

# Friday Times

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## People vaccinated with one dose can enter malls starting Sunday

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## Local

## Speak in tongues



KAFFEKLATSCH

By Shakir Reshamwala

Shakir@kuwaittimes.net

It is not uncommon to find non-Arabs residing in Kuwait for decades who can barely speak Arabic. If they do speak the language, it is mostly rudimentary and just enough to get by. On the other hand, for example, one can find Syrians who can speak fluent German or Afghans who can speak fluent Greek after only a few months or years living in those countries.

The situation is the same across the Gulf – millions of expatriates who cannot speak Arabic and who do not even have the desire of learning it, despite spending their entire lives here. They struggle with official paperwork, muddle through bureaucracy, have difficulty accessing vital information and many a time are also deprived of their rights. Still, they do not enroll their children in Arabic schools, or at least afterschool classes, so that they can learn a new language that will surely boost their career prospects and make their lives easier.

One can argue this is because of the transient nature of residents here who have virtually no chance of obtaining citizenship, but this argument rings hollow when one takes a look at other “guest workers” around the world, who try their best to integrate into the societies they reside in, starting with learning the language.

Looking deeper into this phenomenon, one can surmise the real reason why most non-Arab residents cannot speak the lingua franca of the land is because there is hardly any interaction between the locals and expatriates, and even among Arab and non-Arab residents. Where there is contact or cohabitation, the result is starkly different. Household workers and nurses are a case in point – most of them can speak the Kuwaiti dialect of Arabic relatively fluently with all its nuances and slang words within months of arriving here.

Meanwhile, other non-Arab residents mostly dwell in their own bubbles, with each group populating their own parallel universes. They socialize with their own, send their children to schools whose medium of instruction is usually English, and then on to universities in their home countries or the West. Most have few or no dealings with Kuwaitis or other Arabs, and mostly converse with them in English at the workplace if they happen to be coworkers.

So while there are scores of learners who actually come to the Arab world to immerse themselves into its culture so that they can learn the language and its various dialects, expats already residing here cannot understand basic instructions in Arabic, with reading or writing it out of the question. Even non-Arab Muslims who can usually read Arabic because it is the language of the Holy Quran do so without understanding it, thus depriving themselves of its divine message.

Learning Arabic is also fraught with complications. The Arabic people speak are typically dialects, not the language of the Holy Quran and for a non-native speaker, this adds an almost insurmountable challenge in trying to learn the language.

Learning Arabic – like any other language for that matter – can be a rewarding experience, not only financially, but in many different ways. It can open a window into the rich culture, civilization, literature and arts of the Arab world. Navigating through everyday challenges and red tape will be a lot simpler. And even if you eventually plan to leave Kuwait and return to your home country, today’s connected world means that rich Arabic content is at your fingertips. With just a click, you can be back in Kuwait, conversing like a local and reliving the years spent in this land you once called home.

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



**KUWAIT:** A picture of the Kuwait Ceramic House in Kuwait City. Located near the Museum of Modern Art, the building was known as ‘Bait Ghaith’ before the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters restored it in recent years and turned it into a museum for ceramic arts. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

## More transparency needed in Kuwait’s vaccination race

IN MY VIEW

By Rashid Abdullah

local@kuwaittimes.com

In a dramatic turn of events in Kuwait’s fight against COVID-19, the government decided to deny people not vaccinated against the virus access to some public places including restaurants, cafes, large malls, gyms and salons. This decision, which goes into effect on Sunday, has created a frustrating situation for many individuals who have already registered on the health ministry’s platform, but are still waiting for their shots.

Kuwait has so far administered at least 3.2 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, according to covidvax.live, but the number of people who have received at least one shot remains far less than that. It is unclear why the vaccination process has proceeded slowly in Kuwait. The health ministry blames delays in receiving vaccine shipments for delaying the vaccination of many registered individuals, including people with chronic diseases, who are considered among the categories that have priority for vaccination.

The ministry does not make details about the vaccination process available to the public. This has left the door open for a lot of speculation and rumors to float around, especially as many unvaccinated people watch in frustration younger, healthier individuals get their shots before they do (repeated requests to the health ministry to provide data about its vaccination program have not been returned).

The government meanwhile faces another problem: Trying to convince citizens that the vaccine is safe to take. Dr Khaled Al-Saeed, a member of the health ministry’s vaccination committee, said in a tweet on June 17 that 45,000 citizens have skipped their vaccine appointments despite registering on the online platform and receiving reminders.

It is safe to assume that a large number of those people have elected not to get vaccinated after growing skeptical of the vaccine’s safety. It is human nature for people to have concerns about putting into their bodies an entirely new vaccine or medication, especially one that hasn’t gone through the regular period of testing, which usually takes years.

Meanwhile, the large amount of misinformation on COVID-19 vaccines can easily cloud people’s judgment. The health ministry has spent a lot of time assuring people that the vaccines are safe, when they could have certainly done a better job explaining to them how exactly the vaccine works. A proper explanation can address many of the worries people in Kuwait have, and probably make many of them less reluctant to get vaccinated.

Kuwait is currently going through a critical juncture with a spike in daily infections and intensive care unit occupancy. Its best shot to get through this crisis safely is by boosting its vaccination drive; at least going by the example of other countries that have managed to overcome far worse situations through rapid and organized vaccination processes. This can happen by giving access to the vaccine to every person who has registered on the platform, being more transparent to the public about the vaccination process, and answering people’s concerns in a scientific and logical way.

# Kuwait Times

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E: [info@kuwaittimes.net](mailto:info@kuwaittimes.net)

Local

PHOTO FEATURE



## Caring for the *birds*

— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

**A**cross Kuwait people care for outdoor animals - birds, street cats and dogs and other living things - left vulnerable by soaring summer heat. Many people leave

water on windowsills, in shaded areas near buildings or at roundabouts as well as throw seeds to help care for these small animals.



Local



# SCAMMERS target sellers online



By Nawara Fattahova

**T**hieves are always coming up with new ways and tools to scam people through mobile phones, email, Internet and other technologies. When a particular scam becomes repeated and widespread, awareness becomes higher and fewer people fall victim to these scammers.

One of the newest trends is for scammers to target people selling used items on websites where people buy and sell stuff. Many users of a popular local website for buying and selling all kinds of goods and services reported scamming attempts by people calling them from international numbers, claiming they are interested in buying the items that are displayed online for sale.

When the seller wonders how the potential buyer - who is abroad - will pay them, the scammer will offer the following options: A shipping company courier will

come to the seller to collect the item and pay cash, but the seller has to buy some kind of cards with credit for mobile phones or games. Or the buyer will claim they will pay online to the main website, and send a link to the seller to check the payment. After clicking on this link, it asks the seller to enter their bank account number and other personal data.

At this point, most users realize or suspect that the entire transaction is fishy and stop further communication with these scammers pretending to be serious buyers.

But sometimes people are busy or get distracted and just follow the directions without realizing they might be uploading their credit card data to a fake payment site.

Sellers should never send copies of documents, personal data and most importantly financial information to any potential 'buyer' and should not upload their credit card or bank details to any links sent from buyers.

If a buyer is avoiding personally collecting the item, this is a red flag. Sellers should always pay attention to where calls are coming from, especially those over apps like Whatsapp.

*Anyone online should be aware that scammers scour social media and websites for personal information and will use a variety of stories to get personal details. Never upload bank information, pin codes, passwords or any other personal details online or to any link sent from an unknown or unverified source.*

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## Local

# Kuwait's Amir departs to Germany on private visit



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is seen off at the airport by His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and senior state officials. — Amiri Diwan photos



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah waves as he prepares to leave to Germany on a private visit.



