

**6** World powers in new push for Libya peace



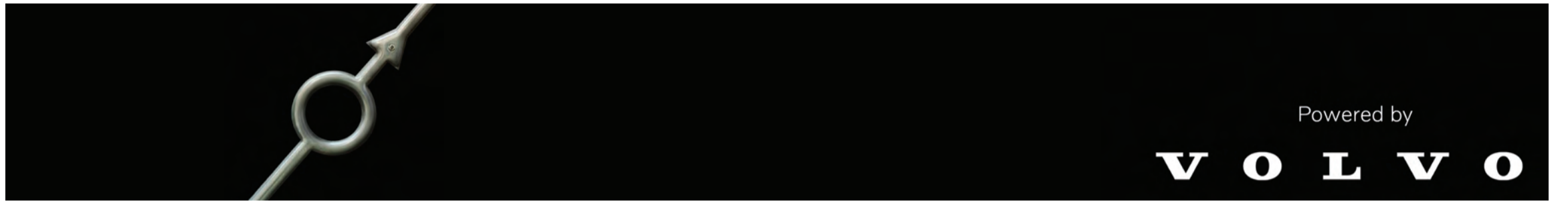
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# Kuwaiti armed forces to help implement health measures

## Authorities to enforce restrictions on unvaccinated people



KUWAIT: General Director of Kuwait Municipality Ahmad Al-Manfouhi heads a meeting of the committee to follow up the implementation of health measures yesterday. — KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait has decided to use armed forces to help implement the health measures adopted by the government last week to confront the spread of the coronavirus, the Municipality announced yesterday. General Director of Kuwait Municipality Ahmad Al-Manfouhi said in a statement that armed forces of the country will join state bodies to confront the spread of COVID-19 and to apply the government's decision on restricting access to public venues for unvaccinated people.

Manfouhi, who also heads the main committee to follow up the implementation of health measures, said the committee discussed yesterday the mechanism for implementing the government's decision. The committee decided to use the armed forces to help civilian health teams implement the decision, starting on Sunday, to restrict unvaccinated citizens and residents from entering restaurants, cafes, gyms, salons and shopping

malls covering more than 6,000 square meters.

Manfouhi explained that Kuwait needs to intensify the application of health requirements during the next two months, hoping to achieve herd immunity by increasing the percentage of vaccinated people. On June 14, Kuwait announced the discovery of the first cases of the Delta COVID-19 variant. Since June 13, Kuwait has opened all museums, cultural institutions and facilities to the public, and has also started direct flights to the United Kingdom, as part of efforts to ease COVID-19 restrictions.

Meanwhile, opposition MPs and groups yesterday continued to lash out at the government and its supporters in the National Assembly for passing the state budget, insisting that approving the budget without a proper debate is "an aggression on the constitution". Leading opposition lawmaker Obaid Al-Wasmi said it

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### News in brief

#### Missing child found in manhole

KUWAIT: Police on Tuesday found a child - who had been missing in Khaitan since the day before - trapped in a manhole. The nine-year-old Egyptian boy had fallen into the four-meter-deep manhole that was covered with wood near an abandoned school. The boy was taken to hospital for medical tests after firefighters safely extracted him. His condition was described as stable.

#### Oman launches residency scheme

MUSCAT: Oman will begin issuing long-term residency to foreign investors, the government said yesterday. Foreign investors and retirees will be granted the right to long stays in the country under the scheme starting in September, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion said. "The residency period is for a renewable period of five or 10 years," it added. — AFP

#### Delta 90% of new EU cases

STOCKHOLM: The Delta variant, identified for the first time in India, could account for 90 percent of new COVID cases in the European Union in the coming months, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control said yesterday. "It is very likely that the Delta variant will circulate extensively during the summer, particularly among younger individuals that are not targeted for vaccination," said Andrea Ammon, director of ECDC. — AFP

#### Thieves steal cow dung

NEW DELHI: A massive manhunt is underway in central India after a gang of robbers stole nearly a ton of cow dung from a village, police said. Villagers in the central state of Chhattisgarh complained to police last week after more than 800 kg of poo disappeared from their storehouse. Police said the gang struck at night, breaking into the depository in Korba district's Dhurena village and fleeing with their pungent plunder estimated to be worth some 1,600 rupees (\$22). — AFP

## First bitcoin fund in Mideast launches on Dubai bourse

DUBAI: The Middle East's first bitcoin fund launched on the Dubai bourse yesterday, with Canadian digital asset manager 3iQ Corp seeking to raise around \$200 million in the offering. Created in 2008 as an alternative to traditional currencies, bitcoin is the world's most popular virtual unit, but its price has slumped recently due to fresh moves from China to crack down on cryptocurrencies.

"3iQ Corp., Canada's largest digital asset invest-

ment fund manager... today officially listed The Bitcoin Fund on Nasdaq Dubai, the region's international exchange," the bourse said in a statement. It said that "this fund is the world's first regulated major Bitcoin fund to be listed on the capital markets in the Middle East North Africa region".

"Bitcoin trades 24 hours a day around the world, and in Canada we trade around North American market times and Dubai is almost perfectly opposite of (those) trading hours," 3iQ Corp chief executive Fred Pye told Bloomberg Television. "We think if the market holds up for the next few months while we get the listing going, we expect to probably be quite far north of (\$200 million)."

Bitcoin fell under \$30,000 on Tuesday for the first time in five months, hit by concerns over China's ongoing crackdown. The unit had recovered

## Attack on Iran atomic agency building foiled

TEHRAN: Iran said it foiled a sabotage attack yesterday on an atomic energy agency building in a mysterious incident that comes as the US blocked Iran-linked websites and as talks to revive a nuclear deal progressed. State television said a "sabotage operation against one of the buildings (of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran) was foiled"

without causing any casualties or damage.

"The saboteurs failed to carry out their plan," the broadcaster added, without identifying the building or the nature of the attack that had been averted. The news of the attack came a day after the US Justice Department said it seized 33 Iranian government-controlled media websites which it alleged were hosted on US-owned domains in violation of sanctions.

Tehran warned yesterday that Washington's decision to block the sites was "not constructive" for ongoing talks aimed at bringing the United States back to the landmark 2015

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## Heart problems in teens after COVID shots

WASHINGTON: A panel of experts convened by the top US health agency was meeting yesterday to review data surrounding more than 300 confirmed cases of heart inflammation among adolescents and young adults after receiving mRNA COVID vaccines.

The committee, hosted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), was to hear a risk-

benefit analysis as researchers probe the shots' probable links to myocarditis. The independent experts were to hear from CDC scientists that "the benefits still clearly outweigh the risks for COVID-19 vaccination in adolescents and young adults", according to slides posted on the agency's website.

As of June 11, 323 people under the age of 29 who received mRNA COVID vaccines have had confirmed cases of heart inflammation, myocarditis, or inflammation of the heart lining, pericarditis, the experts were told. Of these cases, 309 were hospitalized, of whom 295 were discharged, nine remain hospitalized with two in

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TEHRAN: An Iranian youth shows on his mobile a statement declaring the website of Iran's Arabic-language channel Al-Alam has been seized by the US government yesterday. — AFP



BLOOMFIELD HILLS, Michigan: In this photo taken on May 13, 2021, Dash Hunger, 12, receives the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine. — AFP



## Local

# Kuwait's Amir receives Crown Prince, Speaker, Prime Minister



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah at Bayan Palace yesterday. His Highness the Amir also received Speaker of the National Assembly Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem, and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah



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



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

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah at Bayan Palace yesterday. His Highness the Amir also received Speaker of the National Assembly Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem, and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah

Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince received Speaker Ghanem and His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled at Bayan Palace.

In the meantime, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday a condolences letter from Spanish King

Filipe VI, expressing sincere condolences on demise of Sheikh Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir addressed a reply message to the Spanish King expressing heartfelt gratitude for the sincere sentiments of solace on the painful event. His Highness the Amir received a similar cable from Afghan

President Ashraf Ghani, who expressed deepest condolences to His Highness on the sad occasion, prayed to Almighty Allah to bestow mercy on the deceased's soul. In a reply cable, His Highness the Amir expressed appreciation for the sincere sentiments, wishing good health and wellness to the President. — KUNA

## Defense Minister meets UK, Vatican ambassadors

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah received yesterday the UK's Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis on the occasion of her new appointment. During the reception, both sides discussed issues of common interest and ways to enhance bilateral cooperation, said the Ministry of Defense in a press statement. The meeting was attended by British military attaché to the country Col Paul Mulvaney. The Defense Minister, separately, then met the newly appointed ambassador of the Vatican Eugene Martin Nugent, discussing issues of mutual concern. Both receptions were attended by Army Chief-of-Staff Lt Gen Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah.

Meanwhile, Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah held talks with the Vatican Ambassador Nugent. The two sides tackled several



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah meets the UK's Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis. — Defense and Interior Ministries photos

issues of common interest, especially related to security cooperation and ways to enhance it within the deep



Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah meets Ambassador of the Vatican to Kuwait Eugene Martin Nugent.

relations between the State of Kuwait and the Vatican. Ambassador Nugent expressed gratitude to the



Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah meets Ambassador of the Vatican to Kuwait Eugene Martin Nugent.

Kuwaiti minister for his hospitality, highlighting the importance of topics they have discussed. — KUNA

## Deputy Foreign Minister meets French envoy



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Majdi Al-Dafiri meets French Ambassador to Kuwait Anne-Claire Legendre. — KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Majdi Al-Dafiri received yesterday French Ambassador to Kuwait Anne-Claire Legendre, whereas regional and international

affairs were discussed. The meeting was attended by Assistant Foreign Minister for the Deputy Foreign Minister's office Ambassador Ayham Al-Omar. — KUNA

## Attack on Iran atomic agency...

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nuclear deal between Iran and world powers. That agreement is staunchly opposed by the Zionist entity, a US ally. Iran accuses the Zionist state of being behind a sabotage attack on its Natanz uranium enrichment plant in April and the assassination of its top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh last November.

The Zionist entity neither confirmed nor denied involvement in the "small explosion" at Natanz, but public radio said it was a sabotage operation by the Mossad spy agency, citing unnamed intelligence sources. The New York Times, quoting unnamed US and Zionist intelligence officials, said there had been "a (Zionist) role" in that attack.

At the time, the Iranian foreign ministry accused the Zionist entity of an act of "nuclear terrorism" aimed at scuttling the Vienna nuclear talks and vowed revenge.

The Zionist state has also never commented on Fakhrizadeh's assassination. The Zionist state argues the nuclear agreement could allow the Islamic republic to develop a bomb. Iran has always denied seeking nuclear weapons.

Yair Lapid, foreign minister in the Zionist entity's new coalition government, last week pledged the Zionist state "will do whatever it takes to prevent Iran obtaining a nuclear bomb" and said he was opposed to a revival of the 2015 deal. Yesterday's sabotage attack also comes two days after Iran said it temporarily shut down its only nuclear power plant at Bushehr on the country's Gulf coast for maintenance work.

The Bushehr plant and its 1,000-megawatt reactor were built by Russia and officially handed over in Sept 2013, despite concerns over its location in an earthquake-prone area. The 2015 nuclear deal promised Iran sanctions relief in return for limits on its nuclear program. The deal was torpedoed in 2018 when then US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from it and reimposed punishing sanctions on Iran.

Trump's successor Joe Biden favors rejoining the accord and the remaining par-

ties are engaged in negotiations in Vienna to try to salvage it. The developments come days after ultraconservative cleric Ebrahim Raisi was elected Iran's next president in an election the United States denounced as neither free nor fair.

Raisi, seen as close to supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who holds ultimate political power in Iran, said on Monday he would not allow the nuclear negotiations to drag on. He is set to replace moderate President Hassan Rouhani, who has served the maximum of two consecutive four-year terms, in August.

Germany, which is a party to the nuclear talks, said yesterday that it believes there is a "good chance" a deal can be struck soon. "Regarding the negotiations in Vienna, they aren't easy - that's been clear in recent weeks," Foreign Minister Heiko Maas told a joint news conference in Berlin with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. "Nevertheless we are moving forward step by step in every round of negotiations and we assume that in the context of the (Iranian) presidential election, there's a good chance to conclude them in the foreseeable future." — AFP

## After COVID, could the next big killer be heatwaves?

PARIS: Searing, unrelenting heat scorches large swathes of the Earth, killing millions who have no means to escape. Shade is useless, and shallow bodies of water are warmer than the blood coursing through people's veins. This is a scene from a new sci-fi novel, but the suffocating horror it describes may be closer to science than fiction, according to a draft UN report that warns of dire consequences for billions if global warming continues unchecked.

Earlier climate models suggested it would take nearly another century of unabated carbon pollution to spawn heatwaves exceeding the absolute limit of human tolerance. But updated projections warn of unprecedented killer heatwaves on the near horizon, according to a 4,000-page Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, seen exclusively by AFP before its scheduled release in February 2022.

The chilling report by the UN's climate science advisory panel paints a grim - and deadly - picture for a warming planet. If the world warms by 1.5 degrees Celsius - 0.4 degrees above today's level - 14 percent of the population will be exposed to severe heatwaves at least once every five years, "a significant increase in heatwave magnitude", the report says. Going up half a degree would add another 1.7 billion people. — AFP

they have won are wrong", adding that they have suffered a historic downfall.

The liberal Kuwait Democratic Forum said in a statement that the approval of the budget without a presentation by the finance minister amounts to authorizing the government to squander public funds. The forum said such illegal practices by the government is "an ugly way of its continued aggression on the constitution".

A group of Kuwaiti diwanis known for backing the government strongly criticized chaos caused by some MPs during Tuesday's session, warning that this will distort the reputation of Kuwaiti democracy. In a session marred by shouts, quarrels and even punches, the Assembly on Tuesday passed the state budget amid stiff opposition by many lawmakers, who demanded a full debate before the vote. Parts of the session and the voting were held under the protection of Assembly guards, a rare event in Kuwait. — Agencies

## Heart problems in teens after...

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intensive care, and there is no outcome data for five cases.

The cases are predominantly among males, most occur after the second dose, and there are no confirmed deaths at this time. More than 50 million doses of both the Pfizer and Moderna mRNA vaccines had been administered to young people aged 12-19 as of June 11. While the case numbers are low, they are still higher than what would be expected in the age groups and the CDC is studying what the biological trigger might be.

"Myocarditis is a rare disease but it's not a new disease, it's been around for a while," said Matthew Oster, a member of the CDC's COVID vaccine task force. "Traditionally there have been thought to have viral triggers, although there can be others. It does appear that mRNA vaccine may be a new trigger for myocarditis," he added.

But according to CDC modeling based on data from late May, the risk-benefit profile still favors the use of COVID vaccines, even though young people are at lower risk of severe COVID compared to older people. For every million second doses given to 12-to-17-year-old boys, 5,700 COVID cases, 215 hospitalizations, 71 ICU admissions and two deaths would be prevented across 120 days, according to the analysis. Between 56 to 69 cases of myocarditis would be expected.

Lorry Rubin, director of pediatric infectious dis-

eases at Cohen Children's Medical Center told AFP that his own hospital had seen a few cases of adolescent males developing chest pain a day or two after the second dose of an mRNA vaccine. The Pfizer vaccine is currently the only shot authorized in adolescents aged 12 and up. Moderna is authorized from age 18 upwards.

"The cases have been relatively mild," added Rubin, with the patients returning to normal within a few days after treatment with medicine like ibuprofen. Myocarditis is estimated to affect about 0.8 per 100,000 children per year and is more common among infants and teens. Even if a causal link to the vaccines is established, Rubin said it should be weighed against the risks to children from COVID.

While children are less affected than adults, the virus has still hospitalized more than 3,000 children in the United States over the course of the pandemic, and led to more than 300 deaths, according to official data. Some 2,700 people under 30 have died from COVID.

"We've actually had more kids infected with COVID that we know who have had long term impacts, some of whom have been quite ill with cardiac symptoms in the hospital," stressed Lee Savio Beers, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Other experts have adopted a more cautious line. Monica Gandhi, an infectious diseases and public health expert at the University of California San Francisco, said that the United States had gone beyond some other countries' recommendations on vaccinating teens. These include Germany and the Zionist entity, which only recommend vaccinating adolescents who are at high risk, while Britain is still examining the data and hasn't yet reached a decision. — AFP

## Kuwaiti armed forces to help...

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appears that the country is "hijacked" by a small group that is unaware of the serious consequences constitutional violations pose on the constitutional system.

He said that what happened during the latest Assembly session was unprecedented, but he praised the strong popular support for opposition lawmakers. Opposition MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri vowed the opposition will continue to target the forces of corruption, saying "we will not surrender". MP Mohammad Al-Mutairi blasted the government and its supporters, saying that "those who think



## Local

# Unvaccinated worry, weigh options as new restrictions begin in Kuwait

By Reem Al-Gharabally

**KUWAIT:** Starting Sunday, June 27, only fully vaccinated citizens and residents will be allowed to visit shopping malls, salons and barbershops, gyms, restaurants and other locations, the Kuwait Cabinet has decreed. The news has caused anxiety for many people, mostly residents, who have registered with the Ministry of Health but are still waiting to receive the vaccine.

Dave, a personal training manager at a large gym said that only three trainers of a staff of 40 in the gym have been vaccinated. The remaining staff, among them trainers, receptionists and cleaning crew, are registered but still waiting to receive their first shot.

"My first thought when I heard about the new restrictions was our gym is going to have to shut down because almost all our staff are not vaccinated," he told Kuwait Times. "We have now been told that unvaccinated employees are okay to work, but unvaccinated clients can't come in. It does not make any sense to me."

Dave said they have since received a backlash from clients regarding the unvaccinated staff members which has resulted in management taking the decision not to allow unvaccinated staff to train. "I can understand the frustration of clients, but the rules are not ours! To me, their anger is focused on the wrong people. And now our staff will suffer," he explained. Plenty of workers are facing lost jobs and income because of the new restrictions.

## Fears for the unvaccinated

Rajesh, a 30-year-old radiology technician at a private hospital and his colleague are also waiting for their appointments despite being health workers. "They should first provide people with the vaccination and then if they want, they can introduce these rules. How is it possible to vaccinate everyone who are still waiting within a week?" Rajesh asks.

According to a study conducted by the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), fully immunized participants were 25 times less likely to test positive for COVID-19 than those who were unvaccinated. But without contact tracing to track transmission in a larger population, it is impossible to know if vaccinated people will not spread infection. Kuwait does not have an extensive contact tracing program in place.

## Zain supports medical frontliners at Jaber Causeway

**KUWAIT:** Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, visited Jaber Causeway Vaccination Center in collaboration with the Ministry of Health throughout a period of three days. The initiative aimed at easing the hot weather conditions on medical and administrative frontliners at the center, as well as encouraging the public to support the nation's efforts into achieving social immunity during the pandemic.

The visit witnessed the presence of Jaber Causeway Vaccination Center's General Supervisor Dr Talal Al-Fadhlah, the center's Technical Supervisor Dr Hamad Al-Ansari, the center's Administrative Supervisor Dr Dalal Al-Ajmi, as well as Zain Kuwait's External and Internal Relations Department Manager Hamad Al-Matar.

Zain's presence at the center comes as part of a long list of programs and initiatives the company has adopted during the past period in collaboration with MoH and other ministries with the aim of protecting the community from the impacts of the pandemic.

Zain's team was present at Jaber Causeway Vaccination Center, located at the southern island of Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Causeway, which is a recently inaugurated drive-thru vaccination center. The company offered water and ice cream carts in an effort to ease the hot weather conditions faced by over 200 staff members operating as medical, technical, nursing, and administrative frontliners at the center. Zain was keen on recognizing MoH staff's efforts as they battle extreme heat and the danger of infection on a daily basis to protect the community and the nation.

Zain has also launched an awareness campaign on its social media platforms through which the company encouraged the public to vaccinate and

The Covidvax website projects Kuwait has since December administered more than 3.1 million vaccine doses to date. At this rate, Kuwait could have 70 percent of the population fully vaccinated (with two doses) by September 2021. But what about all the people still unvaccinated, or who have received only one jab so far? What will they do this summer if they cannot go to malls, salons, gyms or other commercial places?

Kuwait's vaccine rollout so far is small reassurance for Sara, a Lebanese content creator who has waited six months for her appointment to receive the vaccine. She is worried that as of next week, the new rules will make it impossible for her to do her job effectively.

"Part of what we do is work in places that we will be denied access to as unvaccinated people," Sara said. "We are all happy to abide by the rules. We all sheltered in place when we were asked to. We have followed the rules by the book; when they instigated the curfews we stayed home and did not do neighborhood walks at night. It is very unfair to those who did everything right and still there is no access to a vaccine yet."

Sara has a two-year-old child. "What am I going to do with a toddler who is too young to go to school, who can't go to a park because the summer here is smoldering? Where am I going to take her? All I can do is take her to walk around a mall or go to a restaurant and now I won't be able to do that."

Sara's colleague Dana is also still waiting for her vaccine and is worried the effect the new rules are going to have on older children of parents who still have not had access to the vaccine. "They are going to get depressed and struggle mentally and we will watch a child go from happy, bubbly to despondent and apathetic because I am watching that happen to my 13-year-old."

Many resident mothers have joined mothers' groups on social media to share their anxiety while they continue to wait for their vaccine. Sara feels the chasm between vaccinated Kuwaitis and non-vaccinated residents is growing. "We get many replies from privileged, liberal locals where they ask us if we registered properly or that they are sure this rule does not apply to me. It is enraging," she said. "I have been made to feel time and time again since the beginning of the pandemic as long as the small portion of the population is guaranteed access to health care and vaccines and they



**KUWAIT:** This April 18, 2021 file photo shows people lined up outside the Kuwait Vaccination Center in Mishref to receive their doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

can travel and come back then all is well. The rules have been racist from the very beginning and it is hard to say there is no racism when every single decision feels racist."

