in the boat, KFF explained. No injuries were reported in the incident.

Kuwait affirms states must coordinate in combating COVID-19

GENEVA: The State of Kuwait yesterday affirmed nations of the globe must close ranks in the face of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The stance was expressed by the Permanent State of Kuwait Representative at the United Nations and International Organizations in Geneva, Ambassador Jamal Al-Ghuneim, during the 47th session of the UN Human Rights Council, set between June 21 and July 13.

Ambassador Ghuneim affirmed that the top responsibility lies on every state to secure facilities and required resources to attain the aspired level of health care for citizens. As for the State of Kuwait, it has been in the lead among states that support the international system in facing the pandemic, keenly cooperating with many partners and effectively contributing to a number of significant initiatives with respect of coordinating international efforts for facing the contagion, Ghuneim added. — KUNA

CONDOLENCES

**Kuwait Times Editor-in-Chief,
management and staff
convey their deepest condolences to**

Al-Asousi Family

on the sad demise of

Khalifa Abdulaziz Al-Asousi

May Allah Almighty bestow His mercy on him

Local

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The First Daily in The Arabian Gulf

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EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432
ADVERTISING : 24835616/7
FAX : 24835620/1
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163
ACCOUNTS : 24833199 Extn. 125
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DHAMAN participates in GUST career fair

KUWAIT: Living up to its 'Healthcare for New Kuwait' slogan, the Health Assurance Hospitals Company (DHAMAN) announced its participation in the virtual career exhibition organized by Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST). Regarding this event, DHAMAN Human Resources Director Ahmad Bourisli said that this participation is part of the company's efforts to attract qualified human resources, especially Kuwaiti nationals, with the aim of developing their abilities and qualification to serve the objectives of New Kuwait 2035.



Ahmad Bourisli

Bourisli added that DHAMAN has devised a holistic recruitment plan to hire required medical, technical, and administrative staff from various medical specializations and professional fields in healthcare, especially national human resources. Bourisli noted that DHAMAN has previously launched a number of recruitment campaigns for a number of roles at the company's different facilities, such as the head office, primary healthcare centers and hospitals, which are all part of the company's preparations to finalize activating its healthcare network during next year 2022. Bourisli extended appreciation and gratitude to GUST for organizing these activities, wishing overall success to all students and participants.

Zain holds COVID vaccination campaign for staff at main HQ

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, organized a COVID-19 vaccination campaign at its main headquarters in Shuwaikh in collaboration with the Ministry of Health. The campaign aimed at supporting the efforts exerted by the authorities in immunizing the community during the pandemic.

Zain considers itself an active partner of the Ministry of Health and other entities in protecting the local community against the threats of the pandemic. Since the early days of the crisis, Zain was keen on effectively responding to the efforts of various authorities in the nation by supporting initiatives and programs that contributed to lessening the health, economic, and social impacts of the pandemic. The internal vaccination campaign was organized in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, and included all of Zain's staff as well as point-of-sale employees who operate across the country.

Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi expressed his appreciation to the Ministry of Health's officials for responding to Zain's call to conduct an internal vaccination campaign, as well as for their keenness on being present at the company's main HQ to coordinate the campaign efficiently.

Kharafi added: "my sincere gratitude goes to the teams at MoH for their efforts, which go in line with the nation's plans to reach social immunity. My thanks also go to all of the country's entities and ministries and our great frontliners."

Rising stars win Alghanim prize for young Kuwaiti architects

KUWAIT: Alghanim Industries announced the winners of the first Kutayba Yusuf Alghanim Architecture Prize, a competition conceived by Kutayba Alghanim to advance Kuwait's innovation economy and support young professionals in the arts and creative industry sectors.

The competition was open to Kuwaiti architects and designers under the age of 30, based in Kuwait or abroad, including students. Competitors were asked to redesign a 44-meter tall water tower, located within Alghanim Industries' Shuwaikh Automotive Complex. Originally built in 1966, the tower is out of service today.

A pair of Kuwaiti architects, Sheikh Al-Ajmi and Zahraa Al-Jazzaf, won the first-place prize of \$10,000 for their "Momentum Tower" design. Ameena Al-Qabandi and Noura Al-Subaie won the second-place prize of \$5,000 for their "Tubery" design. Dana Al-Mathkoor won the third-place prize of

\$3,000 for her "Light Tower" design.

The Momentum Tower design will radically transform the tower and the space around it, creating seven levels of mixed-use recreation and co-work space, capping the tower with a platform that offers 360 degree views of Kuwait City.

Reflecting on the experience, Sheikh Al-Ajmi said: "We thought the idea of reimagining an out of service water tower was very unique. Preserving the construction rather than demolishing it was a fun challenge. There was a lot of room for creativity. We are also very happy to see a private sector organization actively supporting young professionals in this way."

"I look at these winners and I see a very bright future for our country," said Kutayba Alghanim. "Their work is creative, functional and beautiful. Reviewing it, I can't help but think of my father, who built the tower in 1966. For him, water towers were a symbol of Kuwait's



KUWAIT: Kutayba Alghanim (center) with Sheikh Al-Ajmi (right) and Zahraa Al-Jazzaf.

progress - a symbol of our promise as a nation. These young architects and designers honor that legacy and they point us to the future again. I am thrilled to support their work and look forward to many future rounds of this prize."

Club hosts first 'esport for all' tournament in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Kuwait Esports Club (KES) organized the first 'esport for all' tournament for participants of all age groups as well as people with special needs, under the patronage of the Public Authority for Sport (PAS). The tournament was announced during a press conference at PAS headquarters in the presence of Acting Director of General Awareness Suad Hakim, on behalf of Deputy Director of the Sports for All Department at PAS Dr Mishal Al-Hadba. Head of the women sports department Marahib Al-Shimmari and head of the awareness department Mushari Al-Thafiri also attended. Meanwhile, KES was represented by Chairman of the Board Abdullah Al-Ali and Secretary Faisal Abul.

Registration began on June 20th for the tournament, which is the first fruit of cooperation between PAS and KES, as both sides expressed their excitement for this partnership and their anticipation to hold more activities and tournaments that develop people's hobbies, skills and capabilities, and are enjoyed by a large section



KUWAIT: (From left) Mushari Al-Thafiri, Abdullah Al-Ali, Suad Hakim and Faisal Abul.

of various age groups.

KES Chairman Abdullah Al-Ali said such tournaments are held in order to focus on positive social activities that revolve around competition, mental motivation, and interactive social contact. He said online multiplayer esports com-

petitions provide an important space for social interaction and mental motivation. "Players plan and organize their collective efforts and strategies to overcome challenges and obstacles presented in the games in which they compete in a high level of sportsmanship," he said.

KALD honors outstanding students in e-learning year



KUWAIT: Kuwait Association for Learning Differences honors the outstanding students.

KUWAIT: Kuwait Association for Learning Differences (KALD) presented the "Diligent Student" award to students with learning difficulties who were able to deal with learning online and successfully continue their education. This comes in appreciation of their perseverance, commitment and outstanding academic gains, KALD said in a statement. "This award comes as part of the strategic partnership between the Association and National Bank of Kuwait, the strategic partner for KALD youth activities," it said.

The award ceremony took place at the Women's Cultural and Social Society in Khaldiya, and it was divided into separate time frames to comply with health protocols. The first place winners in the secondary stage were Ahmad Abdelrahman Al-Mousa from Manarat School for Learning Difficulties in the male students' category, and Noura Taleb Saer Al-Enezi from Um Al-Qura Model School in the female students' category. For the intermediate stage, the first place winners were Mohammad

Khalid Al-Nisf from Manarat School in the male students' category, and Sarah Anwar Abdallah Al-Qatani from Al-Resalah Bilingual School in the female students' category. Head of KALD Amal Al-Sayer said, "The project to organize an award for outstanding students was in the association's plan for some time, but the current circumstances necessitated its launch in order to encourage students, boost their morale and motivate them to benefit from this technological development that has become necessary to improve education, as well as all aspects of life."

Sayer congratulated participating students for all their efforts in learning online under the challenging circumstances. She also acknowledged parents who support their children, as well as teachers and schools administrations who expressed full confidence in their students' abilities. Sayer also thanked the reward's sponsors, Board of Trustees, the Education Ministry, students' evaluation committee, the Women's Cultural and Social Society's administration and KALD staff.

NBK participates in GUST career fair

KUWAIT: As part of its keenness to support young national cadres and provide them with suitable job opportunities, as one of the largest private sector employers of national labor, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) participated in the career fair organized by Gulf University of Science and Technology (GUST), which was held on June 22 - 23.

The fair was held virtually in cooperation with the Khebra platform, which is the first platform in the Middle East connecting different employers, private universities and young talents in Kuwait. During the fair, the bank provided many job opportunities for the Kuwaiti youth of both genders, in line with its consistent efforts to solicit young national cadres, help them develop their skills and provide a work environment that suits their aspirations and future goals.

On this occasion, Mubarak Al-Enezi, Senior Officer - Recruitment at National Bank of Kuwait, said: "NBK's Group Human Resources staff conducted interviews through the digital platform and responded to all inquiries raised by students who filled out the application form for available vacancies. This comes in line with the bank's keenness to encourage those graduates to join the banking sector, which plays an instrumental role in developing the Kuwaiti economy."

Through this participation, NBK provided the youth with the opportunity to learn about the nature of work in

the bank, and available career areas, in addition to familiarizing them with the available training opportunities to develop their skills, he added.

Enezi noted that the bank's participation in this fair is an important opportunity for the youth and fresh graduates seeking to navigate their career paths, as it provides them with an opportunity to learn about the needs and characteristics of the labor market, and helps them choose the suitable job for their qualifications and aspirations.

NBK is committed to provide training programs for young Kuwaiti fresh graduates and students, to equip them with the expertise, professional knowledge, and on-job training, as professional preparation for them to navigate the labor market, manifesting NBK's role as one of the leading local private sector institutions in supporting the youth.

NBK's efforts in soliciting national talents go in line with its development and training plans aimed to invest in national cadres and prepare a promising banking generation. The bank is also keen to offer a series of training courses and professional academic programs, being one of the leading banking institutions in Kuwait in organizing training programs for youth.



Mubarak Al-Enezi





HK pro-democracy paper Apple Daily to decide closure on Friday

Swedish government toppled in no-confidence vote

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TEHRAN: Iran's President-elect Ebrahim Raisi speaks during his first press conference in the Islamic republic's capital Tehran, yesterday. — AFP

Iran's Raisi calls for effective nuke talks

Raisi rules out Biden meet, no obstacles to resuming diplomatic ties with Saudi

TEHRAN: Iran's President-elect Ebrahim Raisi said yesterday he will not allow nuclear negotiations for the sake of negotiations, in his first news conference since winning election last week. Raisi also ruled out meeting US President Joe Biden but said there were "no obstacles" to resuming diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, the Sunni-ruled regional rival of Shiite Iran, which have been severed for five years.

Raisi, 60, won Friday's election in which more than half the voters stayed away after many political heavyweights had been barred from running and as an economic crisis driven by US sanctions has battered the country. Raisi, an ultraconservative cleric who heads Iran's judiciary, will replace moderate President Hassan Rouhani-whose landmark achievement was a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers-in August. "Any negotiations that guarantee national interests will certainly be supported, but... we will not allow negotiations to be for negotiations' sake," Raisi said of the nuclear talks. "Any meeting must produce a result... for the Iranian nation," he added.

The 2015 deal saw Iran accept curbs on its nuclear capabilities in return for an easing of sanctions, but former US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew three years later and ramped up sanctions, prompting the Islamic republic to pull back from its nuclear commitments. Trump's successor Biden has signalled his readiness to return to the deal and state parties-also including Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia-have lately been negotiating its revival in Vienna. EU negotiator Enrique Mora said on Sunday that those involved in the talks were "closer" to saving the Iran nuclear deal but that sticking points remain.

'No' to Biden meet

An austere figure from the Shiite Muslim clerical establishment, Raisi smiled and raised his hands as he arrived for yesterday's press conference. Raisi said he has no intentions of meeting Biden. "No," was his flat response to a question from an American media outlet on whether he they would meet in the event the talks lead to the US lifting sanctions on Iran, and to try and "fix" the issues between the two arch enemies.

Raisi also said his administration would be open to restoring ties with Iran's regional foe Saudi Arabia. "There are no obstacles from Iran's side to re-opening embassies... there are no obstacles to ties with Saudi Arabia," he said. Ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia were cut in 2016 after Iranian protesters attacked Saudi diplomatic missions following the kingdom's execution of a revered Shiite cleric. The two sides are reported to have been engaged in talks hosted by Baghdad since April to improve relations. Raisi, who is subject to US sanctions imposed over the executions of political prisoners in 1988, has in the past denied he played a role in the killings.

'Always defending human rights'

At yesterday's news conference, Raisi said he has "always" defended human rights. "All that I have done

through my years of service has always been towards defending human rights," said the Iranian president-elect, while accusing the west of violating human rights. Raisi, whose black turban signifies direct descent from Islam's Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), is seen as close to the 81-year-old supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who holds ultimate political power in Iran. His victory had been widely anticipated after the Guardian Council, made up of 12 clerics and jurists, had approved just seven candidates, all men, out of a field of almost 600 hopefuls. Three of those vetted candidates dropped out two days before the vote. Raisi said there was a "massive" voter turnout in Friday's election.

"This meaningful presence of the people, their massive presence, came about despite the coronavirus situation, despite the many enmities and psychological warfare of the Iranian nation's enemies," he said. Turnout reached 48.8 percent, a record low for a presidential poll since Iran's 1979 revolution ousted the US-backed monarchy.—AFP

Free COVID vaccines for all Indian adults

NEW DELHI: India opened up free vaccinations to all adults in an attempt to bolster its inoculation drive yesterday, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi kicked off a muted International Yoga Day hailing the practice's "protective" properties against the coronavirus. The country's vaccination drive has significantly slowed in recent months due to a shortage of jabs and hesitancy, even as it battled a vicious surge in cases in April and May that overwhelmed the healthcare system in many places.

Case numbers have since fallen sharply and the authorities have again relaxed many restrictions, sparking fears of another wave. The government had expanded the vaccine roll-out to include all adults aged below 45 on May 1, but states and private hospitals had to procure and buy the shots themselves for the younger age group, leading to confusion and shortages.

But New Delhi later changed tack, announcing it would procure 75 percent of vaccine supplies and distribute them to states so that they can inoculate people for free. So far it has administered 280 million shots, with barely four percent of people fully vaccinated. The government aims to inoculate all of India's almost 1.1 billion adults by the end of the year.—AFP



CHALON-SUR-SAONE: Accused Valerie Bacot (C/yellow scarf) arrives flanked by her family and surrounded by journalists at the Chalon-sur-Saone Courthouse, central-eastern France, prior to the opening hearing of her trial on charges of murdering her stepfather turned husband. — AFP

Woman who killed rapist husband goes on trial in France

DIJON: A French woman who killed the man who raped her for years as her stepfather before becoming her husband and pimp goes on trial for murder yesterday. The case has mobilised defenders of women against male violence, with hundreds of thousands of people signing a petition for her release. "I had to put an end to it," Valerie Bacot, 40, wrote in her book called "Everybody Knew", adding: "I was afraid, all the time."

Bacot was 12 when her mother's partner, Daniel Polette, who was 25 years her senior, raped her for the first time. He was sent to prison, but after his release returned and resumed the serial rapes. At 17, Bacot became pregnant, got thrown out of the house by her alcoholic mother, and went to live with Polette. Polette, also a heavy drinker, became increasingly violent, attacking her with a hammer at one point.

He later ordered her to work as a prostitute for truck drivers passing through, using a Peugeot people carrier. Investigators established that Polette threatened to kill her if she refused, pointing a gun at her many times. When Polette started questioning her 14-year old daughter Karline about her budding sexuality, Bacot

said she decided that "this has to stop".

On March 2016, after Polette ordered his wife to undergo yet another sexual humiliation by a client, she used the pistol that he kept hidden in the car to kill him with a single bullet to the back of the neck. Bacot hid the body with the help of two of her four children. In October 2017 she was arrested, confessed and one year later released pending her trial while remaining under judicial control.

Her lawyers said "the extreme violence that she suffered for 25 years and the fear that her daughter would be next" pushed her to kill Polette. The same lawyers, Janine Bonagguia and Nathalie Tomasini, had already defended Jacqueline Sauvage, a French woman who was sentenced to 10 years in prison for killing her abusive husband but won a presidential pardon in 2016 after becoming a symbol for the fight against violence directed at women.

"These women who are victims of violence have no protection. The judiciary is still too slow, not reactive enough and too lenient towards the perpetrators who can continue to exercise their violent power," Bonagguia told AFP. "This is precisely what can push a desperate woman to kill in order to survive," she said.

Bacot was "certain that she needed to commit this act to protect her children", a court evaluation found. More than 500,000 people have signed a petition demanding that Bacot, who risks life in prison for murder, be cleared of the charge. The trial in Chalon-sur-Saone, in France's central Burgundy region, is due to run through Friday. — AFP

Winners of the First Edition

Kutayba Yusuf Alghanim Architecture Prize



1st Place
Zahraa Al Jazzaf & Sheikha Al Ajmi



2nd Place
Ameena Al Qabandi & Noura Al Subaie



3rd Place
Dana Al Mathkoor



International

Swedish government toppled in no-confidence vote

Lofven has a week to either announce snap election or resign

Brazil is back at UNSC

By Francisco Mauro Brasil de Holanda
Ambassador of Brazil to Kuwait

With an overwhelming majority of 181 votes, including the invaluable support of Kuwait and most Arab countries, Brazil was elected on 10 June for its 11th mandate as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), biennium 2022-23.

Brazil's coming mandate will have the symbolic significance as it coincides with the 200 years of our independence from Portugal, in 1822. Since then, Brazil's trajectory has been marked by stability and prosperity at home and constructive and peaceful relations with the outside world.

The peoples from different races, religions and cultures who settled in Brazil, including an Arab community estimated today at over 11 million people, of whom 35,000 are Muslims, built a Brazilian national identity without losing the attachment to their roots, in an ambience of tolerance and empathy towards each other.

Although occupying more than 50 percent of South American territory, Brazil settled all the border disputes with its 10 neighboring countries through peaceful means, mostly by arbitration. Counting on an energy matrix with more than 40 percent of renewable sources and over 60 percent of hydro resources on power generation, we feel fully prepared to join the international efforts for a cleaner world for the next generations.

Over the past 70 years, Brazil has participated in 41 peacekeeping operations, with more than 55,000 military and police officers. Brazil headed the United Nations Mission for the Stabilization in Haiti (MINUSTAH) for thirteen years and commanded the Maritime Task Force of the Interim Force of Nations Nations of Lebanon (UNIFIL) for almost ten years, from 2011 to 2021.