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah bids farewell to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

**KUWAIT:** His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday headed to Germany on a private visit. His Highness the Amir was seen off by His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah and other senior state officials. — KUNA

## Foreign Minister, Bahrain's envoy discuss ties

**KUWAIT:** Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah discussed yesterday bilateral ties with Bahrain's Ambassador to Kuwait Salah Ali Al-Malki. Meanwhile, Sheikh Dr Ahmad received a copy of credentials of the South Korean Ambassador to Kuwait Chung Ha. In the meeting, Sheikh Dr Ahmad wished the new ambassador success in his tenure and for relations between the two countries further progress and prosper. In the meantime, Kuwait's Foreign Minister received Belgian Ambassador to Kuwait Leo Peeters and the Czech Ambassador to Kuwait Martin Dvorak on the occasion of their tenures' ending. During the meeting, Sheikh Ahmad praised the ambassadors' contributions in boosting bilateral ties between their respective countries and Kuwait. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets Bahrain's Ambassador to Kuwait Salah Ali Al-Malki. —KUNA photos



Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets the South Korean Ambassador to Kuwait Chung Ha.



Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets Czech Ambassador to Kuwait Martin Dvorak.



Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets Belgian Ambassador to Kuwait Leo Peeters.

## Finance Minister, EU Ambassador discuss cooperation

**KUWAIT:** Minister of Finance and Minister of State for Economic Affairs and Investment Khalifa Hamada discussed yesterday with the EU Ambassador to Kuwait Dr Cristian Tudor ways to enhance bilateral cooperation between both sides. During the meeting, several issues of common interest were reviewed, as well as efforts to strengthen cooperation in the economic and investment fields, the ministry said in a press statement. The inauguration of the 2019 EU mission in Kuwait and the role played by the mission in coordinating with Kuwait on various issues of common concern were commended, it added. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, as well as measures taken to mitigate its effects were also discussed, it noted. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Finance Minister Khalifa Hamada meets with EU Ambassador Dr Cristian Tudor. —KUNA



## Local

# People vaccinated with one dose can enter malls starting Sunday

By Nawara Fattahova

**KUWAIT:** People who have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine will be allowed to enter malls, restaurants, cafes, gyms and salons starting Sunday, Kuwait Municipality clarified yesterday. This also applies for those who are excluded from vaccination and pregnant women, and both have to show official proof of this condition.

People can show their vaccination status on the Immune or Kuwait Mobile ID smartphone apps to enter the facilities. Only people whose vaccination statuses appear in green or orange - indicating that they have received one or two doses of the vaccine - will be allowed to enter, whereas people whose statuses appear in red will be denied access, the Center for Government Communication explained yesterday.

From June 27, unvaccinated people will be barred entry to large public spaces in Kuwait including malls, restaurants, gyms, salons and barbershops. Cinemas and sports facilities are also only accessible to those

who have been vaccinated.

Kuwait authorities announced Wednesday that they will use armed forces to help implement the health measures adopted by the government last week to confront the spread of the coronavirus. Most likely, this will mean military forces will be checking vaccination proof at entrances to malls and other large public spaces.

Malls larger than 6,000sqm are closed to those unvaccinated including The Avenues, Marina Mall, Souq Sharq, Al-Raya, 360 mall, Al-Kout mall, Gate mall, Salhiya Complex, Boulevard Mall, and Olympia Mall. Some shopping malls were yet to make an announcement as of Thursday afternoon, including Al-Fanar, Souq Salmiya (City Center), Laila Gallery, Slayil Al-Jahra, Al-Hamra; all of which are largely expected to announce the same before Sunday. The only Mall that confirmed being excluded from the rule and being opened for all is Zahra complex in Salmiya. Many other malls did not respond to inquiries or don't have valid contact numbers. Grocery stores and pharmacies will be available to all.



KUWAIT: This file photo shows the interior of a shopping mall in Kuwait.

## KRCS distributes clothes to 4,000 needy families

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) donated yesterday clothes to 4,000 needy families in Kuwait and who are registered in KRCS'. KRCS Deputy Chairman Anwar Al-Hasawi said the aid comes annually within the KRCS efforts to help and support families in need in Kuwait ahead of Eid Al-Adha, which falls next month. Hasawi said the KRCS assists families in need inside Kuwait which includes widows, orphans, divorcees, people with special needs, and sick, elderly and low-income people. The project of distributing clothing to families in need continues with the support of Kuwaiti private sectors, he added.— KUNA



KUWAIT: KRCS workers stand next to clothes that were distributed to families in need in Kuwait. —KUNA

## Largest Kuwaiti oxygen shipment arrives in India

**NEW DELHI:** Kuwait's Ambassador to India Jassem Al-Najem revealed yesterday that the largest oxygen shipment has arrived from Kuwait at the Indian port of Mumbai to help combat the coronavirus crisis. In a statement to the press, Ambassador Najem said that an Indian naval ship carrying 7,500 medical oxygen cylinders arrived at Mumbai port to help the country fight the mutated version of the virus. The ambassador renewed Kuwait's keenness to alleviate the suffering of the friendly people of India during the health crisis it is going through. Kuwait is in the forefront of global efforts providing India with oxygen and other medical supplies in the wake of massive health crises following the spread of the new strain. During his recent visit to Kuwait, Indian External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar had thanked the Kuwaiti leadership and people for the aid. — KUNA



NEW DELHI: An Indian naval ship carrying Kuwaiti medical oxygen cylinders arrives at Mumbai port. — KUNA

## Kuwait to host EU-Gulf MPs' talks soon: Speaker

**BRUSSELS:** Lawmakers from across the Arabian Gulf region will come together with their European counterparts for talks in Kuwait soon, the country's top lawmaker said yesterday, citing bilateral relations as the primary focus of the meeting. The talks will also address "matters of mutual concern," National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem told a press conference alongside European Parliament (EP) chief David Sassoli, who has given the thumbs up for the encounter, he said. He highlighted such talks as an opportunity to "find common ground" on an array of issues, chief among them the Palestinian cause, which requires urgent action on the part of the international community to cease "Zionist abusive practices" against the Palestinian people, he said. He went on to mention Kuwait's penchant for humanitarian endeavors, listing the aid it has given to war-battered countries such as Iraq and Yemen as a case in point, in addition to its efforts to quell a Gulf Arab dispute. "It is incumbent upon us to utilize all forms of diplomacy as means to protect regional peace and security," Sassoli said, acknowledging Kuwait's efforts towards similar causes. — KUNA



BRUSSELS: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem (left) speaks during a press conference with the European Parliament chief David Sassoli in Brussels, Belgium yesterday. —KUNA



## One dead after apartment block collapses in Florida



RAMALLAH: Protesters take part in a demonstration calling for Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas to quit in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank yesterday following the death of Palestinian human rights activist Nizar Banat who died shortly after being arrested. —AFP

# Palestinian rights activist ‘beaten to death’

## Death in custody of Palestinian Authority triggers angry protests

**RAMALLAH:** A human rights activist and critic of the Palestinian Authority died yesterday shortly after security forces stormed his house, arrested and beat him, triggering angry protests in the occupied West Bank.

The family of Nizar Banat said he had been beaten to death, in an incident that sparked outrage from fellow activists, protests in the West Bank city of Ramallah and calls for an inquiry. Banat, 43, from the flashpoint city of Hebron, was arrested early yesterday by Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces, Hebron governor Jibrin Al-Bakri said.

“Following... a summons from the public prosecution to arrest citizen Nizar Khalil Muhammad Banat, a force from the security services arrested him at dawn,” Bakri said in a statement carried by the official Wafa news agency. He did not cite a reason for Banat’s arrest. Banat’s cousin, Hussein Banat, told AFP some 25 armed men had broken into the activist’s house while he was sleeping and used pepper spray to subdue him.

“A large force entered and aggressively took off all of his clothes then beat him for eight minutes straight,” he said. Speaking to the Al-Quds news website, other members of Banat’s family ac-

cused security forces of “hitting him on the head with wooden sticks and bits of iron” and “deliberately murdering” him.

### ‘Beating’

The governor said that during Banat’s arrest, “his health deteriorated”. “He was immediately transferred to the Hebron government hospital... After he was examined by doctors, he was pronounced dead.” Banat was known for his videos posted on Facebook, in which he denounced alleged corruption in the PA.

He had registered as a candidate in Palestinian parliamentary elections, which had been set for May until president Mahmud Abbas postponed them indefinitely. Two months ago, Banat had said his house had been shot at by unknown attackers. Bakri and prime minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said an investigation had been launched into his death. Approached by AFP, Palestinian security forces declined to comment.