## Business owners impacted too

The new restrictions have also caused concern among business owners. Fahad Al-Arbash, head of the Kuwait Union of Restaurant, Cafe and Catering Companies, asks on Twitter: "How are you going to implement this law for 11,000 restaurants, 3,000 salons and 1,000 health clubs?"

Salon owner Lorie Killingsworth says she has managed to get half her staff fully vaccinated, but the other half are waiting for their second dose. She thinks the new rules are going to affect her business. "We are getting a lot of calls from people asking if we are going to follow the guidelines of the ministry of health. Of course we are," she said. "Clients are asking to get in quick to get their hair cut. And then they ask if we can do home service. That is another grey area. That would be defeating the purpose."

Lori believes many workers in smaller salons across Kuwait are not vaccinated. "I managed to get my staff vaccinated by registering through a vaccine campaign event organized by the salon union.

On the day, word got out there were thousands of people lined up, both male and female salon workers. Then a Ministry of Health person walked the line and turned them away because their salon had not pre-registered. That was sort of sad."

## Left out

Another group will also be affected by the new restrictions: those who do not want to or cannot vaccinate. Samira, a Kuwaiti teacher at a private school, suffers from the autoimmune condition lupus. The CDC warns that people with autoimmune conditions may receive the vaccine, but they need to be aware that no data is currently available on the safety of COVID-19 vaccines for people with such conditions. Samira tried to obtain a medical exemption from the Ministry of Health citing this concern but says it has been rejected.

"I feel I have no freedoms in my own country. I feel I am being held prisoner. Also, I am half American and most of my family and siblings live in America and I can't go see them because I cannot leave the country without a vaccine. I think on the spectrum of who is affected by this in Kuwait I am still relatively privileged so if I am feeling this way, I can only imagine the level of violation residents feel."



**KUWAIT:** Jaber Causeway Vaccination Center's General Supervisor Dr Talal Al-Fadhlah (second left) with Zain Kuwait's External and Internal Relations Department Manager Hamad Al-Matar (left), the center's Technical Supervisor Dr Hamad Al-Ansari (second right), and the center's Administrative Supervisor Dr Dalal Al-Ajmi.



achieve the nation's goals in reaching social immunity. In addition, Zain distributed "VACCINATED" stickers at Kuwait Vaccination Center in Mishref, Jaber Causeway Vaccination Center, as well as on Snap, Instagram, and WhatsApp to promote positivity about vaccination.

Zain recently organized an internal 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 nation's authorities in immunizing the community during the pandemic.

Throughout the past 18 months, Zain has showcased the spirit of responsibility as a leading national company by making its human and tech resources available to shoulder the public sector and maintain the nation's wellbeing.

The company also launched numerous social awareness campaigns aimed at elevating the health and safety of the community. Not only that, but Zain was also keen on continuing its support of social, educational, and cultural initiatives - which it has always been a top supporter of - in a virtual format this time to adhere to official health measures and guidelines to keep everyone involved safe.

Zain's tireless efforts have extended throughout the year, where it has launched its own social initiatives, supported existing health and social programs, in addition to handling the crisis, all under its corporate sustainability and social responsibility strategy.

## Kuwaiti woman's murder case verdict on July 6

**KUWAIT:** The Criminal Court has set July 6 as the date to give its verdict in the murder case of Kuwaiti citizen Farah Akbar. The prime suspect had pled not guilty to the crime which took place in April and in which he is accused of stabbing the victim to death after kidnapping her in Sabah Al-Salem. The case had sparked an outcry in Kuwait with demands from the public to lawmakers for more protection to women in Kuwait. According to reports, the suspect had wanted to marry the victim, but her family rejected the proposal.

The woman's family said they had filed several cases at several police stations and with some public prosecutors, but the man was not kept in custody. The woman's sister - who is a lawyer - said that she repeatedly pleaded with a public prosecutor that the release of the man could endanger her sister's life, but he was nevertheless freed on bail. She also said police stations did not take their complaints seriously.

In other news, police arrested a citizen who works for Kuwait Fire Force on accusations of committing arsons in Sabah Al-Salem. Police patrols had responded to a call about a fire in the area, and arrested the man after finding flammable substances on him. Al-Rai Arabic daily reported yesterday. The man was taken to the proper authorities for further questioning. In a different case, Jahra firemen put out a blaze reported in the basement of a building in the area. The basement was used as a warehouse for housewares.

## Kuwait 2nd cheapest Gulf city for foreigners: Mercer

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait City is the second cheapest city among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in terms of cost of living for foreign residents, according to the 2021 Mercer cost of living city index. Kuwait ranks 115 out of 206 cities in this year's index: down two spots from 2020's index. Kuwait City ranks second after Doha, which the index ranks as the cheapest GCC city for foreigners at 130 worldwide. Dubai meanwhile became cheaper for foreigners within a one year's period according to Mercer, as the index ranks the city in the 41st place, down from 23rd a year ago. Yet, it remains the second most expensive in the Gulf after Riyadh, which ranks 29th on this year's list, a slight increase from 2020's list in which it ranked 31st.

After Dubai, Manama is considered the third most expensive GCC city as it is placed 71st on the index. The Omani capital Muscat is the third most affordable in the Gulf, and it became cheaper to live



there in the past year as it ranks 108th on this year's list, a drop from 96th on last year's list. Globally, the Lebanese capital Beirut overtook Tokyo as the third most expensive city in the world for foreigner, jumping from the 45th place in 2020 while the Japanese capital dropped one place to fourth. Ashgabat, Turkmenistan (first), Hong Kong (second) and Zurich, Switzerland (fifth) round up the top five. The index's ranking was based on more than 200 factors that include housing, transportation, food, clothing, household goods and entertainment.

## Kuwait hails WHO rapport amid COVID fight

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait has forged a partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO) as part of the country's efforts to combat the coronavirus pandemic, its health ministry said, citing the emergence of more contagious variants as a reason for further cooperation. "Kuwait was the first country WHO visited back when the pandemic first struck," said Dr Rehab Al-Watayan, the ministry's international relations officer, adding it was a testament to the "proximity" of bilateral ties. On WHO's newly-opened regional office in Kuwait, the official expected the facility to serve as a catalyst for greater cooperation, which is necessary to topple the COVID pandemic, she said. On what the future has in store, the global health body's representative in Kuwait Dr Assad Hafeez said he was certain that common goals would "come to fruition," chiefly, efforts to eradicate the COVID pandemic and its newly identified strains. — KUNA

## Kuwait pension fund assets hit record \$23.1b in Q1

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Public Institution for Social Security's (PIFSS) assets rose to \$23.1 billion in March, the highest figure in the pension fund's history, driven by the financial market's robust performance last year. The gain in assets amounted to a 20.9 percent increase from last year's figure, subsequently ratcheting up investment by 16.5 percent, PIFSS Director General Mishal Al-Othman said in a statement. He attributed the pension fund's "record gains" to the diligence of a national workforce that is "committed to sustainable and long-term growth," which includes proper asset management, added the official. The fund's investment sector was propped up by the "global financial market's solid performance last year," according to its deputy chief for investment affairs Raed Al-Nisf, who predicted "fluctuations" in the global stock market for the foreseeable future. The fund "routinely updates" its plans and strategies to keep investment growth steady, "based on the latest developments in the global stock market," he added. — KUNA



# Denmark woos Kuwait to invest in renewable energy, life science tech

By Ben Garcia

**KUWAIT:** Saudi-based Danish Ambassador to Kuwait Ole E Moesby arrived in Kuwait yesterday, where he is set to meet heads of Kuwait's ministry of foreign affairs, ministry of defense and chamber of commerce, along with members of the business community. He also plans to meet with the Danish military personnel stationed in Kuwait. Moesby is Denmark's ambassador to Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Moesby will try to convince Kuwait to invest in Denmark's renewable energy and life science technologies. "I will tell them to invest in long-term sustainable and renewable energies. We are number one in renewable energy. While countries around the world are still deciding their 2030-2035 goals, Denmark has already done the planning. We are 20 to 30 years in advance. We are developing wind farms, which I believe Kuwait can also do because wind and sunshine are here too. Hydrogen technology could be developed in Kuwait too. If Kuwait wants to become a strong player in the energy field in the future, it should not only concentrate on petroleum and oil, but also develop its renewable energy technology, because that's the future of the world right now," he told Kuwait Times.

According to Moesby, Denmark has invested a lot in health. "We are very much into life sciences - it's in the area of medicine and pharmaceuticals. Our agribusiness companies are now mostly into organic products. We have several high-quality dairy products. We have technology for farming, and encourage Kuwaitis to take advantage of this technology. We can do the design and planning," he added.

Moesby took pride in the AAA rating granted to Denmark by US credit rating agency Standard & Poor's. "We are the best country in Europe for doing business. We have a high standard in terms of business. Our interest rate is basically negative, which means I have to pay the bank to take care of my money. In other countries, they are giving interest on the money in the bank. But we are paying

them to keep our money. The reason for this is because we have a conducive, reasonable and stable business environment. If you are looking for investment, you go to Denmark," he said.

## Excellent partner

With regards to Denmark-Kuwait bilateral relations, Moesby described Kuwait as an excellent and traditional partner of many years. "We have several products here. You can notice several of our designs and products in hotels, restaurants and many offices. Danes designed the National Assembly, its interior and several more buildings in Kuwait. Also, visit supermarkets and you will find several products from Denmark, from appliances to organic produce and pharmaceuticals. We may not be the biggest importer or exporter, but we have a steady stream of trade with Kuwait," he said.

The Danish population in Kuwait is around 200, mostly in high-level positions. "There are some Danes married to Kuwaitis, and Danes working in several high-level positions. There are people in the oil, hospitality, pharmaceutical and bakery sectors. Did you know that the first excavation on Failaka Island in Kuwait was headed by a Dane in the 1950s? Many artifacts were uncovered there, and we traced the origins of the first settlement," the ambassador said.

Moesby also spoke about Denmark's response and its contribution to the global fight against the coronavirus pandemic. "We managed the COVID-19 pandemic properly and excellently in March 2020. We didn't know the pandemic will last this long. We are thankful that the number of cases and deaths are now diminishing all over the world. Denmark is now in the final phase before going back to normality by July. At the moment we are in the last part of this battle, with the number of cases dropping to only 200 per day in a population of 5 million people. We have controlled transmission, while 70 percent of our people have already been vaccinated. The only group remaining are 30-35 years old. We also have no issue with people who don't want to be vaccinated," he said.

initiative. As we know in the region the vaccination rate is still lagging behind. So any effort to increase vaccination rate is more than welcome."

On March 18, 2020, Lazzarini, a Swiss-Italian national, was appointed Undersecretary General and Commissioner General of UNRWA by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. On the current situation of UNRWA, he told KUNA that there are many challenges the UN agency is confronted with. "One of them is the financial situation. The Agency has been in financial crisis for many years because there has been a discrepancy on what the Agency is supposed to deliver for the Palestinian refugees and what the voluntary contribution of certain member states have been, which has led to constant cash-flow crisis," he said.

This has been highly unsettling for Palestinian refugees and for our 28,000 staff and for the countries hosting the refugees, he noted. For this reason, UNRWA together with a number of supporter countries have decided to organize an international conference by the end of this October, during which the Agency will be presenting a blueprint in terms of what is expected from it in services delivery. "The idea behind this is to promote better pre-



**KUWAIT:** Danish Ambassador to Kuwait Ole E Moesby speaks to Kuwait Times. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## 3 million vaccines

Denmark has also donated 3 million vaccines to WHO's Covax program, intended for distribution to several developing countries around the world. "Separately, we also delivered 350,000 AstraZeneca vaccines to Kenya. We sent respirators to Ukraine and Nepal and oxygen to India. We are very committed to helping other countries that need us," Moesby said.

"The most important thing is that we managed to register our people to trace and monitor COVID-19 cases quickly. It helped us a lot in saving elderly people and the vulnerable. We managed to restrict areas of concerns - we isolated and focused our attention on them. There were times too when we had no more beds for sick people," he recalled.

Denmark is a small country in Europe, but according to Moesby, most of the time, like Kuwait, it plays an important mediatory role in several complex issues. With regards to Denmark's position on the Middle East conflict, it advocates a two-state solution. "It's been a long and enduring conflict; like everyone else, we would like to see this end soon. But we want to keep the status quo and convince both sides to return to the negotiating table. Until then, we have to respect the Oslo agreement," he said.

dictability so that UNRWA becomes a predictable partner in the region," he said. The decision on the venue of this conference will be taken by Jordan and Sweden as co-hosts in July. He noted that on Monday, June 21st, UNRWA launched a \$164 million humanitarian and early recovery appeal following the Zionist bombardments of Gaza in May. The 11-day Zionist air strikes have caused substantial damage to physical infrastructure, including homes and UNRWA installations, as well as water and sanitation networks in refugee camps, he pointed out.

Commenting on his current visit to Brussels, Lazzarini said he is meeting with members of the European Parliament and European Commission officials. "The EU is a very longstanding, solid and strong supporter of UNRWA. This year we are celebrating 50 years of partnership and very soon UNRWA will be signing with the European Commission a joint declaration," he revealed. The UNRWA chief appealed to the international community that "it is in our common interest to have a strong, predictable UNRWA in the region to focus on the development of Palestinian refugees and through this predictability we are promoting security in a highly volatile region." — KUNA

## News in brief

### Speaker off to Brussels

**KUWAIT:** National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem left yesterday to Brussels for a two-day visit, during which he is scheduled to meet with European Parliament President David Sassoli and Belgian Parliament Speaker Eliane Tello. Ghanem's meeting with senior officials in the European Parliament and the Belgian Parliament come as a representative of the Arab geopolitical group to discuss developments in the occupied Palestinian territories in the wake of the recent attacks by the occupation forces on Jerusalem, Gaza and the rest of the Palestinian territories.

### Back to 100% staff

**KUWAIT:** The Civil Service Commission became the first state department to restore its workforce back to 100 percent since the start of the pandemic, after its new chief Mariam Al-Aqeel gave orders to cancel all work related restrictions within a month, including reinstating fingerprint scanners for staff entrance.

### Oil price up

**KUWAIT:** The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by 85 cents to \$73.83 per barrel Tuesday after being at \$72.98 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. The prices of the Brent crude and the West Texas Intermediate, globally, saw a decrease with the first going down by nine cents to \$74.81 per barrel, the same case with the latter, which also went down by 60 cents to \$73.06 pb.

### Bosnia thanks Kuwait

**VIENNA:** The Bosnian city of Tuzla lit its Chamber of Commerce building in the Freedom Square yesterday with the Kuwaiti flag, in gratitude for Kuwait's humanitarian role. This came on the occasion of laying the foundation stone for housing the families of children with cancer, with a donation from the Kuwaiti General Secretariat of Endowments.

## Kuwait, UAE among fastest growing markets for UK services

**LONDON:** Kuwait and the UAE are among the fastest-growing markets for UK services globally, the Lord Mayor of the City of London William Russell has confirmed. Russell said that British innovation in green and digital are huge opportunities for further collaboration for Kuwaiti investors. "We look forward to continuing to work with them in the years ahead and see a bright future for our ongoing trade relationship," the Lord Mayor said. He estimates current investments from the GCC nations, namely from Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE greater than 140bn Sterling (\$195 billion- current exchange rate), adding that the City continues to welcome these investments into green infrastructure programs. Accordingly, future investments seem to be heading more toward green finance and fintech.

Russell recently held discussions with senior figures in Kuwait and elsewhere in the Gulf on an array of topics, but mainly in terms of green investment in the lead-up to COP26, which will take place here in the UK next November. Unsurprisingly, he considers the prospect of an eventual trade deal with the GCC, which would collec-

tively make it a bigger trading partner for the UK than China as a giant step forward. On Kuwaiti investment, Russell expressed his delight Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA) remains committed to London where it has established itself as the world's oldest sovereign wealth fund back in 1953. He explained that Kuwaiti investments in UK infrastructure include 20% stakes in London City Airport, Associated British Ports, Thames Water, and several significant properties in and around the Square Mile and Canary Wharf.

On Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic's effects, the Lord Mayor of the City of London played down any long-term negative impact, saying that the City will continue to be a vital global center for business, heritage, and culture while continuing confidence from investors and businesses is shown by the amount of development currently underway. "London's fundamental strengths such as its vast international reach, pragmatism, and spirit of innovation have not been lost, and I am confident that our unique city will continue to thrive for decades to come. We have been through tough times before and we will come through this period as well," he said. As a result, the Mayor concludes that the City of London and the UK government should now focus on an ambitious vision for the future and lead in growth markets such as green finance, fintech, and other fast-growing areas to enable the sector to retain its position on the world stage. — KUNA



The Lord Mayor of the City of London William Russell

## UNRWA chief seeks stronger cooperation with Kuwait

**BRUSSELS:** The Commissioner General of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Philippe Lazzarini, is to visit Kuwait soon with the aim to strengthen the partnership for the benefit of Palestinian refugees. "I will soon be visiting Kuwait. I am in discussions with Kuwaiti authorities for an official visit, which will take place this summer or beginning of the fall," he said in an interview in Brussels yesterday.

"I look forward to discuss more in details the partnership between Kuwait and UNRWA. I know that in Kuwait there is a lot of support for the Palestinian refugees and I hope this will be translated also into a continuous partnership with UNRWA," he said. Commenting on Kuwait's initiative to promote vaccination among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, he said "the initiative to promote vaccination among the refugees is definitely a welcomed



**AMMAN:** Trucks carrying Kuwaiti aid prepare to leave to the Gaza strip. — KUNA

## Kuwaiti aid convoy heads from Jordan to Gaza strip

**AMMAN:** A convoy of Kuwaiti humanitarian aid headed Tuesday from Jordan to Gaza as a part of a campaign to support Al-Aqsa that Kuwait Society for Relief (KSR) is overseeing, after obtaining necessary permits from Israeli occupation authorities to cross borders. Jordan Hashimite Charity Organization (JHCO) in cooperation with KSR sent two trucks of foodstuff from its warehouses in Zarqa through King Hussein Bridge that connects Jordan to the West Bank, in preparation for delivery to beneficiaries in blockaded territory. General Director of KSR Abdulaziz Al-Obeid stated that these two trucks are part of the aid dispatched by JHCO two weeks

ago. The relief supplies were sent from Kuwait via military aircraft to support Palestinians in the occupied lands. He added that the Israeli occupation authorities granted passage for the two trucks as part of the convoy managed by JHCO in association with the Jordanian army to be delivered to Gaza. The society, he said, is awaiting further permits to deliver medical equipment to Makassed hospital in Jerusalem to meet pharmaceutical needs, hoping that this happens as soon as possible. The First shipment of aid gifted by Kuwait Society for Relief to the Palestinian people arrived June 9 via a military aircraft carrying 40 tons of food supplies and medical aid to be sent to Jerusalem and Gaza via Jordan. The Kuwait government-sponsored aid, part of the national campaign featuring contribution of 33 Kuwaiti societies and launched in May following Israeli occupation aggression on Jerusalem and Gaza strip. The campaign garnered an estimated total of KD 2.3 million from 59,000 donors. — KUNA

## ABK promotes employees' health, mental wellbeing

**KUWAIT:** In its continuous efforts to promote physical activity and mental wellness amongst its employees, Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) launched its internal health and wellbeing program earlier this year, in alignment with the World Health Organization's 'Five Ways to Wellbeing at Work' framework. The program is designed to achieve a sustainable health regimen, supported by a systematic approach to enhance employees' lives in and out of the workplace, with the key component of the program centered on the employee/employer relationship, redefining employee-benefits to include issues related to mental health, resilience and physical well-being. Due to the pandemic, unprecedented challenges negatively impacted the physical and mental health of businesses and employees alike, leading to employers realizing the importance of a healthy workplace and life balance and the importance of ensuring employee wellbeing.

The rollout of ABK's mental health and wellbeing program addresses these challenges by ensuring employees have access to all the necessary outlets that allows them to reach optimal levels of physical and mental health. In addition, and with the purpose of raising awareness and encouraging its employees, the bank holds multiple activities, talks with guest speakers and monthly competitions highlighting core wellbeing pillars that promotes the importance of being active, giving, taking notice, connecting, and continuous pursuit of learning and self-development opportunities. ABK works hard to ensure an employee-first approach and through programs such as these, reinforces the bank's pledge towards preserving and developing its employees through recognition and support.





Russia says fires warning shots at British ship

## Syria 'fixers' cash in on despair of prisoners' families

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HONG KONG: Members of the press take photos as executive editor in chief Lam Man-Chung (C) proof reads the next day's 'Apple Daily' newspaper before it goes to print for what was announced earlier in the day to be for the last time, in Hong Kong late yesterday. —AFP

# HK pro-democracy paper confirms closure

## Apple Daily's top columnist arrested on same charge

HONG KONG: Hong Kong pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily announced yesterday it will print its final edition after authorities froze its assets using a sweeping new national security law, silencing the city's most China critical media outlet. The decision is the latest blow to Hong Kong's freedoms and will deepen unease over whether the international finance centre can remain a media hub as China seeks to stamp out dissent.

Journalists outside the paper's headquarters yesterday evening said they planned to print one million copies overnight—a staggering number given Hong Kong's 7.5 million population. And they spoke of their heartbreak at the paper's closure and loss of some 1,000 jobs. "I have tens of thousands of words in my heart but I am speechless at this moment," Ip Yut-kin, chairman of the paper's parent company Next Digital, told AFP. Apple Daily has long been a thorn in Beijing's side, with unapologetic support for Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement and caustic criticism of China's authoritarian leaders. Those same leaders have used a new security law to bring about its rapid demise.