Brazil currently participates at the UN Mission for Stabilization in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), where it commands its military component and provides training in jungle warfare for troops from third countries joining MONUSCO. It also now commands CTF-151, in the framework of the Combined Maritime Forces, a multilateral military partnership made up of 34 member nations.

Brazil reaffirms its unwavering commitment to the UNSC reform. It is the Brazilian view that the long overdue reform of the UNSC is essential for the Council to maintain its centrality. Brazil will continue to defend strict respect for international humanitarian and human rights principles and laws, paying utmost attention to individual freedoms and fundamental guarantees.

As a member of the Group of Friends for the Protection of Civilians, Brazil endeavours to reduce the impacts of armed conflicts on civilian population. In fulfilling this mission, Brazil will remain committed to the protection of vulnerable populations, especially women, children, the elderly and handicapped. It will work to guarantee education for children and young people, mainly refugees and internally displaced persons; favor measures to protect hospitals; and ensure access to medical services.

It is the Brazilian view that such measures are even more important in the light of the COVID-19 effects. As a member of the UNSC in 2022-2023, Brazil will promote the valorization of women's agenda and thus combat abuse and sexual exploitation.

As a supporter of the creation of the Peace Building Committee (PBC) in 2005, and president of the agency in 2014, Brazil promoted the participation of developing countries and African regional and sub-regional organizations in the Commission's activities and sought engagement between the PBC and the UNSC.

Since 2007, Brazil has held the presidency of PBC Guinea-Bissau configuration. First among the developing countries to exercise this function, Brazil has worked in close coordination with relevant national, regional and international organizations. Brazil recognizes the importance of collaboration and joint planning between the UN and relevant regional organizations, such as the Organization of American States (OAS), the African Union (AU), the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP) and the Gulf Cooperation Council, among others.

As an active and dedicated founding member of the United Nations, Brazil was assigned with the distinction of opening the high level debates of the annual General Assemblies. Brazil takes up its mandate at the UNSC with a renewed commitment to the vital role of the United Nations as the parliament of men, and of the Security Council as its central forum to address global security issues.



STOCKHOLM: Sweden's government was toppled yesterday after Stefan Lofven became the country's first prime minister to lose a no-confidence vote, meaning he can now either resign or trigger a snap election. The motion of no confidence was filed on Thursday by the far right Sweden Democrats, after the Left Party, which has been propping up the government, said it was planning such a motion itself in protest against a plan to ease rent controls.

The conservative Moderate Party and the Christian Democrats were quick to back the motion, which was passed by 181 MPs in the 349-seat parliament.

Critics have described the constellation as an "unholy alliance" of parties at opposite ends of the political spectrum.

After 11 unsuccessful no-confidence votes in modern Swedish political history, Lofven, who has previously distinguished himself by his ability to survive political crises, becomes the first head of government to be ousted in this way.

Lofven now has a week to either announce a snap election or resign, leaving it up to the speaker of parliament, Andreas Norlen, to open negotiations with the parties to find a new prime minister.

Speaking at a press conference after the vote, Lofven did not announce a decision, noting he had a week to speak with other parties and to consider his options. He added that his focus would remain doing "what is best for Sweden."

Should he leave it up to Norlen to find a new prime minister, analysts said that Lofven could be chosen again.

"No matter what happens now, I and my party will be available to, together with others, shoulder the responsibility to lead the country," Lofven said.

In any case, the government will stay on temporarily to handle routine tasks until a new administration is formed.

Spain to pardon jailed Catalan separatists today

BARCELONA: Spain's government will today pardon the jailed Catalan separatists behind a failed 2017 independence bid, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said. "Today, guided by this constitutional spirit of forgiveness, I will propose that the cabinet approve the pardon," he said during a speech yesterday at a carefully choreographed event at Barcelona's prestigious Liceu theatre.

Sanchez said his leftist government has "opted for reconciliation" and believes the controversial measure would "pave the way for this path". His announcement was met with cries for an amnesty for the jailed separatists from dozens of protesters who gathered outside the theatre, many carrying pro-independence Catalan flags. Manel Cantero, a 59-year-old teacher, said the separatists needed an amnesty because "there's nothing to pardon". "We exercised a fundamental right," he told AFP.

The Socialist premier has sought in recent weeks to rally support for the pardons, arguing they are key to overcoming the political impasse over Catalonia's separatist drive. Catalonia has been a dominant theme in Spanish politics since the rich northeastern region pressed ahead with a banned independence referendum in 2017 which was marred by police violence.

Syria regime shelling on Idlib kills nine

BEIRUT: Syrian government shelling on the rebel-controlled enclave of Idlib yesterday killed at least nine people, including four civilians, a war monitor reported. The violence was the latest in a spate of violations of a ceasefire deal that was brokered by Turkey and Russia in March 2020 and had largely held since.

Yesterday's artillery fire struck several locations near the ceasefire lines and one Syrian soldier was killed in retaliatory fire, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. In one incident in the village of Al-Bara, two women were killed by regime shelling, the Observatory said.

In the village of Ihsen, shelling struck a police station, killing one policeman and four members of armed groups opposed to the government of President Bashar al-

Assad and its allies. Another 13 people were wounded, the monitor said. Both areas are under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a jihadist organisation that includes ex-members of Al Qaeda's former Syria affiliate. Smaller factions are also present in those areas, said Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the UK-based Observatory. The northwestern Idlib region, which borders Turkey to the north and is home to more than a million people, is the last part of Syria controlled by rebel or jihadist groups. Assad's regime, backed by Russia and Iran, has vowed to retake the region and the enclave shrank under pressure from deadly land and air offensives.

A ceasefire deal brokered by Ankara-the main rebel backer-and Moscow was reached 15 months ago. Despite sporadic skirmishes along the ceasefire lines, the truce has largely held, averting a major assault that aid groups warned could cause suffering on a scale yet unseen in the decade-old war.

The past few weeks have witnessed an uptick in violations, mostly by regime and allied forces, Abdel Rahman said. "The

'Political theatre'

Any snap poll would be held in addition to the general election scheduled for September 2022, which would result in two ballots in just over a year.

"For a long time it looked like the minority government would make it until the end of the term," political commentator Mats Knutson told public broadcaster SVT over the weekend.

But the inherent divisions "have finally become too big," he said.

The political crisis was triggered by a preliminary plan to reform the country's rent controls. That would potentially allow landlords to freely set rents for new apartments.

On the left, the proposal for "market rents" is seen as being at odds with the Swedish social model and a threat to tenants' rights.

Last-ditch efforts to appease the Left Party, which holds 27 seats, failed.

An offer to hold talks with stakeholders in the rental sector was dismissed by Left Party leader Nooshi Dadgostar as "not serious and political theatre aimed at stalling the process".

The minority government took power in 2019 after months of political turmoil following inconclusive elections in 2018.

To secure control it signed a deal with two centre-left parties, the Centre Party and the Liberals, and was propped up by the Left Party.

Departing, only to return?

The deal included proposals for several liberal market reforms, including the controversial easing of rent controls. "For me, there is a sense of very strong lack of willingness to compromise when you can't stand back from a single issue to avoid a government crisis," Dadgostar told SVT the morning ahead of the vote.

"The issue of liberalising the housing market was a ticking bomb," said Anders Sannerstedt, a politi-

The referendum was followed by a short-lived declaration of independence, plunging Spain into one of its biggest political crises since democracy was restored in 1975 following the death of longtime dictator Francisco Franco.

'Desire to forgive'

In 2019, Spain's Supreme Court convicted 12 Catalan politicians and activists for their role in the independence push, with nine of them handed jail terms of between nine and 13 years. The ruling triggered days of protests across Catalonia which sometimes turned violent in Barcelona and other cities.

Most Spaniards, 53 percent, oppose the pardons, although 68 percent of Catalans are in favour, according to a survey by the Ipsos polling firm. The Supreme Court has also opposed the pardons, as do the main opposition parties. Tens of thousands of people protested in central Madrid on June 13 against the plan to offer clemency.

Many conservatives say Sanchez is motivated mainly by a desire to hold on to power since his minority government relies in part on Catalan separatists to pass legislation in the national parliament. But Sanchez last week received surprise support for the pardons from Spain's main business lobby CEOE, which opposes Catalan independence, as well as from the Catalan Catholic Church. Spanish Foreign Minister Arancha Gonzalez Laya yesterday defended the planned pardons, calling them "the expression of a society's desire to forgive".

Pardons are 'key'

Analysts said Sanchez was taking a political gam-



STOCKHOLM: Sweden's Prime Minister Stefan Lofven attends a press conference after the no-confidence voting in the Swedish Parliament, Stockholm, yesterday. —AFP

scientist at Lund University.

Lofven's most likely move will be to resign, Sannerstedt said. "I think nobody wants an extra election... and the Social Democrats will, according to recent polls, lose quite a lot of votes in an election right now," he said.

If Lofven resigns, the political deadlock in parliament could allow him to return, Sannerstedt said.

Jonas Hinnfors, a political scientist from the University of Gothenburg, echoed that view. "He is an extremely good negotiator," he said.

"Given that the seat distribution is the same, the most likely outcome is that Lofven will come back," Hinnfors said.

Despite triggering the crisis, Dadgostar later told a press conference that her party would be open to seeing Lofven back in the driver's seat.

"We would like to see Stefan Lofven returning as prime minister, but without market rents," Dadgostar said, adding that they would always seek to block a "right-wing nationalist government." —AFP



BARCELONA: Pro-independence demonstrators gather during a protest as Spain's prime minister Pedro Sanchez delivers his speech at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, yesterday to outline his government's plans to pardon the jailed Catalan separatists. —AFP

ble with the pardons now in the hope that he could overcome any harm to his government's popularity before national elections, due by January 2024. "With time, the pardons will seem anecdotal if the economy is doing well," said Pablo Ferrandiz, a sociologist at Madrid's Carlos III University.

He recalled that Spain is one of the "main beneficiaries" of the European Union's 750-billion-euro (\$910-billion) coronavirus rescue fund which will start flowing later this year. It remains to be seen though if the pardons will foster dialogue between Madrid and the Catalan regional government, headed since May by Pere Aragonés, a moderate separatist. —AFP



BARAH: A Syrian woman stands amid the rubble inside a destroyed house in the northwest Idlib province of Barah, in the the Jabal al-Zawiya region of the rebel-held Idlib province yesterday, following reported bombardment by government forces. —AFP

escalation is unprecedented since the start of the truce," he said. On June 10, 12 people were killed in regime shelling on the Idlib region, in what was one of the deadliest incidents since the ceasefire came into effect.

According to the Observatory, close to half a million people have been killed by conflict since March 2011, when brutal government repression of pro-democracy protests ignited a civil war that also displaced half of Syria's population. —AFP

UN rights experts urge Vatican to halt child sex abuse

GENEVA: A group of UN human rights experts said yesterday they had urged the Vatican to take steps to stop child sex abuse in Catholic institutions and prevent it from happening again. The experts called on "the Holy See to take all necessary measures to stop and prevent the recurrence of violence and sexual abuse against children in Catholic insti-

tutions, and to ensure those responsible are held to account and reparations are paid to victims".

The four special rapporteurs, who do not speak for the United Nations but report their findings to it, wrote to the Vatican in April. The experts voiced their "utmost concern about the numerous allegations around the world of sexual abuse and violence committed by members of the Catholic Church against children", according to the letter released yesterday.

They also said they were worried about measures adopted by the church to "protect alleged abusers, cover up crimes, obstruct accountability of alleged abusers, and evade reparations due to victims". They said there had been persistent allega-

tions of obstruction and a lack of cooperation with legal proceedings to prevent accountability and reparations.

The experts urged the Vatican to cooperate fully with law enforcement in the countries concerned, and to hold off signing agreements in order to evade accountability for church members accused of abuse. The group was also concerned about what it said were continued attempts to undermine legislative attempts to prosecute child sex offenders.

The letter was penned by the special rapporteurs on the sexual exploitation of children; on cruel and degrading treatment; on the promotion of truth, justice and reparation; and on the rights of persons with disabilities. —AFP

International

Hong Kong pro-democracy paper Apple Daily to decide closure on Friday

Paper's closure would shutter one of the few remaining local newspapers

HONG KONG: Hong Kong pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily said yesterday its board will decide whether to close the publication at their next meeting on Friday after an asset freeze by authorities using a new national security law left the outspoken media group unable to pay staff.

Apple Daily has long been a thorn in Beijing's side, with unapologetic support for the city's pro-democracy movement and caustic criticism of China's authoritarian leaders. Its owner Jimmy Lai is in jail and was among the first to be charged under the security law after its imposition last year.

Its chief editor and CEO were detained last week and its finances frozen under the law, which Beijing has used to stamp out dissent in the international business hub. Apple Daily's remaining board met yesterday to discuss the paper's future.

"The board... decided to meet again on Friday to decide whether to terminate Apple Daily," the paper said in a short push notification to readers. Rival outlets Now TV and Oriental Daily both reported, citing sources, that Apple Daily's board has all but decided to close the paper, with the final publication date to be announced at the next meeting on Friday.

The paper's closure would shutter one of the few remaining local newspapers willing to be critical of China's authoritarian leaders. It would also be a huge victory for authorities who have made no secret of their desire to see the outlet silenced.

'Locked accounts'

In an interview with CNN, a senior aide to Lai said last week's freeze order by the city's security chief had crippled the newspaper's ability to do business. "Our problem at Apple Daily is not that we don't have funds, we have \$50 million in the bank," he

said. "Our problem is the Secretary of Security and the police will not let us pay our reporters, they will not let us pay our staff, and they will not let us pay our vendors. They have locked up our accounts."

Lai, 73, is in prison for attending democracy protests in 2019. He faces a life sentence if convicted of national security crimes. Last Thursday, more than 500 police officers raided the paper's newsroom and arrested five executives over a series of articles that police said called for international sanctions. Two of those executives—chief editor Ryan Law and CEO Cheung Kim-hung—have been charged with "colluding" with foreign forces to undermine China's national security and were remanded into custody over the weekend. The operation was the first time political views and opinions published by a Hong Kong media outlet have triggered the security law.

Security crackdown

Written in Beijing and imposed on Hong Kong last June, the law allows authorities to freeze assets of any individual or company in the international business hub that is deemed to be a security threat. It does not require a court order. Last month, Lai's personal assets in Hong Kong and his media company shares were frozen.

Then on Thursday, Secretary for Security John Lee said a further HK\$18 million (US\$2.3 million) of Apple Daily's company assets had been blocked. "These are all orders from basically the Secretary of Security, we are facing a security agency, we are not facing courts," Simon told CNN.

Simon is himself wanted by Hong Kong police on national security charges but left the city last year and has since relocated to the United States. Apple



HONG KONG: File photo taken on August 11, 2020 shows a commuter reading a copy of the Apple Daily newspaper on a train in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's pro-democracy Apple Daily newspaper warned yesterday it is unable to pay staff and is at imminent risk of closure after the government froze the company's assets. —AFP

Daily said it was planning to ask Lee to unfreeze some money so it can pay 700 employees. If the application is unsuccessful, the paper said it planned to go to court.

Hong Kong's Security Bureau declined to comment on whether it had been contacted by Apple

Daily, citing ongoing legal proceedings. "Endangering national security is a very serious crime," a spokesperson told AFP. "We handle such crimes according to the law, targeting at illegal acts, and invoke the power to freeze offence related properties based on need and the law." —AFP

Indonesia hits two million virus cases as crisis deepens

JAKARTA: Indonesia passed two million coronavirus cases yesterday as infection rates soar and hospitals are flooded with new patients, prompting warnings that the Southeast Asian nation's health crisis could spiral out of control. The unwanted milestone comes after daily case rates more than doubled in recent weeks and authorities identified the presence of highly infectious COVID-19 variants.

Yesterday, official figures showed that Indonesia had recorded a daily record high of 14,536 cases, taking the total to just over two million with nearly 55,000 deaths, among a population of nearly 270 million. But those figures are widely thought to be a severe undercount, due to low testing and contact tracing—some experts have said that official cases may only be about 10 percent of the real number.

"It's starting to bubble up to the surface, like a time bomb," said Windhu Purnomo, an epidemiologist at Indonesia's Airlangga University. "This is just the beginning. Depending on how things are handled, we could end up with a major explosion like in India." Case numbers are spiking as Indonesia grapples with new virus strains, including the highly infectious Delta variant first identified in India.

The rise has also been blamed on millions traveling across the Muslim-majority nation at the end of Ramadan, despite an official ban on the annual migration. Hospital occupancy rates have soared to

over 75 percent in Jakarta and other hard-hit areas, while funerals for COVID-19 victims have also reportedly jumped.

"It's worrying," Jakarta resident Rahmani told AFP at a cemetery where he attended the funeral of a relative who died of the virus. "As good citizens we have to follow government orders to obey health protocols."

Younger victims

The Indonesian Medical Association said the variants appeared to be sickening younger people. "Previously, COVID-19 patients were elderly or those with [pre-existing conditions]," the association's COVID-19 spokeswoman Erlina Burhan said earlier.

"But since the virus variants were detected, a lot of patients were younger" and did not have pre-existing conditions, she added. Widespread rule-breaking on mask-wearing and other health protocols, as well as vaccine scepticism, are among factors cited for the worsening situation.

The World Health Organization has called for tougher movement restrictions. Indonesia's government, widely criticised for a weak pandemic response, said yesterday it would temporarily beef up restrictions in the capital Jakarta and other hot spots—but enforcement has been lacklustre. While Indonesia has not put major cities under the kind of strict measures rolled out in some virus-hit nations, dozens of communities in Central Java's Kudus regency were put into lockdown after the Delta variant was spotted in local testing samples.

And a rash of severe cases in inoculated medical workers has raised questions about the China-produced Sinovac jab, which Indonesia is heavily relying on to vaccinate more than 180 million people

by early next year.

This month, more than 300 vaccinated doctors and health-care workers in Central Java were found to have been infected with COVID-19, with about a dozen hospitalised. Nearly 1,000 Indonesian health workers have died from the virus since the pandemic started.

Indonesia is ramping up inoculations by expanding the programme to anyone over 18 and eyeing incentives, such as giving away free live chickens to older people willing to get jabbed, in a rural part of West Java. But there is widespread misinformation about the pandemic, and many are sceptical about vaccines.

"I'm convinced that we don't need to react excessively," said Jakarta-area resident Rateka Winner Lee. "My wife and I both had COVID-19 before so we already have the natural vaccine inside our body." —AFP



JAKARTA: Funeral workers carry a coffin for burial at a cemetery for COVID-19 victims in Jakarta yesterday. —AFP

five years in prison for insulting the king, as well as 10 years behind bars for the conspiracy charge.

The latest charges "appear to be a threat and intimidation to other activists who wish to protect the environment", said Am Sam Ath, deputy director of local rights group Licadho. Mother Nature has faced a raft of legal troubles from Cambodian authorities. Last month, three environmental campaigners affiliated with the group were sentenced to between 18 and 20 months in prison for organising a peaceful march to protest against a massive lake being filled with sand in the capital.