Yesterday, some 300 people gathered in Ramallah, the seat of the PA, calling for Abbas to quit. “The arrests don’t scare us,” they chanted, brandishing portraits of Banat. “Abbas, go!”

Security forces fired tear gas, and one protester was hit in the

face with a canister and hospitalized.

Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, said it held president Abbas “fully responsible for the repercussions” of Banat’s death.

### ‘Dark day’

The EU, one of the biggest donors to the PA, said it was “shocked and saddened” by the incident and called for a “full, independent and transparent investigation”. The bloc’s delegation had voiced concern last November after Banat spent four days in custody, and again in May after Palestinian security forces raided his home. The bloc’s envoy to the Palestinians said at the time that “violence against politicians and human rights defenders is unacceptable” and urged the PA to ensure “respect for freedom of expression and the protection of human rights activists”.

Farid Al-Atrash, from the Palestinian rights group the Independent Commission for Human Rights, said Banat’s death marked “a dark day in the history of the Palestinian people”. Shawan Jabarin, director of rights group Al-Haq, joined calls for a “careful investigation”. — AFP

## International

# 64 killed in Ethiopian air strike on Tigray market

## United Nations calls for an urgent investigation into the strike

**MEKELE:** At least 64 people were killed and 180 injured in an Ethiopian air strike on a market in the war-torn Tigray region, a local health officer told AFP yesterday. “The air strike was in the market area, so many, many people were injured,” said Mulu Atsbaha, an advisor to the Tigray regional administration on maternal and child health.

The strike on Tuesday in Togoga town also left 180 injured, Mulu added. He said the toll had been gathered from residents of Togoga town, 30 kilometres (18 miles) north-west of the regional capital Mekele, and “confirmed with local leaders”.

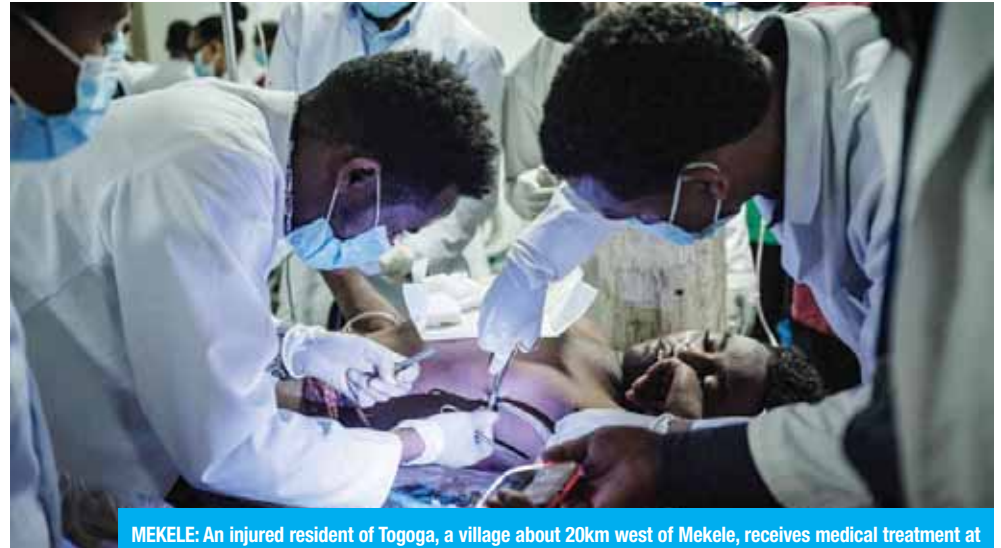
Ethiopia’s army spokesman said yesterday that the military carried out the attack on Togoga, but said rebel fighters were the target. “We do not accept that this operation targeted civilians,” Colonel Getnet Adane told AFP, insisting that those injured

or killed were fighters “in civilian clothes”.

But survivors and health workers described aerial explosions striking a busy market at the peak of trading, killing and injuring dozens, including children. The United Nations has called for an urgent investigation into the strike.

The attack came as vote counting was underway following Monday’s national elections in Ethiopia. However, the conflict in Tigray meant no vote was held there, and the region has seen an upsurge in fighting in recent days. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops to Tigray in November to oust the dissident regional leadership, promising a swift victory.

But nearly eight months later, fighting continues, which has triggered a humanitarian crisis with the UN warning 350,000 people are on the brink of famine. —AFP



**MEKELE:** An injured resident of Togoga, a village about 20km west of Mekele, receives medical treatment at the Ayder referral hospital in Mekele, the capital of Tigray region, Ethiopia. —AFP

## Lebanon crises leave LGBTQ community with no safe place

**BEIRUT:** The combined effects of Lebanon’s economic meltdown, last year’s Beirut port blast and COVID-19 lockdowns have left the LGBTQ community more vulnerable than ever, warned a report published yesterday.

The blast at a port warehouse that devastated swathes of the city on August 4 last year had a disproportionate impact on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community, the Oxfam charity said.

One of the world’s largest ever non-nuclear explosions killed more than 200 people and left thousands homeless, including in the culturally diverse neighbourhoods of Mar Mikhail and Gemmayzeh. “Being home to many queer residents and queer-friendly restaurants, bars, clubs, community centres and public spaces, these neighbourhoods offered a refuge for queer individuals,” Oxfam said in its report.

The slow pace of reconstruction and the risk of gentrification if and when these areas are finally rehabilitated could result in the loss of LGBTQ hubs being more than temporary. Oxfam said the LGBTQ community in Lebanon was now “facing a housing crisis” and that more than

half of the individuals interviewed had their homes damaged in the blast.

The report said “39 percent do not have a safe living space, and a further 11 percent had been forced back with their families where many said they faced abusive, unsafe or unaccepting environments.”

The blast has been “the final straw” for the community’s people in Beirut, said Nizar Aouad, Oxfam’s Lebanon gender advisor, adding that “it destroyed whatever safe spaces were left in the city”. Some of the bars, night clubs and community spaces where the queer community used to gather safely have also been closed down by successive lockdowns caused by the Covid pandemic.

Chances they will reopen now that restrictions are being lifted have been curtailed by a devastating economic crisis, which the World Bank has described as one of the world’s worst since the 1850s.

Religiously diverse Lebanon is one of the Middle East’s more liberal countries, but the LGBTQ community continues to face systematic social, economic and legal discrimination. —AFP

## Raisi to clarify, but complicate West’s dealings

**TEHRAN:** The election of a loyal acolyte of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as Iranian president could ease the West’s dealings with the Islamic Republic due to a streamlined power structure in Tehran but Ebrahim Raisi’s hardline stance could also spell trouble, analysts say.

Under pressure to boost an economy crippled by US sanctions, Raisi is not expected to block EU efforts to revive a 2015 deal on Iran’s nuclear ambitions by bringing the US back into the accord.

But, according to analysts, his hostility towards the United States means Raisi is unlikely to respond to Western demands for a wider deal covering Iran’s ballistic program, meddling in neighboring countries and its detention of Western nationals.

Khamenei has ruled Iran since the death of revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989 and has the final say on all foreign policy matters as long as he lives. “Raisi, like Khamenei, is suspicious and skeptical of Western intentions vis-a-vis Iran and will be cautious about future Western engagement,” said Sanam Vakil, senior research fellow at the London-based Chatham House think tank.

“This foreshadows a continued pattern of anti-American resistance, economic nationalism and internal repression, punctuated by moments of pragmatism,” she added.

Raisi’s June 18 election victory, achieved on the back of record low turnout and disqualification of key rivals, means Iran will have a president in complete harmony with

Khamenei for the first time. This should help clarify Western policymaking on Iran which had been muddled by domestic disputes between the team under outgoing President Hassan Rouhani—including English-speaking Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif—and hardliners loyal to Khamenei. This infighting was exemplified by an audio recording attributed to Zarif that emerged in April and stunned Iran, in which the foreign minister complained bitterly about interference by the elite Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) who answer to Khamenei.