Owner Jimmy Lai, currently in jail for attending democracy protests, was among the first to be

charged under the law after its imposition last year. But the final chapter of the 26-year-old paper was written over the last week when authorities deployed the security law to raid the newsroom, arrest senior executives and freeze its assets.

That last move crippled the paper's ability to conduct business and pay staff. Yesterday, Apple Daily announced its closure "out of consideration for the safety of its staff". Its website will go offline overnight.

### Crackdown

China imposed its security law on Hong Kong last year to stamp out dissent after the city was convulsed by huge and often violent democracy protests. Authorities said their prosecution of Apple Daily was sparked by articles and columns that allegedly supported international sanctions against China, a view now deemed illegal.

It was the first time reporting and opinions published by a media outlet in Hong Kong had triggered the security law. Lai, chief editor Ryan Law and CEO Cheung Kim-hung have all been charged with colluding with foreign forces to undermine China's national security and remanded into custody.

Yesterday Yeung Ching-kee, one of the paper's top columnists, was arrested on the same charge. The decision to freeze Apple Daily's assets laid bare the sweeping powers now at the disposal of Hong Kong authorities to pursue any company deemed to be a national security threat.

The security law does not require a court order or criminal conviction to freeze assets. Multiple international media companies have regional headquarters in Hong Kong, attracted to the business-friendly regulations and free speech provisions written into the city's mini-constitution. But many local and international outlets are questioning whether they have a future there. "Every journalist in Hong Kong now has a metaphorical gun pointed at their heads," Sharron Fast a lecturer at the University of Hong Kong's journalism school told AFP. "When the result of your writing can lead to lifetime imprisonment—you are being censored. Apple will not be the last - just the latest."

### First trial

Hong Kong has plunged down an annual press freedom ranking by Reporters Without Borders, from 18th place in 2002 to 80th this year. Mainland

China languishes at 177th out of 180, above only Turkmenistan, North Korea and Eritrea. The European Union said Apple Daily's closure "seriously undermines media freedom and pluralism".

China has hailed the security law for successfully restoring stability after the 2019 demonstrations. Authorities initially said it would only target "a tiny minority". But it has radically transformed the political and legal landscape of a city that China promised would be able to keep key liberties and autonomy after its 1997 return.

Yesterday the first trial under the new law got under way. Tong Ying-kit, 24, is accused of terrorism and secession after he allegedly drove a motorbike into police while flying a protest flag that read "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times". His trial is not being heard by a jury in a major departure from Hong Kong's common law traditions.

Tong's case is unusual because he is the only Hong Konger so far charged under the security law with an explicitly violent act. More than 60 people have now been charged under the law, including some of the city's best-known democracy activists, but their offences are related to political views or speech that authorities have declared illegal. —AFP

## Nine Catalan separatists freed after Spain pardon

SANT JOAN DE VILATORRADA: Nine Catalan separatists who were serving long prison sentences for their role in a failed 2017 independence bid were released from jail yesterday, a day after being pardoned by Spain. The seven men left the Lledoners jail, some 70 kilometres (45 miles) northwest of Barcelona, where they were met in the rain by umbrella-carrying supporters shouting "Independence, independence!"

As they walked through the gates, they were embraced by newly-appointed Catalan leader Pere Aragonés and posed for a photograph alongside a Catalan independence flag and a banner reading "Freedom for Catalonia", an AFP correspondent said.

"Long live a free Catalonia!" said Oriol Junqueras, who was deputy head of the Catalan government at the time of the crisis and the prisoner serving the longest sentence of 13 years. "Until the day of victory, we will continue to work with everyone to make this dream of a Catalan republic a reality."

Two women were also freed from separate prisons, just hours after the pardons for all nine separatists were published in the government's official gazette. The clemency decision was approved by the Spanish government on Tuesday in the

hope it can draw a line under past confrontations with Catalonia's separatist-led regional leaders and open the way for talks.

The prisoners were serving between nine and 13 years each for their role in a banned referendum that was marred by police violence and followed by a short-lived declaration of independence in the wealthy northern region, sparking Spain's worst political crisis in decades.

Some of those involved fled abroad, while 12 were tried and convicted with three-quarters of them handed years of jail time. Although the prison terms have been dropped, all nine are banned from holding public office and the pardons are conditional on them not committing "a serious crime" over the next three to six years.

They have all served more than three years behind bars. "I am here because the sacrifice they have made for Catalonia and for all of us has been huge," said Ignasi Sole, a 65-year-old retired mechanic who was waiting outside Lledoners prison for their release. "It's a way of thanking them."

### 'Independence through dialogue'

As they walked out, several of the prisoners pledged to



SANT JOAN DE VILATORRADA: (From left) Catalan separatists Raul Romeva, Jordi Turull, Jordi Cuixar Oriol Junqueras, Joaquim Form, Jordi Sanchez and Josep Rull leave Lledoners jail yesterday in Sant Joan de Vilatorrada. —AFP

continue the struggle. We will keep fighting," said Jordi Cuixart, head of Omnium, one of the region's biggest grassroots pro-independence groups, who was serving a nine-year sentence. "Today is not a day of surrender, it's a day in which all of us Catalans say we will continue to fight."

Leaving Was-Rad women's prison in Barcelona, former parliamentary speaker Carme Forcadell said they would work to secure a full amnesty that would allow those who fled abroad to return home.

"Let's make this small victory work towards our greater victory: achieving an amnesty, self-determination and a Catalan republic," she said. The pardons have been condemned by Spain's right-wing opposition as well as by the Supreme Court, but Madrid hopes they will give impetus to the upcoming talks with Aragonés who is more

open to dialogue than his hard-line predecessor.

Aragonés and Junqueras, who heads the moderate ERC party, have recently taken steps towards Sanchez by distancing themselves from the path of unilateralism. "The best way to achieve (independence) is through dialogue, negotiation and agreement," said Aragonés, who will meet with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez for the first time on June 29. Aragonés has pledged to push for an amnesty and a new referendum on self-determination this time with Madrid's approval.

Spain has rejected both out of hand. When the separatists were sentenced in October 2019 by Spain's Supreme Court, the ruling triggered an outcry across Catalonia, with thousands hitting the streets in protests that sometimes turned violent. —AFP



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## International

# World powers meet in Berlin to seek lasting peace in Libya

## Security situation has been slowly improving

**BERLIN:** World powers gathered yesterday in Berlin to seek lasting peace in Libya by ensuring the conflict-wracked North African country stays firmly on the path towards general elections on December 24. Representatives of Libya's interim government will join US Secretary of State Antony Blinken as well as the foreign ministers of France, Turkey and Egypt at the UN-sponsored talks.

Russia's Sergei Lavrov will be absent, but deputy foreign minister Sergey Vershinin will attend in his place. The efforts to end a decade-long spiral of violence in Libya are the second round held in Berlin, after the first attended by the presidents of Turkey, Russia and France in January 2020, before the pandemic.

Ahead of the talks, host German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas reminded participants of pledges made in 2020 for an end to international meddling and for foreign militants or troops to withdraw. "For the further stabilisation of the country, it is crucial that elections take place as planned and that foreign fighters and mercenaries really do leave Libya," Maas said ahead of the gathering.

"It is our aim to support the Libyan transitional government so that it can take the fate of the country into its own hands." The United Nations has estimated that 20,000 foreign fighters and mercenaries are still on Libya's territory. And that presence is seen as a threat to the UN-backed transition leading to the elections.

### No one's interest

The oil-rich country descended into chaos after dictator Moamer Gadhafi was toppled and killed in a 2011 NATO-backed uprising, resulting in multiple forces vying for power. In recent years Libya has been split between two rival administrations backed by foreign forces and countless militias. In October, after Turkey-backed forces of the Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli routed those of eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar, the two camps agreed a ceasefire in Geneva.

The security situation in Libya has been slowly improving since. However, the UN recently warned that progress has stalled, notably on a key requisite of the polls—the pullout of all foreign soldiers. Western leaders have repeatedly called on the foreign fighters to depart. But Russian mercenaries supporting Haftar's side in the east of the country are still in place.

Turkey meanwhile has troops in Tripoli, which it argues were sent under a bilateral agreement with the government, implying that they are not affected by a request for foreign troops to leave. But any withdrawal is also a delicate balancing act, said the German foreign minister.

"Foreign forces must leave the country in a gradual and uniform manner, so that there won't be a sudden military imbalance that could be used by one side for a sudden offensive," Maas told Die Welt newspaper.

A diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, stressed the sensitivity of the situation, saying solutions could not be found overnight. But he also



**BERLIN:** German Chancellor Angela Merkel welcomes Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah at the Chancellery in Berlin yesterday, on the sidelines of a new round of Libya peace talks held in the German capital. —AFP

voiced cautious optimism that some progress could be made on Wednesday, because it was in no one's interest for conflict to break out again.

Jalel Harchaoui, Global Initiative senior fellow and an expert on Libya, also believed the talks could bring tangible help on the upcoming elec-

tions. "Somebody could come up with a good idea of agreeing on a constitutional basis in July and be on course for elections in December," he said, referring to a key requisite for the polls. "I think there's a good chance (for elections by year's end) and the Berlin process could help." —AFP

## Ex-policeman ahead as NY votes for mayor

**NEW YORK:** Former policeman Eric Adams took the early lead in a New York City primary Tuesday that will all but certainly select the next mayor tasked with shaping the post-pandemic future of America's largest metropolis. Following the first results, Adams led a diverse group of 13 candidates vying for the job often called "the second-most difficult" in the United States after that of president, although the winner is unlikely to be known for several weeks.

Tech entrepreneur Andrew Yang, a moderate who ran for president last year and who was once a frontrunner in the New York mayoral race, conceded defeat shortly after polls closed at 9:00 pm (0200 GMT Wednesday) with early returns putting him far behind.

"I am not going to be mayor of New York City based on the numbers that have come in tonight," Yang, 46, told supporters. Voters headed to polls with COVID-19 still casting a long shadow over the Big Apple, the epicenter of America's early outbreak, and which has lost 33,000 people to the virus.

But the city is now coming back to life—virtually all coronavirus restrictions have been lifted, and 66 percent of adults have received at least one vaccine dose. A crowded field of progressives and moderates face off in a race made all the more uncertain by a new ranked-choice system of voting that has clouded all predictions.

The new voting system asks voters to rank up to five candidates in order of preference. Unless a candidate immediately garners more than 50 percent of the votes—an unlikely scenario—the candidate who came in last is eliminated, and the ballots cast for them are redistributed to voters' second choice, and so on until a candidate finally exceeds the 50 percent threshold.

This system may not produce a clear winner until mid-July. Since New York is a Democratic stronghold, the eventual winner is virtually guaranteed to win November's mayoral election against the Republican candidate. "There's a lot at stake here," said Columbia University politics expert Lincoln Mitchell, citing issues ranging from the post-pandemic recovery to climate change.

Unemployment, homelessness, shootings and homicides have all surged since the novel coronavirus struck. Thousands of businesses have closed, tens of thousands of wealthy residents have fled, and most office workers are still working from home.

### Five choices

The pandemic, demonstrations sparked by the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, and attacks on Asian Americans have also highlighted the extent of racial inequalities in the city of 8.5 million. New York's first new mayor in eight years will have to contend with projected budget gaps of several billion dollars each in the next few years.

They will succeed unpopular left-wing Democrat Bill de Blasio, who has been mayor since January 2014. "It's time for a change," said Esther Rombaut, 48, after voting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

"It's going to be critical for the next person to figure out what to do with fiscal policy and how to get our kids back in school," she added. For Susan Green, a 74-year-old interior designer, one issue topped the others. "New York needs law and order, and a great deal of it," she told AFP, before voting for Yang. Sixty-year-old-year-old Adams, the Brooklyn borough president, who is Black, put public safety at the forefront of his campaign. Shortly after 11:30 pm, he led with 30.9 percent of the vote, with 89 percent of first-choice votes counted, according to New York's election office. —AFP

## Senate Republicans block sweeping US voting rights measure

**WASHINGTON:** US Senate Republicans on Tuesday torpedoed a Democratic effort to protect voting rights and expand ballot access for all Americans, a flashpoint issue months after an election marred by Donald Trump's baseless allegations of fraud. Waving off broad bipartisan public support for election law updates, the opposition party united to block the advancement of a sweeping package which would amount to the most expansive federal election reform in decades.

Democrats brought the "For the People Act" to the floor as a test vote, in reaction to controversial efforts by Republicans to enact strict new voting laws in dozens of states. Critics have widely savaged those measures, which include restricting mail-in ballots, criminalizing the delivery of water to people waiting to vote, and limiting early Sunday voting hours as a way to deny Black churches' "souls to the polls" events.

The Democrats' historic bill, S1, is aimed at ensuring Americans can vote by mail, plus have full access to early voting and use of ballot drop boxes. A version of the bill, which also reforms campaign finance laws and attempts to thwart gerrymandering, or the partisan redrawing of district lines, passed the House of Representatives in March.

But the text failed on a strictly party line 50-50 vote in the Senate, where support from 60 senators was needed in order to even begin debating the measure. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer had made a final unsuccessful appeal to his Republican colleagues. "Are we going to let the most dishonest president in history continue to poi-

son our democracy from the inside? Or will we stand up to defend what generations of Americans have organized, marched for, fought and died for: the sacred, sacred right to vote?" he asked.

Afterward, Schumer delivered a scathing rebuke to Republicans as he sought to claim a moral victory. While all Democrats voted to protect voting rights, "voter suppression has become part of the official platform of the Republican Party," he said.

The blocking of S1 ensures the issue remains a political firestorm into the 2022 midterm elections and beyond. There was worry that Democratic moderates, led by Senator Joe Manchin opposes the vast expanse of S1, would not support it.

But Manchin aligned with his party after leadership agreed to introduce a "commonsense compromise" that he proposed. "I remain committed to finding a bipartisan pathway forward because the future of our democracy is worth it," Manchin said in a statement.

Manchin's compromise maintains most of the Democratic bill's provisions, but allows a key concession—voter identification requirements—in a bid to win over Republicans. Democrats have accused Republicans of caving to Trump's pressure about mail-in voting and other expansive voting rules, and targeting the ways that younger, poorer, non-white and typically Democratic voters access the ballot.

### 'Under assault'

The White House had acknowledged the vote would fail, but nevertheless issued a statement of support, as it highlighted how Americans' right to vote "is under assault" thanks to moves by Republican state legislatures. "In state after state, new restrictive laws on voting, and efforts to replace non-partisan election administration with partisan processes designed to overturn the will of the voters have become more widespread," the White House budget office said.

Republicans however remain firmly opposed to the Democratic effort. Their bill is a "transparently



**WASHINGTON:** US Vice President Kamala Harris speaks to members of the media after presiding over a vote on a sweeping voting rights bill at the Capitol in Washington, DC. —AFP

partisan plan to tilt every election in America permanently in their favor," said top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell.

"It's a recipe for undermining confidence in our elections, remaking our entire system of government to suit the preferences of one far end of the political spectrum." With the voting rights bill now blocked, Democrats face pressure to abolish the filibuster, the Senate procedure that allows the minority to block legislation unless it earns support from 60 of the chamber's 100 members.

President Joe Biden, a 36-year veteran of the Senate, has expressed opposition to getting rid of the filibuster outright. But several lawmakers in his party believe such a move is the only way to ensure voting protections and get other elements of his ambitious progressive agenda into law.

The White House conceded Monday that defeat of S1 would likely "prompt a new conversation about the path forward," including the fate of the filibuster. Schumer said the bill's defeat was not the finish line for voting rights action, but the starting gun. "We are going to explore every last one of our options," he said. "We have to." —AFP

## Syria 'fixers' cash in on despair of prisoners' families

**BEIRUT:** Syrian mother Umm Saeed was so desperate to find her two jailed sons she even sold the family furniture to pay "fixers", but a decade of deceit has left her no closer to the truth. "Had they asked for my heart, I would have handed it over," the 63-year-old mother told AFP by phone from central Syria, using a pseudonym for fear of reprisal. But "they lied to me".

In war-torn Syria, where tens of thousands of people have disappeared into a murky web of regime jails infamous for torture, a booming trade has emerged for "fixers" offering to help families locate or save their loved ones. Policemen, lawyers, businessmen and even lawmakers, with security and judicial contacts, demand steep fees to dig up information about a disappeared son or brother, allow a visit, reduce their sentence, or obtain their release.

Some efforts are successful, while more often scammers pocket the money and stop answering phone calls. It's normally families who seek out the so-called fixers, but sometimes they receive cold calls persuading them to pay up for a photo or voice recording, only to vanish with the money. AFP spoke to members of eight such families, most of whom asked that their real

names not be used.

Umm Saeed said her two sons were detained in 2012. "Whenever someone told me about a potential middleman, I would go to them," said the mother, who suffers from heart problems. She paid a lawyer who asked for the equivalent of more than \$3,000 but "did not provide the slightest bit of information".

Another man claiming to be a policeman was paid with a mobile phone after saying he could get her permission to visit Sednaya, a notorious prison in Damascus. But when she showed up at the jail which Amnesty International calls a "slaughter house", she was told the pass was fake and sent away. "I sold my home furniture and my daughters' gold. I have nothing left," she said.

### 'Black market'

Diana Semaan, a researcher at Amnesty, said the government's policy of silence on the fate of detainees had created a "black market" for information. "Families, desperate for information, end up paying huge amounts of money, sometimes their entire life savings, to intermediaries and 'middlemen' close to the Syrian government," she explained. Suae, 45, said her family in northern Syria had paid 20 million pounds to various brokers over the years to try to find her brother since he disappeared in 2013.

In April, someone contacted the family asking for payment to release him. But after they raised the cash, "he told us my brother had died three days



**DAMASCUS:** File photo shows Syrian prisoners staging a protest and a hunger strike at the central prison in Adra, in support of President Bashar Al-Assad who is facing international pressure over a UN inquiry into the assassination of Lebanese former premier Rafiq Hariri. —AFP

earlier", Suae said. Two weeks later, another person rang, offering a phone call with her brother. When the call came, there was no audible voice on the other end of the line; all they got for their money was static.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says around half a million people have entered regime jails since the 2011 start of Syria's conflict, of whom 60,000 have died of poor detention conditions or torture. Another mother, 56-year-old Umm Yahya, said she had managed to visit her son just once, six months after he was detained in Idlib, northwest Syria, in 2012.

"I barely recognised him. His weight had dropped from 110 (240 pounds) to less than 50 kilos," she said. She has heard nothing since. Her family has over the years poured a small fortune into the pockets of possible intermediaries, selling two plots of land and a house in Idlib to cover the costs, but to no avail.

Her husband has grown increasingly reluctant to squander the family's savings. Two years ago, a lawyer asked for \$10,000, but her husband refused. "If a hundred more people turned up, even if there was just a one percent chance of success, I would do it again," said Umm Yahya. —AFP



## International

# Russia says fires warning shots at British ship in Black Sea

## Putin 'concerned' about NATO build-up near Russian borders

MOSCOW: Russia yesterday said it fired warning shots at a British Navy destroyer in the Black Sea after it violated the country's territorial waters, while the UK denied that shots had been fired. Incidents involving Western aircraft or ships are not uncommon at Russia's borders, especially during heightened tensions with Washington, Brussels and London, but rarely result in open fire.

The HMS Defender "was given a preliminary warning that weapons would be used if the state borders of the Russian Federation were violated. It did not react to the warning," the Russian defence ministry said, as quoted by the Interfax news agency.

The defence ministry added that "a border patrol ship fired warning shots" and a Su-24 aircraft dropped four bombs along the destroyer's path. It said that the ship then left Russian waters. But the UK's defence ministry swiftly denied that the incident had happened at all.

"No warning shots have been fired at HMS Defender. The Royal Navy ship is conducting innocent passage through Ukrainian territorial waters in accordance with international law," the ministry said. After announcing that it had fired warning shots at the HMS Defender, Russia's defence ministry summoned Britain's military attaché, Interfax reported.

According to the Russian defence ministry, the incident took place off the coast of Cape Fiolent on Crimea, which Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014, also claiming the peninsula's coastal waters. The Royal Navy said earlier in June that the HMS Defender had "peeled away" from its strike group conducting NATO operations in the Mediterranean to carry out "her own set of missions" in the Black Sea.

### Russia's NATO 'concerns'

Earlier yesterday, President Vladimir Putin said Russia is "concerned" about the NATO build-up near Russian borders. Addressing an international security conference in Moscow, Putin said the alliance "refuses to constructively consider our proposals to de-escalate tensions and reduce the risk of unpredictable incidents".

The US periodically sends warships to the region in a show of support for Ukraine, often drawing



PORTSMOUTH: File photograph taken on June 5, 2019, shows HMS Defender prepares to take part in a sail past to honour D-Day veterans on board the Royal British Legion's ship MV Boudicca en route to Normandy, in the Solent off the coast of southern England. —AFP

protests from Russia. At the height of tensions over Ukraine this spring after Russia built up troops on its border and in Crimea, Moscow stepped up military exercises in the Black Sea and Washington warned it would send two warships.

Those ships were never dispatched, as Russia pulled back its forces and the tensions eased. At the time, Russia also threatened to close parts of the Black Sea, which would have affected access to Ukrainian ports in the Sea of Azov that is connected to the Black Sea through the Kerch Strait on the eastern tip of Crimea.

Ukraine had been free to navigate the Kerch Strait — of crucial importance to Kiev for exporting grain and steel — along with Russia until 2014, when

Moscow claimed full control of the waterway after annexing Crimea. "By international law, of course, the waters off Crimea are not Russian, as the annexation is not recognised," Mark Galeotti, a professor of Russian studies at University College London, tweeted yesterday.