The tussle over Cambodia's environment and resources has long been a contentious issue in the kingdom, with environmentalists threatened, arrested and even killed in the past decade. Last week the US embassy condemned the "worsening" situation in Cambodia and announced that it was redirecting millions in funds from government entities to local NGOs. —AFP

by early next year.

Over the weekend they were "charged with conspiracy to plot and for insulting the king", Plang Sophal, a spokesman for Phnom Penh Municipal Court, told AFP in a text message yesterday. Also charged was Mother Nature's co-founder, Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson, a Spanish environmentalist who was deported from Cambodia in 2015 after he criticised the government's plans for a controversial dam.

Sophal did not elaborate on why the activists were hit with those particular charges. While Cambodia has a constitutional monarch, King Norodom Sihamoni, it has long been ruled by its strongman premier Hun Sen—who is Asia's longest-serving leader.

The lese majeste laws triggered alarm from rights groups who warned that they could be wielded as another tool to target dissent. If sentenced, the Mother Nature activists face a maximum penalty of

Four Czech soldiers charged over Afghan man's death

PRAGUE: Czech military police have charged four soldiers over the death of an Afghan man who had killed a Czech dog handler in 2018, a prosecutor said yesterday. The Respekt weekly said Wahidullah Khan shot Czech soldier Tomas Prochazka dead and wounded another two soldiers at the Shindand air base in western Afghanistan in October 2018. He gave himself up at once, he was questioned by Afghan, Czech and American soldiers and died in hospital shortly afterwards.

Respekt cites a 2019 report by the US Army Criminal Investigation Command saying Khan had been brutally beaten up during the interrogation. It quotes an Afghan interpreter as saying Khan was heard crying in pain during the Czech interrogation and that he was beaten by the American soldiers too.

"We are supervising the criminal proceedings," Hynek Olma, a prosecutor at the regional prosecution office in the second Czech city of Brno, told AFP without giving any details. "The case of the four charged soldiers is being handled by criminal authorities," Defence Minister Lubomir Metnar said in a tweet.

"Until a legitimate decision is passed, I will honour the presumption of innocence and will not give any further comments on the case," he added. Respekt said two of the four Czech elite soldiers were charged with violent blackmail and disobedience, and the other two with negligence and breach of duty.

It added eight US soldiers were also being investigated over the incident, but they have not been charged yet. Czech soldiers are deployed in Afghanistan within the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission. NATO said earlier it would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by September 11.

Over two decades of military involvement in Afghanistan, US-led foreign forces have faced allegations of torture, illegal killings and war crimes by rights groups.

In November, an Australian military inquiry found that the country's special forces deployed in southern Afghanistan had "unlawfully killed" 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners. Such revelations had often been used by the Taliban to demand the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country. —AFP

Cambodia charges environmentalists over royal insults

PHNOM PENH: A Cambodian court has charged four environmental activists with insulting the king and plotting against the government, an official said yesterday, after three of them were arrested for documenting waste run-off into a river.

Unlike in neighbouring Thailand, the use of royal defamation laws in Cambodia is still a relatively new phenomenon as the legislation was only enacted in 2018. The three activists—Sun Ratha, Ly Chandaravuth and Yim Leanghy of advocacy group Mother Nature—were arrested Wednesday for documenting the draining of waste into Phnom Penh's

to mark the birthday of the democracy icon, who turned 76 under junta house arrest. Many replicated the floral hairstyle and uploaded pictures onto social media, from a former beauty queen to rebel soldiers.

Suu Kyi told her lawyers "to convey her thanks and share her wishes for the people", her lawyer Khin Maung Zaw told reporters after the court hearing yesterday. He added that she was "in good health". The hearing heard testimony that Suu Kyi broke coronavirus restrictions during last year's elections that her National League for Democracy (NLD) party won in a landslide, and illegally imported walkie talkies.

Journalists were barred from the proceedings in the special court in the capital Naypyidaw and an AFP reporter said there was a heavy

police presence outside. Brief meetings with her legal team have been the only channel to the outside world for Suu Kyi—who remains widely popular in Myanmar—since she was detained in February.

Last month she used her first in-person court appearance to voice defiance against the junta, affirming that her NLD party would "exist as long as people exist because it was founded for people". Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing has justified his power grab by citing alleged electoral fraud in the November poll and has threatened to dissolve the NLD.

Suu Kyi's lawyers have said they expect the trial to wrap up by July 26. The other charges against her include claims that she accepted illegal payments of gold and violated a colonial-era secrecy law. —AFP

Suu Kyi thanks supporters for flower protests

YANGON: Deposed Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday thanked her supporters for defying the junta to celebrate her 76th birthday with flower protests, as her trial on a raft of criminal charges resumed. A mass uprising in Myanmar against a February military putsch has been met with a brutal crackdown that has killed more than 870 civilians, according to a local monitoring group.

Protesters across the country on Saturday donned flowers in their hair-long a signature Suu Kyi look-

to mark the birthday of the democracy icon, who turned 76 under junta house arrest. Many replicated the floral hairstyle and uploaded pictures onto social media, from a former beauty queen to rebel soldiers.

Suu Kyi told her lawyers "to convey her thanks and share her wishes for the people", her lawyer Khin Maung Zaw told reporters after the court hearing yesterday. He added that she was "in good health". The hearing heard testimony that Suu Kyi broke coronavirus restrictions during last year's elections that her National League for Democracy (NLD) party won in a landslide, and illegally imported walkie talkies.

Journalists were barred from the proceedings in the special court in the capital Naypyidaw and an AFP reporter said there was a heavy



MONYWA: Photo taken and received courtesy of an anonymous source via Facebook yesterday shows protesters, some holding flares, taking part in a demonstration against the military coup in Monywa, Sagaing region. —AFP

Business

TUESDAY, JUNE 22, 2021

Bitcoin dives as China widens crackdown on crypto mining

BEIJING: Bitcoin tumbled more than 10 percent yesterday after China broadened a crackdown on its massive cryptocurrency mining industry with a ban on mines in a key southwestern province.

Chinese mines power nearly 80 percent of the global trade in cryptocurrencies despite a domestic trading ban since 2017, but in recent months several provinces have ordered mines to close as Beijing turns a sharp eye to the industry. Authorities in the province of Sichuan ordered the closure of 26 mines last week, according to a notice widely circulated on Chinese social media and confirmed by a former bitcoin miner.

The price of bitcoin sank to as low as \$32,309. The unit has taken a severe hit in recent weeks, having hit a record near \$65,000 in April, partly because of Beijing's crackdown.

The notice reportedly instructed power companies to stop supplying electricity to all cryptocurrency mines by Sunday. It vowed a "complete clean-up" and ordered local governments to carry out a "dragnet-style investigation" to find and

shut down suspected crypto mines.

The province represents one of the largest bases for mining in the country. A former cryptocurrency miner told AFP they had "closed everything" in line with the requirements in recent days. "There have been working groups coming to check... making sure we shut down operations and removed the machines," he said.

Sichuan, a mountainous region in southwest China, is home to a large number of cryptocurrency mines, which require a colossal amount of energy supplied by the province's cheap and abundant hydropower. According to a report in the state tabloid the Global Times, the closure of mines in the province has resulted in the shutting down of more than 90 percent of the country's bitcoin mining capacity.

Yesterday, China's central bank added that it recently summoned banks and payment institutions—including the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, Agricultural Bank of China and AliPay (China) Internet Technology—over pro-

viding services for virtual currency transactions and speculation. The People's Bank of China said virtual currency transaction activities "disrupt the normal economic and financial order and breed risks of illegal cross-border asset transfers", adding that institutions must cut off links facilitating them.

Beijing has turned the screw on cryptocurrency miners to stamp out financial risks from speculation, although environmental concerns about the gas-guzzling mines is also a factor. Chinese media reported that electricity supply to all crypto mines across the province was stopped at midnight Sunday, as the topic trended on social media. Sichuan is China's second most intensive mining region after Xinjiang in the country's northwest, according to Cambridge University's Bitcoin Electricity Consumption Index.

All crypto mines in the sparsely populated but coal- and hydropower-rich regions of Inner Mongolia and Qinghai were also ordered to shut down in recent months, with citizens encouraged to



BEIJING: Bitcoin tumbled more than 10 percent yesterday after China broadened a crackdown on its massive cryptocurrency mining industry with a ban on mines in a key southwestern province.

report illegal mines. Last month, the value of bitcoin dived after three Chinese financial industry bodies reasserted a ban on financial institutions from offering cryptocurrency services, warning against risky speculation by traders.

China is in the midst of a wide-ranging regulatory crackdown on its fintech sector, whose biggest players—including Alibaba and Tencent—have been hit with big fines after being found guilty of monopolistic practices. —AFP

Why China is getting tough on crypto

BEIJING: Cryptocurrency prices have fluctuated wildly in recent weeks as China intensifies a crackdown on trading and mining operations. Bitcoin slumped more than 10 percent yesterday after Beijing pulled the plug on the massive mines of Sichuan province. China's regulatory assault on the digital currency has crypto watchers reaching for answers as to why Beijing is clamping down now and what it means for the market. Why the crypto crackdown? Beijing craves control, with the financial system now increasingly in its sights.

Bitcoin, the world's largest digital currency, and other cryptos cannot be traced by a country's central bank, making them difficult to regulate. Chinese authorities outlawed trading this month to "prevent and control financial risks". Analysts say China fears the proliferation of illicit investments and fundraising—it also has strict rules around the outflow of capital. Crypto transactions threaten these controls.

"China does not have an open capital account and cryptocurrencies circumvent this which is an anathema to China's authorities," Jeffrey Halley, Asia Pacific analyst at Foreign Exchange trading firm Oanda, told AFP. But the crypto crackdown also opens the gates for China to introduce its own digital currency, already in the pipeline, allowing the central government to monitor transactions. While crypto creation and trading have been illegal in China since 2019, Beijing's latest moves have led to its vast network of bitcoin miners shutting up shop.

What makes China important?

China's electricity-guzzling bitcoin data centers power nearly 80 percent of the global cryptocurrency trade. Access to cheap power and hardware has allowed Chinese companies to process the vast majority of crypto transactions and generate the tedious hexadecimal numbers needed to mint new currency. China relies on a particularly polluting type of coal, lignite, to power some of its mining and Bloomberg predicts it will not be able to meet its cryptocurrency industry's needs through renewable energy until 2060.

Crypto-mining is expected to use 0.6 percent of the world's total electricity production in 2021—more than the annual consumption of Norway—according to Cambridge University's Bitcoin Electricity Consumption Index. Chinese restrictions may in part be triggered by the fact that crypto's enormous power demands have led to a surge in illicit coal extraction, posing a serious risk to Beijing's ambitious climate goals. Several provinces have ordered mines to close as the central government plays whack-a-mole with the shadowy sector. Authorities in the province of Sichuan ordered the closure of 26 mines last week and told power companies not to supply electricity to the energy-guzzling facilities. The hit on one of the largest mining provinces tanked the price of bitcoin to \$32,309.

What are China's digital currency plans?

China launched tests for a digital yuan in March. Its aim is to allow Beijing to conduct transactions in its own currency around the world, reducing dependency on the dollar which remains dominant internationally. "It is about making the yuan more internationally available whilst maintaining complete control," analyst Halley said.

But while countries race to get their own digital currencies in a market-leading position, experts say state-sanctioned digital money will not dampen the wider appeal of crypto as a safe place far from the reaches of governments. "Bitcoin only marginally competes as a payment system," Leonhard Weese, Co-founder at The Bitcoin Association of Hong Kong said. "At the moment, its main appeal is that it cannot easily be seized, censored and debased." —AFP

Germany opens antitrust probe against Apple

BERLIN: Germany yesterday opened an investigation against Apple over anti-competition practices, making the iPhone maker the fourth US tech giant to be hit by such probes. The antitrust authority had in recent weeks opened similar investigations against Amazon, Google and Facebook under a new law that took effect in January giving regulators more powers to rein in big tech companies.

The watchdog said it has initiated the first stage of the probe to determine if Apple has "cross-market significance". "An ecosystem extending across different markets can be one indication of such a position held by a company," said the authority. "Such positions of power can make it very hard for other companies to counter it."

Andreas Mundt, who heads the Federal Cartel Office, said his service will look at whether Apple has established such a digital ecosystem across several markets around the iPhone with its proprietary operating system iOS. "A key focus of the investigation will be the operation of the App Store, because in many cases, it empowers Apple to have an influence on the business activities of third parties," he added.

An Apple spokesperson underlined the company's contribution to the employment market in Germany, saying its iOS app economy supported 250,000 jobs. "We look forward to discussing our approach with the FCO and having an open dialogue about any of their concerns," said the spokesperson in a statement.

'Sufficient choice'

Following the first stage of the probe, the cartel office said it might then look at other specific issues after it received complaints from "several companies against potential anticompetitive practices." This included a complaint against the company's

Facebook rolls out 'live audio', podcasts in US

WASHINGTON: Facebook yesterday began rolling out its service for people seeking audio-based connections in a direct challenge to the upstart social platform Clubhouse. The "live audio rooms" will enable users of the social media giant to listen to, and sometimes participate in, conversations led by celebrities and "influencers" or create a fundraiser on the platform.

The new audio features "enable you to discover, listen in on and join live conversations with public figures, experts and others about topics you're interested in," said Fidji Simo, head of the Facebook app, in a blog post. "Public figures can invite friends, followers, verified public figures, or any listeners in the room to be a speaker. The host can invite speakers in advance or during the conversation. There can be up to 50 speakers, and there's no limit to the number of listeners."

Facebook has tapped a number of celebrities for its audio launch including rapper D Smoke, wellness guru Dr. Jess and civil rights activist DeRay Mckesson. The launch follows a wave of interest in audio-based social networks and growth in Clubhouse, which drew some 10 million users since launching last year. Twitter and Spotify have also made moves into live audio



BERLIN: A shut apple store on the Kurfuerstendamm boulevard in Berlin. Germany yesterday opened an investigation against Apple over anti-competition practices, making the iPhone maker the fourth US tech giant to be hit by such probes. —AFP

alleged tracking restrictions of users in connection with the introduction of the iOS 14.5 operating system. It added that complaints had also been filed by app developers disputing the usage of Apple's system for in-app purchases.

Germany's tougher stance against the digital giants came after new EU draft legislation unveiled in December aimed at curbing the power of the internet behemoths that could shake up the way Silicon Valley can operate in the 27-nation bloc. The push to tighten legislation comes as big tech companies are facing increasing pressure around the globe, including in the United States, where Google and Facebook are facing antitrust suits.

Besides looking at the reach of the companies, scrutiny often extends to privacy issues.

In its investigation targeting Google, for instance, the German cartel office said it was examining if consumers who wish to use the search engine giant's services "have sufficient choice as to how Google will use their data". The multinationals are also facing a crackdown from Western governments seeking to claw back taxes which they fear had been channeled unfairly into tax havens.

Germany and France have joined calls from the United States to impose a global minimum corporate tax of at least 15 percent, a move which targets multinationals like Amazon and Google. Critics have repeatedly warned that many of the world's biggest companies use tax havens or exploit loopholes to pay far less in taxes than some individuals. —AFP



ARLINGTON: In this file illustration photo, a smartphone screen displays the logo of Facebook on a Facebook website background. Facebook yesterday began rolling out its service for people seeking audio-based connections in a direct challenge to the upstart social platform Clubhouse. —AFP

services. Facebook separately said it would begin offering podcasts in the US, available directly in the Facebook app, including offerings from culture critic Joe Budden and internet influencer Jac Vanek, among others. The move

comes with Facebook and other US tech giants under heightened scrutiny for their growing dominance of key economic sectors and a legislative push which could lead to the breakup of some of the giants. —AFP

Business

US slaps sanctions on Belarus officials in coordination with EU

Key sectors of Belarus economy targeted for sanctions

WASHINGTON: The United States yesterday imposed sanctions on dozens of Belarusian officials in a coordinated move with Western allies to hit strongman Alexander Lukashenko after the forced landing of a commercial plane. "These coordinated designations demonstrate the steadfast transatlantic commitment to supporting the Belarusian people's democratic aspirations," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement.

The Treasury Department said it was freezing any US assets and barring any transactions with 16 individuals and five entities including Lukashenko's press secretary, Natalia Mikalaeuna Eismant.

The State Department said it was also banning travel to the United States by 46 Belarusian officials. The United States already imposed a slew of sanctions on Belarusian state-owned companies in May after authorities forced a Ryanair flight to land in Minsk by alleging a bomb threat and arrested a passenger, 26-year-old opposition journalist and activist Roman Protasevich. The latest sanctions were taken in coordination with the European Union, Britain and Canada.

The EU yesterday put seven Belarusian officials, including the ministers of defense and transport to an asset freeze and visa ban blacklist over the forced landing of a Ryanair plane.

The bloc also added a further 71 individuals—including Russian tycoon Mikhail Gutseryev, Lukashenko's son Dmitry and daughter-in-law Liliya—for ties to the government's sweeping crackdown on opposition or supporting the regime, the EU's officials journal said.

The EU foreign ministers also yesterday agreed sanctions on key sectors of the Belarus economy as the bloc ratchets up pressure on President Alexander Lukashenko after the forced landing of an airliner, diplomats said. Ministers meeting in Luxembourg backed broad-ranging measures targeting major revenue sources for the Belarusian regime: potash fertilizer exports, the tobacco industry, petroleum and petrochemical products, and the financial sector, diplomats told AFP.

Officials said the measures—including a ban on sales of surveillance equipment to Belarus and tightening of an arms embargo—should be formally adopted by the 27-nation bloc in the coming days. Ministers also for-



LUXEMBOURG: Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio speaks with European Union Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell during a European Union Foreign Ministers meeting, in Luxembourg, yesterday.— AFP

mally signed off on placing 86 additional individuals and entities in Belarus on an assets freeze and visa ban blacklist, with the names to be published in the EU's official journal later in the day.

"We want to contribute in this way to the financial drying up of this regime."

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell had earlier said the sanctions should be wrapped up after a summit of the bloc's leaders in Brussels later this week. "Sanctions are a way of putting pressure on the government of Belarus," Borrell told journalists. "We're going to hurt the economy of Belarus heavily."

'No silver bullet'

Belarusian strongman Lukashenko sparked international outrage by dispatching a fighter jet on May 23 to intercept the Ryanair plane flying from Greece to Lithuania. When the plane was forced to land in Minsk, Belarus arrested dissident journalist Roman

likely to be technically-oriented," O'Hare concluded.

However, Asian equities tumbled on growing expectations the US Federal Reserve will begin lifting interest rates as early as next year to prevent the economic recovery from overheating. European indices dived by about two percent on Friday, as traders digested the Fed's pivot towards more restrictive policy. To soothe the traders fretting over surging inflation, central bank officials have for months pledged to maintain ultra-loose monetary policies until the rebound was well on track. But last week the Fed brought forward its forecasts for tightening.