“A more monolithic power structure will be less bogged down by infighting, which often impeded Rouhani’s agenda and that of his envoys,” said International Crisis Group analysts Ali Vaez and Naysan Rafati in a note on the election. They said Raisi is set to be the first president under Khamenei whose views have “mirrored” those of the supreme leader. Before Raisi, Khamenei has worked with four presidents—all served the maximum two consecutive terms and none saw completely eye-to-eye with the supreme leader. Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) was a longstanding political rival of Khamenei, Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) a reformist, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) a maverick who fell out with Khamenei in his second term and Rouhani, an advocate of better ties with the West.

Raisi also enters office as the first Iranian president to be personally sanctioned by the US under a November 2019 executive order that cited his record on human rights.

He is also accused of playing a key role as a prosecutor on a “death commission” that sent thousands of prisoners to their deaths in 1988, killings Amnesty International has described as a crime against humanity. And as judiciary chief for the last two years he is also charged by rights groups with presiding over a system that allows the execution of child offenders as well as the holding of Western nationals as de-facto hostages. —AFP

## International

# International pressure on Russia to leave Syrian cross-border access open

## UN authorization will require a vote before expiration on July 10

**UNITED NATIONS:** The UN and a handful of countries pressured Russia Wednesday to continue allowing authorization of the only border crossing through which humanitarian aid reaches Syria's insurgent Idlib region, but Moscow remained adamant that such a move threatens Syrian sovereignty.

"I strongly appeal to the members of the Council to reach consensus on allowing cross border operations as a vital channel of support for another year," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the Security Council. However veto-wielding Russia, which is allied with President Bashar al-Assad, has made clear its opposition to a further extension of the border crossing's authorization, which allows aid to reach some three million people living in the Idlib region.

Russian UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia maintained that the Idlib region is "a refuge for terrorists and radicalized jihadists," insisting that the better alternative is to transport aid from Damascus through the frontlines. Negotiations have been launched on a draft resolution — brought forth by Ireland and Norway, two non-permanent Security Council members — to extend the authorization of the Bab al-Hawa crossing, which is located on the Turkish border.

The UN authorization will require a vote before expiration on July 10, but there is great risk of a veto by Russia. The cross-border mechanism "has been an anachronism for a long time," Nebenzia said, rejecting the idea of an extension

of the border crossing authorization, which has been in force since 2014.

Guterres, however, said that "a failure to extend the Council's authorization would have devastating consequences. The Syrian people are in dire need, and it is essential to mobilize all our capacities, along all channels." The UN and West say that bureaucracy and politics make humanitarian aid delivery inoperative through Russia's proposed Damascus route.

In a letter Tuesday to the UN chief and Security Council, approximately 30 countries called for a renewal to the cross-border authorization. "The renewal of the cross-border mechanism is critical to ensuring direct and continued vaccine distribution to all Syrians," the group of countries said in their letter, adding that "the elimination of the cross-border mechanism would have a crippling effect on millions of Syrians."

US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said that "for millions of Syrians, Bab al-Hawa is a literal lifeline." "Every month, one thousand trucks carry food, nutritional assistance, clean water, and medical supplies to people living in desperate need," she added. "Without cross-border access, more Syrians will die. We have an obligation to extend the mandate. We must vote for renewal."

In 2020, Russia, using its veto repeatedly, implemented a drastic reduction on the number of crossing points, from four to one. —AFP



**HASAKEH, Syria:** In this file photo taken on February 22, 2020 Russian military police vehicles patrol the M4 highway in the northeastern Syrian Hasakeh province on the border with Turkey. The UN and a handful of countries pressured Russia June 23, 2021 to continue allowing authorization of the only border crossing through which humanitarian aid reaches Syria's insurgent Idlib region. —AFP

## Moroccan gardener seeks to clear name in French murder

**PARIS:** A Moroccan gardener convicted of murdering his boss in France in 1991, caught after he scrawled a message in blood at the scene, will launch another legal bid to clear his name, his lawyer said. The gruesome killing of wealthy widow Ghislaine Marchal at her villa on the French Riviera is one of the best-known murder cases in France and has become the subject of several books and a film.

Omar Raddad was sentenced to 18 years in jail in 1994 despite his protestations of innocence, with the key piece of evidence being a message with a glaring grammar mistake scrawled on a door in Marchal's blood. The message — "Omar m'a tuer" (Omar killed me) — fuelled intense speculation about its author. Many people questioning whether Marchal, who was highly educated, would have used the infinitive (tuer) instead of the past participle (tué) for "killed". The prosecutor claimed Raddad killed her after an argument about a cash advance on his wages to pay off his gambling debts.

Raddad, who was freed in 1998 after having his sentence partially commuted by former president Jacques Chirac, has unsuccessfully appealed against his conviction in the past but is hoping new DNA evidence will convince judges to order a re-trial. Fingerprints from four unknown men have been identified at the crime scene which represent "new facts that are likely to raise doubts about the guilt" of Raddad, his lawyer Sylvie Noachovitch said. —AFP

## Indonesian extremists finance jihad with charity

**JAKARTA:** Generous Indonesians donating their spare change to the poor and needy are unwittingly helping finance deadly terror attacks and jihadist training camps, in a scam that has netted big money for extremist groups.

Former radical Khairul Ghazali once spent his days visiting restaurants, convenience stores and supermarkets to drop off charity boxes, wearing an official-looking uniform to avoid suspicion. Passers-by would slot in coins and crumpled banknotes in the belief that they were helping the impoverished, orphaned children or maybe a Palestinian aid organisation.

But Ghazali's boxes secretly belonged to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) — the notorious network behind Indonesia's deadliest terror attack, the 2002 Bali nightclub bombings. "People can't tell the difference between these and other charity boxes," said Ghazali, 56, who now runs an Islamic boarding school and tries to de-radicalise former extremists.

"The money collected is usually used to pay for terrorism." With little outside funding, hardline Islamist groups depend on the charity box scam to pay for operations across Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation, which has suffered a series of hotel bombings and other attacks over the years.

North Sumatra police said in March they had seized more than 500 boxes suspected to be funding pipelines for the Islamic State group and radicals linked to Al-Qaeda. The seizure, weeks before an IS-inspired married couple blew themselves up at a church on Good Friday, was the tip of the iceberg.

A JI militant arrested last year admitted that one foundation linked to the notorious terror group was running more than 20,000 boxes nationwide, police said at the time.



**TANGERANG:** This picture taken on April 19, 2021 shows a customer dropping loose change into one of many donation boxes at a convenience store in Tangerang, on the suburbs of Jakarta. — AFP

There are no official figures on the number of illicit charity boxes around Indonesia, but experts believe they are in every city and region across the sprawling Southeast Asian archipelago. "This is not new but the scale of it, which is now massive, is something new," said Jakarta-based security analyst Sidney Jones.

Most Indonesian terror groups now rely "overwhelmingly" on domestic funding to pay for day-to-day operations, she said. Terror groups have also raised cash from member and sympathiser donations, online fundraising and laundering money through legitimate businesses, such as Indonesia's many palm oil plantations.

"But the attacks that have happened after the Bali Bombing have been mainly funded through charity box funds," Ghazali said. Funds from the scam have been traced to jihadist training camps in ultra-conservative Aceh province and the East Indonesia Mujahideen, a radical group blamed for beheading four Christian farmers on the island of Sulawesi last month. —AFP

## International

# Former US cop who killed Floyd to face sentencing

## Derek Chauvin, the face of US police brutality

**MINNEAPOLIS, US:** Twelve years in prison? Twenty, or even 30? On Friday, former policeman Derek Chauvin will hear his sentence for the murder of African-American George Floyd, a killing that sparked America's biggest demonstrations for racial justice in decades.

Minnesota law provides for a minimum sentence of 12.5 years behind bars for the 45-year-old white ex-cop, who has been incarcerated since being found guilty of homicide two months ago.

But Judge Peter Cahill, who will hand down the sentence at 1.30 pm (1830 GMT) in a Minneapolis court, identified four aggravating circumstances that could signal a much heavier sentence. He said Chauvin had "abused his position of trust and authority," had treated Floyd with "particular cruelty" in front of minors and "committed the crime as a group with the active participation of at least three other" police officers.