"Continuing to pass those waters — without being too provocative — is a crucial way of reaffirming law over land and sea grab." The most serious recent tensions over the waters were in November 2018, when Russian forces boarded and took control of the ships as they headed through the Kerch Strait.

Russia captured 24 Ukrainian sailors as part of the seizure, returning them to Ukraine as part of a prisoner swap in September 2019. —AFP

## Afghan translators fleeing the Taliban land in Britain

LONDON: Afghan translators who worked with the British military and fear reprisal attacks from the Taliban have arrived in the UK as part of a relocation scheme, campaigners said yesterday. The Sulha Alliance for Afghan interpreters told AFP the first group of around 30 translators and their families landed in Birmingham, central England, on Tuesday evening, adding they expected the arrivals would go into Covid quarantine for 14 days.

The government declined to comment on the reports about the departure of the flight over concerns about the safety of the relocating Afghan translators and their families. At the end of May, Britain announced it would accelerate plans for the relocation of Afghan staff who worked with the military and their families ahead of a planned withdrawal of US-led NATO forces.

Under a relocation scheme for former and current Afghan staff, more than 1,300 workers and

their families have been brought to Britain. More than 3,000 Afghans are expected to be resettled under the accelerated plans, the government said.

Home Secretary Priti Patel has said the government has a "moral obligation" to relocate staff and to "recognise the risks they faced in the fight against terrorism and reward their efforts". Retired Colonel Simon Diggins, the former British attaché in Kabul and now a campaigner for the Sulha Alliance, said the translators would receive four months of support after which he said, "the real struggle begins".

Afghan translators and other local staff who worked with Britain and other NATO members such as the United States, Germany and France have clamoured to be relocated for fear of Taliban reprisals. In the two decades since the US-led invasion, dozens of Afghan translators have been killed or tortured in targeted assaults by the radical Islamist group.

Even more have been injured in attacks on foreign troops during patrols in armoured vehicles. Campaigners have criticised what they say are confusing relocation schemes by NATO members, which they claim have allowed many translators to fall through the gaps and will struggle to evacuate all necessary staff before the western alliance's withdrawal. —AFP

## Three killed in bomb targeting police in Lahore

LAHORE: A bomb killed three people in Pakistan's eastern megacity Lahore yesterday, in an attack officials believe targeted police and security forces. The blast happened outside a house near a checkpoint in an affluent neighbourhood, the province's police chief Inam Ghani said.

"Our assessment is that the most obvious target was the police and security forces," he said, adding that the blast was being treated as a terrorist incident. He said it was unclear whether a vehicle was packed with explosives that were remotely detonated or if a suicide bomber was behind the blast.

A spokesman for Lahore police said three people were killed and 14 wounded. Police chief Ghulam Mehmood Dogar earlier said that officers were investigating "from every angle" after acknowledging that the house of Hafiz Saeed, the jailed head of banned militant organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), is located in the area.

## Taliban still in control of Tajikistan border crossing: Officials

KUNDUZ: The Taliban remain in control of Afghanistan's main crossing with Tajikistan, local officials said yesterday, a day after the insurgents seized a vital inland transit hub and sent government forces fleeing into the neighbouring country.

The militants have launched a sweeping offensive across large swathes of northern Afghanistan in recent days, swallowing up a dizzying number of rural districts as US and international forces wind up their withdrawal from the country.

Tuesday's capture of the border hub of Shir Khan Bandar — along the key trade route to Central Asia — came as the Taliban encircled nearby Kunduz city, sparking fears the provincial capital was on the verge of falling. "We have reports from our local staff that the Taliban have confiscated all the goods and commodities in the port, and they have destroyed the customs office," said Massoud Wahdat, a spokesman for the Kunduz chamber of commerce and industries.

A Taliban spokesperson denied that the group's forces had ransacked the facilities. "We are working to get the port operational again," said Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid. Tajikistan's national security committee confirmed Monday that more than 100 Afghan government forces had crossed the border as they fled the Taliban onslaught.

"The Tajik border guards, guided by the principles of humanism and good neighbourliness, allowed the Afghan military to freely enter the territory of Tajikistan," said the committee, adding that four Afghan soldiers were injured and one had been killed. —AFP



LAHORE: Security officials inspect the site of an explosion that killed at least three people and wounded several others in Pakistan's eastern city of Lahore yesterday. —AFP

Footage aired by private TV channels showed mangled vehicles and rescue workers sifting through broken windows and shattered walls of the building. Blasts in Pakistan's major cities have become increasingly rare in recent years following a massive crackdown on militant groups in urban areas along with a string of military offensives targeting jihadist strongholds along the Afghan border. —AFP

## Thai authorities warn against planned protest

BANGKOK: Thai authorities warned demonstrators against gathering to mark the anniversary of the Siamese Revolution yesterday, citing the kingdom's soaring COVID-19 infections.

Key pro-democracy groups have announced plans for demonstrations across Bangkok today to commemorate the 89th anniversary of the Siamese Revolution, an uprising that transformed Thailand from absolutism to a constitutional monarchy.

Mass protests against the government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha shook Bangkok in the second half of last year, fuelled by discontent at the former military chief who came to power via a 2014 coup, but tailed off as COVID-19 cases rose. The kingdom is now in the throes of its third wave of the virus, registering high daily numbers of infections and deaths, which has seen authorities clamp down on gatherings.

"The police is ready to take care of the security for protests tomorrow... Police will focus on maintaining peace and order and follow the disease control regulation," Bangkok metropolitan police commissioner Pakpong Pongpetra said. "Anyone who violates the laws during protests will have legal actions taken against them," he said, adding authorities "will not use force if it's not necessary".



SONGKHLA: In this handout photo from the Royal Thai Army taken and released on June 22, 2021, COVID-19 patients of a local hospital are transferred by a military truck to be accommodated in a field hospital for coronavirus treatment facility in Songkhla amidst Thailand's third wave of infections. —AFP

The protest venues announced by the groups include key city roundabouts and public spaces including the Democracy Monument and the downtown skywalk at a popular shopping district. There are also demonstrations planned across the country, from the tourist city of Chiang Mai in the north to the southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat.

The pro-democracy movement sent shockwaves through Thailand's establishment, particularly their most controversial demand—a call to reform the kingdom's unassailable monarchy. Some 150 people have been charged since the movement started, with key leaders hit with multiple counts under

Thailand's tough royal defamation laws.

Many of them were released on bail under conditions that include not protesting, but they are expected to be leading Thursday's marches. "Come out tomorrow to show our fight is not over," tweeted prominent student leader Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul, who was released on bail in May.

"We will continue fighting." At the peak of the movement last year, the protests drew tens of thousands of demonstrators calling for an overhaul to Prayut's administration, but momentum has slowed in 2021 because of an uptick in COVID cases. The kingdom has recorded more than 228,500 total cases of COVID-19 and 1,744 deaths. —AFP

**CONSUMER PROTECTION DEPARTMENT**

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MODEL: CLA (117), GLA (156), A Class (176)  
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# Business

THURSDAY, JUNE 24, 2021

## US lawmakers take first step toward Big Tech regulation

### Largest tech firms additionally would be prohibited from acquiring competitors

WASHINGTON: US lawmakers take a first step toward regulating Big Tech yesterday with a vote on a series of bills with potentially massive implications for large online platforms and consumers who use them. The House Judiciary Committee scheduled a "markup" on a series of antitrust reform bills, setting the stage for consideration by the full House of Representatives in the coming weeks.

The five bills, if enacted, could pave the way for a reorganization or breakup of giants such as Google, Facebook, Apple and Amazon while shaking up the entire internet ecosystem. The measures would bar tech giants from operating a platform for third parties while offering competing services on those platforms. Lawmakers also seek to ban tech firms from prioritizing their own products or services. The largest tech firms additionally would be prohibited from acquiring competitors.

The creation of requirements allowing for data "portability" and "interoperability," which could make it easier for people to quit Facebook, for example, while keeping their data and contacts, is also part of the package. House Judiciary chairman Jerrold Nadler said the measures "pave the way for a stronger economy and a stronger democracy for the American people by reining in the power of the most dominant firms online."

Fiona Scott Morton, a Yale University professor and former US official who has written extensively on Big Tech, said the legislation stems from the failure of antitrust enforcement to make a dent in the dominance of major technology firms. "This is regulation, it's not antitrust anymore," Morton said.

#### Hitting a wall?

The package comes amid signs of a more aggressive posture by Washington against dominant tech firms, including President Joe Biden's nomination of Lina Khan—a prominent advocate of

breaking up Big Tech—to head the Federal Trade Commission, an agency charged with antitrust enforcement.

The package has some support from Republicans in addition to the Democratic leadership, signaling likely passage in the full House. The fate in the Senate is less clear. Analyst Daniel Ives at Wedbush Securities said chances of passage of a major antitrust overhaul are slim in the current political situation, and that any enforcement action would be limited in the absence of new legislation. As a result, share prices of the major tech firms have seen little movement.

"We believe this antitrust momentum hits a brick wall and for now is more a headline risk that investors are taking in stride."

#### 'Negative effects'

Critics of the bills say it could degrade services people rely on, potentially forcing Apple to remove its messaging apps from the iPhone or Google to stop displaying results from YouTube or Maps. Amazon vice president Brian Huseman warned of "significant negative effects" both for sellers and consumers using the e-commerce platform and reduced price competition.

The measures may also impact Microsoft, which has not been the focus of the House antitrust investigation but which links services such as Teams messaging and Bing search to its Windows platform.

The legislation "absolutely applies to Microsoft and many other companies," Microsoft president Brad Smith told Bloomberg in comments confirmed by AFP, adding that "there will be days when there are restrictions that we think go too far that undermine innovation, that basically undermine our ability to serve customers."

Matt Schruers, president of the Computer & Communications Industry Association, which



LONDON: File photo taken on December 18, 2020, an illustration picture taken in London shows the logos of Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft displayed on a mobile phone and a laptop screen. US lawmakers take a first step toward regulating Big Tech yesterday with a vote on a series of bills with potentially massive implications for large online platforms and consumers who use them. —AFP

includes many large tech firms, said the legislation would set a bad precedent by targeting a handful of tech companies. "These bills unreasonably target leading US tech companies that have improved users' experience with innovation, efficiency, and low-cost or free-to-the-user services," Schruers said.

Aurelien Portuese of the Information Technology

and Innovation Foundation, a think tank which often reflects the views of the sector, said the legislation stems from a mentality that "big is bad and large companies are to blame" but fails to consider unintended consequences.

By targeting firms of a specific size or market value, Portuese said, "it regulates the gatekeepers but not competition," he said. —AFP

## Eurozone economy booms at fastest rate in 15 years

BRUSSELS: Business activity in the eurozone jumped at its fastest rate in 15 years this month, a closely watched survey said yesterday, as a reopened economy unleashed pent-up demand in Europe. Economic data group IHS Markit said the "impressive progress" of vaccinations was jumpstarting the single-currency area, fuelled by eased restrictions that are at their lowest since September.

This "brightening prospect of life increasingly returning to normal has... pushed confidence to an all-time high, fuelled greater spending and encouraged hiring," said Chris Williamson, chief economist at IHS Markit. Accordingly, the firm's PMI index—which shows the earliest trends in the manufacturing and service sectors—said activity leapt from 57.1 in May to a booming 59.2 in June, far above the 50-point level that indicates growth. The data set the scene for major growth in the second and third quarters, closing the chapter on a double-dip recession that came with the second wave lockdowns of last autumn and winter, the firm said. IHS Markit said the explosive growth was creating its own spillover effects, with supply chains under pressure and prices reflecting the sharp increase in demand.

"The strength of the upturn—both within Europe and globally—means firms are struggling to meet demand, suffering shortages of both raw materials and staff," Williamson said. Jack Allen-Reynolds, chief European economist at Capital Economics pointed to the demand for labour that "has shot up as large parts of the economy have opened at once, and this was never going to be an easy process."

The surge in inflation meanwhile will add to some of the pressure on the European Central Bank to tighten the cheap money taps that are aimed at spurring spending and investment. ECB chief Christine Lagarde on June 10 said it was "too early" to consider winding down pandemic support, even as the economic recovery gathers steam and inflation surges. "The problem with these surveys is that they measure the number of businesses that indicate higher prices, not the extent of it," said Bert Colijn, senior economist at ING. "In this reopening phase, that might overstate expectations of the pace of inflation," he said. Capital Economics also downplayed the impact of inflation, which "will drop back well below" the ECB's near two percent target next year, it predicted. —AFP

## Stocks extend gains as traders eye loose policies

HONG KONG: Asian markets rose yesterday to extend a global rally, as fresh pledges on monetary policy by the Federal Reserve reassured investors who had been rattled last week by the bank's forecasts of an earlier-than-flagged hike in interest rates.

Wall Street tanked Friday and Asia followed suit Monday as traders contemplated a rate lift-off possibly next year as officials try to prevent overheating and soaring inflation caused by the world's top economy thundering out of the collapse of 2020.

Fears about the end of ultra-loose policies put in place at the height of the pandemic have haunted trading floors for months, knocking a more than year-long equity rally off stride. But observers said that repeated Fed promises to maintain the measures until unemployment is tamed and inflation is running consistently hot appear to be sinking in.

On Wednesday, Fed chief Jerome Powell took his turn to reassure. "A pretty substantial part, or perhaps all of the overshoot in inflation comes from categories that are directly affected by the re-opening of the economy such as used cars and trucks," he told lawmakers.

"Those are things that we would look to stop going up and ultimately to start to decline." He said the price spikes had been bigger than expected and could last longer than initially thought, but added: "We will not raise interest rates preemptively because we think employment is too high, because we feared the possible onset of inflation."

"We will wait for actual evidence of actual inflation or other imbalances." Earlier in the day, New York Fed boss John Williams said talk on rate hikes remained "way off in the future". All three main indexes on Wall Street ended with healthy gains for a second straight day with the Nasdaq at a record, and Asia took up the baton.

Hong Kong led the way rising 1.8 percent, while Taipei also piled on more than one percent. There were also advances in Shanghai, Singapore, Seoul, Wellington, Manila and Bangkok, though Sydney, Mumbai and Jakarta fell

## US new home sales drop for second straight month

WASHINGTON: US new home sales fell for the second straight month in May while the median sales price hit a new record high, government data said yesterday, reinforcing the case that the housing market is slowing.

The Commerce Department said new home sales were at 769,000 annualized last month, 5.9 percent



SEOUL: Currency dealers monitor exchange rates in front of screens showing South Korea's benchmark stock index (top R) and the Korean won/CNH exchange rate (top L) in a trading room at KEB Hana Bank in Seoul. —AFP

while Tokyo was flat. London, Paris and Frankfurt dipped in morning trade.

#### Fresh buying opportunity

The Fed's acknowledgement of higher inflation and the fact it has brought forward its rate hike forecasts are "a reflection of more positive longer-term dynamics", said BlackRock Investment Institute strategists led by Jean Boivin.

"We believe the Fed's new outlook will not translate into significantly higher policy rates any time soon. This, combined with the powerful restart, underpins our pro-risk stance." Meanwhile, others say the recent selling could provide an opportunity for markets to take another leg up to fresh highs, with Natix analyst Jack Janasiewicz calling it "bewildering", adding: "This caused a nice quick flush out of some weak hands riding the reflation trade and likely reset positioning to a better place."

Bitcoin extended a rebound yesterday, sitting above \$34,000 after a volatile day that saw it fall

below April's downwardly revised rate and also lower than analysts had forecast. The median sales price of new properties climbed to \$374,400, even as supply increased so that, if no more houses came onto the market, the stock would sell in 5.1 months at the current pace.

"Sales look set to fall further, with a decent chance they'll soon be back below the pre-COVID trend," said Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics. Real estate demand soared during the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic as those who could afford it sought out new properties, and the pace in May was 9.2 percent higher than the same month in 2020.

However Shepherdson said the data indicate the

below \$29,000 for the first time since January. The unit has taken a hit this week by fresh moves to crack down on cryptocurrencies by China, while analysts warn it could well drop back to \$20,000 — having only hit a record near \$65,000 in April.

"Bitcoin's continued sell-off has contributed to a negative outlook by traders driven by bearish news out of China," said Nick Mancini, a crypto analyst at Trade The Chain. "The mood among traders is now continuing to sour."

Oil prices extended gains to sit around multi-year highs on increasing optimism over demand as the world economy reopens and governments talk about easing quarantine measures, allowing easier overseas travel.

Analysts said the lack of progress on the Iran nuclear deal was also providing support as it puts off the return of supplies to the global market from the major producer. Traders are now looking ahead to the next output meeting of OPEC and other key producers. —AFP

arrival of vaccines against the virus has chilled demand, pointing to the uptick in supply of new properties. "The brief, albeit frenetic, boom phase of the housing recovery is over," he said.

Sales trends were uneven across the country, rising 33.3 percent in the Northeast but plunging 14.5 percent in the South. The West saw growth of 6.7 percent, while sales in the Midwest were flat.

Mahir Rasheed of Oxford Economics said the elevated prices have kept consumers out of the market, and predicted they'd soon come down. "Sky-high lumber prices have contributed to the recent spike in new home prices, although some relief may be on the horizon given the plunge in lumber prices since mid-May," he said in an analysis. —AFP



## Business

# Italy PM promises reform as EU green lights virus funds

## Italy's central bank has forecast growth of nearly five percent this year

ROME: Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi said Tuesday he would proceed with reforms at "maximum speed" after the European Union gave the green light to billions of euros in post-pandemic recovery funds. Italy was one of the European countries hardest hit by coronavirus and will receive the biggest share of the EU's 750-billion-euro (\$900 billion) recovery plan agreed last year.

During a visit to Rome, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen announced its support for Italy's "ambitious" and "foresighted" plan to spend 191.5 billion euros in EU grants and loans between now and 2026. At a joint press conference, Draghi emphasised the need to spend the money well, adding that key reforms linked to the investments, notably of Italy's snail-paced justice system, would "proceed at maximum speed".

"The Italian government and all of us have a responsibility towards the rest of the European countries, towards the European citizens who have paid taxes to finance our national plan," he said. Von Der Leyen is on a tour of EU member states to launch the recovery fund, agreed after a historic decision to pool debt. Amid concerns from some of the EU's "frugal" northern members about subsidising spending in what they see as the less fiscally virtuous south, the investment is closely tied to reform.

"We were always aware of the fact that it will need a combination of reforms and investment to boost the economy when we get out of the (coronavirus) crisis, to really leapfrog forward to modernising and reviving our economy," Von der Leyen said. The first instalment of Italy's EU funds, worth almost 25 billion euros, could arrive before the end of July.

### Eurozone's third economy

The two leaders were speaking at Rome's legendary Cinecittà film studios, which will benefit from the EU funds to the tune of more than 300 million euros. Known as "Hollywood on the Tiber" in the 1950s for hosting US blockbusters like "Quo Vadis" and "Ben-Hur", it was second home to legendary Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini and remains one of Europe's largest studios.

At 222 billion euros counting in additional funds from Italy, Draghi's recovery plan focuses on digitalisation, support for women and young people and the transition to a greener economy. A further 26 billion euros has been earmarked for specific works up until 2032, including high-speed rail.

Italy's economy—the third largest in the eurozone—shrank by a staggering 8.9 percent in 2020 but the central bank has forecast growth of nearly five percent this year. However, public debt is expected to reach 159.8 percent of GDP at the



ROME: Italy's Prime Minister, Mario Draghi poses with the Next Generation EU recovery plan, handed to him by European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen (L) during a joint press conference at Rome's Cinecittà cinema studio. — AFP

end of the year, the second highest ratio in the eurozone after Greece.

"If the Italian plan were to fail, it would call

into question the whole European policy of common debt," Carlo Altomonte, professor of economy at Milan's Bocconi University, said. — AFP

## Google gives workers tool for remote work planning

SAN FRANCISCO: Google on Tuesday unveiled a platform that lets its workers calculate pay and benefits for remote work, and how this would change if they move to a cheaper - or more expensive - city. With the company's new hybrid workplace, "more employees are considering where they live and how they work," a Google spokesperson said in response to an AFP inquiry.

The new Work Location Tool will show workers how their compensation will be adjusted depending on their location, since pay is based on costs of living in places and tuned to local job

markets. Google, which employs some 140,000 people worldwide, expects that in the post-pandemic work model 60 percent of its employees will meet in offices just a few days a week, and 20 percent of its workers will be in new office locations.

The remaining 20 percent of "Googlers" are expected to work from home, according to the spokesperson. Google chief executive Sundar Pichai has spoken of a need for flexibility regarding remote work and changes of location as tech companies reopen campuses abandoned during the pandemic. — AFP



PARIS: File photo taken in Paris on April 29, 2018 shows the Google logo displayed on a screen and reflected on a tablet. — AFP

## Sudden travel surge tests US airlines

NEW YORK: US airlines are scrambling to ramp back up to meet soaring travel demand that has transformed America's airports from cavernous to crowded almost overnight. The surge in pent-up demand is exposing immediate staffing shortfalls in the aviation workforce, as well as medium-term labor challenges following an exodus of experienced workers during the downturn.

The issues came to a head over the weekend when American Airlines canceled 400 flights and said it would cut one percent of its flights in July to better manage an "incredibly quick ramp-up of customer demand." While American was more aggressive than rivals in adding capacity, all major carriers face challenges in the sudden rush, analysts said.

"They've had so many planes just waiting in hangars or runways that weren't being used... there's a lot of maintenance," said Ian Gendler, executive director of research at Value Line. "It's not an overnight thing." The surge in bookings and the economic recovery are "fantastic things for the airlines, but they have to execute," Gendler said.