The news was initially taken broadly in stride by investors as the Fed's so-called "dot plot" outlook for rates suggested it would not begin hiking until 2023, and would discuss winding down its bond-buying program later this year. But investors were spooked later by comments from St Louis Federal Reserve President James Bullard that liftoff could come as soon as late 2022. That sparked hefty losses on Wall Street. The selling continued yesterday in Asia, with Tokyo posting a drop of more than three percent.

Bitcoin slumps

Meanwhile, bitcoin slumped more than 10 percent at one point after China intensified a crackdown on trading and mining operations. The world's most popular digital currency later stood down 4.1 percent at \$32,517.71. Beijing has pulled the plug on the massive bitcoin mines of Sichuan province, in a regulatory assault on the digital currency that has rattled the market. Chinese authorities now have the financial system increasingly in their sights.— AFP

Protasevich and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega on board. Last year, the EU slapped sanctions on 88 individuals—including Lukashenko and his son—over a brutal crackdown on protests since the veteran leader claimed victory at elections in August deemed fraudulent by the West.

Lukashenko, ruler of Belarus since 1994, has so far shrugged off the pressure with backing from his key ally Russia. Ahead of their discussions, EU ministers met with exiled Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who insists she rightfully won last year's poll.

"Sanctions aren't a silver bullet but they can help to end violence and release people," Tikhanovskaya wrote on Twitter. Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said he would also raise with EU counterparts the issue of a sudden spike in migrants, mostly Iraqis and Syrians, crossing over into the country from Belarus. Landsbergis accused the

Belarusian authorities of funneling the migrants through to hit back at its neighbor for leading the push to punish Minsk.

He warned the flow could increase after sanctions were approved and that Lithuania "might need help and assistance from other European countries". By approving sanctions on potash fertilizers and petroleum and petrochemical products, European Union foreign ministers are targeting two mainstays of the Belarus economy.

The sanctions-to-be formally adopted by the 27-nation bloc in the coming days-target major sources of revenue for the regime of Alexander Lukashenko.

Potash

Belarus is the world's second-largest exporter of potash fertilizers after Canada, according to the World Bank, with sales in 2018 worth \$2.8 billion. State group Belaruskali says it produces around a fifth of the world's potash fertilizer and employs 16,000 people.

Exports are an important source of foreign currency for the state-controlled economy. Most Belarusian potash is exported to Brazil, China and India, but Poland and Belgium are also major clients. Production was suspended several times at the Belaruskali potash plant as workers joined strikes during last year's post-election protests against Lukashenko.

Petroleum products

Belarus does not have its own hydrocarbon reserves but oil and gas still play a major role in its economy. The country benefits from preferential prices for Russian crude and has maintained refineries and pipelines built when it was part of the Soviet Union.

Refined petroleum products are Belarus's biggest export, worth \$6.5 billion in 2019. Its main clients are Ukraine, which bought \$2.5 billion worth that year, and Britain, which bought \$2.2 billion worth. Three EU countries followed: Germany, the Netherlands and Poland which together accounted for more than \$1.5 billion in purchases. Belarus also controls a series of pipelines carrying Russian oil and gas to Europe, but the EU does not yet appear to be targeting the network, which provides Minsk with significant transit fees.— AFP

Global stocks up; bitcoin slumps

NEW YORK: US and European stocks mostly rose yesterday, bucking Asian losses as investors mulled the US interest rate outlook, while bitcoin sank on news of a Chinese crackdown. London firmed less than a tenth of a percentage point in afternoon trading after UK supermarket group Morrisons rejected a takeover approach.

Frankfurt gained 0.7 percent and Paris rose by 0.3 percent. Wall Street opened mostly higher, with the Dow adding 0.1 percent after the blue-chip index turned in last week its worst performance since October by tumbling 3.4 percent. "A cautiously positive start to the week ... as investors attempt to put the volatility of last week behind them," summarized IG analyst Chris Beauchamp.

"Rising instances of the Delta (COVID) variant in Europe will likely weigh on European markets—but the overall view continues to be that the second half of the year will see a further return to normality."

However analyst Patrick J. O'Hare at Briefing.com said that the rebound on Wall Street might be more technical in nature than driven by fundamentals. "One of the main drivers of support this morning is arguably a recognition from buyers that this key technical level has consistently presented a good buying opportunity over the past 14 months," he said. "Amid an absence of macro-moving news, the positive bias seems more



TOKYO: Pedestrians walk past a stock indicator displaying numbers of the Nikkei 225 of the Tokyo Stock Exchange in Tokyo yesterday.— AFP

McDonald's to create 20,000 jobs in UK, Ireland

LONDON: US fast-food giant McDonald's has announced plans to create 20,000 jobs in Britain and Ireland to help meet an expected boom in post-pandemic demand. McDonald's said in a statement published Sunday that it will open 50 restaurants over the next 12 months as Covid restrictions ease.

The US group currently employs more than 130,000 people at 1,400 restaurants in Britain and

Ireland. "It's fantastic to be able to offer an additional 20,000 people an opportunity to work with us," said Paul Pomroy, chief executive of McDonald's UK & Ireland.

"There is no doubt the pandemic has had a huge impact on many people's employment opportunities and threatened the future of high streets up and down the country." However, Pomroy also cautioned over the weekend that McDonald's faced recruitment difficulties, in line with the broader sector.

It is "getting harder and harder to recruit" staff, he told the Sunday Telegraph newspaper. Trade body UKHospitality has warned of a "staffing crisis" due to the impact of pandemic travel rules and post-Brexit immigration. The British hospitality industry faces a shortfall of about 188,000 staff, according to recent analysis from the trade organization.— AFP



Aussie firm begins Cambodia's first commercial gold mine

SYDNEY: An Australian company yesterday officially launched operations for Cambodia's first commercial gold mine in the kingdom's resource-rich northeast, officials said. Renaissance Minerals (Cambodia) Limited—owned by Perth-based Emerald Resources—has begun work on the Okvau Gold Project in Mondulkiri province. It is expected to generate more than \$300 million in tax revenues and royalties over seven years for the country, according to a statement from the Australian embassy in Phnom Penh.

The project has the backing of strongman premier Hun Sen, who wrote in a June 10 Facebook post that it was a "great achievement" to boost Cambodia's econ-

omy—which has been battered by the pandemic. An average of three tons of pure gold will be produced per year in its first eight years of operation, he said. Located in Keo Seima district, the Okvau Gold project area has been carved from the once-protected land of Phnom Prich Wildlife Sanctuary, a government official told AFP.

Residents in Keo Seima—many of whom are indigenous minorities—have long clashed with authorities over government-backed projects that they allege are a cover for rampant deforestation of valuable timber. But the gold mining project was being conducted with "high responsibility for the protection of the environment and society", Hun Sen vowed in his post.

The Southeast Asian nation has been searching for minerals for years. In December, Cambodia extracted its first drop of crude oil from its waters in the Gulf of Thailand, a long-awaited milestone for the impoverished country. But the prospects for the project appear grim after an announcement earlier this month that KrisEnergy—the company operating the oil field—could not pay its debts and was filing for liquidation.— AFP

UK supermarket Morrison's shares soar on £5.5bn bid

LONDON: Shares in British supermarket chain Morrison's surged yesterday after it rejected a £5.5-billion (\$7.6-billion, 6.4-billion-euro) takeover approach as too low. The company's share price rocketed almost a third to 231.80 pence in early deals, after it snubbed the unsolicited cash bid from US private equity firm Clayton, Dubilier & Rice (CD&R) over the weekend.

Shares swiftly rebounded above the offer price level of 230 pence. "It's quite likely we will see another bid come in," CMC Markets analyst Michael Hewson told AFP. "UK supermarket shares have underperformed for some time and entirely probable that this weekend's bid could ignite interest in the whole sector."

"This is likely to push any acquisition price up towards the 250-pence area if these private equity firms are serious about gaining exposure to the sector." Morrison's had revealed the news late on Saturday and published its statement on the London Stock Exchange on Monday. "The board of Morrison's evaluated the conditional proposal ... and unanimously concluded that (it) significantly undervalued Morrison's and its future prospects," it said in the statement. "Accordingly, the board rejected the conditional pro-

posal on 17 June 2021." Morrison's reported last month that first quarter like-for-like sales were up 2.7 percent, excluding fuel. Online sales grew 113 percent year-on-year. However it also incurred £27 million in COVID-related costs during the first three months of the year.— AFP



LONDON: People walk past a Morrison's supermarket in Stratford, east London yesterday. Shares in British supermarket chain Morrison's surged yesterday after it rejected a £5.5-billion (\$7.6-billion, 6.4-billion-euro) takeover approach as too low.— AFP

Business

NBK International Update

Economic recovery gathers pace but fresh US inflation spike fuels concern

Oil prices above \$70 as global economic rebound continues

KUWAIT: Global financial markets remained moody over the past month, benefitting from continued reopening measures as pandemic pressures ease across both the US and Europe, generally upbeat economic data and signs that authorities are in no rush to scale back policy support despite inflation worries. The US S&P was up 1.9 percent in the month to mid-June, while the 10-year treasury yield remained below its March peak at 1.58 percent.

Oil prices have also made strong gains, with Brent above \$70/bbl on demand optimism and OPEC supply discipline. Despite the broad positivity, the global economy is not out of the woods on COVID and pressures on developing countries with less access to finance and vaccines remain severe. G7 countries promised to start addressing this with the pledge to supply low-income countries with at least 1 billion vaccine doses to try to end the pandemic next year, although this fell far below the 11 billion doses needed according to the international health community.

US inflation

Economic indicators continue to point to very robust growth, boosted by enormous fiscal stimulus and rising spending in particular on the services sector most leveraged to the economy's reopening. The ISM services activity index surged to a series record of 64.0 in May on strong orders and lengthening supplier delivery times, overtaking its manufacturing equivalent for the first time in the post-pandemic recovery. This data bodes well for another big GDP growth figure in 2Q21 of perhaps 9 percent (annualized) following the 6.4 percent recorded in Q1, which would leave the economy comfortably above its pre-COVID size. The recovery in the labor market - important both for policy and in sustaining consumer spending - continues to lag some way behind output however. Non-farm payrolls disappointed again in May, up just 559,000 and are still 7.6 million short of pre-pandemic levels, while the unemployment rate dipped to 5.8 percent helped by a fall in the labor force. Strong economic growth should see employment growth accelerate over coming months, though the true underlying state of the labor market may not become clearer until the phasing out of enhanced unemployment benefits (which may affect the incentive to work), which in some states is set to start in mid-June.

Meanwhile, the debate over the inflation outlook and its implications for Fed policy continues to intensify. Consumer price inflation jumped to a near 13-year high of 5.0 percent y/y in May on a combination of surging demand, capacity shortages in key sectors and statistical base effects including from year-ago weakness in oil prices. The Fed continues to see these pressures as mostly short term, and has some support for this view from the bond markets, with the 10-year treasury yield dipping below 1.5 percent (since reversed) after the release of the May inflation surprise.

But while it looks possible that inflation may have peaked and will start to come down in coming months as year-on-year base effects fade, the year-end headline figure could still be above 4 percent and a persistently high rate could push inflation expectations and wage growth higher, causing longer-term effects.

Eurozone recovery

Economic activity in the Eurozone continues to pick up as the earlier virus wave fades and restrictions are eased. The

composite PMI hit a more than three-year high of 57.1 in May, with the service sector (55.2) starting to close the gap on already booming manufacturing (63.1). Sentiment has also rebounded, with reopening steps boosting the prospects for travel and tourism over the key summer period. This should translate into a decent 1.5 percent q/q rise in GDP in 2Q21 (-0.6 percent in Q1), accelerating in the third quarter despite the potential for unemployment (8.0 percent in May) to edge back up as furlough schemes are unwound. Also helpful for the outlook is the imminent approval by the EU of the first country-level (for Spain and Portugal) spending plans under the group's €750 billion Next Gen pandemic recovery fund agreed last year. Worth 5 percent of GDP, spending will be spread over five years but front-loaded, and seen to benefit smaller countries the most.

The European Central Bank as expected left policy on hold in June, but recommitted to maintaining PEPP asset purchases at the current elevated pace despite reports that multiple ECB members wanted to slow bond buying given the now visible economic recovery.

In the UK, the government decided to delay by four weeks its full reopening measures scheduled for June 21st in light of rising - if still relatively modest - virus cases. This is to allow more full (i.e. double-shot) vaccinations seen as important to combat the delta virus strain. The economy has continued to bounce back strongly from strict restrictions in place earlier this year with GDP up 2.3 percent m/m in April and forecast to rise 5-6 percent q/q in Q2.

Japanese economic activity

The Japanese economy continues to grapple with the impact of a persistent pandemic and the extension of emergency measures designed to control it. Both the manufacturing and services sector PMIs weakened in May, with the former dropping to 53.0 in May from 53.6 in April and the latter to 46.5 from 49.5 in April. The decline in services sector activity was the 16th in a row, and came on the back of the extension of the anti-COVID emergency measures at home and the implementation of stricter measures in the country's main Asian export markets. Japanese wholesale prices in May notched up their fastest annual growth since 2008, climbing 4.9 percent y/y due to the broader increase in global commodity prices, which is itself a reflection of higher global demand and, probably more so, constrained supply chains caused by the pandemic.

Chinese 3-child policy

Following census results that highlighted China's rapidly-aging population, the government announced that the two-child policy would be adjusted to allow couples to have three children. This new policy aims to stop the ongoing decline in the country's working-age population and to support economic growth in the medium-to-long term. However, the new policy is not expected to make a major difference to fertility patterns, with recent surveys showing major concerns about the costs of bringing up children and accessing affordable childcare.

Meanwhile, some recent economic indicators revealed further signs of slowing demand and inflationary pressures. Credit growth eased to 12.2 percent y/y in May, the slowest pace since February 2020, as the authorities started to slowly unwind emergency measures and cool credit growth to con-

Chart 1: US Consumer price inflation



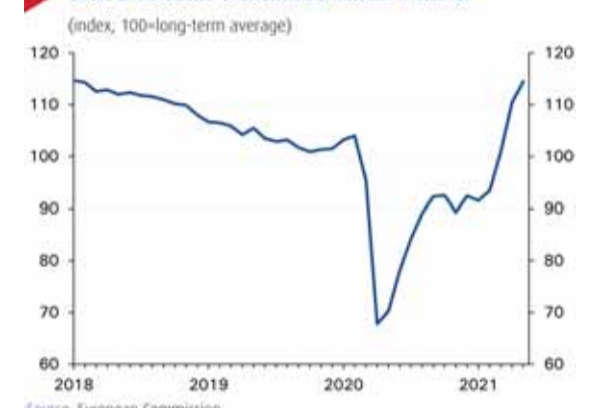
Source: Refinitiv

Chart 3: India GDP



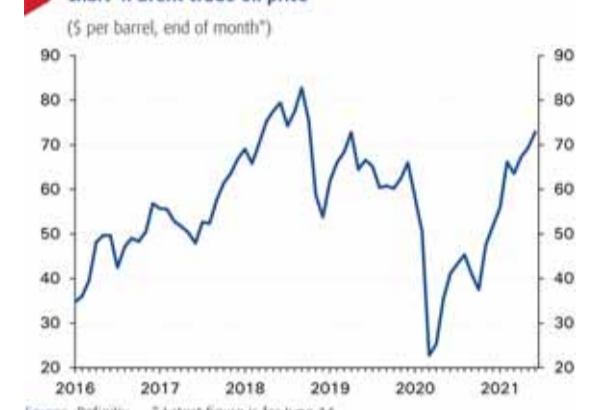
Source: Refinitiv

Chart 2: Eurozone economic sentiment indicator



Source: European Commission

Chart 4: Brent crude oil price



Source: Refinitiv * Latest figure is for June 14

Oil prices above \$70

Brent crude broke through the psychologically important \$70 level on 1 June and then extended those gains to close as high as \$72.9/bbl on 14 June. Price have been pushed up by expectations of stronger oil demand over the northern hemisphere summer and continued oil supply restraint by OPEC+, as well as the broader rally in commodities. On the demand side, economic activity, especially in advanced economies, has improved as the vaccination drive has accelerated and mobility restrictions eased. The International Energy Agency (IEA) now forecasts that global oil demand could surpass pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2022, an upgrade of its March assessment, with growth this year of 5.4 mb/d and 3.1 mb/d in 2022 following 2020's historic decline of 8.6 mb/d. Moreover, the IEA even went so far as to warn that unless OPEC+ brings on more supply in the coming months the market is at risk of overheating.

OPEC+ reaffirmed at its early June meeting that output will rise incrementally, by 700 kb/d in June and 841 kb/d in July following May's 600 kb/d (these figures include the restoration of Saudi Arabia's additional production cuts). The tight demand/supply dynamics are worth watching over the coming months, and there is a good chance that with the market in deficit, OECD commercial oil stocks below the pre-COVID 2015-19 average and oil prices looking more likely to firm up rather than soften, that OPEC+ could open the taps further.

India's GDP growth

India's 1Q21 (4Q FY20/21) GDP expanded by a modest 1.6 percent y/y, helped by a pick-up in government spending (28 percent y/y) and investment (11 percent y/y) as the government continued its efforts to curb the adverse effects of the virus on the economy. This marks the second consecutive quarter of mild expansion (0.5 percent in 4Q20) despite the massive surge in virus cases seen March-May, which is now receding. More recent monthly data shows the economy still under pressure. The May services PMI fell sharply into contraction territory at 46.6 (55.4 in April), while the manufacturing PMI pointed to the slowest pace of expansion in ten months, at 50.8 (55.5 in April). On the policy front, the Reserve Bank of India kept rates unchanged (4 percent repo rate), but reaffirmed its commitment to revive growth by remaining accommodative, with \$5.5 billion in asset purchases planned for June, followed by a larger \$16 billion package for September.

We expect the economy to regain momentum in subsequent quarters, given the low base levels of 2020, helped by a pick-up in government spending and private investment and perhaps a gradual recovery in the private sector as virus concerns ease amid concerted vaccine and social distancing efforts.

Kamco Invest to host Cathie Wood during a webcast

KUWAIT: Kamco Invest, a regional non-banking financial powerhouse with one of the largest AUMs in the region, will be hosting a very special live webcast with Cathie Wood, CEO and CIO of ARK Invest 30th of June, 2021 at 6 pm.

The webinar will be held in collaboration with ARK Invest and Nikko Asset Management. This unique and fascinating event will provide an opportunity to listen to Cathie's thoughts on what she believes are the five Innovation platforms: DNA sequencing, Robotics, Energy storage, Artificial Intelligence, and Blockchain technology, and much more.