On May 25, 2020, Chauvin and three colleagues arrested Floyd, 46, who was suspected of having passed a fake \$20 bill in a store in Minneapolis, a large city in the north of the United States. They handcuffed him and pinned him to the ground in the middle of the street. Chauvin then squatted down with a knee on the back of Floyd's neck for nearly ten minutes, indifferent to the dying man's groans and to the pleas of distraught passers-by.

The scene, filmed and uploaded by a young woman,

quickly went viral. After weeks of home confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of people poured on to the streets across the country and also in other countries, to demand an end to racism and police brutality.

It took weeks for the mass demonstrations to taper off, but the debate around the pressing social issues remain vivid in the United States, where President Joe Biden has been slow to come up with the police reforms he promised during his campaign.

### 'Good faith'

Against that backdrop, Chauvin's trial was closely followed by millions across the country. The former police officer, who was present for the full six weeks of his trial, refused to testify. His lawyer said he had followed the police procedures in force at the time and that Floyd's death was due to health problems exacerbated by drug use.

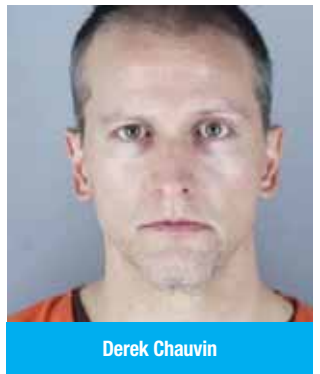
The jurors were not convinced and took less than ten hours to find him guilty. Their decision was greeted with a huge sigh of relief across the country — many had feared an acquittal would lead to worse unrest, while others feared that once again a white police officer would get away with what they saw as murder. Ahead of the sentencing Chauvin's lawyer, Eric Nelson has pleaded that his client made "an error in good faith" and requested a reduced sentence

to time already served, which would allow his client to be released immediately.

Derek Chauvin, the former police officer who will be sentenced today Friday for the murder of George Floyd, had a record of using excessive force before the unarmed Black man died under his knee in a crime prosecutors branded a "shocking abuse of authority."

Chauvin, described by colleagues as rigid and silent, knelt on the 46-year-old Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes on a Minneapolis street on May 25 last year, despite the dying man's pleas and those of shocked passers-by who filmed the tragedy.

The killing sent reverberations throughout the United States and the world, and launched a reckoning on racial injustice in America. Chauvin's lawyer Eric Nelson has said his client "exuded a calm and professional demeanor" in his interactions with Floyd, and sought to convince the jury that the white ex-cop only applied a hold that was authorized and consistent with his training. —AFP



Derek Chauvin

## Pandemic fallout to be felt 'for years': UN agency

**VIENNA:** The coronavirus pandemic is pushing more people into drug use, while illicit cultivation could also get a boost, the UN said yesterday, warning that the crisis's fallout was likely to be felt "for years to come".

The Vienna-based United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which each year pulls together data from its wide network of member countries in its annual report, said it also feared illicit opium poppy and coca leaf cultivation could rise as the economic crisis caused by the pandemic led to joblessness and other problems around the globe. "The new report shows that drug markets have swiftly resumed operations after the initial disruption at the onset of the pandemic" last year, a statement by agency said. Top opium producer Afghanistan reported a 37 percent jump in the amount of land used for illicit poppy cultivation during 2020 compared with the previous year, the report said. Inequality, poverty and mental health conditions-known factors that push people into drug use—are also on the rise across the world, it said in a chapter entitled "COVID-19 fallout likely to be felt in drug markets for years to come". Most countries have reported a rise in the use of cannabis during the pandemic, it said, noting generally people decreasingly saw risks in its use.

The crisis has also seen an increase in the non-medical use of pharmaceutical drugs, while consumption of drugs that are "typically used in social settings", such as cocaine, has dropped. UNODC noted ever bigger shipments of illicit drugs and increased smuggling amid disruption to commercial air traffic.



**MONT-DE-MARSAN, France:** A woman receives a dose of a vaccine during a visit of French Health Minister Olivier Veran (right) and French Prime Minister Jean Castex (not seen), to observe the sanitary situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in Mont-de-Marsan, southwestern France, yesterday. —AFP

Even before the pandemic, global cocaine manufacture doubled in output between 2014 and 2019, when it reached a new record of an estimated 1,784 tons, according to the report. It has reached all-time highs in recent years, which is also in line with increasing global drug use in part due to the growing world population.

Cocaine supply chains to Europe are "diversifying, pushing prices down and quality up and thereby threatening Europe with a further expansion of the cocaine market", it said. It added that a rising number of smaller groups, including some originating in the Balkans, was now involved in cocaine trafficking, leading to "increased competition and efficiency". —AFP

## American jailed for betraying military sources in Iraq

**BAGHDAD:** A Pentagon translator was sentenced Wednesday to 23 years in prison for passing the names of US informants in Iraq to a person linked to Lebanon's powerful Shiite movement Hezbollah. Mariam Thompson, 62, had admitted transmitting the classified information to a Lebanese national in hopes that it would be passed on to the group designated a terrorist organization by Washington.

"Thompson's sentence reflects the seriousness of her violation of the trust of the American people, of the human sources she jeopardized and of the troops who worked at her side as friends and colleagues," John Demers, head of the Justice Department's National Security Division, said in a statement.

According to court documents, Thompson worked as an interpreter on a foreign military base when, in 2017, she began a relationship on a video app with a man who said he was connected to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

"Over time, Thompson developed a romantic interest in her co-conspirator," the Justice Department said. She was assigned to American special forces in Arbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, in December 2019, when the unit initiated strikes against a pro-Iranian militia, which ended January 3, 2020 with the death of powerful Iranian General Qassim Suleimani. —AFP

## International

# Germany and France seek EU backing on Putin summit bid

## Kremlin says Putin backs increased EU-Russia dialogue

**MOSCOW/BRUSSELS:** President Vladimir Putin backs a proposal from Germany and France for the EU to restart summits with Russia, the Kremlin said yesterday.

"We assess the initiative positively," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. "Putin is a supporter of creating mechanisms for dialogue and contacts between Brussels and Moscow."

Peskov was responding to a question about a proposal by Berlin and Paris for the 27-member bloc to contemplate a potential summit with the Kremlin chief. Many EU member states oppose the idea and Ukraine's foreign minister blasted the proposal earlier yesterday ahead of a debate on the issue by the European Union's leaders.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday "a lot is unclear" including the agenda of the proposed summit. "It is necessary for our colleagues to explain what they mean and what they are aiming for," Lavrov said at a press conference.

Ties between the bloc and Russia have deteriorated since Moscow annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014. The last summit between EU chiefs in Brussels and Putin took place in early 2014.

Brussels has imposed waves of sanctions on Moscow, which has responded with its own counter-measures.

Germany and France will attempt to persuade

EU leaders to relaunch regular meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin, in a controversial bid that Ukraine slammed as "dangerous".

Berlin and Paris late Wednesday put forward a last-minute proposal for the bloc to contemplate the idea of a potential summit with Putin in the wake of US President Joe Biden's sit-down with him in Geneva last week. Moscow said Putin was a "supporter" of the proposal, which would potentially revive a regular fixture that was frozen in 2014 after the takeover of Crimea by Russia.

"In my opinion, we as the European Union must also seek direct contact with Russia and the Russian president," Chancellor Angela Merkel told Germany's parliament ahead of the summit.

"It is not enough for the American president to talk to the Russian president," she said, stressing that the European Union too "must also create different formats for talks". Merkel, who could be attending her last EU summit with German elections set for September, insisted that the 27-member bloc should meanwhile put up "a united front against the provocations" by Russia.

### 'Dangerous deviation'

Ukraine's foreign minister blasted the German-French effort to sit down formally with Putin given that the longtime leader had failed to demonstrate any willingness to change. "Initia-



**BRUSSELS:** Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel (right), talks to Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz on the first day of a European Union (EU) summit at The European Council Building in Brussels yesterday. —AFP

tives to resume EU summits with Russia without seeing any progress from the Russian side will be a dangerous deviation from EU sanctions policy," Dmytro Kuleba said after meeting the EU's foreign policy chief in Brussels.

Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron will face resistance from numerous EU

member states—especially in eastern Europe—who were blindsided by the push and remain deeply wary of talking to the Kremlin. EU ambassadors failed to thrash out a common position on the proposal on Wednesday and left it for the leaders to hammer out the details when they discuss the issue later. —AFP

## Gibraltar votes in postponed abortion referendum

**GIBRALTAR:** Gibraltar was voting yesterday on plans to ease draconian abortion laws in a referendum delayed for over a year by the coronavirus pandemic. The issue has exposed sharply opposing views within the tiny, normally closely-knit British enclave at the southernmost tip of Spain, which is home to some 32,000 people. The referendum was initially slated for March 19, 2020 but was postponed as virus cases began spiralling at the start of the pandemic.

After the polls opened at 9:00 am (0700 GMT), a line of socially-distanced voters waited to cast their ballots at Inces Hall theatre, its facade covered with a vibrant mural. Heading towards the theatre, voters passed two banners, one with a scan of an unborn baby saying "Their lives are in your hands. Vote no!" and a smaller green placard reading "Yes for care compassion and change."

Except in cases where it would save the mother's life, abortion is currently banned in Gibraltar on pain of life imprisonment, although such a penalty has not been applied in modern times. The government is proposing changes to the law to allow abortion where a woman's mental or physical health is at risk — such as in cases of rape or incest — or when foetuses have fatal physical defects. "It's very important to give value to every single life, and yes of course, women have got rights, but so have the babies," 67-year-old pensioner Marie-Luisa Bruzon told AFPTV after voting against. —AFP

## Husband of exiled Belarus opposition leader stands trial

**MOSCOW:** The husband of Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya went on trial yesterday in the ex-Soviet nation, a rights group said, months after historic protests erupted over a disputed presidential election.

The mass anti-government demonstrations broke out in August 2020 after President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus with an iron grip for nearly three decades, claimed a sixth term in power in what Tikhanovskaya and several Western leaders believe was a rigged vote.

These have now subsided, but independent journalists and activists continue to receive jail terms in a government crackdown. Sergei Tikhanovsky, a popular YouTube blogger who had campaigned against Lukashenko before being arrested, stood trial in the city of Gomel in southeastern Belarus, the independent Viasna rights group said.

He faces up to 15 years in jail. Five other activists are also on trial, including historic opposition figure Mikola Statkevich. Tikhanovsky had planned to run against Lukashenko in the 2020 August presidential elections but was detained on charges of violating public order soon after announcing his presidential bid.

His wife Svetlana—a stay-at-home mum and political novice—took his place and quickly gained popularity, becoming Lukashenko's main opponent in the election.



**PRAGUE:** This file photo taken in Prague on June 9, 2021 shows Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya (right) holding a picture of her husband, the opposition figure jailed blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky. —AFP

The hearing in Gomel was held behind closed doors inside a detention center where Tikhanovsky has been kept for over a year, Viasna said. A video shared online by a pro-government journalist showed the six defendants being brought to the hearing with their hands handcuffed behind their backs. Wearing plain T-shirts and trousers, the men were placed inside a cage for defendants.

As Statkevich walked in, he shouted "Long live Belarus!", the slogan of the opposition during last year's demonstrations. The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes in Belarus, said in March that Tikhanovsky and his associates "manipulated public consciousness" using social media. —AFP

## International

# One dead after apartment block collapses in Florida

## A large portion of the building north of Miami Beach reduced to rubble

**MIAMI:** A 12-storey oceanfront apartment block in Florida partially collapsed early yesterday, killing at least one person and sparking a major emergency response with dozens of rescuers combing the rubble for survivors. Video footage posted online showed a large portion of the building in the town of Surfside — just north of Miami Beach — reduced to rubble, with the apartments' interiors exposed.

It was unclear how many people lived in the building or who had been inside at the time. Some residents were able to walk down the stairs to safety while others had to be rescued from their balconies. At least one person has been confirmed dead, Surfside mayor Charles Burkett told NBC's Today show.

"My police chief has told me that we transported two people to the hospital this morning at least, and one has died. We treated 10 people on the site," Burkett said. He said dogs were helping in the search for survivors but "tragically" had not found anyone yet. "Apparently when the building came down it pancaked, so there's just not a lot of voids that they're finding or seeing from the outside."

And he said it was not clear how many people

had been inside, or why the building collapsed. "It looks like a bomb went off, but we're pretty sure a bomb didn't go off, so it's something else."

Santo Mejil, a local resident, said his wife was an overnight caretaker who was in the complex when it collapsed. "She said she heard a big explosion. It felt like an earthquake," he told the Miami Herald newspaper, tearing up as his wife called again to say she was being evacuated from the complex.

"My prayers are with all those impacted by this horrific tragedy and with their families," Miami-Dade mayor Daniella Levine Cava tweeted. "We are so grateful to @MiamiDadeFire, @MiamiBeachFire and all the first responders on the scene - may they stay safe while working to save lives." Miami Beach Police Department said its officers were "assisting the Town of Surfside at a partial building collapse."

"Multiple police and fire agencies from across Miami-Dade are assisting," the force added. Miami-Dade Fire Rescue said: "Over 80 MDRF units... are on scene with assistance from municipal fire departments." Local media said records showed the building was built in 1981 and had more than 130 units inside. — AFP



MIAMI: First responders arrive at a partially collapsed building in Miami Beach, Florida, yesterday. —AFP

## Mass grave finds stir ghosts of hidden histories

**PARIS:** The discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves near a former Catholic school for indigenous children in Canada comes just weeks after a similar grim find sent shock waves through the country. The cases expose a shameful chapter in Canada's history and are among several other burial sites unearthed in the last decade that expose long-hidden horrors.

### Canada's indigenous children

The latest discovery in Canada involves the former Marieval residential school in eastern Saskatchewan that had hosted indigenous children between 1899 and 1997 before being demolished. It comes just weeks after the nation was rocked by the discovery of the remains of 215 schoolchildren at another former indigenous residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia.

Some 150,000 Native American, Metis and Inuit children were forcibly enrolled up until the 1990s in 139 of these residential schools in Canada, where they were isolated from their families, language and culture, and physically and sexually abused by staff and teachers. More than 4,000 students died in the schools, according to a commission of inquiry that concluded Canada had committed "cultural genocide" against indigenous communities.

### Spain's Valley of the Fallen

The Spanish government in March approved a special fund to exhume graves at the Valley of the Fallen, a vast complex near Madrid where some 33,000 victims of the Spanish Civil War are buried. Built between 1940 and 1958 partly by the forced labor of political prisoners, the imposing basilica and mausoleum were initially intended for those who had fought for the fascist dictator



In this file photo taken on June 4, 2021 people from Mosakahiken Cree Nation hug in front of a makeshift memorial at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School to honor the 215 children whose remains have been discovered buried near the facility, in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada. —AFP

General Franco. But in 1959 the remains of many Republican opponents were moved there from cemeteries and mass graves across the country without their families being informed.

When Franco died in 1975, authorities opted to draw a veil over the past for fear of further conflict. Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has made the rehabilitation of Franco's victims a priority since coming to power in 2018. Campaigners estimate that more than 100,000 dead from the war and its aftermath remain buried in unmarked graves across Spain — a figure exceeded only by Cambodia, says Amnesty International. In January a six-year-long inquiry concluded that 9,000 children had died in state- and Catholic Church-run homes for unmarried women and their babies in Ireland that were still operating as recently as 1998. — AFP

## Biden names widow of McCain as envoy to UN agency

**WASHINGTON:** US President Joe Biden said Wednesday he will nominate Cindy McCain, widow of Republican senator John McCain, as the US Ambassador to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, headquartered in Rome. Cindy McCain announced her support for the Democratic candidate for the White House last September, marking a break with incumbent Republican President Donald Trump, who was campaigning against Biden for re-election.

"My husband John lived by a code: country first. We are Republicans, yes, but Americans foremost. There's only one candidate in this race who stands up for our values as a nation, and that is @JoeBiden," she wrote at the time on Twitter. A furious Trump shot back on his own Twitter account.