### Training needed

Activity at US airports bottomed out in April 2020, when there were several days with fewer than 100,000 passengers nationwide, US data show. Volumes recovered somewhat from that nadir over the next months, but airports remained strikingly low-trafficked until vaccinations became widespread. Chris Riggins, a Delta pilot and a spokesman for the Air Line Pilots Association, took note this spring when an airport garbage bin was overflowing and people had placed trash on top.

"Right now, you couldn't tell the difference from summers before," he said. As bookings have risen, major carriers have recalled their staffs and unveiled recruitment drives. Delta announced this week plans to hire 1,000 new pilots by next summer, while American is "actively hiring" in several groups, including reservations, airport customers service and maintenance, an American



NEW YORK: In this file photo taken on May 28, 2021, travelers wait in line at John F. Kennedy (JFK) Airport ahead of Memorial day weekend in New York City. US airlines are scrambling to ramp back up to meet soaring travel demand that has transformed America's airports from cavernous to crowded almost overnight. — AFP

spokesperson said.

Some of the workers are needed to backfill positions from staff who took early retirement packages last year when carriers were looking to cut costs to survive the pandemic. Delta is also in the midst of a pilot training push aimed at more than 1,700 pilots who did not fly during the pandemic, Riggins said. Another large group of pilots who will need training are pilots who flew during Covid-19 but are now shifting to new planes, replacing some 1,800 pilots who recently retired.

"Those pilots need to be replaced and we need to rehire, so I think you're going to see training like this for the foreseeable future," Riggins said. In the near-term, Riggins expects the aviation industry to struggle to find enough staff to clean airports, cater for airlines or manage concessions at airports. Fast-food restaurants may only be able to serve for limited hours, he said.

### Better options?

Gary Peterson, whose union represents mechanics, flights attendants, luggage handlers and other non-pilot aviation staff, said shortfalls will be exacerbated by the more extensive on-boarding requirements at secured operations like airports. It normally takes about 30 days to take fingerprints

and conduct a background check, but that timeframe is being dragged out because some government agencies are themselves short-staffed in some cases, or slowed by social distancing requirements still in place, said Peterson, international vice president at Transport Workers Union (TWU) and a certified mechanic for American Airlines.

Prior to COVID-19, aviation companies were struggling to recruit enough pilots, mechanics and dispatchers. Now those labor problem areas remain, but the industry is also contending with competition from other sectors for roles such as baggage handlers.

"Why would you work in sweltering heat in Dallas for say \$15 an hour when you could go up the street at Amazon, work in an air conditioned building and make the same amount of money?" asked Peterson.

Recruitment is also getting harder for flight attendants following assaults and other abusive behaviors on board from customers angry over mask requirements and other protocols. Peterson thinks most tourists will reach their destinations and expects a gradual improvement over the course of the summer. But there will be issues. "They're going to see problems throughout the summer," he predicted. — AFP

disclose their ESG risk-related strategic objectives, including any related performance indicators.

The authority called on banking regulators in EU countries to look at ESG risks when they assess the business models of banks, and urged them to extend the time horizon for review to 10 years. The EBA carries out annual "stress tests" of European banks to evaluate whether they would be able to withstand adverse events.

Last month it released the results of a pilot review of the climate risks of banks, which found the need for a harmonised approach and common metrics to address and mitigate potential disruptive impacts upon lenders from environmental risks. — AFP

## European regulator urges banks to evaluate climate risks

PARIS: The European Banking Authority called yesterday upon banks to better take into account climate-related risks when setting their business goals and strategies. The EBA, which is responsible for setting the rules for regulating and supervising banks in EU countries, issued a report on environmental, social and governance (ESG) risks.

## UK gov't to regulate streaming giants in media shake-up

LONDON: The British government yesterday announced plans to subject online streaming platforms to tighter regulation as part of a wider shake-up of the country's media landscape. Under the proposals, services such as Netflix, Disney+ and Amazon Prime Video would face the same level of regulation as traditional broadcasters including the BBC, ITV and Sky.

Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden said the review would "level the playing field between broadcasters and video-on-demand services". Television channels in Britain must follow a broadcasting code set by regulator the Office of Communications (Ofcom) covering areas such as harmful content and requiring impartiality in news programmes.

But online streaming platforms — with the exception of the BBC's on-demand iPlayer service — face lighter regulation, primarily limited to protecting children and preventing content that incites hatred. Netflix and Apple TV+ are not regulated at all in Britain.

The reforms also aim to increase public service broadcasters' online prominence to ensure their programmes can be found and accessed easily on smart TVs and other devices. "Technology has transformed broadcasting but the rules protecting viewers and helping our traditional channels compete are from an analogue age," Dowden added.

"The time has come to look at how we can unleash the potential of our public service broadcasters while making sure viewers and listeners consuming content on new formats are served by a fair and well-functioning system."

### 'Politically motivated'

The government also revealed it intends to sell Channel 4, a publicly-owned but commercially-funded television broadcaster that draws 90 percent of its income from advertising. Channel 4 launched in 1982 and its remit involves supporting the UK's independent production sector and producing a unique and diverse range of programmes.

The UK government said privatisation would enable Channel 4 to diversify its revenue sources, reach international markets and invest in new content and technology to respond to competition from subscription-based streaming services. It pointed to ITV and Channel 5 as examples of successful public service broadcasters operating under private ownership.

Critics claim the decision is politically motivated as politicians from Britain's ruling Conservative party have accused the broadcaster of bias. In 2019, Channel 4's head of news and current affairs Dorothy Byrne branded Prime Minister Boris Johnson a "liar" and a "coward".

He now rarely gives interviews to the broadcaster, although he relented at the recent G7 summit in Cornwall, where he was grilled — uncomfortably — on his Brexit commitments. EU leaders "say you don't keep your word... They think you'll rip up the agreements that you've signed," the Channel4 News interviewers suggested to Johnson.

Johnson's government also has the BBC in its sights, with questions over its compulsory annual licence fee funding model in the face of competition from streaming services. — AFP



## Business

# Brexit proves a headache across UK business sectors

## For small businesses, costs are rising quickly and squeezing margins

LONDON: A lone worker kneels among the vines at the Ridgeview winery in southern England, as a dozen or so visitors sample the estate's sparkling wine. Demand for British wine is up domestically but at the same time, Brexit has led to a shortage of seasonal workers, increased costs and red tape.

Across the country, similar problems have disrupted businesses since Britain fully left the European Union in January. But it is not yet clear whether the issues are just teething troubles or more long-lasting. Tamara Roberts, chief executive of the family run wine estate, said finding labour had never been a problem in the past.

"It's only really been this year we have seen real shortages," she told AFP. "It's really tricky with the pandemic and the travel restrictions to see where the pressure is coming from. We think Brexit pushed people to stay home because we haven't made it easy for them to come."

The political and economic repercussions from Britain's vote five years ago to leave the European Union are far from over. The British wine industry did not take a stand at the time but is now struggling with the consequences. "We have time to consider our options, work with agencies" to find around 20 seasonal workers, "but we don't have a solution," said Roberts.

"We're looking for a chef, we haven't been able to push our offer in that area as we would have hoped," she added. "There is definitely a pressure to increase pay if we're all competing for the same people." At the same time, "we've seen logistics costs tripling" because the red tape for exporting product and importing machines and bottles has become so complicated that Ridgeview now goes through middlemen, she added. "Whether it's Germany or France or

Holland, the interpretation of rules are quite different so it's quite hard to navigate."

### 'Existential threat'

For small businesses, costs are rising quickly and squeezing margins. "We'll probably have an idea by the end of the year of what's short-term, what's long-term," said Roberts. On the up side, domestic demand has jumped given the difficulties of importing foreign wine, especially online.

"The hospitality industry hasn't fully reopened. We hope to see a recovery in that, we think that will happen before the recovery in exports," added Roberts. She also noted that the impact of Brexit remains vague.

Much will depend on the bilateral trade agreements signed by Britain and other countries, such as those that have just been agreed with Norway or Australia, or the one under negotiation with the United States. Further north, in Boston, which had the highest number of pro-Brexit votes in 2015, Ian Collinson's flower growing business has reported the same difficulties in finding seasonal workers for times of peak demand, such as Valentine's Day and Mother's Day. Brexit has been a positive in that "demand is high because of the extra friction on imports", he said.

But if the labour issue is not solved, it is "an existential threat to the industry in the UK", he added. Collinson is considering scaling back production and ending it in certain varieties that require more manual labour, in favour of more mechanised blooms such as lilies.

### No timber

In London, Sanjay Nairi, complained that Brexit



**BURGESS HILL:** A worker inspects wine vats at Ridgeview Estate's winery near Burgess Hill, southern England. Problems have shaken the lives of many businesses across the country since the UK's effective exit from the single market in early January, without it being yet possible to know whether they will be temporary or sustainable. —AFP

had compounded existing difficulties in sourcing materials for his construction company "Refurb-it-all" because of high demand. "Cement, timber... materials that are coming across from the continent, these have got delay times, the supply chain is unreliable, materials prices are going up practically on a

daily basis," he said.

And he too is struggling with labour shortages. "I lost about seven guys," out of a staff of around 20, he said. Yet demand, particularly from individual homeowners who have saved money during the crisis and want to renovate their homes, is high. —AFP

## Argentina resumes beef exports

**BUENOS AIRES:** Argentina's government on Tuesday announced the progressive resumption of beef exports suspended a month ago in a bid to moderate skyrocketing prices at home. Exports were authorized up to a maximum of 50 percent of 2020's average monthly volumes, government ministers told reporters in Buenos Aires.

The country is the world's fourth-largest beef exporter as well as one of its biggest consumers per capita, and revenues from the sector are vital to the country's economy. It exported some 819,000 tons of beef and cow leather worth \$3.37 billion in 2020 — a 16.5-percent drop from 2019 — primarily to China, Germany and Israel, according to the INDEC statistics institute. "The 50 percent quota will remain in place until August 31 and depending on the results, we will consider how to adapt it," said Minister of Productive Development Matias Kulfas. The quota excludes exports under an agreement with the European Union on hormone-free beef.

The government is also prohibiting the export of seven beef cuts popular with domestic consumers, including the family staple "asado," until December 31. "The absolute priority is that there is no shortage of meat on the Argentinian table. We think this will help to stabilize prices," Kulfas said of the measures.

In mid-May, President Alberto Fernandez's government announced a one-month suspension on foreign meat sales to "get the sector in order, restrict speculative practices and avoid tax evasion in foreign trade." Poverty affects 42 percent of Argentines, and Fernandez sought to reduce the cost of living by implementing price controls.

## NBK named Best Trade Finance Bank in Kuwait for 2021

**KUWAIT:** National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) was named "Best Trade Finance Bank in Kuwait for 2021" in the annual survey of Global Trade Review (GTR) magazine specialized in global emerging markets and trade, commodity finance and transaction banking.

GTR's selection of NBK as one of the leading banks in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in the area of trade finance, was based on surveys of customers and market-specialized institutions worldwide. The GTR Leaders in Trade awards highlight excellence in the trade, commodity, supply chain and export finance, and fintech markets.

It is worth mentioned that, despite the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic on global trade, NBK contributed to mitigating its impacts by continuing to provide trade finance services to various customer seg-

ments to weather this crisis, with priority given to medical supplies and foodstuff.

The bank also continued to lead major syndicated financings and provide banking facilities for mega projects in a number of sectors, including the oil sector, the latest of which was the syndicated facilities arranged for Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) amounting KD 1 billion. In addition, the bank fully employed its global platform and widespread network to help its customers ensure their transactions are made, despite working remotely, and the disruptions in global supply chains resulting from the pandemic. GTR is a reputable global trade finance magazine that publishes reports and analyses on trade export, commodity and supply chain finance, as well as trade credit insurance, treasury and fintechmarkets. Each year GTR recognises the market's pioneering institutions and top performers from around the world in the GTR Leaders in Trade Awards and GTR Best Deals Awards.

It is worth mentioning that NBK was also named Best Trade Finance Provider in Kuwait for 2021 in the annual survey of the reputable international finance magazine Global Finance. The rankings are based on input from industry analysts, corporate executives and technology experts worldwide.



**BUENOS AIRES:** File photo taken on May 20, 2021 show pieces of meat are seen at the butcher's shop of the Don Julio restaurant in Palermo neighbourhood, Buenos Aires. Argentina announced the progressive resumption of beef exports suspended a month ago in a bid to moderate skyrocketing prices at home. —AFP

Fernandez insisted Argentina could not accept the recent rise in meat prices in a country already reeling from three years of recession and the adverse economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

The price rises contributed to Argentine inflation, already among the highest in the world, reaching 17.6 percent in the first quarter of 2021, according to INDEC. Cattle farmers announced a two-week halt on domestic beef sales in response to the government's move.

The protest did not harm domestic availability, with butcheries and markets having stocked up and consumption dropping due to a sharp price increase—some 76.2 percent year-on-year in May. According to Argentina's chamber of industry and commerce, the industry employs some 100,000 people. —AFP

## Argentina strikes deal with creditor countries

**BUENOS AIRES:** Argentina said Tuesday it had reached an agreement with the Paris Club of creditor countries to avoid defaulting on a loan repayment in July, unlocking temporary relief of some \$2 billion. "We have reached an understanding with the Paris Club" to avoid defaulting on July 31, when a grace period was to expire for the repayment of a final tranche of debt of about \$2.4 billion. Economy Minister Martin Guzman told reporters.

Instead of \$2.4 billion, Argentina will repay \$430 million in the short term, followed by the rest later. The \$2.4 billion was the last repayment on debt renegotiated with the Paris Club in 2014. Paying the amount, said Guzman, "would have been a blow to international reserves, (and) would have generated more exchange rate instability and more macroeconomic instability."

A default, on the other hand, would have similarly been a hard blow to the economy. The new repayment dates have not been defined, Guzman added, but the first would likely be by July 31 and the second in 2022.

Argentina will continue negotiations for repayment of some \$44 billion borrowed from the International Monetary Fund by the previous government in 2018. "Our goal is to have a good agreement, the sooner the better, but the priority is that it be good," said Guzman. —AFP



## LuLu Hypermarket launches 'Let's Connect 2021'

**KUWAIT:** Regional retail heavy weight LuLu Hypermarket has launched 'Let's Connect 2021', an innovative promotion intended to bridge distances and connect people during the ongoing health crisis. The promotion aims to help people overcome the communication limitations caused by the crisis, which has separated families from their loved ones back home, kept people away from work and students from school, as well as disrupted social engagements both offline and online.

To promote connections during the crisis, the Let's Connect festival, which runs from 23 June to 3 July in all outlets of the hypermarket in Kuwait, is offering astonishing deals on a wide range of communication tools such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and other IT accessories.

Special prices during the 'Let's Connect 2021' promotion are available on all leading electronics brands at the hypermarket, including on smartphones and accessories from Apple, Samsung, Lenovo, Toshiba, Xiaomi, Huawei, Vivo and Oppo, as well as on accessories from brands such as Anker, Aukey, Belkin, Kioxia, Sandisk, Trands, Xcell and others.

Besides direct sales at all LuLu Hypermarket branches, the promotion is also available online to help shoppers who cannot readily access the retail stores due to lack of time or other precautionary constraints.

Both offline and online shoppers can also avail several modes and terms of payment from Gulf Bank and other leading banks in the country. In addition, another highlight of the Let's Connect promotion is the special installment scheme offered by LuLu Hypermarket that allows customers to make purchases on easy repayment terms.

Let's Connect 2021 underlines LuLu Hypermarket's firm belief that communication between people, whether offline or online, is the foundation that helps build strong social relations among families, friends, and relatives. In this regard, the promotion offers shoppers the ability to avail of a wide variety of high-quality communication equipment at very competitive prices.

## HUAWEI Themes launches the 2021 edition of 'Next Design Awards' in ME

**DUBAI:** HUAWEI Themes, a leading pre-installed, customisable design application on Huawei devices, has announced the 2021 version of 'Next Design Awards', to discover and celebrate the highest quality design work in the Middle East and Africa region. Through this contest, Huawei aims to push the boundaries of design in the world by offering creators the opportunity to produce digital aesthetics under the 2021 theme 'Let your inspiration flow'.

The 2021 edition of Next Design Awards welcomes designers to submit work across seven categories including Phone Themes, Watch Faces, Cities in Bloom, Foldable Screen Themes, Enjoy the Moment, Original IP, and Wallpapers. The judging panel

includes leading designers and global artists such as Song Xiewei, Klaus Hesse, and Takashi Akiyama.

Winners of the Next Design Awards 2021 will be eligible for a total pool of \$200,000 across the categories of Grand Prize, Stars of Tomorrow, International Artists, and Amazing Animators. The winner of the Grand Prize will be awarded \$20,000, which includes \$10,000 in cash and \$10,000 in grants, as well as a HUAWEI Mate 40 smartphone, and the latest HUAWEI Watch 3. Winners will additionally be designated as HUAWEI Themes-certified designers, and thus eligible to earn revenue from HUAWEI Themes.

Adam Xiao, Managing Director of Huawei Mobile Services in the Middle East and Africa, Huawei Consumer Business Group, said, "We are thrilled to kick start the 2021 edition of the Next Design Awards by HUAWEI Themes. Last year's edition saw over 500 competitors from the MEA region alone, which shows the calibre of design-centric and creative minds. We invite our 2021 participants to 'Let your inspiration flow' and bring forward their best work for the world to appreciate and enjoy."

In the contest's 2020 edition, the Next Design Awards attracted over 41,000 entries from 90 countries, and over 100 designers were certified by HUAWEI Themes. The prestige earned from winning the competition resulted in substantial commercial success for a number of themes designers in the region.

HUAWEI Themes is available in over 170 countries and regions, it features a global user base of 600 million users, and 120 million monthly active users. HUAWEI Themes has helped build a vibrant community of over 10,000 creators.

Participants will be able to sign up for the Next Design Awards through their HUAWEI ID, with both pictures and videos. Pictures submissions must be higher than or equal to 3,000 pixels, and under 20MB in size, while videos submissions must be in MP4 or GIF format, editable, and under 20MB in size. Participants can submit up to 30 entries each.





## Lifestyle | Features

Nature bites  
back: Animals  
push human  
boundaries

The pandemic and climate change is testing as never before the delicate balance of human co-habitation with the natural world. As an Australian prison is evacuated after it was overrun by the plague of mice ravaging the east of the country, we look at some of the most spectacular recent examples.

## Australia mice plague

Battling a massive plague of mice after the end of a three-year drought, eastern Australia is seeing crops destroyed, grain silos and barns infested and homes invaded by the rodent that was first introduced to the country by European colonialists. Skin-crawling videos of writhing rodent masses have been shared around the world along with reports of patients bitten in hospital, destroyed machinery and swarms running across roads en masse.

In the latest twist on Tuesday, mice forced the evacuation of hundreds of inmates from a jail after they gnawed through ceiling panels and wiring. Experts warn that climate change could make such chronic infestations more regular. Indeed the Gippsland region in the south-east of the country has been covered in a sea of spider webs after an invasion of sheet web spiders fleeing flooding in early June.



A large black bear is behind a series of car break-ins in New Hampshire, US police said, after it was caught red-pawed on home security cameras clambering into a pick-up truck.

## Bear behind car break-ins

A large black bear is behind a series of car break-ins in New Hampshire, US police said, after it was caught red-pawed on home security cameras clambering into a pick-up truck. Police in the town of Thornton released a video showing the animal loitering by the parked vehicle, before standing up on its hind legs, using its paws to open the door, and then climbing nonchalantly into the driver's seat. Officers said they suspect the bear is a serial offender.

Even without the incriminating footage, there were clues that pointed to the furry miscreant - a bear print was discovered at the scene of one ransacking, according to the Boston Globe. The bear remains at large, with local media saying it has not been causing trouble other than its penchant for rifling through cars.

Latino actress  
Zegler cast as  
Snow White in  
Disney adaptation

Colombian-American actress Rachel Zegler will play Snow White in Disney's latest live-action adaptation, the company said Tuesday. Zegler, 20, is currently largely unknown to audiences but will soon star as Maria in Steven Spielberg's much-delayed remake of "West Side Story," out in December, having seen off 30,000 rivals in an arduous open audition process.

The casting of a Latino actress for a Disney princess role traditionally portrayed by white actresses follows Disney's 2019 announcement that R&B singer Halle Bailey, who is Black, will play Ariel in "The Little Mermaid". "Rachel's extraordinary vocal abilities are just the beginning of her gifts," said Marc Webb, director of the Snow White adaptation, in a statement to AFP.

## China's herd

A herd of elephants which has wandered off its reserve in Yunnan province in China has made headlines around the world, with 3,500 people in their path evacuated from their homes and hundreds of trucks deployed to keep them away from densely populated areas. State broadcaster CCTV is carrying a 24-hour live feed of the migration which began late last year and which has so far cost farmers more than a million dollars in damage to crops.

## Elephant in the room

An elephant stuck his head through Kittichai Boodchan's kitchen wall in western Thailand on Sunday night to nose through his larder for a midnight snack. Kittichai lives near a national park and this was not the first such visit. Last month the elephant knocked a hole through the wall, creating an opening reminiscent of a drive-through restaurant window.

## Tough teen

A California teenager became a social media sensation when a video of her shoving a large bear off her suburban garden wall to protect her dogs went viral earlier this month. "The first thing I think to do is push the bear. And somehow it worked," said the 17-year-old, whose shove sent the bear falling off the low wall and retreating with her cubs.