Cathie is the Founder, CEO, and CIO of ARK Invest and is considered one of the most successful investors in disruptive technologies. She has been known for her big calls on disruption, innovation, and the new landscape of investing. She registered ARK Investment Management LLC ("ARK") as an investment adviser with the US Securities and Exchange Commission in January 2014. As Chief Investment Officer ("CIO") and Portfolio Manager, Cathie led the development of ARK's philosophy and investment approach and has ultimate responsibility for investment decisions. Cathie and her team have built a hugely successful track record not just in performance, but also in audience engagement with their views on disruptive trends.

Kamco Invest is a regional non-banking financial powerhouse headquartered in Kuwait with offices in key regional financial markets, established in 1998 and listed on Boursa Kuwait in 2003. It is an Independently managed subsidiary of KIPCO Group adopting highest standards of corporate governance and regulated by the Capital Markets Authority and Central Bank of Kuwait. The Company offers a comprehensive range of investment solutions covering asset management, investment banking and brokerage.

Kamco Invest has AUM of over \$13.3 billion as of 31 March 2021 allocated to various asset classes and jurisdictions, making it the fifth largest asset manager in the GCC according to Moody's September 2019 asset management report. It has acted as investment banker to deals exceeding \$24.7 billion from its inception to 31 March 2021 in equity capital markets, debt capital markets and mergers & acquisitions.



Cathie Wood

Celebrate World Music Day popular music apps from AppGallery

KUWAIT: Nothing beats the sound of your favorite track coming on! We all agree that music plays an essential role in our lives and can have so many benefits. It can lift our mood, revive old memories, boost creativity and help for relaxation and much more.

In celebration of World Music Day on June 21st, AppGallery, Huawei's official distribution platform and one of the top three marketplaces globally, invites you to discover the five most popular music apps in AppGallery. These apps enable listening to the music on the move anywhere, creating playlists of your favorite tracks, discovering new local artists, identity songs, and many other features.

Anghami - The Sound of Freedom:

Anghami is one of the Middle East and North Africa

KFH continues 'Diraya' financial awareness campaign

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House "KFH" continues its support to Be Aware "Diraya" campaign launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait and Kuwait Banking Association. The campaign aims to shed light on customers' rights, rules and regulations of dealing with banks, information safety and security against intrusion, combating fraud transactions in addition to other warnings and regulations. This campaign comes as part of the bank obligation to keep the customers informed about their rights and duties towards banking and financial transactions and their cyber security.

The campaign discusses finance process, banking cards, awareness of customers with special needs, tips on cyber security and protection of bank accounts. Also, it provides the mechanism to lodge complaints, protect customers rights and identify the banking sector duties and its role in enhancing and developing national economy.

KFH contribution in the campaign comprises the dispatch of various messages on different topics related to the main components of the campaign. These messages are sent to all types of customers to suite the culture and nature of each tier. Also, messages are sent on continuous basis to employees who are considered as the second main component in the awareness triangle (customers - employees - public) who are either potential or tar-

geted customers, thus aiming to achieve the targets of the campaign.

The main targets of the campaign comprise awareness, identification of and warning against any possible risks of failing to follow safety and security instructions upon using modern technology means. Regulations include refraining from extending any information about accounts and personal transactions to any unknown parties or reply to messages from unknown sources as this would be a violation to data privacy and banking protection regulations.

KFH is keen on spreading financial education, saving and investment knowledge and customer's awareness of the bank's products and services. KFH appreciates the efforts extended by the Central Bank of Kuwait and Kuwait Banking Association in organizing the Be Aware "Diraya" campaign to spread awareness in society regarding banking and financial transactions and e-banking services.

Technology has opened vast business opportunities. However, several risks and challenges were also detected considering the several attempts, most of which failed, to hack customers' accounts and cause system damage. Accordingly, this situation has called for a comprehensive awareness plan and enhancement of the cyber security systems, anti-money laundering systems and prevention of other legally incriminated and suspicious activities.

KFH messages highlight the clear and defined policies placed by the Central Bank of Kuwait to supervise the lending and finance operations at banks. These policies provide that the customer shall be provided with the loan details, value and

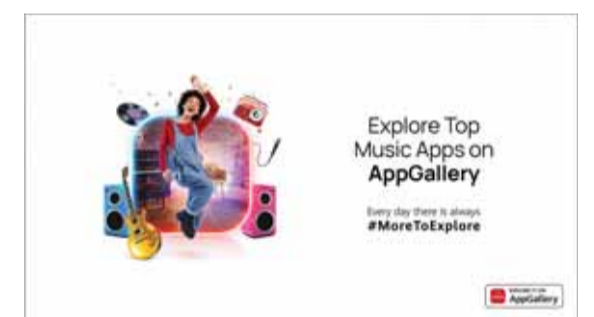
largest music streaming app, and it has everything you need. Discover, stream and download from a library of millions of Arabic and International songs for free, create playlists for every minute of your day, share them with everyone, and enjoy podcasts from all around the region.

Deezer: play new Music, live radio & any MP3 song:

Deezer is an online music streaming service. It allows users to listen to music content from record labels and podcasts on various devices online and offline. Listen to playlists packed with top songs and sounds by the hottest artists. Download any MP3 from the latest albums and sing along to your favorite tune with on-screen lyrics. Listen to your music on-demand, online or offline, wherever and whenever you want, and have Music at your fingertips for waking up, chilling out, and living life.

Mazzika:

Mazzika is a non-stop free streaming mp3 music app. It enables the user to stream and saves music for phones and tablets wherever and whenever they like. It features free music streaming, local music storage, play music in the background, and an online radio service.



HUAWEI Music:

The HUAWEI Music is a music app that comes pre-installed on Huawei phones or downloaded from AppGallery, Huawei's official distribution platform. It offers you to stream songs from the vast database across Huawei devices.

Free Music for Soundcloud:

Free Music is a third-party free music player client for SoundCloud. It allows users to listen to songs freely without a subscription limit.

CBK bonds and related Tawarruq

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

No. of instalments, settlement dates, instalment/net salary ratio and default penalties. The customer is given at least 2 days grace period to review the contract fully before signing. Once signed, a draft copy of the contract shall be given to the customer including type of loan, payment term, instalment value and profit. There are two types of loans offered to customers, consumer loan and residential loan.

According to CBK instructions, the bank is required to provide financial advice and all information concerning the finance contract and explain all details related to the finance transaction including rate of return/finance amount, No. of instalments to be paid by customer and components of each instalment before signing the contract with the customer. Customer shall be given two days period to review the contract and read the terms and conditions carefully and be aware of his rights and obligations before signing the contract.

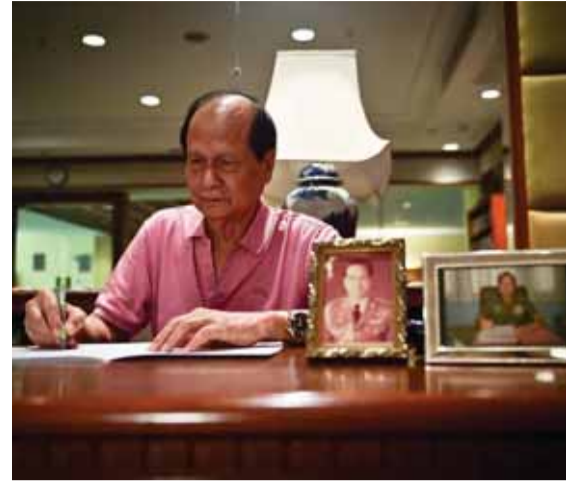
Lifestyle | Features



In this file photo taken on April 7, 1997, Charles Sobhraj (center) is escorted by police upon his arrival at Indira Gandhi International Airport near New Delhi, from where he was deported to France. — AFP photos



In this file photo taken on June 12, 2014, Sobhraj is escorted by Nepalese police at a district court for a hearing on a case related to the murder of Canadian backpacker Laurent Ormond Carriere in Bhaktapur.



This photo taken on May 25, 2021 shows former police officer Sompol Suthimai writing next to old photographs of his time as an Interpol officer in Bangkok.

'The Serpent' still haunting lives four decades on

Nearly half a century after he sowed fear along the 1970s "hippie trail", French serial killer Charles Sobhraj, the "Serpent" of the hit TV drama series, still haunts the lives of those who crossed his path. Now 77 and jailed in solitary confinement in Nepal since 2003, Sobhraj is suspected of involvement in at least a dozen murders around Asia in the 1970s.

His modus operandi was to charm and befriend his victims - many of them starry-eyed Western backpackers on a quest for spirituality - before drugging, robbing and murdering them. The TV series, made jointly by the BBC and Netflix, conjures the seedy, steamy Bangkok of the 1970s with sepia tones, flared trousers and traffic-clogged streets. French star Tahar

parentage - arrived in Bangkok in Oct 1975 with his Canadian girlfriend and an Indian associate.

They moved into a flat in the same building as Gires, near Bangkok's notorious Patpong red light district. What became the Serpent's lair was demolished years ago, but the disused apartment block that stood in for it in the TV series has become a minor tourist attraction. Gires, aged 22 at the time, was impressed by Sobhraj - not least when he told her he was a gemstone trader, a tactic he used to lure cash-strapped backpackers.

"He was cultured, courteous. As neighbors, it didn't take long for us to get to know each other," she said. But doubts soon arose. "Many people were getting

had to stop."

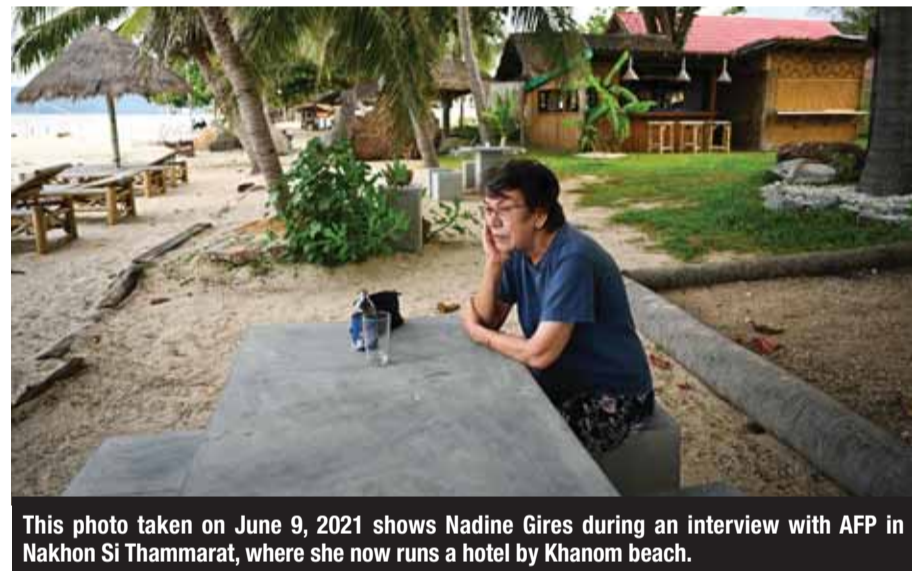
Together with Dutch diplomat Herman Knippenberg, she set about gathering evidence on the slippery Sobhraj, a conman with a hatful of different identities and adept at covering his tracks. Gires searched Sobhraj's apartment and went around backpacker haunts looking for clues about missing persons. In one of the most dramatic, high-tension scenes of the TV show, Sobhraj bumps into her unexpectedly.

The moment in March 1976 that formed the basis for the scene is still seared into Gires's memory. "In a hotel lobby, someone tapped me on the shoulder," says Gires, who travelled to London to help the show's scriptwriters. "It was him. It was the most terrifying moment of my life." Fearing for her life, she agreed to let him take her home, hoping to avoid arousing his suspicions. "My heart was beating 100,000 times a minute but he didn't notice anything," she says.

Even now, barely a day goes by without Gires thinking about Sobhraj, and the fear lingers. "I need to know he is held within four walls. The thought of him being free terrifies me. What could he do now that he knows I know?" she says.



This photo taken on May 20, 2021 shows the Baan Bellawin apartments, where parts of the television series "The Serpent" was filmed, in Bangkok.



This photo taken on June 9, 2021 shows Nadine Gires during an interview with AFP in Nakhon Si Thammarat, where she now runs a hotel by Khanom beach.

Rahim plays Sobhraj, oozing mesmerizing, manipulative menace - in a frighteningly familiar way for one of those who knew him.

The neighbor

When Nadine Gires visited the set of the series in 2019, seeing Rahim in character as Sobhraj brought the past flooding back. "I was terrified. I thought he had escaped from prison, that he was coming back to do evil," she told AFP. "Everything came back: anger, fear." Sobhraj - a Frenchman of Vietnamese and Indian

sick in his home. I jokingly said to Charles: "You're putting a curse on them". But Gires, now aged 67 and running a hotel by the beach in southern Thailand, says she had no idea what Sobhraj was really up to. "We thought it was weird, but how could we imagine such a scheme?" she says.

But everything changed at Christmas 1975, when a young Frenchman staying with Sobhraj showed them a safe full of forged passports. "He told us: 'He poisons people'. He was terrified," she explains. "He was not only a swindler, a seducer, a robber of tourists, but an evil murderer. It

The policeman

Sompol Suthimai is 90 now, but the memories of his "most interesting" case still burn bright. As a Thai police officer working with Interpol, he was on holiday in early 1976 when - under pressure from Knippenberg - the Bangkok Post published photos of murdered tourists. "I said to myself: This is a joke - how is it possible that so many people have been killed without it being known by the police?" Sompol says.

He rushed back to Bangkok and met Knippenberg, who was initially suspicious, having tried and failed to get the Thai police to take an interest in the case. Eventually the diplomat passed Sompol the dossier of evidence he had amassed with Gires - diaries and plane tickets belonging to the victims found at Sobhraj's flat.

But Sobhraj had managed to flee the kingdom a few days earlier. Sompol

issued an international arrest warrant. Sobhraj was arrested in New Delhi in July 1976 and spent two decades in an Indian jail for manslaughter and drugging and robbing tourists. He went to France after his release and lived there quietly until 2003 before returning to Nepal, where he was jailed for two murders, and has been behind bars ever since.

Sobhraj's alleged crimes in Thailand have long passed the statute of limitations, and Sompol is left to rue his colleagues' failings four decades ago. "The police did not pay much attention. They made a mess," he sighs.

The writer

From his jail cell, Sobhraj sold his story to a publishing house, and in July 1977 Australian journalists Julie Clarke and Richard Neville were dispatched to meet him. They paid guards to get regular access to him, and a strange relationship developed. "We'd been down the hippie road too, so we were obsessed with this case," Clarke told AFP.

Over the course of their meetings, Clarke says, the "charming" Sobhraj recounted the murders in chilling detail, keeping nothing back. At one point he described pouring petrol on a young Dutchman and setting him on fire after beating him. "He despised backpackers, he saw them as poor young drug addicts,"

says Clarke, now retired and living in Sydney. "He considered himself as a criminal hero."

Clarke and Neville's book, "On the Trail of the Serpent", became a bestseller and was the basis of the TV serial. Since then, Sobhraj has denied the crimes, and his French lawyer Isabelle Coutant-Peyre says the confessions in the book are "fabricated". But Clarke says Sobhraj is trying to "rewrite history" in the hope of getting out of jail.

The few months she spent in the shadow of the killer left her with "traumatic memories". "We had nightmares. From his prison, he wrote us missives and dictated us his orders. He had also sent people to watch us," she says. But his magnetism was obvious. "If you were a student traveler on the hippie trail, how could you not trust this man who was into Buddhism and Hinduism, who dropped Nietzsche into the conversation and gave you tips on where to stay?" she says.

Sobhraj's days of high living are far behind him, and the prison governor in Nepal has told him he will die behind bars, according to his lawyer. But Clarke says his resilience is remarkable - while in prison he has survived open heart surgery. "He won his bet with his mother - to die old," she says. — AFP



An aerial view taken on June 6, 2021 shows the Well of Barhout, known as the "Well of Hell", in the desert of Yemen's Al-Mahra province. — AFP

Danger and demons: Yemen's 'Well of Hell'

Surrounded in mystery and tales of demons, the Well of Barhout in Yemen's east - known as the "Well of Hell" - is a little-understood natural wonder. Closer to the border with Oman than to the capital Sanaa 1,300 km away, the giant hole in the desert of Al-Mahra province is 30 m wide and thought to be anywhere between 100 and 250 m deep.

Local folklore says it was created as a

prison for the demons - a reputation bolstered by the foul odours rising from its depths. Yemeni officials say they don't know what lies below. "It's very deep - we've never reached the bottom of this well, as there's little oxygen and no ventilation," said Salah Babhair, director-general of Mahra's geological survey and mineral resources authority.

"We have gone to visit the area and entered the well, reaching more than 50-60 metres down into it. We noticed strange things inside. We also smelled something strange... It's a mysterious situation." Sunlight doesn't extend far into the structure, and little can be seen from the edge except the birds that fly in and out of its depths.

Videographers seeking close-ups of

the inside of the well have said they are almost impossible to capture - local superstition has it that objects near the hole can be sucked towards it. Babhair said that the well was "millions and millions" of years old. "These places require more study, research and investigation," he said.

Over the centuries, stories have circulated of malign, supernatural figures known as jinns or genies living in the well. Many local residents remain uneasy about visiting the vast hole, or even talking about it, for fear of ill fortune from a chasm which, legend has it, threatens life on Earth itself. Yemenis have had enough bad luck as it is. — AFP

PARALYZED FRENCH HIP-HOP ARTIST MAKES MUSIC WITH HIS EYES

Being left paralyzed by the same motor-neurone disease that incapacitated Stephen Hawking has not kept one French hip-hop artist from making music - with nothing but his eyes.

Guilhem "Pone" Gallart, a founding member of French rap collective Fonky Family, first fell ill with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) in 2015, and it has left him bedridden and on permanent life support.

But with the aid of software that tracks his eye movements to imitate the actions of a mouse, he is able to compose and write, as well as speak with a computer-generated voice. It has resulted in a mini-album of dreamlike electro beats, "Listen and Donate", released last week, and support from one of his musical heroes, British songwriting legend Kate Bush.

"If there's a message... it's that's anything is possible," Pone told AFP. It took him almost four years to get back to making music after he fell ill. "It's not that I didn't want to, but I was busy with other things, like survival," he said. "When the specter of death disappeared, thanks in large part to a tracheotomy, I rediscovered the desire to write music, but I didn't think it was possible with just my eyes."

'Stronger than before'

ALS is a motor-neurone disease that results in the loss of muscle control,



Guilhem Gallart, known as Pone, lies on a bed at his home in Gaillac in the south of France on June 16, 2021. — AFP

affecting the ability to move, speak, eat and breathe unassisted. But technology has reopened possibilities for Gallart, who is in his 40s. "I have rediscovered the Pone that I knew before," said his wife Wahiba. "And even stronger than he was before."