"I hardly know Cindy McCain other than having put her on a Committee at her husband's request. Joe Biden was John McCain's lapdog. So many BAD decisions on Endless Wars & the V.A., which I brought from a horror show to HIGH APPROVAL. Never a fan of John. Cindy can have Sleepy Joe!"

McCain is the chair and director of the Hensley Beverage Company, a Phoenix-based distributor of beer, wine, spirits and nonalcoholic drinks, and is active in a number of philanthropic organizations. "I am deeply honored and look forward the work ahead," McCain wrote on Twitter. Her nomination will have to be confirmed by the Senate in which he husband served until his death in 2018. He had run as the Republican candidate for the presidency against Barack Obama in 2008. —AFP

## International

# In Russia, vaccine skeptics rush to buy fake COVID jab certificates

## Russia's daily virus cases, deaths hit six-month highs

**MOSCOW:** Watching as Russia's drive to vaccinate its citizens against coronavirus stumbled earlier this year, Sergei had a hunch that authorities would eventually make inoculations mandatory. But the 30-something in the southern Krasnodar region had no plans of getting a jab. So he found a dealer online hawking fake vaccine certificates, sent his personal details over encrypted messenger Telegram and transferred 15,000 rubles (\$200,175 euros).

Three weeks later, Sergei logged onto Russia's government services portal to find a certificate showing he had received both doses of the country's homegrown Sputnik V vaccine—without ever having been jabbed. Russia last August stoked concerns over Sputnik V by registering the vaccine ahead of large-scale clinical trials, but international experts have since declared it safe and effective.

Many Russians are nonetheless wary, with some 60 percent saying they do not plan to be inoculated, according to independent polling. Sergei said he believes the jab has side effects, and fears the vaccine is "experimental." "I don't want to die because of what the government wants," Sergei said in an exchange on Telegram, showing AFP a redacted screenshot of his personal government portal showing his vaccine certificate.

That sentiment has helped foster a black market on Telegram and Russian darknet forums where dozens of dealers are claiming to sell fake jab certificates and even falsified registration on the government's vaccination database.

While some clients complain of being defrauded, others have left reviews saying everything went as planned. And demand has only grown since Sergei's hunch came true.

### Mandatory vaccines

Moscow last week ordered mandatory vaccinations for service industry workers, after only about a million of its 12 million residents got shots in the six months they were available. A host of other Russian regions followed suit. Restaurant-goers in Moscow will also need to show proof of vaccination or previous infection starting from June 28, and further restrictive measures are expected as authorities move from persuasion to coercion in a bid to get more Russians vaccinated.

Moscow authorities say the measures are working, with some 60,000 people per day — 10 times more than before—now signing up for vaccination appointments. But one seller on a darknet forum, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP that 20 to 30 orders for fake certificates were coming in daily. "I'm get-



**MOSCOW:** A woman enters a vaccination point to receive an injection of Russia's Sputnik V (Gam-COVID-Vac) vaccine against the coronavirus disease in a public services office in Moscow. — AFP

ting asked to vaccinate whole companies," the seller boasted in an exchange on Telegram.

At the low end of the black market, Russians can get a paper booklet certifying they were vaccinated for 2,000 rubles (\$28, 23 euros). At

the top end, for 30,000 rubles (\$400, 350 euros) middlemen say they can get a medical worker to pour out vaccine doses and upload falsified medical records to the government portal. —AFP

## Ex-guerrilla's daughter accuses Nicaragua of kidnapping father

**MANAGUA:** Ten days ago Victor Hugo Tinoco was detained, accused of plotting against the Nicaraguan government alongside 18 other opposition figures, in an episode his daughter says is part of ongoing "state terrorism." Cristian Tinoco's father fought side by side with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega against the country's former dictatorship, but now he has found himself caught in the crosshairs of a law that critics say can be used to attack those that speak out against Ortega's ruling regime.

For many, the detentions amount to kidnapping for political motives. On June 13, "my father left home with my siblings. They were going to a shopping center," Cristian Tinoco told AFP. "When he left the shopping center he was immediately kidnapped. Ten policemen in balaclavas violently put him in a van." Nicaragua's authoritarian government has cracked down on opposition figures recently, with just five months to go until presidential elections in which Ortega is widely expected to seek a fourth consecutive term in office. Since June 2, five potential presidential candidates have been detained. Among those are former Sandinista guerrilla fighters, and even a banker, all for inciting "foreign interference" as part of the international sanctions applied against Ortega and his inner circle. And now others are being detained, too.

Three days after Cristian's father's arrest, police came to search his house. "Instead of ringing the bell, they banged on the door... my mother opened the door and they entered," said 40-year-old Cristian, who is suffering from cancer. "They opened the drawers and put document after document on the bed to look over every piece of paper. They took away documents, my dad's passport, laptop, tablet. They checked the mattresses," she said. — AFP

## Thai democracy protesters rally despite warnings

**BANGKOK:** Hundreds of pro-democracy protesters rallied in Bangkok yesterday to call for the government's resignation, defying warnings from authorities about the kingdom's soaring coronavirus cases. The marches came on the 89th anniversary of the Siamese Revolution—the uprising that transformed Thailand from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy.

Bangkok was rocked by near-daily protests against Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha's government in the second half of 2020, but the pro-democracy movement has lost steam after virus outbreaks and the jailing of student leaders. Authorities have clamped down on public gatherings as the kingdom grapples with a third wave of infections, with its daily case number hovering around the 3,000 mark.

Despite police warnings, hundreds gathered at Democracy Monument, a major intersection in Bangkok, and marched in the direction of Parliament House to protest against the rule of Prayut, the former military chief who came to power in a 2014 coup. Early-bird protesters gathered at the intersection before dawn for a candlelight ceremony.

Som, a 16-year-old student, said she wasn't worried about the coronavirus risk. "We have never had any real democracy," she told AFP. "The country is not going anywhere." Student leader Parit "Penguin" Chiwarak—who is facing royal defamation charges and was released on bail last month—marched to a drum beat wearing a plastic golden crown and



**BANGKOK:** A pro-democracy protester holds a large replica of the 1932 Siamese Revolution plaque as he walks with others in an anti-government march as they commemorate the anniversary of the revolution in Bangkok yesterday. —AFP

carrying a flag. Some demonstrators carried signs that read "Abolish 112", a reference to the kingdom's harsh royal defamation laws that carry a 15-year jail term for those convicted of insulting the monarchy.

One protester was dressed like the Statue of Liberty and demonstrators burned a mock constitution in the same week the Thai parliament debated changes to the country's charter. "Even those who were on the government's side are now calling out the government's work and criticizing failed government efforts," said protest leader Panupong Jadnok as he walked alongside demonstrators. —AFP



## International

# Ghani visits US as Taliban make huge advances across Afghanistan

## Taliban takeover of Afghanistan not inevitable: US experts

**KABUL:** Afghan President Ashraf Ghani began a visit to Washington yesterday at a time the Taliban are making huge advances across the country. There are fears that already-demoralized Afghan security forces will be swiftly overrun when the remaining American troops withdraw. And peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government remain stalled.

Kabul could be captured by the Taliban within a year as US forces withdraw from Afghanistan, but its fall is not inevitable and will depend on a much better-run Afghan defense force, US experts say.

As worries mount that the insurgents could retake power in the war-torn country, experts with years of experience in Afghanistan warned that poor leadership, corruption and ethnic divisions in the Afghan security forces offer the Taliban advantages, and that much depends on whether President Ashraf Ghani's troubled government can hold.

The Islamist rebels have taken control of dozens of Afghanistan's 400 districts since the September deadline for withdrawal was set by Washington, where Ghani is set to meet with US counterpart Joe Biden at the White House today. The Wall Street Journal reported Wednesday that a new US intelligence report estimates that the Taliban could win control of the country's capital within six to 12 months of the US pullout.

### Taliban not unstoppable

"There's really no denying the size and the speed of the kind of territorial losses the government has suffered," Andrew Watkins of the International Crisis Group told AFP. But "the fall of Kabul is not imminent. The Taliban is not an unstoppable military juggernaut," he said.