## Conservation controversy

But there was a grim end to another ursine encounter in Slovakia last week when a brown bear killed a 57-year old man outside Bratislava. The death sparked fury from hunters who claim that bear numbers have become too high because of a ban on hunting to save the species. The outcry echoes similar debates in other countries over bear conservation.

## Wolves divide

The protection of wolves is equally divisive, with an outcry in the US in March after licensed hunters in Wisconsin killed 216 wolves in 60 hours - a fifth of the state's entire population. Donald Trump lifted federal protection for wolves, exposing them to trophy hunting in several states. A similarly heated debate is raging in France where the wolves have flourished since 1992, after being previously hunted to extinction. While their numbers are only a fraction of those found in Italy, Spain, Romania or Poland, farmers balk at the ban on killing the predator across most of the EU.

## Gatecrashing boars

Wild boars also raise hackles across most of continental Europe, damaging well-manicured lawns and golf courses from the French Riviera to the Baltic, where they have become notorious for venturing into residential areas looking for food. In one of the funnier incidents, a German wild boar stole a nudist's laptop last year by a lake in Berlin, with a video of the naked sunbather chasing after the animal clocking up millions of views.

## Lockdown liberty

Pandemic lockdowns have brought a new-found freedom to many wild animals, allowing them to wander into the heart of cities. With half the world's population locked down last year, social media was full of images of wildlife reclaiming the streets, from herds of wild sika deer wandering through metro stations in Japan to packs of jackals congregating in the center of Tel Aviv. —AFP

"Her strength, intelligence and optimism will become an integral part of rediscovering the joy in this classic Disney fairytale." Zegler, of New Jersey, wrote on Instagram "well... hello to a dream come true." Hours before the announcement Zegler had tweeted her admiration for Bailey's casting in "The Little Mermaid," adding: "I love you Disney princess cinematic universe."

Zegler's casting comes more than two decades after Disney cast singer Brandy, who is Black, as Cinderella in a live-action 1997 film. But Disney came under criticism in 2018 for "whitewashing" Princess Tiana in cartoon movie "Ralph Breaks the Internet," hastily redrawing the character with darker features just months before the film's release.

Cuban-American singer Camila Cabello is set to appear as Cinderella in yet another live-action adaptation later this year, produced by Sony-owned Columbia Pictures and set for release on Amazon's Prime Video. Production on Disney's untitled Snow White film is expected to begin next year. — AFP

Twin joy as Tokyo panda  
gives birth to two cubs

A panda at Tokyo's Ueno Zoo gave birth to twins yesterday, weeks after news of Shin Shin's pregnancy sent stocks in nearby restaurants soaring. They were born in the early hours of yesterday, the zoo said in a statement, adding that it had not yet confirmed the sex of the pair. Zoo director Yutaka Fukuda said the twin birth was a first for the Ueno facility. "When I heard the news that the second baby was born, I couldn't help but whoop," he told reporters.

One of the cubs, weighing in at 124 gm, was placed in an incubator, zoo spokesperson Naoya Ohashi said in a press conference later. The mother panda "is in good health, and carefully looking after" the other baby, he added. When pandas have twins, they usually only raise one, "so we will be making sure the mother panda will breastfeed one while we keep the other in the incubator," Ohashi said.

Zookeepers will be swapping the babies so that both cubs experience natural feeding, he added. Mother Shin Shin sparked a rally in stocks of eateries near the zoo earlier this month when her suspected pregnancy was announced, with investors anticipating a visitor boom to the area after the delivery.

Shares in one Chinese restaurant nearby spiked nearly 30 percent on the pregnancy and was up around 6.4 percent in early trade yesterday. And even the government weighed in, with spokesperson Katsunobu Kato calling the birth of the cubs "cheerful news" and inviting "all of Japan to watch over them".

Zookeepers had been on alert for a possible pregnancy after Shin Shin and partner Ri Ri mated in early March. The



Ueno Zoological Gardens staff Naoya Ohashi shows an image of giant panda Shin Shin giving birth to the first of her twin cubs at Tokyo's Ueno Zoo yesterday. — AFP

pair are also parents of a female panda, Xiang Xiang, who was born in June 2017 and became a massive draw for the zoo. She was scheduled to be repatriated to China two years after her birth, but Japanese officials negotiated to extend her stay until the end of this year.

Japanese media have been offering regular updates on the Ueno pandas, which in non-pandemic times draw huge crowds of domestic and foreign tourists. There are an estimated 1,800 giant pandas left in the wild, mainly in bamboo forests in the mountains of China, according to environmental group WWF. Around 600 more live in zoos and breeding centers around the world.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature classifies giant pandas as "vulnerable". The black and white mammals are immensely popular around the world and China loans them out as part of a "panda diplomacy" program to foster foreign ties. The bears are notoriously bad at reproducing, but in early June, a panda in Malaysia gave birth to its third cub during its stay there. And a newborn in Washington DC has enthralled Americans since its birth in August 2020, with over a million people tuning in on a "Panda Cam" to watch Xiao Qi Ji - Little Miracle. — AFP

US comics legend  
Chris Ware wins top  
Angouleme prize

Graphic novelist Chris Ware was awarded one of the industry's top prizes yesterday, the Grand Prix of Angouleme, for his work documenting the quiet dramas of suburban American life. The uncontested king of the genre in the US, the 53-year-old was all but guaranteed to one day win the French award, which celebrates an entire career, having been runner-up for the past three years.

France is one of the most avid comic-consuming nations in the world, and the Angouleme International Comics Festival is widely seen as the industry's most illustrious event. Normally held in January, it was postponed this year due to the pandemic, but with restrictions still in place for a few more weeks in France, the festival was unable to go ahead physically.

So Ware, author of the classic "Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth" based on his own Midwestern upbringing, was forced to accept his award from the United States. Ware joins a trio of past US winners: Art Spiegelman ("Maus"), Bill Watterson ("Calvin and Hobbes") and Richard Corben (fantasy comics).

## 'Tangled and knotted'

Born in Omaha, Nebraska, Ware is known for his meticulous attention to the tiny details of ordinary life - delivered with simple, clear lines and comforting, rounded figures. Balancing melancholy with streaks of dark humor, they speak to the anxieties and solitude of modern life - themes that are not for every reader but have long impressed critics.

"The apparent meticulousness of my stuff only comes from trying to provide as clear as possible reading experience out of the tangled and knotted experience of life as I've come to know it," he told The Guardian newspaper in 2019. His books are generally long and sprawling, but his



Chris Ware

immediately recognizable style scored him early success, and led to 25 New Yorker covers.

Ware has previously won Best Comic Book at Angouleme in 2003 for the French translation of his breakout work, "Jimmy Corrigan", and the Special Jury Prize for the indefinable "Building Stories" in 2015. It was the publication of "Rusty Brown" in 2020, his lauded recreation of a single day in the world of his youth, that appears to have finally tipped the balance with voters for the Grand Prix.

The winner is selected by fellow writers and artists from the industry. There was some controversy this year when a group of French voters lodged invalid ballots in the first round as part of a protest over government support for the industry. It was not clear how this affected the outcome, which saw Ware go into a second round against two French artists, Penelope Bagieu and Catherine Meurisse, before winning the final vote.

Comics have increasingly thrived in France, with sales up 46 percent in the last decade to reach 591 million euros last year, according to the National Centre for Books, thanks in large part to the popularity of Japanese manga. Organizers hope next year's edition of the Angouleme festival will go ahead as normal from 27 to 30 January. — AFP

Spielberg signs  
major streaming  
deal with Netflix

Steven Spielberg will produce multiple new films for Netflix every year, the company said Monday, in a major deal that highlights how fully Hollywood has embraced streaming platforms. The partnership with arguably Tinseltown's top director is a coup for Netflix at a time when competition with streaming rivals including Disney+ and HBO Max is heating up.

It also follows reports that Spielberg had been skeptical about streaming in recent years, and had even moved to bar Netflix films from Oscars eligibility - claims that the legendary "Jaws" and "Schindler's List" director has since dismissed as false. In a joint statement about the Netflix deal, Spielberg praised "this new avenue for

our films" as an "amazing opportunity to tell new stories together and reach audiences in new ways."

Spielberg also praised his close relationship with Netflix co-CEO and content chief Ted Sarandos, a former industry outsider who has risen to become one of Hollywood's top power brokers. "We cannot wait to get to work with the Amblin team and we are honored and thrilled to be part of this chapter of Steven's cinematic history," said Sarandos.

Spielberg's Amblin Partners will continue to make content for Universal, one of Tinseltown's oldest major studios, while his upcoming "West Side Story" will be released by Disney-owned 20 Century



Steven Spielberg

SOUTH AFRICAN OPERA  
STAR FURIOUS OVER  
PARIS AIRPORT GRILLING

South African opera star Pretty Yende on Tuesday accused French customs agents of treating her with "outrageous racial discrimination" at Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport, a claim strongly contested by police and airport sources. "Police brutality is real for someone who looks like me," the soprano, who is black, wrote on her Instagram account a day after arriving for a string of performances in Paris.

Yende, 36, said she was "traumatized" after being "stripped and searched like a criminal offender" at the airport. "I am one of the very very lucky ones to be alive to see the day today even with ill-treatment and outrageous racial discrimination and psychological torture and very offensive racial comments in a country that I've given so much of my heart and virtue to," she wrote.

Yende did not say why she was pulled aside for questioning, but a French police source said the singer had arrived from Milan on a South African passport without a visa. "At no moment were there any incidents," the source said, adding that Yende had not been asked to remove her clothes. — AFP



Pretty Yende

Studios. Monday's announcement does not specify whether Spielberg, who in recent years has produced many more films than he has directed, will personally direct any of the Netflix movies.

But the deal comes as the industry pivots from a model that insisted on lengthy, exclusive "windows" for movie theater releases, to one in which major films often appear on streaming platforms simultaneously or very soon after they hit the big screen - or even skip theaters altogether.

That move has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Another production by Spielberg's Amblin, "The Trial of the Chicago 7," was intended for theatrical release by Paramount but ended up on Netflix last year while thousands of movie theaters were closed. Monday's deal also did not say whether Spielberg's films for Netflix would also appear on the big screen first. Other top directors who have recently joined forces with Netflix include Martin Scorsese ("The Irishman"), Spike Lee ("Da 5 Bloods") and David Fincher ("Mank"). — AFP



## Lifestyle | Features

## Lost parts of Rembrandt masterpiece restored by AI

It's one of the great acts of art vandalism. In 1715 large chunks of Rembrandt's masterpiece "The Night Watch" were cut off in order to fit the colossal canvas into a new home. Now for the first time in more than 300 years, visitors to Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum can see the painting in its original form thanks to a stunning reconstruction of the lost pieces.

Based on a small 17th century copy of "The Night Watch", scientists used artificial intelligence to recreate the missing sections, which have been printed and mounted around the famed artwork. "It's very exciting to see," Rijksmuseum director Taco Dibbits told AFP. "Because you know the painting since you're a child, and you feel that suddenly you've taken a step back in time for 300 years."

The reconstruction has revealed the true dynamism of Rembrandt's original composition, with the two key people at the center of the painting, Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch, now offset to the side, said Dibbits. The lost figures of two men and a small boy have meanwhile been restored to the left hand side where a 60-cm strip was cut off the painting, which even in its smaller form measures a huge 3.79 m by 4.36 m.

The Rijksmuseum, which recently reopened after the relaxation of coronavirus measures, will keep the panels in place for three months, as part of a huge restoration of the painting launched in 2019.



The remounted 1642 'Night Watch' is put in place at the Rijksmuseum Museum during 'Operation Night Watch', the largest ever investigation into the painting by Dutch master Rembrandt in Amsterdam on Tuesday. — AFP

#### 'Sending AI to art school'

Rembrandt painted "The Night Watch" in 1642 after a commission by Cocq, the mayor and leader of the civic guard of Amsterdam, to depict the officers and other members of the militia. After hanging in the civic guards' club house for 73 years the painting was moved to Amsterdam town hall where it was destined for a space between two doors but "it didn't fit", said Dibbits. "The people who moved it decided to cut it and really took scissors and just cut on all four sides."

The strips that were cut off have never

been found. It was the first of many trials suffered by "The Night Watch", which was stabbed by a man with a knife in 1911, hidden in a bunker when Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands, slashed by another knifeman in 1975 and sprayed with acid in 1990.

The reconstruction of the missing pieces was possible because of a much smaller copy made in the 17th century by the artist Gerrit Lundens - but that copy was in a somewhat different style and color, and from a slightly different perspective. The solution was "sending artificial

intelligence to art school", said Robert Erdmann, Senior Scientist at the Rijksmuseum, who led the project.

#### 'A delight'

"If we were to simply blow this up and put it next to "The Night Watch" it wouldn't match in any way," Erdmann told AFP. "So to help it match, I've trained three separate neural networks to help with this process, so that's a kind of artificial intelligence in which we can teach the computer by giving it examples." The computer compared Rembrandt's original to the copy, and once it had mastered his style, Erdmann set it to work on recreating the lost pieces.

Its mimicry was so successful it even learned to copy the minute cracks in the surface of the existing Night Watch, he said. Finally the image was printed onto canvas, which was varnished and then placed on four metal frames that were placed around the painting. "It was really a delight" to see the restored painting, said Erdmann. "It really changes the entire composition."

Art experts can now see how the black-clad captain and his white-uniformed lieutenant were in fact set off to the side to show how the militia was in motion, while the extra figures on the left give depth and perspective. "The key is that Rembrandt keeps on surprising us, he keeps on doing things that you wouldn't expect him to do," said Dibbits. — AFP



In this photograph taken on June 1, 2021, Tibetan rapper Tenzin Dhondup, MC Tenzin, poses for a picture in a bar in the regional capital Lhasa, in China's Tibet Autonomous Region. — AFP

## 'Godfather' of Tibetan rap spits karmic rhymes

In his tracksuit, silver chain and sparkling trainers, MC Tenzin would look like any other rapper if not for the backdrop of towering Himalayan peaks in his videos and rhyme-dropping about karma. The self-described "Godfather" of Tibetan rap is a leading light of the region's hip-hop scene, where tight social constraints are at odds with the in-your-face art form.

Tibetan rappers walk a tightrope unfamiliar to their peers overseas, with some cautiously exploring local pride and Buddhist identity in coded lyrics to avoid the unwanted attention of Chinese authorities. Most, however - MC Tenzin included - give politics a wide berth to be able to continue creating their music. "I am a little bit different (from Western rappers). I do my best to create a positive experience," says the 36-year-old, whose real name is Tenzin Dhondup. He discovered hip-hop listening to American giants like Eminem and 50 Cent in his home village of Pasum near the foot of Mount Everest, connecting so much with the music that it felt like "home". "I listened to them so much sometimes my ears hurt," he told AFP during an interview at a bar in the Tibetan capital Lhasa's nightlife district.

#### Tibetan identity

In the decade since, a home-grown Tibetan scene has emerged, with Tenzin among the early pioneers. Chinese hip-hop got a huge boost with the 2017 launch of the wildly popular TV talent contest "The Rap of China," which helped bring the genre into the mainstream, and Tibetan fans say the lyrical flow of Buddhist chants fits rap's rhythms.

Some younger rappers with Tibetan roots are nudging boundaries by expressing cultural pride, "challenging the stereotype of underdeveloped Tibetans (and) advocating for inter-ethnic equality", according to one researcher's 2019 study at Georgetown University, based on interviews with dozens of Tibetan musicians.

Tibet has alternated over the centuries between independence and control by China, which says it "peacefully liberated" the rugged plateau in 1951. In 2008, the region exploded in deadly rioting after rising anger over the perceived dilution of their ancient culture by rapid Chinese-fueled development, and controls have been ultra-tight ever since.

In his videos, stylish rapper Uncle Buddhist flashes between trendy neon-lit parties and grasslands on horseback, singing about the "unified single root" of Tibetan tradition. His song "Tsampa" references Tibet's grain-based staple food, a symbol of Tibetan cultural pride and unity. Religious overtones and singing in Tibetan can also express subtle opposition to Chinese pressure for secularization and assimilation.

"Because the artists can't be explicit, I see important messages in the way that they choose to express themselves, dress, the topics they choose to rap about and who they collaborate with," said Dechen Pemba, founder of the High Peaks Pure Earth website, who has translated Tibetan raps into English.

#### Karma and kindness

Most Tibetan rappers, however, stick to positive messages and cultural imagery like temples, colourful prayer flags and maroon-robed monks. Popular hip-hop duo ANU scored a hit with the catchy karma-focused anthem "Fly" that told listeners to "search for the highest soul". In another, they rap about kindness as the "essence of Buddhism" and rail against material greed.

Against the wishes of his parents, budding rhyme-slinger MC Tenzin eventually relocated to the big city, Lhasa. "I worked in a travel agency, slept there at night. In the beginning, it was very difficult," he said. "One night me and my friend sat drinking Lhasa Beer and we started to make music." Rapping in Tibetan, Mandarin, English, and Nepalese, he mostly uses Douyin - the Chinese version of social media platform TikTok - along with live shows to share his music and interact with fans.

The Tibetan scene is so embryonic, however, that MC Tenzin also works as a tour guide since he still hasn't earned enough to make a living - or the support of his parents, who "don't understand rap music". His parents had planned for him to make a life in their village with his family and follow the social practice of fraternal polyandry - a once-common custom where several brothers marry the same wife. — AFP



In this picture taken on Feb 11, 2021, devout Hindu Shankar Ghosh poses for a photo in front of an Armenian Church in Dhaka. — AFP

## Empty Armenian church's last worshipper in Bangladesh

With no priest to minister and no faithful to pray, an Armenian church in Bangladesh has one last parishioner: A Hindu caretaker doing his "sacred duty" to preserve a relic of the city's former commercial elite. Shankar Ghosh makes the sign of the cross before opening the entrance of the striking white and yellow edifice, built 240 years ago in the capital Dhaka.

Back then the city was home to hundreds of Armenians, a diaspora that traced its roots in the Muslim-majority nation back to the 16th century and eventually rose to become prominent traders, lawyers and public officials. The last known descendant of this community left Bangladesh several years ago - but not before entrusting the Armenian Apostolic Church of the Holy Resurrection to Ghosh, who had already lived within its grounds for half of his life.

"I love this work. I consider it a sacred duty bestowed upon me," the 61-year-old told AFP. "Whether it is a church, temple or mosque, I believe all are for one God." Four decades ago, Ghosh worked at a jute factory - an industry pioneered by Armenians in the region - where he struck up a friendship with the family running it. Through them, he met church custodian Michael Joseph Martin, who invited Ghosh to be his assistant.

The young man moved into the church compound in 1985 and never left. "It is a home of God and I thought no other work would better suit me," Ghosh said. His 30-year-old son was born in the compound and acts as its resident historian. When Martin moved to Canada in 2014, he handed his protegee the keys to the church.

Ghosh became full-time custodian after Martin died last year at the age of 89, and is now supported by overseas Armenians - led by Los Angeles-based businessman Armen Arslanian - who keep the church running. "The Ghosh family has a special place in our church," Arslanian told AFP.

#### 'This beautiful place'

Ghosh is drawn to tranquility of the grounds in the heart of the capital's Armanitola neighborhood, which was named for the city's Armenian community. Narrow and congested roads, flanked by residential blocks and wholesale markets, lay just beyond the compound. But within the grounds, the cacophony of traffic horns fade away and birdsong rises from a small garden.

Young couples and students gather under the garden's trees, sharing private moments in the shade. Each morning, Ghosh emerges from the compound where he lives with his wife and two children to open the church doors and light candles on the altar. He utters a non-denominational prayer for 400 Armenians - once prominent members of Dhaka and now buried under neat rows of tombstones next to the building.

Several assistants help him maintain the church and feed the half a dozen stray dogs living in the grounds. Baptisms and weekly mass haven't been held in the church for several decades. But the church comes to life every Easter and Christmas, when a Catholic priest holds services attended by ambassadors stationed in Dhaka.

Ghosh often strolls around the tombstones - the earliest dating back to 1714, decades before the church was built. Laying a flower on the grave of Martin's late wife Veronica - the last Armenian to be buried in the compound, in 2005 - Ghosh hopes her husband's remains are brought back to Dhaka. "He belongs here in this beautiful place," he said, adding that he too hoped to be buried in the grounds after his death. "I only pray that I'll get similar treatment to what I have been providing to these (graves)." — AFP

## Chinese monk who saved 8,000 strays is dog's best friend

His bald head glistening with sweat, Zhi Xiang peers into the eyes of a stray dog whose coat has become matted in heavy rain and says soothingly: "Let me cut your hair, cutie." The bedraggled pooch is among scores of dogs hauled off the streets of Shanghai by police and packed in metal cages in a foul-smelling holding area. More than 20 puppies are also crammed into a yellow plastic crate; one dog is dragged in while inside a tied bag.

But for Zhi's intervention, they will all be put down in a matter of days. But Zhi is no ordinary animal rescuer: he is a Buddhist monk and will give these dogs a new life either at his ancient monastery or at a shelter he runs in the Chinese city. He already has nearly 8,000 dogs to feed and care for. A few hundred will eventually be resettled in Europe or North America. "I have to rescue them because if I don't, they will die for sure," said the 51-year-old, who temporarily discards his monk's robes for an orange workman's suit as he gives vaccinations to dishevelled dogs fresh off the streets. Driven by his faith, Zhi has been rescuing animals - mostly dogs but also cats and other strays - since 1994.

It started when he began treating cats hit by vehicles on the road. Back then, there were few stray animals, but that has changed markedly in the last four or five years, he said. China's growing wealth has seen a boom in the pet market but some people simply abandon them when they do not want to care for them anymore, said Zhi.