The results are there to hear on his new album, which, as the title suggests, hopes to raise funds for an organization, Trakadom, that helps chronic patients to receive care at home. Pone set the charity up with two doctors, with the aim of training more carers for at-home support. "Talking about this with doctors, nurses and carers, I saw there was a serious lack of training, and that many of them wanted that opportunity," he said.

Pone himself is on an artificial respirator, but lives at home in the Tarn region of southwestern France, with his wife and two daughters. His first return to music was a 2019 album "Kate & Me", dedicated to his love of Kate Bush's music and including "It's Me Cathy", a reworking of her classic "Wuthering Heights". — AFP

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Jolie speaks with Malian refugees in Goudebo.



Refugees are seen in Goudebo. — AFP photos

US STAR ANGELINA JOLIE VISITS REFUGEE CAMP IN BURKINA FASO



US actress Angelina Jolie, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) special envoy, gives a statement in Goudebo, a camp that welcomes more than 11,000 Malian refugees in northern Burkina Faso, on International Refugee Day on June 20, 2021.

Oscar-winning actor Angelina Jolie on Sunday visited a refugee camp in Burkina Faso sheltering thousands of Malians who have fled jihadist violence in the region. Jolie visited the camp at Goudebo, in the northeast of the landlocked west African country, as part of her role as an ambassador for the UN refugee organization, the UNHCR.

Jolie arrived by helicopter accompanied by Burkina Faso's Foreign Minister Alpha Barry for a ceremony to mark World Refugee Day. "I have marked this day every year for 20 years with refugees in different countries," she said after her visit. "I have never been as worried about the state of displacement globally as I am today," she added.

"The truth is we are not doing half of what we could and should to find solutions to enable refugees to return home -

or to support host countries, like Burkina Faso, coping for years with a fraction of the humanitarian aid needed to provide basic support and protection."

An attack in March last year forced some 9,000 refugees, sheltering there despite previous raids, to flee - and caused its de facto closure. Since December, the Burkinabe authorities and the UNHCR have been relocating the refugees there, having stepped up security at the camp. There are now more soldiers posted at a new barracks and increased patrols.

Between December and July, nearly 11,000 people from towns in Burkina Faso's north have returned to Goudebo, said the UNHCR. "The refugees are battered because the security situation is deteriorating day by day despite the efforts by the Burkinabe authorities, their

partners and the defense and security forces in the Sahel region," said Wanadine ag Mohamed, the representative for the Goudebo refugees.

He pointed to the June 4-5 attack on the northeast village of Solhan where gunmen killed at least 132 people, according to the Burkinabe authorities. Since 2012, around 22,000 refugees of various nationalities have found refuge in Burkina Faso, including many Malians fleeing the abuses of jihadist groups in northern and central Mali. But Burkina has in turn become the target of attacks by Al-Qaeda- and Islamic State-linked jihadists since 2015 which have left more than 1,400 dead and forced a million people to flee their homes. — AFP

'Hitman's Wife's Bodyguard' hits top of box office

North American moviegoers again showed their love of action comedies this weekend as new release "The Hitman's Wife's Bodyguard" shot to the top of the box office, taking in an estimated \$11.7 million, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported. Total takes remain pale compared to their pre-pandemic levels, but Hollywood watchers have taken heart in the progressive reopening of theaters and the lifting of capacity limits in many cities.

As a sequel to Lionsgate's popular "The Hitman's Bodyguard" from 2017 — and with Ryan Reynolds, Samuel L Jackson and Salma Hayek reprising their leading roles - the new "Bodyguard" was expected to do well. But it will have to keep doing well to make up for its \$70 million production cost, Variety said.

Last week's box office leader "A Quiet Place: Part II" - hovering at or near the top since its release four weeks ago - slipped slightly to second spot, taking in \$9.4 million for the three-day weekend. The Paramount horror flick about ferocious unseen monsters stars Emily Blunt. Her husband John Krasinski directs. In third was Sony's family-friendly "Peter Rabbit 2: The Runaway," at \$6.1 million. The mixed live-action/animation features the voice of James Corden in the title role, with live performances by Rose Byrne, Domhnall Gleeson and David Oyelowo.

Fourth spot went to another horror movie, Warner Bros.' "The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It," at \$5.2 million. Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga again star as paranormal investigators fighting demonic nastiness. And in fifth was Disney's family-friendly "Cruella," at \$5.1 million. Emma Stone stars as the puppy-persecuting title villain.

Rounding out the top 10 were: "In the Heights" (\$4.2 million) "Spirit Untamed" (\$1.6 million) "12 Mighty Orphans" (\$870,000) "The House Next Door: Meet the Blacks" (\$604,000) "Wrath of Man" (\$350,000) — AFP



Frank Grillo attends the "Hitman's Wife's Bodyguard" special screening at Crosby Street Hotel on June 14, 2021 in New York City. — AFP

Archaeological finds stolen from Italy returned

Italy said yesterday it had recovered from a Belgian collector hundreds of illegally gathered archaeological finds dating as far back as the sixth century BC, worth €11 million. The nearly 800 pieces "of exceptional rarity and inestimable value", including stela, amphorae and other works, came from clandestine excavations in Apulia in Italy's southeastern tip, according to the Carabinieri police in charge of cultural heritage.

The investigation began in 2017 after a state archaeology lab in Apulia noticed in European art catalogues that decorative elements from a Daunian funerary stele belonging to a "wealthy Belgian collector" resembled those found within a fragment in a southern Italian museum. That flat stone slab from Daunian - a historical region of Apulia - in the collection of the Belgian collector was missing a piece in its center.

Placido Domingo: 'We cannot rewrite our past'

Two years after sexual harassment accusations that cost him his career in the United States, opera legend Placido Domingo is back on stage in Europe, determined to salvage his reputation. For a while, the tenor-turned-baritone's career looked in jeopardy after the Associated Press published allegations in 2019 from some 20 women in the US. They accused him of forcing kisses on them, inappropriate touching and sexual remarks, protected by his power to make and break careers.

But Domingo, still considered the king of opera, is performing in Paris yesterday for the first time since Jan 2019, at the Gaveau Hall. It follows appearances from Moscow to Munich in recent weeks, with more to come in Italy and Austria. Earlier this month, the 80-year-old returned to the stage in Madrid, where he was born in 1941, for a charity gala that he says was the most emotional moment of his career.

"To climb the stage and have the audience on their feet and applauding for eight minutes non-stop - it was a tremendous feeling," he told AFP. "As I started, I thought I would not be able to sing due to the force of the emotion."

'Eyes of the present'

The concert in Madrid came barely a year after the Spanish Ministry of Culture cancelled a series of his shows at the city's Teatro de la Zarzuela in the fall-out from the harassment investigation. An enquiry by AGMA, the leading singers' union in the US, had concluded he had engaged in "inappropriate behavior".



A police officer handles some of the nearly 800 archaeological pieces recovered from a Belgian collector following an investigation that began in 2017. — AFP

An official within the restoration lab noticed that the piece in the museum's collection completed the design of a shield and a warrior on horseback that was missing on the stele. "During the course of the search, a veritable 'archaeological treasure' was recovered, consisting of hundreds of Apulian figurative ceramic finds and other Daunian stela, all illegally exported from Italy, which were then seized in Belgium," read a statement from police.

Italy was able to repatriate the works after all the legal appeals of the collector were dismissed, police said. Besides stela, the collection includes vases painted with red figures, amphorae, black glazed ceramics, and numerous terracotta figurines. The pieces date back to between the sixth and third centuries BC. — AFP



In this file photo taken on July 5, 2019, Spanish opera singer Placido Domingo performs on stage during the dress rehearsal of "Spanish Night" at the 150th Chorgie in Orange. — AFP

Domingo has always denied the allegations, which date back to the 1980s, saying he "never behaved aggressively towards anyone", and he has not faced any judicial proceedings.

But he has apologized if his behavior made any colleagues "feel uncomfortable", and gave up his post as director of the Los Angeles Opera, effectively ending his career in the United States. "They were very difficult months, but they have passed and I am happy to have resumed contact with the press in a very sincere way," he told AFP. "I made a mistake in not doing so earlier, because the whole thing was a trial by media," he added.

Although he spoke to AFP in person, the answers to questions about the harassment allegations were conducted by email, on the request of his PR team. He repeated his claim that the allegations were "unjust" and "without foundation". But he added: "These days, we must look at the past with the eyes of the present, because it is right to pose these ques-

tions in order to open the way for a new sensitivity and conscience."

"We cannot rewrite our past. We should understand it in context and criticize it, severely if necessary, but it makes no sense to destroy it," he told AFP.

'Even more intensely'

Domingo said he continues to receive offers to sing in theatres "around the world, including the United States", but that he didn't want to put any "in difficulty". Domingo contracted COVID during the first wave, but says he has now returned to work "even more intensely". He confirms he is in contact with the director of the Paris Opera, Alexander Neef, and that he dreams of returning to the Palais Garnier, especially now that Venezuelan conductor Gustavo Dudamel, his former colleague from the LA Opera, has taken charge.

Domingo has broken all the records in his illustrious career: 151 roles, more than 4,000 performances, more than 100 albums. He had 103 encores after a performance of "Otello" by Verdi in 1986 - his favourite opera, and one that he has performed 225 times. And he gained global megastar status in the 1990s as one of the "Three Tenors" alongside Luciano Pavarotti and Jose Carreras.

He says he has no idea when he will retire. "One could live four lifetimes and there would still be so many operas left to sing," he said. "I will quit when my voice no longer obeys me or because it's become physically difficult," said the singer. He is concerned about the pandemic setting back the careers of emerging stars, though he said the vast pool of talent and continued popularity of opera made him optimistic for the future. "It is now up to the public to decide who will be the next Pavarotti, Carreras and Domingos," he said. — AFP

DIRECTOR HOPES FILM PROMPTS BIDEN TO CURB DEATH PENALTY

Director Patrick Forbes hopes his new documentary "The Phantom" could be the spark prompting President Joe Biden to act against the death penalty thanks to its powerful message: "An innocent man was executed." The movie, set for a July 2 release, takes a detailed look at the murder of Wanda Lopez, who was stabbed to death one night in February 1983 while working as a cashier in a Corpus Christi, Texas service station.

Just before she died, the young woman had called police to describe a suspect. The documentary, a reconstruction of the crime in minute and chilling detail, opens with a recording of Lopez's last words: "You want it? I'll give it to you. I'll give it to you. I'm not going to do nothing to you. Please!" The police, who arrived too late to save Lopez, took off in pursuit of a man who witnesses had seen fleeing on foot. Forty minutes later they arrested Carlos DeLuna, a 20-year-old with a long criminal record. He was hiding under a car.

Feeling certain they had found Lopez's killer, investigators ended the hunt, even as DeLuna vociferously insisted on his innocence. No trace of blood was found on him. During his trial, DeLuna said he had fled out of fear of being blamed, and said he, in fact, knew the guilty party: a certain Carlos Hernandez whom he had met in prison.

But when shown photos of men by that name, DeLuna was unable to identify Carlos Hernandez. Certain lies he told during the trial further undercut his credibility. The prosecutor insisted that "Carlos Hernandez" was a figment of DeLuna's imagination - a "phantom." He was convicted and subsequently sentenced to death. After all his appeals failed, DeLuna was executed in 1989.

'Tocayo'

Only afterward did the "truth slowly sort of trickle out," director Forbes, who in 2011 made "True Stories: WikiLeaks - Secrets and Lies," told AFP. In 2004, Columbia University law professor James Liebman, intrigued by the case, launched an investigation of his own with the help of his law students and a private detective.

They quickly determined that Carlos Hernandez most definitely was a real person. He had died in prison in 1999 while serving a sentence for attacking a woman with a knife - one of several times he had been arrested while carrying a knife. And he bore an uncanny resemblance to DeLuna.

In 2012, Liebman and his students published an extraordinarily long and detailed article in a respected law journal titled "Los Tocayos Carlos: An Anatomy of a Wrongful Execution." It provided the basis for Forbes' film. Forbes insists, however, that he began his project without any preconceived opinion of the case. "This movie would be fatally flawed, if it was purely, you know, an advert for the death penalty campaign," he said. He methodically tracked down key figures in the case - not only police, prosecutors, lawyers and witnesses but also some of the women who were victims of Hernandez's violence and who, years later, still feel traumatized by it. One of them told Forbes that Hernandez had bragged to her about killing Wanda Lopez and getting away with it thanks to his "tocayo," a Spanish word for someone with the same name.

'Every mistake'

Forbes now feels he has a firm grip on the truth of the sordid case: "It's a horrible one, but it's a very human one. You know, people make mistakes," he said. "The thing about this case," Forbes added, "is, every mistake that could have been made, was made." He places much of the blame on a legal system that fails to provide equal protection to the poor and minorities. "The perpetrator of this crime is a poor Hispanic man, the innocent guy who is executed is a poor Hispanic man, none of them were going to be given a fair crack of the whip."

Forbes hopes his film will not only help, belatedly, to clear DeLuna's name but also lead to wider change. That's why he agreed to let "The Phantom" be used in support of a petition demanding that Biden commute the death sentences of anyone in federal penitentiaries. — AFP

Sports

Up to 10,000 fans allowed at Tokyo Olympics events: Organizers

TOKYO: Up to 10,000 fans will be allowed at Tokyo Olympic events, organizers said yesterday, warning competition could move behind closed doors if infections surge. The decision, just weeks before the opening ceremony, ends months of speculation about whether domestic spectators would be able to attend the pandemic-postponed Games. Overseas fans were banned in March.

A lottery will determine which existing ticket-holders can attend a Games that will be unlike any other, with cheering banned, masks mandatory, and fans told to go straight home after the competition. "In light of the government's restrictions on public events, the spectator limit for the Olympic Games will be set at 50 percent of venue capacity, up to a maximum of 10,000 people in all venues," organizers said in a statement.

A decision on spectators at the Paralympics will be delayed until July 16, a week before the Olympics open. And officials left open the possibility of a reversal if the virus rebounds. Tokyo was under a coronavirus state of emergency until Sunday.

"If there should be major dramatic change in the infection situation, we may need to revisit this matter amongst ourselves and we may need to consider the option of having no spectators in the venues," Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike said.

Senior medical experts, including top advisors to the government, have said holding the Games behind closed doors would be "ideal" from a health perspective. They fear crowds of fans could fuel a new surge in infections in a country still racing to vaccinate its residents. Organizers said it was unlikely that negative virus tests would be required to attend.

International Olympic Committee chief Thomas Bach, speaking before the announcement, said he was



TOKYO: (From left) Seiko Hashimoto, President of Tokyo 2020, Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike (on screen) and Tamayo Marukawa, Minister for the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, speak during a five-party meeting at Harumi Island Triton Square Tower Y in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

"absolutely sure that it will be a decision to best protect the Japanese people and all participants". There will be some wiggle room on the cap, with organizers allowing sponsors and others dubbed "stakeholders" to attend above the 10,000 limit.

They said those spectators would travel separately from the public and pose less of a virus risk, but

declined to specify how many people would come under that group. School children invited as part of a special program also won't count towards the cap. "People still talk about what they saw at the first Tokyo Olympics. That's how memorable this event is. We want to offer the same experience to children," Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto said.

Revenue slashed

The decision means Tokyo 2020 needs to take back 910,000 of 3.64 million tickets currently held by domestic fans. Organizers said limiting spectators would cut projected ticket revenues by about 50 percent. And even those limited numbers of fans could be kept out if the virus surges.

Japan has seen a comparatively small virus outbreak, with nearly 14,500 deaths, despite avoiding the harsh lockdowns seen elsewhere. But the vaccine rollout has been slower than in many developed countries, only picking up speed in recent days. Around 6.5 percent of the population is now fully vaccinated.

Polls in Japan have regularly shown most Japanese would prefer to see the Games delayed further or cancelled altogether. But recent surveys suggest a softening of opposition, with more in favor of holding the Games than cancelling it — if postponement is not offered as an option. A survey published yesterday found around a third of respondents want the Games to happen, up from 14 percent last month, though a majority still prefer further delay or cancellation.

Organizers say strict rules will keep both athletes and the public safe, and Bach said yesterday that "well over" 80 percent of people staying in the Olympic Village will be vaccinated. Athletes will be barred from contact with the public and risk being kicked out of the Games if they violate rules including mask-wearing and daily virus tests.

In a taste of the complexities ahead, a coach from Uganda's Olympic team tested positive on arrival in Japan on Saturday. The team was reportedly all vaccinated and would have had to test negative before travel to Japan. — AFP

Kuwaiti team achieves distinctive imprint in Arab athletics tourney

TUNIS: Kuwait athletics team players achieved a distinctive imprint during their participation in the 22nd Arab Athletics Championships, which concluded in Tunisia on Sunday. This tournament is of great importance as it qualifies for the 2020 Olympic Games in the Japanese capital, Tokyo, which will be held in the coming months of July and August.

The promising Kuwaiti participation came despite the global health conditions and the suspension of sports activities due to the spread of COVID-19 around the world, and the desire of Kuwaiti sports to return to competitions after the previous suspension. In the tournament hosted by Tunisia with the participation of more than 400 male and female athletes from 20 countries, Kuwait's players have bagged two gold, one silver and two bronze medals.

On Sunday evening, Kuwait's athletics team obtained the silver medal in the 400-m relay race. In addition, Kuwaiti player Issa Al-Zankawi snatched the gold medal in the Discus Throw contest reaching 60.25 meters. Moreover, Kuwaiti Yagoub Al-Yoha won the gold in the 110-meter-hurdle competition after facing a strong competition with 10 rivals. The coach of the Kuwait national athletics team, Bader Dashti, congratulated Youha for winning the gold medal, stressing that this achievement is the third in a row, as the player achieved other medals in the previous Arab championship in 2017, 2019 and now in 2021. Dashti underlined the great effort made by Kuwait Association of Athletic Federation through facilitating the team's participation in this tournament. He pointed to the effectiveness and success of the training camp that was held in Turkey before the qualifying tournament for the Tokyo Olympics.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's Salsabil Al-Yasar won the bronze in the women heptathlon in which Tunisia and Egypt have won the gold and silver respectively. The Kuwait women's team participated with five athletes in the tournament through discus, shot put, and heptathlon, in addition to the 800m and 100m races. Kuwait's Ibrahim Al-Fadhli also won the bronze in the "Shot Put" contest in the same tournament. Head of the Kuwaiti delegation Faisal Al-Dasm congratulated the Kuwaiti players for their promising participation and efforts, stressing the importance of gaining the



TUNIS: Kuwaiti player Issa Al-Zankawi celebrates with his gold medal in the Discus Throw contest which he won during the 22nd Arab Athletics Championships, in Tunisia on Sunday. — KUNA

necessary expertise from their peers in the Arab teams, in preparation for the upcoming events, especially the Tokyo Olympics.