"This is not caused by people who dislike dogs, or by the government, but by so-called dog lovers who don't have proper animal-caring knowledge," said Zhi. Breeding among strays is causing their numbers to explode. State media said in 2019 that there were 50 million stray animals in China and that number is roughly doubling each year.

#### Dogs and Buddhas

With help from volunteers and his small workforce, Zhi keeps several hundred dogs at his Bao'en Temple, where he is the head monk and golden Buddhas look on serenely against a backdrop of howling pooches. The temple, which is still a place of worship, also hosts a room filled with 200 cats, along with a ragtag collection of chickens, geese and peacocks. The air is an incongruous mix of animal smells and burning incense.

Zhi keeps mostly sick dogs there and the rest go to a bigger facility elsewhere. The lucky ones will find a new home with new owners. The unlucky ones, about 30 percent of the dogs he rescues, die of disease or were already too sick to save. Zhi is not a trained vet but his love of animals, in the way he strokes, soothes and kisses them, is obvious. The continually growing number of unwanted animals is a huge financial strain.



This picture taken on May 26, 2021 shows Buddhist monk Zhi Xiang carrying a rescued dog before sending him to the US at Pudong International Airport in Shanghai. — AFP photos

Zhi, who gets up at 4:00 am each day, gets no money from the government. He has borrowed from his parents and other monks and receives handouts from donors. He estimates that annual costs are about 12 million yuan (\$2 million) and he needs 60 tons of dog food every month. "The problem is that I can't borrow any more money now," he said.

#### Tearful farewell

Since 2019, Zhi has been sending some of the strays abroad to be resettled overseas. Volunteers who can speak English use social media to reach an international audience, and about 300 dogs have been placed in the United States, Canada and various European countries including Germany. The memory of those lucky dogs - their journey from the streets and almost certain death to a new life - brings tears to his eyes. "I think they're very happy so I feel it's worthwhile," he said. "But of course I miss them."

One recent Saturday morning, Zhi was at Shanghai's international airport to drop off a dog to a passenger who volunteered to take it to a new home in the US city of Seattle. Wearing his monks' robes, Zhi holds the small dog in his arms until the last minute, muttering "goodbye, goodbye". He wipes away tears as the woman and dog disappear through the departure gate. "I have a dream that one day, when I have some free time, I want to go abroad and visit them, take photos with every dog that I rescued," he said. "So when I get old and can't walk, I have these photos to look at." — AFP



Zhi feeds rescued cats in Shanghai.



Lifestyle | Features



A man selects valuable items at a recycling workshop near the Bagram Air Base on June 17, 2021. — AFP photos



A man holds a teddy bear as people look for useable items.



A man shows electronic motherboards at a junkyard near Bagram Air Base.



A man collects valuable items at a recycling workshop near Bagram Air Base.



# JUNKYARD OF EMPIRES: AFGHANS SIFT THROUGH LEFTOVERS OF US OCCUPATION

Squatting in the dust by the main road to Afghanistan's biggest air base, Mir Salam sifts through a pile of broken electronics in front of him, salvaged from departing US troops. All around are heaps of junk and scrapped equipment - ranging from telephones and thermos flasks to computer keyboards and printer cartridges. "This is what the Americans do," the 40-year-old told AFP. "They destroy absolutely everything."

The Pentagon is vacating Bagram air base as part of its plan to withdraw all forces by this year's 20th anniversary of the Sept 11 attacks on the United States, and it could be completed by the end of the month. Military gear is being taken home, or given to Afghan security forces, but tons of civilian equipment must be left behind. The result is a booming scrap business that is making money for some, but leaving many resentful.

"They blow it up or are burning it," says Salam of the equipment being discarded. "There were lots of new things in this base - enough to rebuild

Afghanistan 20 times - but they destroyed everything." For two decades, Bagram served as the nerve center for US operations in Afghanistan. A sprawling mini-city visited by hundreds of thousands of service members and contractors, it boasted swimming pools, cinemas and spas - and even a boardwalk featuring fast-food outlets such as Burger King and Pizza Hut.

It also has a prison that held thousands of Taliban and jihadist inmates over the years. Bagram was built by the United States for its Afghan ally during the Cold War in the 1950s as a bulwark against the Soviet Union in the north. Ironically, it became the staging point for the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979, and the Red Army expanded it significantly during their near decade-long occupation. When Moscow pulled out, it became central to the raging civil war - it was reported that at one point the Taliban controlled one end of the three-kilometer runway and the opposition Northern Alliance the other.

### Nothing goes to waste

In recent months, Bagram has come under rocket attacks claimed by the Islamic State. If the Taliban capture the base, it would be a significant step - perhaps even the decisive one - towards seizing control of Kabul itself. Salam pays 1,000 afghanis (\$12) a month to rent a modest fenced plot on the Bagram road, where he stores base scrap that he searches for nuggets to sell to specialized dealers.

The road to the base is lined with dozens of similar enterprises - some ramshackle, but others featuring imposing warehouses with armed guards. The big players have contracts to remove the scrapped equipment, which they cherry-pick for items that can be repaired. Anything they don't use is left for smaller dealers such as Salam.

Cables are stripped for copper, circuit boards broken down for rare-earth metals, and aluminium collected to be smelted into ingots. Nothing goes to waste, says Haji Noor Rahman, another scrap

merchant. "Anything re-usable, people buy it," he told AFP. His warehouse is like a department store for scrap, with the floor covered by an astonishing array of items - broken chairs, busted TV screens, rusting gym equipment, an electronic piano keyboard, artificial Christmas trees and other festive decorations. First aid kits have been gutted, spilling bandages and IV bags.

Picking through the selection is Abdul Basir, who came from Kabul with a friend and snapped up six warped metal doors for around 8,000 afghanis. Elsewhere, a young man unearthed a pair of branded shoes that still appeared to have a few miles left on them. Another browser bought a teddy bear and a mini rugby ball.

### 'Pessimistic' future

It isn't just equipment that will be left behind when the Americans pull out - Bagram is surrounded by satellite communities that rely on the base for employment. "The withdrawal of American troops

will have a bad impact on the economy of the country and that of Bagram," district governor Lalah Shrin Raoufi told AFP, adding he was pessimistic for the future. "Their presence here has provided jobs for thousands and thousands of Afghans," he said, ranging from mechanics to bakers. "I met the employees of a company that provided basic food... they are afraid of losing their jobs."

Raoufi said everything is being done to take charge of the base and its security when the last US forces leave. "We are working with the police, the army and the NDS (intelligence services)," he said. "We have started to recruit soldiers... We will take those who meet the criteria." Meanwhile, the clear-out continues. "They came to rebuild our country but now they are destroying it," says Bagram resident Mohammad Amin, looking over a pile of scrap. "They could have given us all this." — AFP



Workers harvest red seaweed (algae) in the Menzel Jemil lagoon in Tunisia's northern Bizerte region on May 27, 2021. — AFP photos



## Tunisia 'trailblazer' in Med seaweed farming

Wading knee-deep in the calm waters of a lagoon, workers in northern Tunisia harvest red seaweed, in a nation dubbed a Mediterranean "trailblazer" in cultivating the in-demand plant. Red seaweed or algae is used for gelling, thickening and texturing agents that are increasingly a substitute for animal-based products in processed foods, and it is also being used increasingly in cosmetics and pharmaceuticals.

The harvest, the Selt Marine company's first on an industrial scale, comes after years of research and a wait of more than two decades for authorization to use the lagoons, said French-Tunisian entrepreneur Mounir Bouklout. Several countries including nearby Morocco have seen their natural reserves of red seaweed diminish in recent years due to overexploitation. Instead near Bizerte, north of the Tunisian capital, 10 percent of what is harvested goes back into the water, said Bouklout, another seaweed expert. "We wait for nature to do its work, and after 45 days we harvest it," Bouklout told AFP.

Surrounded by hills topped with wind turbines, workers pull seaweed growing around cylindrical netting from the lagoon and bring it to shore. The plant matter,



Workers process dried red seaweed at a factory in Bir Kassaa in the region of Ben Arous on the outskirts of Tunisia's capital on May 28, 2021.

which ranges from green to dark red in color, is separated, dried in the sun and taken to a factory to be turned into substances such as agar-agar. The sought-after red variety is mainly grown in Asia, which is the world's biggest producer, consumer and exporter of seaweed.

But Tunisia's waters and climate also favor its farming, which can encourage the development of local marine life including shellfish. Seaweed absorbs elements like nitrogen and phosphorous, so growing it is also a way of "naturally cleaning the lagoon", Bouklout said.

### 'Trailblazer'

He said the firm hoped to reap 500 tons of wet seaweed this harvest, with plans to rapidly expand the growing area in the coming years, eyeing a 3,500 ton yield next year. "Tunisia is a trailblazer" in cultivating seaweed in the Mediterranean, said Houssam Hamza, an aquaculture expert for the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Selt Marine is the biggest grower of red seaweed in the region but also has expertise in "transforming the seaweed into different products" and adding value locally, he told AFP. For 25 years, the business



Workers prepare red seaweed to be planted.

has been processing seaweed imported from Asia in the Tunis suburb of Ben Arous. The plants are washed then heated to 90 degrees Celsius to obtain a liquid that is pressed, dried and crushed into a fine white powder.

Mixed with other ingredients, it is used in dairy products, cold meats, confectionery and other foods for local, European, Turkish and Chinese companies, Bouklout said. Its potential is being studied for products from biodegradable bottles to noodles and even meat-substitute vegetarian nuggets, said biologist Mariem Mouheddine, head of research and development.

The business employs around 100 people, according to Bouklout, and hopes to expand to 500 over the next two years, in a country struck by an economic crisis and skyrocketing unemployment even before the coronavirus pandemic. FAO aquaculture expert Hamza said seaweed farming presented important opportunities for Tunisia. He said there was still work to do, including in promoting innovation in the sector, but "it's also our role (of the FAO) to stand beside Tunisia" and its young people. — AFP



Workers process drying harvested red seaweed.

## London orchestra's 'miracle' trip to France despite COVID, Brexit

Simon Rattle, music director of the London Symphony Orchestra, considers it "a miracle" they are headed to France for their first international shows since the pandemic, though Brexit still poses a long-term threat. The logistics of moving nearly 100 musicians and all their instruments for a four-week residency at the Aix-en-Provence Festival in southern France were tricky at the best of times.

In the middle of a pandemic, with ever-changing rules on foreign travel and quarantines, they became fiendishly complex. "I think the Aix festival, who have been one of the boldest and bravest of any of the summer festivals, was tearing out what remained of their hair in the last weeks," Rattle told AFP. He was speaking ahead of the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO)'s departure for the festival, which runs from June 30 to July 25.

It took a flurry of diplomatic activity that went right up to the culture ministries in both countries, for a deal to be struck. Since most were vaccinated, the orchestra was granted permission to travel between their hotel and the venue for rehearsals during their quarantine. "It's very symbolic that we were able to make this happen," said LSO managing director Kathryn McDowell, adding that the orchestra had been crossing the Channel since 1906.

But even if the immediate challenges have been overcome, the problems of Brexit and the near-total lack of government support for musicians in Britain have only just begun. "This is a complicated time, you know, in a country which does not support culture financially in the way that most of Europe does," Rattle said.

### 'Looming catastrophe'

The LSO has been a regular visitor over the past decade to the Aix festival, one of the world's leading opera and classical music events alongside Salzburg and Beirut. But its days of travelling regularly around the continent may be numbered. Since Britain's exit from the European Union, its musicians are no longer guaranteed visa-free travel to the EU, triggering heavy costs and an administrative burden for touring.

Orchestras face the additional difficulties of transporting equipment in heavy-duty lorries, which are now permitted just

three stops in the EU. Singer Elton John is among many warning of a "looming catastrophe" for British musicians if they lose the chance to tour abroad.

For now, the LSO, which had been booked for last year's cancelled Aix Festival, is excited to be back on the road. It will play not one, but two, operas: a modern creation, "Innocence", and a classic from Wagner. "It's a complete miracle," said Rattle. "Playing an opera like Tristan und Isolde is almost beyond pipe dreams."

### 'Insane in every way'

But Brexit will likely push the LSO to review its financial model, since it relied on European shows for 40 percent of its income before the pandemic. That said, environmental concerns may have forced a change in any case. "Last year... we should have been on tour 99 days out of the year, which is, of course, insane in every possible way, both for the planet and for people's energy and sanity," Rattle told AFP. "But it was the only way that an orchestra like this can survive."



British conductor Simon Rattle conducts during a rehearsal of Tristan und Isolde by the London Symphony Orchestra at St Luke's Church in central London on June 10, 2021. — AFP

A big part of the problem, he said, is the lack of government support for musicians in Britain. The LSO's members are not on a salary - they are paid when they play. "Most of the European orchestras, almost without exception, have a salary, and they have been able to live," said Rattle. "We have had to become pirates, in the best possible way." He said the LSO would now have to "make up a whole new financial way of living in which playing in Europe is not the main part of our support".

That is hard to swallow for such an international orchestra, made up of 26 nationalities. Brexit "is a story of unintended consequences. Nobody has thought very much about the effect on the cultural sector in England," Rattle said. "But of course, nobody wants it to be a disaster." — AFP



## Sports

# No booze, no autographs: Tokyo 2020 sets fan rules with a month to go

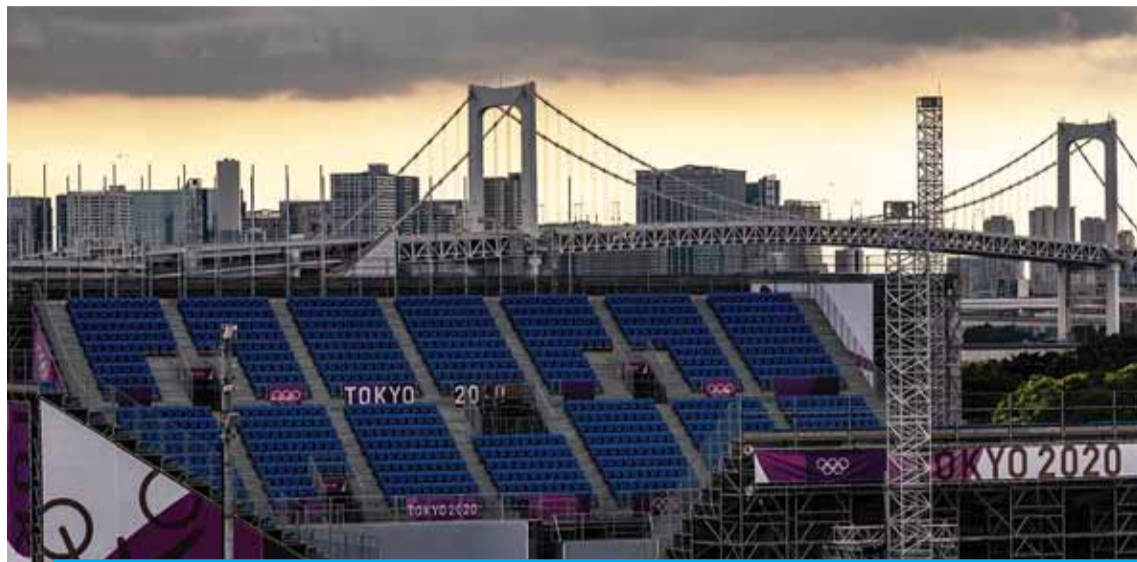
**TOKYO:** No alcohol, no hugs, no cheers and no autographs: Tokyo Olympic organizers unveiled tough new rules for spectators at the pandemic Games yesterday as they marked one month until the opening ceremony. Tokyo 2020 president Seiko Hashimoto warned festivities "will have to be suppressed" to keep the Games safe, and conceded that organizers will need to be "creative" to stoke a party atmosphere.

Games chiefs decided on Monday to allow up to 10,000 spectators into competition venues, but Hashimoto warned them not to expect the kind of festive mood currently being enjoyed by football fans at Euro 2020. "In Europe, the venues are filled with celebration," she said. "Unfortunately, we may not be able to do the same."

Fans are forbidden from cheering or "making direct contact with other spectators" and will be asked to go straight home after events end. Asking athletes for autographs or "expressing verbal support" is also a no-no, as is waving a towel or "any form of cheering that could create a crowd".

"The festive mood will have to be suppressed — that has become a major challenge," Hashimoto told reporters. "People can feel joy in their hearts, but they can't be loud and they have to avoid crowds," she added. "Those are the areas where we need to be creative, and we are putting in a lot of effort to come up with a new way of celebrating."

Spectators will also have to do without alcohol, even though it is allowed at other sporting events currently being held in Japan. Hashimoto said the ban was decided "to alleviate the concerns of the public as much as possible."



**TOKYO:** A general view shows the Ariake Urban Sports Park, the main venue for cycling BMX freestyle, cycling BMX racing and skateboarding during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic games, 30 days before the Olympic Games opening ceremonies, in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

## 'True values'

The late decision on the spectator cap has given organizers a ticketing headache only a month before the opening ceremony. Over 3.6 million Olympic tickets are already in fans' hands, but organizers have been forced to set up a lottery to claw back around 900,000 of them for events that exceed the cap. No more tickets will be sold.

expansion, the time has come. The Harlem Globetrotters stand ready to negotiate for a franchise.

Silver has fuelled speculation that the NBA is considering adding a 31st team to the league, telling ESPN in an interview last December that expansion was "inevitable." "It's sort of the manifest destiny of the league that you expand at some point," Silver said at the time. Seattle has long been considered the front runner for any new NBA franchise. The city has been without a team since the SuperSonics moved to Oklahoma City in 2008, and would in theory have a stronger case than the Globetrotters given that New York already has two NBA franchises.

The Globetrotters were founded in 1926, and are best known as a travelling exhibition team having played thousands of games in 122 countries around the world. However the team has contributed several key moments in NBA history, most notably when Globetrotter Nathaniel Clifton became the first Black player to be signed by the league in 1950. The same year, the Globetrotters' Chuck Cooper became the first Black player to be drafted when he was chosen by the Boston Celtics with the 14th pick overall. — AFP

## Harlem Globetrotters want NBA franchise

**NEW YORK:** The iconic Harlem Globetrotters basketball team have petitioned NBA commissioner Adam Silver requesting to be considered as a candidate to join the league as an expansion franchise. In a letter sent to Silver on Monday, the Globetrotters called on the NBA to reward the team's work in helping to spread basketball worldwide by welcoming it into the league.

"As an organization whose storied history is already tightly interwoven within that of the NBA, the Harlem Globetrotters are looking for a long overdue seat at the table," Globetrotters general manager Jeff Muun said in a statement. "Our players were instrumental in the integration of the league dating back to 1949. We stood proudly as our players were recruited by NBA teams."

"Now after years of attracting the best Black players, it's time to the NBA recognized our contribution to the game. With the league already considering an



**PHOENIX:** Deandre Ayton of the Phoenix Suns makes the game-winning dunk over Ivica Zubac of the LA Clippers in game two of the NBA Western Conference finals at Phoenix Suns Arena on Tuesday in Phoenix, Arizona. — AFP

## Suns sink Clippers with last-gasp Ayton dunk in see-saw thriller

**LOS ANGELES:** Deandre Ayton made the go-ahead catch and dunk with one second left and a bloodied Devin Booker scored 20 points as the Phoenix Suns shocked the Los Angeles Clippers 104-103 in game two of their NBA playoff series.

Booker shook off a cruel clash of heads that left him bloodied and bruised, returning to the game as the Suns took down the Clippers in a see-saw fourth quarter to win their ninth straight and seize a 2-0 lead in the Western Conference finals.

"It was like a Muhammad Ali fight with haymaker after haymaker going back and forth," said Suns guard Cameron Payne, who finished with a career-high 29 points. Ayton scored the eventual game winner in a thrilling finish as the Suns perfectly executed on their final possession of the game. The play started with an inbounds pass by Suns forward Jae Crowder who lobbed it directly to the front of the basket where a leaping Ayton was waiting. He caught and then dunked the ball in one motion to give the Suns a 104-103 lead with 0.7 seconds left.

Clippers Paul George then put up a desperation shot at the buzzer but it hit the front of the rim and bounced harmlessly away to end the game in front of the crowd of 16,600 at Phoenix Suns Arena. "Jae made a great pass," said Ayton, who finished with 24 points and 14 rebounds. "I am glad it counted. We just wanted to finish the game strong."

If game one in the series was the feel-out game then game two was the knockout punch. Booker had his nose bloodied late in the third quarter when he accidentally butted heads with Clippers' Pat Beverley. The 24-year-old Booker needed two stitches and may have broken his nose. But rather than let it end his night, Booker returned to power his team to victory with another superb offensive performance. "They put a lot of pressure on D-Brook. I hope his nose isn't broken," said Ayton.

Payne raised the bar to make 12 of 24 shots from the field and had nine assists with no turnovers. He was starting at guard for the second straight game with Chris Paul out after reportedly testing positive for COVID-19. George scored 26 points and Reggie Jackson added 19 for the Clippers, who also fell behind 2-0 in their previous series against the top seeded Utah Jazz before rallying to win.

George missed a pair of free throws with 8.2 seconds left that could have put the game out of reach for the Clippers. "We had a chance to win the game," said Clippers head coach Ty Lue. "We played, we didn't win this game, it is unfortunate. It happens. We got to go home and take care of business." Game three is tonight in Los Angeles. The Clippers were playing their fourth consecutive playoff game without forward Kawhi Leonard, who is out with a sprained right knee. — AFP

Tokyo 2020 ticketing chief Hidenori Suzuki apologized to those who will miss out, but urged those who will attend to play their part supporting the athletes. "You are representing Japan in supporting all the athletes from around the world," he said. "You are the people who will really shape the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics." Organizers have already begun arriving, including International Olympic Committee vice presi-

dent John Coates, who accompanied Hashimoto on a tour of the Games' gymnastics venue yesterday. Athletes are also already in town, and offering organizers a taste of the challenges ahead.