Dasm said that despite the circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic, "our players presented high performance levels amid intense competition from Arab athletes for the qualifying positions for the Tokyo Olympics. He expressed appreciation for the political leadership and those in charge of Kuwaiti sports in various games, especially athletics, and their efforts in improving the Kuwaiti sport to achieve regional and international achievements, thanking Tunisia for hosting the tournament and good organization.

Meanwhile, President of the Tunisian Athletics Federation Khaled Amara said that the tournament achieved great success in terms of the levels and numbers of the players, stressing the importance of the wide participation of the Arab countries, especially as it qualifies for the Tokyo Olympics. In the meantime, the administrative supervisor of the Kuwaiti women's team Mona Qabazard said that the team participated with five players after a good and distinguished preparations. Two players went to a training camp in Turkey with the national team, and three went to an internal camp in Kuwait. She expressed her aspiration for an effective participation and more achievements. — KUNA

Felix books Olympic berth, Bromell storms to 100m win

EUGENE: Allyson Felix punched her ticket to a fifth Olympic games while Trayvon Bromell cemented his status as favorite to succeed Usain Bolt as the world's fastest man with victory in the 100m at the US track and field trials in Oregon on Sunday. The 35-year-old Felix, the only woman in history to win six Olympic track gold medals, produced a signature display to snatch second in the 400m at Hayward Field and clinch her place at next month's Tokyo Games. Felix, who resumed her track and field career two years ago after life-threatening complications arising from the premature birth of her daughter, looked to be fading out of contention coming down the stretch.

But the 13-time World Championship gold medalist dug deep to reel in the field and claim second place, a result which was greeted with the loudest roar of the night. "Man, it has been a fight to get here and one thing I know how to do is fight, and I just did that all the way home," said an elated Felix, whose time of 50.02 seconds was her fastest in the event since 2017.

Quanera Hayes — another returning mother — won in 49.78sec while Wadeline Jonathas claimed the other ticket to Tokyo after coming third in 50.03. Felix, who will retire after next month's Olympics, said she hoped



EUGENE: Quanera Hayes (center), first, Allyson Felix (left), second, and Wadeline Jonathas, third, pose after the Women's 400 Meter Final on day three of the 2020 US Olympic Track and Field Team Trials at Hayward Field on Sunday in Eugene, Oregon. — AFP

her qualification would send a message to other mothers. "I think society tells us a lot of times if you have a child your best moments are behind you but that's absolutely not the case," Felix said.

Wire-to-wire Bromell

Elsewhere on Sunday, Bromell blasted to a wire-to-wire victory in the 100m, winning in 9.80sec. The 25-year-old from Florida, who has made a remarkable return to form this year after a career ravaged by injuries, took first ahead of Ronnie Baker (9.85sec) and Fred Kerley (9.86sec.) Justin Gatlin meanwhile failed in his quest to make a fourth Olympic games at the age of 39, coming home in eighth place in 10.87sec. Bromell,

Jabeur becomes first Arab woman to win WTA title

LONDON: Ons Jabeur became the first Arab woman to win a WTA title on Sunday when the Tunisian beat Daria Kasatkina of Russia 7-5, 6-4 in an engrossing hour and a half tussle in Birmingham. Jabeur, the second seed, gained a measure of revenge as she secured her first title at the expense of Kasatkina, one of two women to have beaten her in her previous finals appearances.

"I knew I had to go for it, I had to win this title to at least breathe and give an example," said Jabeur. "There's not a lot of Tunisian or Arabic players playing, so I hope this could inspire them, and I want to see more Arabic (players) and Tunisians playing with me on tour."

Jabeur, ranked 24 in the world, has been in fine form this season where she ranks alongside former world number one Ashleigh Barty in terms of matches (28) won. The 26-year-old held her nerve despite Kasatkina breaking back when Jabeur served for the first set at 5-4.

Jabeur, though, broke world number 35 Kasatkina immediately and this time she made no mistake in serving to win the set. Kasatkina had beaten Jabeur twice in three-set affairs. However, her opponent did not give her a sniff of a chance of a repeat of forcing her into a decider as she raced into a 4-0 lead in the second set.

Kasatkina, winner of two titles this season, fought her way back to 4-3 down but the Tunisian remained focused, sealing the title on her first match point when the Russian netted. Jabeur revealed the pain of her defeat to Kasatkina in a final in Moscow in 2018 where she pleaded with her to be more generous the next time they met.

"Last time we played was in Moscow, she (Kasatkina) won, and I was crying, it was a great battle," said Jabeur. "I told her, 'Can you please share some titles with me, at least, let me win my first WTA?'" — AFP

the fastest man in the world over 100m this year with a season's best of 9.77sec, will head to Japan as hot favorite for the 100m.

No American sprinter has won the Olympic 100m crown since Gatlin took gold at the Athens Olympics in 2004. Bromell, however, warned there was no danger of him becoming over-confident heading into the Olympics. "I feel with confidence sometimes comes complacency," he said. "I come from the hood, nothing was easy for me, and so every time I go to training I feel I have everything to lose."

Elsewhere Sunday, Michael Norman won the 400m to clinch his first Olympic ticket, winning in 44.07sec. Michael Cherry was second in 44.35sec while Randolph Ross was third in 44.74sec. In the women's 100m hurdles, world record holder Keni Harrison made up for her 2016 trials heartache after a convincing victory in 12.47sec.

Harrison was the favorite for Olympic gold in 2016 but failed to qualify for the Rio games at the trials where she finished sixth in the final. Brianna McNeal, who won gold in Rio in Harrison's absence, finished second in Sunday's final with a time of 12.51sec.

Christina Clemons was third in 12.53sec. McNeal's participation at this week's trials is shrouded in controversy. The 29-year-old is facing a five-year suspension for an anti-doping rules violation, and was only allowed to compete in Eugene because she is awaiting a hearing at the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

McNeal, who served a one-year suspension in 2016 after three whereabouts violations, could be kicked off the team if she loses her appeal, which is expected to be heard sometime in the next few weeks. — AFP

Tennis chief invites Jabeur to visit Kuwait

KUWAIT: President of the Kuwait Tennis Federation and Arab Tennis Federation Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent congratulatory letters to the President of the Tunisian Olympic Committee Mehrez Boussayene and President of the Tunisian Tennis Federation Salma Mouelhi on the occasion of Tunisian Tennis player Ons Jabeur winning her first WTA tournament, the WTA Birmingham Classic, and going up to the 20th place in the world ranking.

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber expressed his excitement for this Arab achievement, which is the first of its kind in women's tennis in the Arab World. He said the Arab Tennis Federation is ready to extend all possible support to the Tunisian Tennis Federation and other Arab federations in order to achieve their goals. Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber invited Jabeur to visit Kuwait and meet with Kuwaiti players, and hoped that Kuwait players would "benefit from the experience of this distinguished player."



Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

Usain Bolt has twin boys - Thunder and Saint Leo

KINGSTON: All-time Olympic great sprinter Usain Bolt and his partner Kasi Bennett announced Sunday the birth of twin boys, who have been named Thunder Bolt and Saint Leo Bolt. Bolt revealed the news on Instagram with a Father's Day family photo, showing a lightning bolt emoji next to each of his children's names in the caption, without stating when the twins were born.

Bennett also posted a shot of the couple posing with the twins and daughter Olympia Lightning Bolt captioned: "Happy Father's Day to my forever love! @usainbolt You are the rock of this family and the greatest daddy to our little ones. We love you world without end!"

Olympia Lightning was born in May 2020 but the name was only announced two months later. Messages of congratulations poured in after Bolt's Instagram announcement, from fans as well as athletes — including fellow Jamaican sprint star Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, American 200m specialist Wallace Spearmon and 200m world champion Dina Asher-Smith of Britain who posted "Congratulations so adorable!"

The 34-year-old Bolt, who won eight gold medals at the 2008, 2012 and 2016 Games, will not be competing at the COVID-delayed Tokyo Olympics next month after retiring in 2017. The fastest man in history, Bolt holds the world records for 100 meters and 200 meters. He is the only sprinter to win the 100m and 200m double at three consecutive Olympics.

Bolt, who won 23 major championship golds in a glittering career, tried to turn to professional football after his track career ended, but failed to secure a contract and retired from all sport in 2019. "It was a good experience. I really enjoyed just being in a team and it was much different from track and field and it was fun while it lasted," he said at the time. — AFP

Sports

Hawks upset top seeded Sixers, Booker pours in 40 in Suns' win

LOS ANGELES: Kevin Huerter scored a playoff career-high 27 points as the upstart Atlanta Hawks punched their ticket to their first Eastern Conference finals in six years on Sunday, with a 103-96 game seven win over the Philadelphia 76ers.

All-star Trae Young finished with 21 points and 10 assists, John Collins had 14 points and 16 rebounds and Danilo Gallinari came off the bench to score 17 points for the Hawks, who won three games in Philadelphia to take the series 4-3. "Winning game seven is a treat for us," said Huerter. "We are a little naive. We always believe we can win."

contest, and 22-year-old Huerter needed to shoot well because of all the injuries in their lineup — they were without De'Andre Hunter, who had a right knee injury.

After the game Young slipped off his jersey and went up into the stands at Wells Fargo Arena to hand it to his father for Father's Day. "A winning jersey. I wanted to win it for my dad," he said. Joel Embiid scored a game-high 31 points and grabbed 11 rebounds for the Sixers.

But he also committed eight turnovers, including a key wobble with 41 seconds left in the fourth. Tobias Harris added 24 points and 14 rebounds, Seth Curry

92 and the Hawks held on from there. "We felt like this was going to be our year. It sucks. There is a lot to regret," Embiid said.

Suns outshine Clippers

Elsewhere, Devin Booker delivered a 40-point triple-double as the Suns shook off some playoff rust to beat the fourth-seeded Clippers 120-114 in the opening game of the West finals earlier Sunday. Booker also had 13 rebounds and 11 assists for his first career triple-double as the Suns won despite the absence of all-star guard Chris Paul, who has been quarantining due to the NBA's COVID-19 health and safety protocols. "I'm just going out there to win every game possible," said Booker. "I've been saying this since the start of the playoffs — every next game is the biggest game."

The Suns' Jae Crowder said it was fitting that Booker put on a show in front of the crowd of 16,583 at Phoenix Suns Arena. "I expect it. I know the type of player he is," Crowder said. Game two is scheduled for Tuesday night in Phoenix. This is an unexpected NBA final four match-up between two franchises trying to cap their storybook seasons by winning their first NBA titles. The Clippers have never been to the Conference finals before and the Suns last made it in 2010. This was the Suns' first game since last Sunday when they completed a four-game sweep of the Denver Nuggets in the second round. It is their ninth trip to the Conference finals as they seek their first title in their 53-year history.

Deandre Ayton scored 20 points with nine rebounds while Mikal Bridges (14 points), Jae Crowder (13 points) and Cameron Johnson (12 points) scored in double digits for the Suns. For the Clippers, Paul George scored 34 points, Reggie Jackson had 24 points and DeMarcus Cousins added 11 points off the bench. "I have no excuse," Clippers coach Tyrone Lue said. "I thought we played hard and competed. A little credit — they were making shots and we didn't. But I loved our fight. I loved what I saw."

Both teams were missing star players after Clippers forward Kawhi Leonard suffered a knee injury in game four of the second round against the Utah Jazz. Leonard did not join the Clippers on the trip to Phoenix. Lue said he wasn't sure of his availability. The Clippers beat the Jazz in epic fashion, ending one of the league's most infamous droughts by advancing to the conference finals for the first time in their 51-year history. — AFP



PHILADELPHIA: Kevin Huerter #3 of the Atlanta Hawks shoots a three-pointer against the Philadelphia 76ers during Round 2, Game 7 of the Eastern Conference Playoffs on Sunday at Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. — AFP

The Hawks will now face the Milwaukee Bucks in game one of their series tomorrow as both NBA semi-finals are now set. The Phoenix Suns have a 1-0 lead over the Los Angeles Clippers in the Western Conference final.

The Hawks had surprised by dispatching the New York Knicks in five games in the opening round. They needed a balanced offense in Sunday's winner-take-all

had 16 points and Ben Simmons contributed 13 assists in the loss.

Game seven was a see-saw contest with 20 lead changes and 19 ties but the turning point came in the final minute of the fourth. Embiid's turnover was preceded by a costly foul by reserve guard Matisse Thybulle which sent Huerter to the foul line for three shots. Huerter made all three to boost the lead to 96-



LE CASTELLET: Winner Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen celebrates with the trophy on the podium at the end of the French Formula One Grand Prix at the Circuit Paul Ricard in Le Castellet, southern France, on Sunday. — AFP

Verstappen denies Hamilton in French thriller

LE CASTELLET: Max Verstappen won the French Grand Prix on Sunday to extend his lead over Lewis Hamilton in the drivers' title race and leave the world champion's Mercedes team "with a big fight" to retain control of their Formula One field. The Red Bull driver hunted down and overtook the world champion with over a lap to go at a gusty Le Castellet to claim his third win out of seven races this season. "Towards the end I enjoyed it! At the beginning it was super difficult out there with the wind," said Verstappen.

This was a massive statement by the Dutch driver and his resurgent Red Bull team who won their third successive race after Monaco and Baku. It pushed Verstappen 12 points clear of Hamilton ahead of back-to-back races on Red Bull turf in Austria.

Mercedes, for so long used to ruling the roost, are relishing the two-team title battle. "We're in for a big fight this season and we'll have to dig deep as a team. We are up for it!" they tweeted. Sergio Perez in the other Red Bull came in third with Valtteri Bottas in the second Mercedes finishing fourth at the circuit where the mesmerizing light blue and red striped contours evoked a trippy psychedelic 1960s album cover.

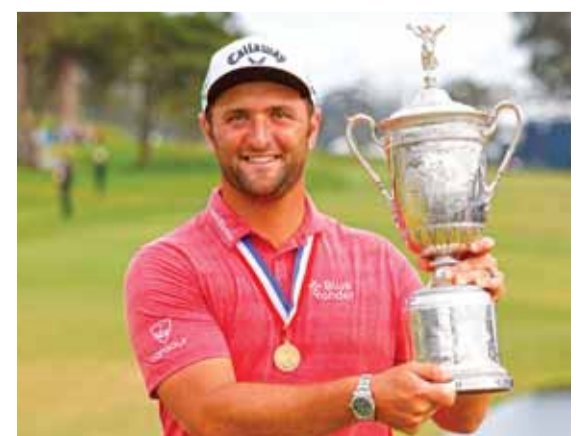
Red Bull team principal Christian Horner had said before the race "if we can beat them here we can beat them anywhere" of Mercedes, who were itching to get back onto a regular track like the circuit Paul Ricard after getting lost on the streets of Monaco and Baku.

But things got off to a bumpy beginning for pole sitter Verstappen, who went off the track in a horror start coming out of turn one, Hamilton accepting the unexpected gift to take the lead. "I couldn't keep the car under control," complained Verstappen. Hamilton had led 105 of the 106 laps for his wins here in 2018 and 2019, and he set about extending his near total stranglehold at the Provencal track.

'Nip and tuck'

Approaching a third of the 53-lap race Hamilton had established a near three second gap back to Verstappen, with Bottas and Perez in pursuit. With drivers starting to complain of tire wear Charles Leclerc was the first to come into the pits for a change of footwear for his Ferrari. Verstappen wasn't far behind, with Hamilton coming in for a slick stop on lap 20, coming out as Verstappen flashed past with Perez, still to pit, the new leader. The Mexican, winner in Baku last time out, was hauled in on lap 25, leaving Verstappen in the lead and Hamilton half a second behind. "We can't keep this up until the end of the race that's for sure" Verstappen told his pits over the team radio referring to tires on lap 29. And on lap 32 he came in again, resuming in fourth, 25sec behind Hamilton, but with better grip he was only seven seconds behind in third by lap 40.

With nine laps to go Verstappen muscled past Bottas, the gap ahead to Hamilton just five seconds. Hunting his prey down it made for an epic end for the 15,000 fans allowed in due to the easing of coronavirus restrictions in France. And he duly picked off the Silver Arrows on the penultimate lap to trigger wild celebrations in the Red Bull garage. "The whole race me and Lewis were fighting each other, so it will be like this the rest of the season," Verstappen said. Horner, the architect of Red Bull's revival, hailed "a great race". — AFP



SAN DIEGO: Jon Rahm of Spain celebrates with the trophy after winning during the final round of the 2021 US Open at Torrey Pines Golf Course (South Course) on Sunday in San Diego, California. — AFP

News in brief

Venezuela, Ecuador draw

RIO DE JANEIRO: Ronald Hernandez scored an injury time equalizer to earn minnows Venezuela a share of the spoils in a 2-2 draw with Ecuador at the Copa America on Sunday. The point left Ecuador bottom of the five team group on one point, with Venezuela a place and a point above them after having played a game more. Hosts Brazil lead the group with a perfect two wins from two ahead of Colombia, who lost 2-1 to third-placed Peru in Goiania. — AFP

Super League 'still alive'

BARCELONA: Barcelona president Joan Laporta insisted Sunday that the controversial Super League project "is still alive" despite it being widely condemned as a crude land grab. "The project is alive," Laporta said at a meeting of club members where he claimed the competition would be worth "a minimum of 700 million euros (\$830.3 million) per season for Barcelona." Despite opposition from UEFA, fans and rival clubs, Laporta insisted the Super League would mean "financial sustainability for the clubs and makes for a more attractive competition." — AFP

Rayo Vallecano return

MADRID: Rayo Vallecano returned to the Spanish top flight on Sunday after two years in the second division with a 2-0 play-off win over Girona. The win gave the team from the Madrid suburbs a 3-2 aggregate victory after they lost the first leg 2-1 at home last weekend. Rayo had finished the regular season in sixth place in the second division but they will now join Espanyol and Mallorca, who were automatically promoted, in the top flight next season. They replace Huesca, Valladolid and Eibar who were all relegated. — AFP

Rahm makes fairy tale return from COVID to US Open win

LA JOLLA: Jon Rahm knew after contracting COVID-19, missing his parents meeting his son and losing a near-certain PGA victory two weeks ago that he was due for something good to happen. It turned out to be winning his first major title, which happened Sunday at the US Open at Torrey Pines, one of his favorite places in the world.

"This one is very incredible, very hard to believe, that this story can end up so good," Rahm said. "It almost feels like it's a movie that's about to end and I'm going to wake up soon. With the setback I had a couple of weeks ago, to end up like this, it's incredible. I

do love Torrey Pines, and Torrey Pines loves me."

Defending champion Rahm had seized a six-stroke lead after 54 holes at the Memorial when he was told seconds after finishing his round that he had tested positive. He spent the next week in quarantine until two negative tests allowed him to return to US Open preparations. On the same course where he proposed to his wife Kelley Cahill and where he won his first US PGA title in 2017, Rahm sank birdie putts on 17 and 18 to defeat South African Louis Oosthuizen by one stroke.

"It felt like such a fairy tale story that I knew it was going to have a happy ending," Rahm said. "I could just tell. I knew there was something special in the air. I could just feel it. I just knew it. That's why I played as aggressive as I did, because it was like, man, this is my day, everything's going to go right. I felt like that helped me. I just knew that I could do it and believed it." It didn't hurt he had faced similar putts before at Torrey Pines in PGA Tour play. "I knew I could get it done," Rahm said. "I've made a couple of long left-to-

righters in the past in some clutch moments, and I was able to get two more on the last two holes. The fact I stayed patient and hopeful and believed something good was coming my way is what helped. I never lost hope for a second."

In a strange way, getting COVID-19 helped Rahm pull off his long-sought breakthrough triumph. "I believed from the biggest setbacks we can get some of the biggest breakthroughs, and that's why I stay so positive," Rahm said. Rahm has been trying to control his temper better on the course, but after a club-crunching incident at last month's PGA Championship, the Spaniard has felt calmer and in greater emotional control.

"I feel like coming in here without having practiced much relaxed me a little bit. In case I play bad, I have an excuse. Hey, I had COVID," Rahm said. "I feel like it relaxed me a little bit and ever since the Sunday at the PGA, I felt a bit of a shift on the golf course mentally. I still had that grit, but almost like each miss bothered me less." — AFP



MONTREAL: Nicolas Roy #10 of the Vegas Golden Knights scores the game-winning goal past Carey Price #31 of the Montreal Canadiens during the first overtime period in Game Four of the Stanley Cup Semifinals of the 2021 Stanley Cup Playoffs at Bell Centre on Sunday in Montreal, Quebec. — AFP

Roy scores in overtime as Golden Knights square NHL series 2-2

LOS ANGELES: Vegas regained the emotional edge in their Stanley Cup playoff series with the Montreal Canadiens on Sunday night, after Nicolas Roy's overtime winner capped a nail-biting 2-1 Golden Knights victory in Montreal. Roy grabbed his own rebound and scored on a chip shot 78 seconds into the extra session as the Golden Knights levelled the best-of-seven NHL semi-finals series at 2-2. Parked directly in front of the Canadiens' net, Roy buried his second chance, moving to the right and deftly lofting the puck over a tangled mass of Montreal players from a sharp angle.

But the winner wouldn't have been possible if shifty Vegas forward Max Pacioretty hadn't circled the back of the net with the puck then made a spinning shot on goal which created enough confusion for Roy to find some open space and nine-iron it into the upper half of the cage.

Roy had a number of family members in attendance, including his dad on Father's Day. "That was unbelievable," he said. "I got my family here. I know they were really happy and I know we wanted to win pretty bad here." Brayden McNabb also scored for the Golden Knights, while goaltender Robin Lehner made 27 saves in a surprise start in front of a pandemic-limited crowd of 3,500 at the Bell Centre arena. Game five is tonight in Nevada.

Paul Byron scored and goaltender Carey Price stopped 19 shots for the Canadiens, who were a perfect 4-0 in overtime games prior to Sunday night. Montreal was without head coach Dominique Ducharme for a second consecutive game after he tested positive for COVID-19 on Thursday. Assistants Luke Richardson and Alexandre Burrows have taken over running the bench.

Vegas coach Peter DeBoer gambled and replaced starting goalie Marc-Andre Fleury with his backup and it paid off as Lehner made 27 saves. A Fleury miscue led to the Knights losing to Montreal in game three. Fleury misplayed the puck behind his net, allowing it to carom off his skate to a Montreal player in front who scored. Brayden McNabb also scored for the Golden Knights in the win in game four. — AFP



Gilmour loss hurts Scotland's hopes against Croatia at Euro



LONDON: Scotland's midfielder Billy Gilmour - star of the match - reacts after the UEFA Euro 2020 Group D football match between England and Scotland at Wembley Stadium in London on Friday. — AFP

GLASGOW: Scotland's bid to reach the knockout stages of a major international tournament for the first time was rocked by the announcement yesterday that Chelsea midfielder Billy Gilmour had tested positive for coronavirus.

Rarely will the loss of a player with just one senior start for his country be so lamented. The 20-year-old walked away from Wembley on Friday with the man-of-the-match award after getting the better of a host of fellow Premier League stars as Scotland kept their Euro 2020 campaign alive with a 0-0 draw against England.

Steve Clarke's side need to beat Croatia at Glasgow's Hampden Park tonight to stand any hope of reaching the last 16. "We always do it the hard way, or the Scottish way," said midfielder John McGinn after a 2-0 defeat to the Czech Republic in Scotland's first major tournament game for 23 years a week ago left them with a mountain to climb.

The one crumb of comfort for Clarke is that he has not lost any more players to self-isolation despite

their contact with Gilmour. All 25 remaining members of his squad trained on Monday after news of the midfielder's positive case broke.

Gilmour's calm and composure on the ball at Wembley despite the noise and tension around the match between the old enemies led to a deluge of plaudits. "Billy Gilmour is my idol," tweeted three-time tennis Grand Slam winner Andy Murray, while former Scotland captain Graeme Souness claimed he was the playmaker his country could build around for 10 years.

Scotland will now have to find a way to cope without him — he is forced to self-isolate for 10 days — but Clarke is at least blessed with options in midfield, which is why he had resisted the clamor to start Gilmour until the trip to London.

Southampton's Stuart Armstrong, who replaced Gilmour for the final quarter of an hour at Wembley, is expected to come into the side and should offer more of a goal threat to a team that has failed to find the net in their opening two matches.

One-dimensional Croatia

Three years on from shocking Argentina and England to reach the World Cup final, Croatia find themselves in the same situation as Scotland, with just one point from their opening two games. Without the energy of Ivan Rakitic in midfield and the cutting edge provided by the bulldozing presence of Mario Mandzukic up front, both of whom have retired from international football, Croatia have appeared one-dimensional. A moment of magic from Ivan Perisic salvaged a 1-1 draw against the Czech Republic to keep their hopes of qualification alive. But the 32-year-old Inter Milan winger and captain Luka Modric, 35, remain their nation's key players.

"Right now we're not the Croatia we all want," said Modric, who has already played 61 games for club and country this season. "We all have to improve, from the first player to the last." Victory for either side should be enough to seal a place in the last 16 as one of the four best third-placed sides, even if they do not sneak into the top two in Group D. — AFP

News in brief

Croatia's boss frustrated

GLASGOW: Croatia manager Zlatko Dalic believes his side have been treated unfairly over the application of coronavirus rules at Euro 2020 ahead of their crucial clash against Scotland tonight. Scottish football chiefs announced yesterday that midfielder Billy Gilmour had tested positive for COVID-19 but no other players have been forced to self-isolate. Croatia had planned to base themselves at St Andrews, on the east coast of Scotland, for the group stage, with two of their matches in Glasgow after their opener at Wembley. However, they were forced into a late change of plans because Scottish government rules on close contacts would potentially have meant several players being forced to isolate in the event of a positive case in the squad. — AFP

France lose injured Dembele

BUDAPEST: France have lost Ousmane Dembele for the rest of Euro 2020 after X-rays showed the Barcelona winger's knee injury would not heal in time, the French Football Federation said yesterday. Dembele, 24, was hurt in the closing minutes of the 1-1 draw against Hungary in Budapest on Saturday after coming on as a substitute. X-rays on Sunday evening showed he would not be back before the end of the Euros. "The recovery time is incompatible with keeping him in the squad," the FFF said. — AFP

Trio miss Germany training

HERZOGENAUACH: Mats Hummels, Thomas Mueller and Ilkay Gundogan missed Germany training yesterday with injury knocks, two days before their crunch match against Hungary at Euro 2020. The trio all started Saturday's 4-2 win over Portugal which put the Mannschaft's European Championship campaign back on track, but Hummels and Mueller are both resting knee injuries, while Gundogan took a blow to the calf. The German Football Association (DFB) has not said whether Mueller, Gundogan or Hummels will be fit to start their final Group F match against Hungary in Munich tomorrow. — AFP

Inspiration from Chelsea

MADRID: Cesar Azpilicueta said yesterday Spain can draw inspiration from Chelsea's triumph in the Champions League after a slow start has left them struggling to make the last 16 at Euro 2020. Azpilicueta lifted Chelsea's second European Cup as the team changed gear under new coach Thomas Tuchel, a superb finish to the season culminating in a surprise victory over Manchester City in the final. Spain are pinning their hopes on a similar transformation after two disappointing draws against Sweden and Poland means they need to beat Slovakia tomorrow to guarantee qualification from Group E. — AFP

England shutting out Euro noise, says Sterling

LONDON: Raheem Sterling says England are shutting out the "noise" and "panic" from outside their Euro 2020 camp after their labored goalless draw against Scotland. The Manchester City forward was part of Gareth Southgate's team that was booed off the pitch at Wembley on Friday and came in for widespread criticism from elsewhere.

But the 26-year-old, who scored the only goal in England's opening win against Croatia last week, said the players knew how to ignore the external pressure. "I do feel there's a bit of an overreaction... I just feel there's more of a panic on the outside than inside the building," he said. "At the same the players who have been at a few tournaments, who have huge experience, try to help the other ones. I don't see anyone in the camp that feels any pressure or feels hard done by. As much as we can inside the building the best thing we can do is focus on the training field, focus on what's being done inside."

"The more you listen to outside noise, the more it can affect you," he added. Despite the disappointing result against Scotland, England can top Group D if they beat the Czech Republic at Wembley tonight. That would guarantee a last-16 tie at Wembley, though it would be against world champions France, Germany or defending champions Portugal.

Finishing second would offer an easier game on paper, though in Copenhagen. Sterling said home advantage could be crucial. "There is always an advantage being on home soil, that's for sure," he said. "With the fans raring and making it a hostile place to come, I do think it can be a good advantage and, like I say, we've got four points, I keep stressing we've got four points and we've got one game to go and we're going to need our fans on Tuesday to get us across the line."

Sterling has been linked with a move away from Premier League champions City after finding himself on the bench a number of times towards end of the 2020/21 campaign, including for crunch Champions League games. He said he was enjoying playing under Southgate.

"It is just happiness, just being happy, enjoying my football and that is what I am doing being here with the national team," he said. "If you're not playing, you're not happy. That's me, that's been me since I was a kid. If I'm playing football I am really happy, if I'm not, I'm not happy." — AFP



LONDON: England's forward Raheem Sterling takes part in their MD-1 training session at the Tottenham Hotspur training ground in London yesterday, on the eve of their UEFA Euro 2020 Group D football match against Czech Republic. — AFP



ROME: Italy's coach Roberto Mancini (center) speaks with Italy's midfielder Marco Verratti (left) and Italy's forward Andrea Belotti during the UEFA Euro 2020 Group A football match between Italy and Wales at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Sunday. — AFP

'Magical Nights': Mancini rekindles love for Azzurri

ROME: Roberto Mancini has turned the clock back for Italy, recapturing the atmosphere of the 1990 World Cup the country hosted, with a 1-0 win over Wales capping a perfect Euro 2020 group-stage run. Three years after taking over following Italy's failure to qualify for the World Cup for the first time in 60 years, Mancini has led the Azzurri back to center stage in emphatic fashion. All Italy's group matches have been played in Rome's Stadio Olimpico. And the song "Notti magiche" (Magical Nights) popularized during their home World Cup 31 years ago when Italy reached the semi-finals rang out among the thousands of fans who were both delighted to rediscover their all-conquering national side and return to the stands after over a year away because of the pandemic.

After a perfect European qualifying run, Italy have continued that form in the group stage, beating Turkey and Switzerland, both with a 3-0 scoreline, before the victory over the Welsh sealed top spot in Group A. It was an 11th consecutive victory without conceding a goal. "It was nice to hear the Stadio Olimpico singing 'Notti magiche' (Magical Nights)," said 56-year-old Mancini. "It brought us back a few years when we were all younger and we felt an extraordinary love for the national team. This is why I want to dedicate this victory to them."

He added: "We say Ciao Roma and thank them for what they have done." Matteo Pessina's goal before half-time means Italy will play the runner-up from Group C, either Austria or Ukraine, at Wembley, where the semi-finals and final will also be hosted. Italy extended their unbeaten run to 30 games — 25 wins and five draws — a feat last achieved under two-time World Cup winning coach Vittorio Pozzo between 1935 and 1939.

"I'd like to resemble one of the coaches who won the World Cup," said Mancini, who has been in charge of four-time world champions Italy for 35 games. "Pozzo won many other important things. We are still behind." Another record beckons — a 12th consecutive victory. That was achieved by Ferruccio Valcareggi, who led Italy to their only European title in 1968, and a runners-up spot in the World Cup two years later.

'Dream big'

Mancini brought in fresh legs against the Welsh, with eight changes from the Swiss game, but the outcome was the same as a side with an average age of 27 again dominated their rivals. Marco Verratti returned to midfield from injury and proved decisive, setting up 24-year-old Pessina for his first competitive international goal in his seventh appearance for Italy, having scored two others in friendlies.

Midfielder Federico Chiesa also got his first start in this Euro 2020 and earned the man of the match award. "We are ready to dream big. We've all the options in hand," said the 23-year-old Juventus player. "The best is yet to come. It's great to play at Wembley. But our goal is to return to London after the last 16. We've given the coach a lot of headaches about who to field. We have 26 players on the team who can start."

Mancini conceded the run had been perfect as Italy matched their unbeaten group runs in three previous world and European tournaments in 2000, 1990 and 1978. "We couldn't have done better," said the former Manchester City manager. "Changing even one or two players doesn't change anything because everyone knows what they have to do and the product does not change."

Italy's home advantage also helped with rivals Wales, who also reached the next round after playing their first two group games in Baku. The Welsh are now preparing for a last 16 game in Amsterdam on Saturday, although coach Robert Page questioned the wisdom of having venues spread across the continent. "On paper it sounds a great idea," Page said, "but logistically it's a nightmare and with COVID on top of that, it just makes the job harder." — AFP

Classifieds

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Amiri Hospital	22450005	Adan Hospital	23940620
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
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Baumgartner sends Austria into last 16

Wijnaldum double as Dutch complete perfect Euro 2020 group phase

BUCHAREST/AMSTERDAM: Christoph Baumgartner's first-half goal sent Austria through to the last 16 of Euro 2020 yesterday after a 1-0 win over Ukraine that left their opponents facing an anxious wait to see if they qualify. Hoffenheim midfielder Baumgartner turned in David Alaba's corner on 21 minutes in Bucharest as Austria pipped Ukraine to second place in Group C behind the Netherlands.

Austria will play Italy at Wembley on June 26 after advancing from the group stage at a major tournament for the first time since the 1982 World Cup. Ukraine, eliminated in the group stage at the past two European Championships, must wait to find out if they advance as one of four best third-placed teams.

Andriy Shevchenko had ruled out his Ukraine team playing for the draw they needed to finish as runners-up, having snapped a run of six straight losses at the competition with their 2-1 win over North Macedonia. Austria coach Franco Foda recalled Marko Arnautovic after the forward missed the 2-0 defeat by the Netherlands while serving a one-match ban for insulting a North Macedonia player in their opening game.

Needing victory to be assured of a place in the next round, Austria went ahead as Baumgartner beat 18-year-old defender Illia Zabarnyi to Alaba's corner and poked beyond Georgiy Bushchan. Ukraine came close to an equalizer when Mykola Shaparenko drew a good low save from Daniel Bachmann, the rebound just eluding a lunging Andriy Yarmolenko, who had scored in the first two group games.

Baumgartner's evening ended prematurely due to injury and his replacement Alessandro Schopf soon set up Arnautovic, the former Stoke man dribbling wide moments after Konrad Laimer's curling effort was punched away by Bushchan. Austria nearly handed Ukraine a way back into the match when Stefan Lainer headed Viktor Tsygankov's free-kick towards his own goal, but Bachmann reacted well to preserve the victory and a spot in the knockout phase.

Meanwhile, Georginio Wijnaldum scored twice as

the Netherlands completed a perfect group stage at Euro 2020 by comfortably beating North Macedonia 3-0 in Amsterdam yesterday. The Dutch captain, who signed for Paris Saint-Germain from Liverpool just before the tournament began, scored twice in the second half at the Johan Cruyff Arena after Memphis Depay had put them in front.

Depay, fresh from sealing a transfer of his own to Barcelona, could claim assists for both of Wijnaldum's goals as Frank de Boer's side made it nine points out of nine in Group C. They had already secured qualification for the last 16 as group winners after defeating Ukraine and Austria in front of their own fans at the home of Ajax, and so the 1988 European champions knew they were heading for a knockout tie in Budapest next weekend.

North Macedonia, meanwhile, were already out after losing their first two games in their debut appearance at a major tournament. They leave without a point, but they will never forget this campaign and this game will be best remembered as the last of veteran 37-year-old striker Goran Pandev's international career after two decades.

He was gifted a Dutch shirt with the number 122 - the number of caps he has won - before kick-off, and was given a guard of honour by his team-mates as well as an ovation from the home fans on being replaced midway through the second half. But the North Macedonians couldn't sign off on a high, with Pandev setting up Aleksandar Trajkovski for a shot off the post when the game was still goalless.

They also had two goals disallowed for offside and felt that the Netherlands' opener in the 24th minute should not have stood. Pandev felt he was fouled on the edge of the Dutch box by Daley Blind but the Romanian referee allowed play to go on and the home side broke forward. Depay exchanged passes with Donyell Malen before finishing and the goal stood following a VAR check.

Relaxed send-off

PSV Eindhoven forward Malen and Ajax midfield prodigy Ryan Gravenberch came in for Wout



AMSTERDAM: North Macedonia's forward Goran Pandev (left) and Netherlands' defender Denzel Dumfries vie for the ball during the UEFA Euro 2020 Group C match at Johan Cruyff Arena yesterday. — AFP

Weghorst and Marten de Roon as the only two changes made to the Dutch line-up by De Boer. He stuck with his much criticized 3-5-2 formation - before tweaking it in the second half - but was reluctant to rest too many players with six days after this until their next match.

Wearing their black change kit, the Netherlands had VIP support in the shape of Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who watched the game alongside his North Macedonian counterpart Zoran Zaev. And, despite the cold and damp conditions, the evening had the air of a relaxed send-off for the Dutch side, who will not play any more games in Amsterdam - victory in the last 16 will send them

on to a quarter-final in distant Baku.

After Depay's opener, Denzel Dumfries came close to making it 2-0 before they ran away with the game early in the second half. Matthijs de Ligt had a header cleared off the line prior to Depay squaring for Wijnaldum to make it 2-0 six minutes into the second period. Another delightful move brought the third goal just before the hour as Malen's pass found Depay whose shot was saved by Stole Dimitrievski only for Wijnaldum to convert the follow-up for his third of the tournament. Weghorst then hit the bar within moments of appearing off the bench and the Netherlands look in good shape, albeit with tougher tests lying ahead. — AFP



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