A Ugandan Olympic coach tested positive on arrival in Japan on Sunday, despite the delegation having been vaccinated and testing negative on arrival. The rest of the delegation was allowed to travel on to their training camp, but placed in quarantine until July 3. Yesterday, a second member tested positive, an official from the city hosting the team said. Despite the challenges and the restrictions, former athlete Hashimoto told reporters on Tuesday that a stripped-back Games was a chance to refocus attention on the "true values" of the Olympics. "In recent years when I was participating as an athlete, there were concerns that this (event) has become so huge," she said. "This time, I feel that the true values of the Olympic and Paralympic Games are finally being discussed."

It may not be a line that convinces everyone, with athletes facing restrictions including daily testing and a ban on travel except between venues and the Olympic Village. Domestic opposition to the Games has softened in recent weeks, but around half of Japan's public still don't want the event to open in four weeks' time, polls show. Around 200 people gathered yesterday evening in Tokyo to protest the Games, calling for it to be cancelled. And for those who worry about a fun-free Games, Hashimoto said she hoped the Olympics would showcase Japan's "culture of hospitality and caring about each other." "I hope such spirit of caring about each other will become the legacy of the Games." — AFP

## News in brief

### Pistons win NBA lottery

**LOS ANGELES:** The Detroit Pistons will pick first in the 2021 NBA entry draft next month after winning the league's draft lottery on Tuesday. Detroit last picked first when they chose future hall of famer Bob Lanier in 1970. Three years earlier they selected Jimmy Walker in the top spot. The Houston Rockets will select second and the Cleveland Cavaliers will pick third. The Rockets, Pistons and Orlando Magic had highest chances of winning the lottery and the top pick. The lottery was good to the Toronto Raptors who moved into the top four. It will be their highest pick since the 2006 draft when they chose Italy's Andrea Bargnani first overall. The Orlando Magic and Golden State Warriors have two picks in the top 14. — AFP

### Golden Knights on brink

**LOS ANGELES:** Nick Suzuki had a goal and two assists and Carey Price stopped 26 shots as the Montreal Canadiens moved to within one win of reaching the Stanley Cup finals with a 4-1 victory over the Vegas Golden Knights. Montreal grabbed a 3-2 lead in the best-of-seven NHL semi-final thanks to a balanced offensive attack on Tuesday night in front of a crowd of 17,900 at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas. Game six is scheduled for tonight in Montreal. Montreal are seeking to make it to the finals for the first time since they beat the Los Angeles Kings in five games in 1993. — AFP

### Thailand MotoGP cancelled

**PARIS:** MotoGP confirmed yesterday that the race scheduled for Japan has been cancelled due to COVID-19 and that the US race will now take its place on October 3. "The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and resulting travel complications and logistical restrictions mean that it has not been possible to confirm the event at this time, meaning that it will therefore not feature on the 2021 calendar," MotoGP said in a statement. The race in Thailand has been moved to October 17 as part of the calendar rejig of the season. — AFP

### Kuwait's Qabazard cruises

**TUNISIA:** Kuwait's national tennis player Issa Qabazard has qualified for the 16th round as part of the M15 future championships series held in Tunisia after beating his compatriot Bader Al-Abdullah 6-5, 3-6, 4-6 on Tuesday. Speaking to reporters after the victory, Qabazard said that he won a first point in the International Tennis Federation's ranking after beating Abdullah. He noted that the number of total players in the current qualifiers are 64, indicating that the country's team including him, Abdullah and Ali Al-Shatti are taking part in some future competitions that include five consecutive championships and will end on July 25 in Tunisia. — KUNA

## Fraser-Pryce center-stage at Jamaica trials

**KINGSTON:** Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce will look to build on her blistering start to the season as the first Jamaican Olympic athletics trials of the post-U'sain Bolt era get under way in Kingston today. Fraser-Pryce, the two-time Olympic 100m champion and a four-time world champion over the distance, heads a powerful field for the four-day meet taking place at the National Stadium in Independence Park.



**PHILADELPHIA:** Pitcher Max Scherzer of the Washington Nationals delivers a pitch against the Philadelphia Phillies during the first inning of a game at Citizens Bank Park on Tuesday in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. — AFP

## Phillies manager Girardi ejected after spat

**LOS ANGELES:** Starter Max Scherzer pitched five solid innings, struck out eight and got into a spat with opposing manager Joe Girardi as the Washington Nationals beat the Philadelphia Phillies 3-2 on Tuesday. Phillies boss Girardi was ejected in the fifth inning after asking the umpires to check Scherzer for a foreign substance but nothing was found. The move incensed Scherzer who denied the accusation, saying: "I would be an absolute fool to use anything tonight when everyone's antennae are so high."

Major League Baseball on Monday began to enforce a rule book edict prohibiting the use of any foreign substances on the baseball by the pitchers. The drama started in the middle of the fourth inning when Girardi asked umpire Alfonso Marquez to check Scherzer's hair for a possible foreign substance. The umps looked at Scherzer's hat, glove and hands but couldn't find anything wrong.

"I've seen Max a long time, since 2010," Girardi said. "Obviously, he's going to be a Hall of Famer. But I've never seen him wipe his head like he was doing tonight. Ever. So it was suspicious for me. He did it about four times. It was suspicious. I didn't mean to offend anyone. I just have to do what's right for our club."

Scherzer dropped his glove and cap as Marquez and his crew approached. He even started to undo the belt on his pants. "I wasn't heated, I was just trying to show I have absolutely zero on me," Scherzer said. "I have nothing on me, check whatever you want. I'll take off all my clothes if you want to see me. I have nothing on me."

Girardi wasn't ejected until after the fifth inning when Scherzer stared him down as the pitcher left the mound. That caused the Phillies manager to come out onto the field. The home plate umpire decided he had seen enough and threw Girardi out of the game. "I'm not playing games. I'm trying to win games here," said Girardi. "I have respect for the other people over there. I have respect for what Max has done in his career. Again, I have to do what's right for our team." Yan Gomes singled twice and drove in two runs, Juan Soto added two hits and two runs scored in the win. Scherzer allowed two hits and one run. He has had been struggling with a groin injury this season. — AFP

The 34-year-old golden girl of Jamaican athletics is the fastest woman in the world over 100m this year, clocking 10.63sec — the second fastest time in history — in Kingston earlier this month. Only the late Florence Griffith-Joyner has ever run faster than Fraser-Pryce, who changed coaches after a bronze medal at the Rio Olympics four years ago.

Fraser-Pryce faces strong opposition in the 100m however, with 2016 Olympic champions Elaine Thompson-Herah leading the chasing pack. Thompson-Herah clocked the third-fastest time in the world this season with a 10.78sec in Florida in May, and is chasing her fifth straight Jamaican national title, while the field also includes Natasha Morrison, owner of the fourth fastest time this year at 10.87sec. — AFP





# England clinch top spot in Euro 2020 group, Croatia reach last 16

LONDON: England clinched first place in Euro 2020 Group D with a 1-0 win against the Czech Republic, while Luka Modric's rocket propelled Croatia into the last 16 as their 3-1 victory over Scotland eliminated their COVID-hit opponents on Tuesday. Already assured of playing in the last 16, England made certain that the knockout tie will be played in front of their own fans at Wembley thanks to Raheem Sterling's first-half winner against the Czechs. England will face the second-placed team in Group F on June 29.

Elsewhere, UEFA refused a request by Munich city authorities to light the Allianz Arena in rainbow colors for Germany's match against Hungary yesterday. The Bavarian city had wanted to protest against Viktor Orban's right-wing government which has passed a law banning the "promotion" of homosexuality to minors. But UEFA said it was "a politically and religiously neutral organization" and blocked the proposal. Munich said it would light up other landmarks instead.

### Scottish heartache

At Wembley, the Czechs also knew they were sure to advance before kick-off, but their first defeat of the tournament left them in third place. Croatia leapfrogged the Czechs into second place with a commanding second-half display in Glasgow featuring one of the goals of the tournament from Real Madrid midfielder Modric. The 2018 World Cup runners-up will play the second placed team in Group E — which features Spain, Slovakia, Sweden or Poland — in Copenhagen on Monday.

Scotland's first major tournament since the 1998 World Cup ended in heartache as they failed to meet their target of reaching the knockout stages of an international competition for the first time. Having started Group D by narrowly beating Croatia 1-0



LONDON: England's forward Raheem Sterling (right) scores the opening goal during the UEFA Euro 2020 Group D football match between Czech Republic and England at Wembley Stadium in London on Tuesday. — AFP

before being booed off after a drab 0-0 draw against Scotland, England produced a slightly more cohesive display against the Czechs.

There remains much for Southgate's men to work on, but England coped efficiently after a disrupted build-up that saw Mason Mount and Ben Chilwell forced into self-isolation after Scotland's coronavirus woes. "We changed what we were doing overnight

because of the change in personnel, so it is a huge credit to the players," Southgate said. "There is more to come from us yet. We are not fluent but we have moments where we look a good side." Southgate selected Jack Grealish to replace Mount and the Aston Villa midfielder provided a spark as his perfectly-flighted cross to the far post was headed in by Sterling in the 12th minute.

### Solid England

Arsenal's 19-year-old winger Bukayo Saka, also given a surprise start by Southgate in place of Phil Foden, added pace and invention to the England attack. But England couldn't find a killer second as Harry Kane's Euro goal drought extended to three games.

Kane was brilliantly denied by Tomas Vaclik's first-half save as he finally had his first shot on target in the tournament. The Tottenham striker played the full 90 minutes for the first time in the tournament, but once again was a shadow of the player who finished as the Premier League's top scorer this season.

Southgate will take heart from England's solid defense. They have yet to concede a goal in the tournament, with Harry Maguire returning from ankle ligament damage to partner John Stones in central defense and shutting out the Czechs.

At Hampden Park, Callum McGregor cancelled out Nikola Vlasic's early opener to give Scotland hope heading into half-time. But Modric showed the class that made him the man to break Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo's grip on the Ballon d'Or in 2018, a stunning strike with the outside of his foot just after the hour mark restoring Croatia's lead.

Ivan Perisic's header rubbed salt into Scottish wounds 13 minutes from full time. Scotland finished with only one point and they will rue the fact that Chelsea midfielder Billy Gilmour was ruled out of the Croatia game after testing positive for the coronavirus.

Without Gilmour, who had been the man of the match on his first Scotland start in the draw against England, Steve Clarke's team lacked the quality to compete with Croatia. "Croatia are a top team and they showed that. We've acquitted ourselves well in the tournament. It's a young group. We want to go again," Clarke said. — AFP



LONDON: England's coach Gareth Southgate greets England's midfielder Bukayo Saka as he comes off during the UEFA Euro 2020 Group D football match between Czech Republic and England at Wembley Stadium in London on Tuesday. — AFP

## Will Southgate let England off the leash at Euro 2020?

LONDON: England are through to the Euro 2020 knockout stages but Gareth Southgate must find a way to take the handbrake off as he gears up for tougher challenges ahead. With just two goals in their three group games, England are the lowest-scoring side to ever finish top of a group at a European Championship.

On the plus side, they have looked solid at the back, not conceding a single goal in 270 minutes of football, and topping Group D means they get to play at Wembley in the last 16. England, already assured of progress, started brightly in their final group game against the Czech Republic on Tuesday, with Bukayo Saka and Jack Grealish adding zest to a stodgy attack. But the second half of the 1-0 win at Wembley was a grind and there was little to grip the crowd of 22,500, who reserved their biggest cheers for news of Croatia's goals against Scotland in Glasgow.

Raheem Sterling has scored England's only goals of the tournament so far, with Harry Kane still curiously out of sorts after a fine Premier League season in which he finished top of the scoring and assist charts. There was a clamor for Aston Villa captain Grealish to start after last week's disappointing goalless draw with Scotland and Southgate was always likely to make changes for the game against the Czechs. His hand was forced to some extent, with Chelsea midfielder Mason Mount ruled out of action after coming into contact with Scotland's Billy Gilmour who tested positive for coronavirus.

The selection of Grealish paid immediate dividends

as he provided the cross that led to Sterling's early goal and man-of-the-match Saka was a constant threat with his driving runs down the right side of the attack. Kane came close to ending his barren spell but was denied by a fine save from Czech goalkeeper Tomas Vaclik, which left the England captain pounding the pitch in frustration. Despite his flat performances so far, Southgate appears determined to stick with Kane, who won the Golden Boot at the 2018 World Cup, as the man to build his attack around.

### 'More to come'

Southgate said there was "more to come" from his side as they gear up for a likely clash against world champions France, holders Portugal or Germany. England will play the runner-up in Group F, as the final games in that group took place yesterday. "Whoever we play, (will be) really, really tough opposition but we've sort of known that for 18 months," said Southgate.

"The good thing from our point of view is I think we're still improving, we look difficult to play against. There's more to come from us. We've got more match minutes on the pitch for some important players and that squad depth is going to be important because I felt like we've run out of steam a little bit in a couple of the games."

Southgate was full of praise for Grealish and Saka and encouraged by what he witnessed against the Czech Republic. "We saw some of the interchange of positions of those forward players was really exciting, I thought at the start of the game especially," he said. "We were tired a little bit but we knew that because one or two are a little bit short of fitness."

England have been tight defensively despite changes of personnel but far tougher challenges lie ahead, with potential opponents next week including Cristiano Ronaldo and Kylian Mbappe. Everton goalkeeper Jordan Pickford has impressed on the rare occasions he has been called into action.—AFP

## Modric masterclass shows up Scotland's shortcomings

GLASGOW: After a 23-year wait to qualify for a major tournament, Scotland's Euro 2020 experience lasted just eight days after a 3-1 defeat to Croatia extinguished their hopes of reaching the last 16. The Tartan Army will fondly remember frustrating England in a 0-0 draw at Wembley on Friday from their return to the international football limelight.

But a masterclass from Croatia's Luka Modric sent Steve Clarke's men packing from the tournament with a reminder of the class it takes to succeed at this level. "They were unbelievable tonight, Modric especially," said Arsenal defender Kieran Tierney, who is accustomed to coming up against world-class opponents on a weekly basis in the English Premier League. "I think his performance was incredible."

Three years ago, most of Scotland cheered as Croatia beat England to reach the World Cup final. On Tuesday, fans of the Three Lions had their revenge as they celebrated Scotland's exit while watching their side beat the Czech Republic 1-0 at Wembley to secure top spot in Group D.

With both sides needing a win to secure their place in the knockout stages after taking just one point from their opening two games, Croatia's greater experience in controlling their nerves across 90 minutes was telling.

After conceding early to Nikola Vlasic, Scotland struck back with their first goal of the tournament through Callum McGregor to go in level at half-time. But their energy reserves ran dry in the second-half as Croatia kept the ball and finally ended the Scots' resistance in style.

### Luka magic

Modric is the only man since 2007 to deny Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo the Ballon d'Or and showed why he belongs in such exalted company. The 35-year-old, playing in his 62nd game of the season for club and country, received the ball on the edge of the box and fired into the top corner with the outside of his right foot.

"No one is sure how Luka manages that," Croatia boss Zlatko Dalic said of the Real Madrid midfielder. "We expect that Luka will go down, lose his strength, but he is the force that pulls the whole team. He never gives up."

Manager Steve Clarke said Scotland will need to follow that example with the 2022 World Cup less than 18 months away. His side will face a much tougher task to reach Qatar with just 13 spots available to European nations compared to 24 at Euro



GLASGOW: Croatia's midfielder Luka Modric celebrates after scoring the second goal during the UEFA Euro 2020 Group D football match between Croatia and Scotland at Hampden Park in Glasgow on Tuesday. — AFP

2020. However, Clarke was keen to stress the progress Scotland have made in his two years in charge since a humiliating 3-0 defeat to Kazakhstan ended Alex McLeish's reign as manager at the start of Euro 2020 qualifying.

"Tonight we were against a team that are tournament hardened and who knew how to play the third game in the group — and we probably didn't. That's why we are going home and Croatia are going through," he said. "I promise you it won't be 23 years till the next one."

For Croatia, next up is a trip to Copenhagen on Monday to face one of Spain, Sweden, Slovakia or Poland. After a lackluster opening two games, Dalic complained his side had been unfairly written off back home.

But the surprise package of the 2018 World Cup are not done yet thanks in large part to their inspirational captain. "We were not happy with performances in the first two matches and we knew we could be better," said Modric. "When we play like this, we are dangerous to everyone." — AFP

# Classifieds

## Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Adan Hospital	23940620
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
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## 5-star Spain book Croatia showdown

### Claesson hits last-gasp winner for Sweden against Poland

SEVILLE/SAINT PETERSBURG: Spain finally have lift off at Euro 2020 after a 5-0 hammering of Slovakia yesterday sent them through as runners-up in Group E, with Croatia their opponents in the last 16 on Monday. Luis Enrique described his team as a bottle of cava about to be popped and they certainly exploded in Seville, where a scoring frenzy felt cathartic and could yet prove transformative for their chances in the knock-out stages.

Spain were even about to progress as group winners until Viktor Claesson scored in the 94th minute against Poland to secure top spot for Sweden. Slovakia finish third and are out. After two tension-filled draws against Sweden and Poland, Spain were left scrambling to qualify, with Luis Enrique admitting he would have taken any position in the group as long as it meant going through.

But Spain ran riot at La Cartuja, their early anxiety heightened by Alvaro Morata's missed penalty and then quickly eased by two dreadful mistakes by Slovakia's goalkeeper Martin Dubravka. The first was an own goal that will surely go down as one of the strangest moments of the tournament before another Dubravka error allowed Aymeric Laporte to head in.

With the shackles off, Spain let loose in the second half as Pablo Sarabia, Ferran Torres and another own goal from Juraj Kucka confirmed an emphatic win, even if Croatia and Luka Modric will provide a much sterner test next week.

Spain monopolized the ball in the first half but for 30 minutes, it was a familiar story of chances missed and frustration growing. Spain were awarded a penalty as Jakub Hromada went to clear but instead lashed into the leg of Koke. Morata had deferred the spot-kick to Moreno against Poland and this time took charge, only to whip the ball at a comfortable height for Dubravka to palm away to his right. It was the fifth consecutive penalty Spain have missed.

They might have crumbled but instead perse-

vered, even as Sarabia and Pedri both kicked the air before finally Dubravka stepped in to give them a helping hand. Lubomir Satka's scuffed clearance fell straight to Sarabia, whose dipping shot banged against the top of the crossbar and flew upwards. Dubravka was under it and as he tried to flick the dropping ball over his own crossbar, he succeeded only in flapping it into his own net.

Spain breathed a sigh of relief and just before half-time they made it two. Dubravka was again at fault, this time edging out only to see Moreno steer the ball away from him in the area and cross it back in. Laporte did brilliantly to loop his header into the top corner. Slovakia threw Michal Duris and Stanislav Lobotka on at half-time but Spain were liberated and within 10 minutes, it was three. This time, it was not a mistake but a slick move that made it, Jordi Alba pulling back to Sarabia, who steered into the corner.

Morata came off when he might have wanted to stay on and his replacement scored almost with his first touch. Torres applying a superb flick to Sarabia's cross to the front post. It got worse for Slovakia, a scrap in the box resulting in Kucka hacking Pau Torres' header into his own net for a fifth. Spain were briefly top, only for Sweden to snatch a winner.

Meanwhile, Viktor Claesson scored an injury-time winner as Sweden beat Poland 3-2 in Saint Petersburg yesterday to clinch top spot in Group E and knock their opponents out of Euro 2020. Emil Forsberg struck twice, the first coming after just 81 seconds, but Robert Lewandowski's double gave Poland hope of qualifying before Claesson's late goal sent Sweden through as group winners.

Sweden will likely play Ukraine in the last 16 after pipping Spain to first place, with Slovakia exiting alongside Poland following the crushing 5-0 defeat in Seville. Janne Andersson's side, safe in the knowledge they were assured of a place in the next round before kick-off, made a dream start as Forsberg scored for



SAINT PETERSBURG: Poland's midfielder Grzegorz Krychowiak (left) fights for the ball with Sweden's forward Marcus Berg during the UEFA Euro 2020 Group E match at Saint Petersburg Stadium yesterday. — AFP

the second game in a row, netting the second-fastest goal in European Championship history.


The RB Leipzig attacker collected a loose ball just outside the Poland area after Kamil Glik flattened Alexander Isak, riding a challenge from Kamil Jozwiak before firing into the far corner. With Poland needing victory to avoid elimination Lewandowski hit the crossbar twice in a matter of seconds, incredibly failing to convert his own rebound from point-blank range after connecting with Piotr Zielinski's corner.

Zielinski forced Robin Olsen into a pair of flying saves with shots from distance either side of half-time, with the Sweden goalkeeper also making a fine stop from Grzegorz Krychowiak's long-range shot. Juventus winger Dejan Kulusevski came on 10 minutes into the second half for his first appearance

after testing positive for COVID-19 just before the tournament.

His driving run and pass set up Forsberg to curl in Sweden's second on 59 minutes, but Poland responded to set up a thrilling finish. Lewandowski halved the deficit with a brilliant solo effort on 61 minutes, bending into the top corner to become his country's all-time leading scorer at the tournament.

Poland had not scored more than once in any of their previous 13 matches at the finals, but Lewandowski took advantage of confusion between Victor Lindelof and Marcus Danielson to equalize six minutes from time. As Poland desperately pushed for a winner, Sweden snatched all three points right at the death when Kulusevski played in fellow substitute Claesson to slot beyond Wojciech Szczesny. — AFP

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