Most of the districts the insurgents have claimed are "out in rural areas of the country that have little strategic or military value. There's no military need for either actor to be out there."

Yet some are on transport routes and around provincial capitals. "The Taliban are strengthening their chokeholds around major cities. They're not necessarily in the near-term future going to try and take those cities," Watkins said. Afghan security forces have lost the support of US air strikes on the Taliban in the past year, and their own air force could be weakened if thousands of US civilian contractors, who keep Afghan aircraft flying, depart by September.

Carter Malkasian, a former Pentagon official and now an Afghanistan security expert at the CNA consultancy, said it is only "remotely possible" that the Taliban sweep into Kabul in the near term.

However, he said, such an outcome is conceivable within a year, as regional capitals are not currently under threat. "If you see the losses of big cities like Kandahar city or Mazar-i-Sharif, then I would start worrying about Kabul falling," said Malkasian.



**KABUL:** Afghan President Ashraf Ghani talks with journalists after a press conference at the presidential palace in Kabul in this March 1, 2020 file photo.—AFP

James Dobbins, the former US Special Representative for Afghanistan and now an expert at Rand Corporation, said he expects fighting to escalate. Right now, he said, "the Taliban have certain advantages. But their advantages generally apply in the countryside where their supporters are." —AFP

## Sri Lanka pardons Tamil Tigers convicted under terrorism law

**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka's president pardoned 16 men linked to the Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday, as the country faced renewed pressure from the UN over detentions without charge under an anti-terrorism law. The pardon is a first for people linked to the Tigers since Gotabaya Rajapaksa came to power in 2019 on a nationalist agenda, which included a promise that troops who crushed the rebels would not be prosecuted.

The men were convicted under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) that gives security forces sweeping powers to arrest and detain suspects. The UN Human Rights Council and other international rights groups have called for it to be repealed. "The 16 Tamil detainees are among 94 prisoners who received a presidential pardon," prison superintendent Chandana Ekanayake said about the release that came on the Buddhist festival of Poson.

The men had been behind bars for at least a decade, he added. Government officials said the release was the first phase of a plan to free all those held or charged under the PTA. Another 78 people arrested under the law on suspicion of supporting the separatist Tamil Tigers have been in custody for decades, political sources from the Tamil community told AFP.

Lawmaker Namal Rajapaksa, the president's nephew and son of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, told parliament this week that some of those detained had been in jail since before he was born in 1986. He added that his gov-



**COLOMBO:** The pardon is a first for people linked to the Tigers since Gotabaya Rajapaksa came to power in 2019 on a nationalist agenda, which included a promise that troops who crushed the rebels would not be prosecuted. —AFP

ernment is working to free them. The law allows suspects to be held without charge for long periods of time.

The UN Human Rights Council last week urged the government to either charge or release those detained under the PTA, including human rights activists who were recently arrested.

Critics warn the law is being used as a weapon targeting dissidents and minorities in the fractured country. The Tigers were crushed in a no-holds-barred military campaign that ended in May 2009.

International rights groups, including the UN, have called on Sri Lanka to ensure accountability for atrocities allegedly committed when thousands of civilians were killed in the final stages of the 37-year separatist war. The military has denied the allegations and the Rajapaksa government has slammed the criticism as politically motivated. —AFP

## Rogue elephant kills 16 people in central India

**PATNA:** A rogue elephant has killed at least 16 villagers in the past two months in central India after likely being expelled from his herd "for bad behavior", a wildlife official said yesterday.

The mature male, believed to be 15 or 16 years old, has been on the rampage in the tribal Santhal Pargana region of Jharkhand state ever since he was separated from the herd of 22 elephants. "It's likely he was in heat and was expelled because of his bad behavior or sexual rivalry with other males," Satish Chandra Rai, regional divisional forest officer, told AFP.

"We are studying his behavior and a team of 20 officials is constantly trying to track him because our first priority is to protect the animal." The elephant, which is now on its way back seeking to reunite with the herd, has managed to outwit officials with his sheer speed and unpredictability.

On Tuesday, the tusker lifted an elderly couple with his trunk and battered them to death when they had ventured out before dawn. Rai said the elephant was only killing people who accidentally got in its way, got too close, or who tried to provoke it and take pictures.

"He has not been breaking into houses or deliberately attacking people," Rai said. "We want to see if he is accepted back in the herd. If he is not it will be proved he is a bad boy." India has an estimated 30,000 wild Asian elephants — nearly 60 percent of the total wild population.

In recent years there have been rising incidents of elephants killed by locals — and vice-versa — as humans encroach further into forest areas. —AFP

## International

# Hong Kongers snap up final edition of Apple Daily tabloid

## Newspaper says it was a 'victim of tyranny' in a defiant final edition

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong's pro-democracy Apple Daily tabloid said it was a "victim of tyranny" in a defiant final edition yesterday after it was forced to close under a new national security law, ending a 26-year run of taking on China's authoritarian leaders.

The sudden death of the popular newspaper is the latest blow to Hong Kong's freedoms, deepening unease over whether the international finance center can remain a media hub as China seeks to stamp out dissent. Queues formed across Hong Kong yesterday as residents raced to snap up one of the one million copies Apple Daily said it planned to print. Many vendors sold out within minutes and were awaiting fresh deliveries.

The swansong front page featured the paper's own journalists waving goodbye to crowds outside its headquarters. "Apple Daily is dead," deputy chief editor Chan Pui-man, who was arrested last week on a national security charge, wrote in a farewell letter to readers. "Press freedom became the victim of tyranny."

In the working-class district of Mongkok, hundreds queued through the early hours of the morning to get their hands on the final edition, some chanting "Apple Daily we will meet again!"

"It's very shocking," a 30-year-old woman, who was in the queue and gave her first name as Candy, told AFP. "Within two weeks, authorities could use this national security law to dismantle a listed company."

### Asset freeze

Hong Kong's most popular tabloid had long been a thorn in Beijing's side, with unapologetic support for the city's pro-democracy movement and caustic criticism of China's authoritarian leaders.

Those same leaders 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 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 or pay staff and the news group decided Thursday's newspaper would be its last. Overnight it took down its website, Twitter and Facebook accounts. Its edition in Taiwan will continue to operate. But some 1,000 people, including 700 journalists, are now out of work. "Hong Kongers lost a media organization that dared to speak up and insist on defending the truth," eight local journalist associations said in a joint statement, as they called on colleagues to dress in black yesterday.

### Forbidden opinions

China imposed its security law on Hong Kong last year after the city was convulsed by huge and often violent democracy protests in 2019. The prosecution of Apple Daily was sparked by articles and columns that allegedly supported international sanctions against China, a view now deemed illegal.

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. The decision to freeze Apple Daily's assets laid bare the sweeping powers now at the disposal of authorities to pursue any company deemed to be a national security threat. 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



**HONG KONG:** Apple Daily journalists hold freshly-printed copies of the newspaper's last edition while acknowledging supporters gathered outside their office in Hong Kong early yesterday. —AFP

whether they have a future there. 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. China and Hong Kong's authorities have hailed the security law for successfully restoring stability after the 2019 demonstrations and said media outlets must not "subvert" the government. —AFP

## Indonesia jails hardline cleric over virus lies

**JAKARTA:** Indonesian police fired tear gas and water cannon at supporters of a hardline Muslim cleric jailed yesterday for spreading false information about COVID-19 after he held rallies that drew thousands. Rizieq Shihab, 55, was handed a four-year jail term for claiming in a viral video that he was healthy, despite knowing that test results showed he may have been infected with the virus.

Thousands rallied outside the courthouse in Jakarta in support of the cleric, whose influential Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) was banned earlier this year. Police said they had arrested more than 150 demonstrators ahead of the sentencing.

Yesterday's ruling comes after the same court in May sentenced Shihab to eight months' jail for holding sermons and other gatherings that drew tens of thousands of followers, breaking virus restrictions in one of Asia's worst-hit nations. Shihab had urged supporters to attend sermons, a celebration of the Prophet Mohammed's birthday, and his daughter's wedding. All drew huge crowds in the Muslim-majority country, with many supporters not wearing masks or social distancing.

The cleric was later treated in hospital over suspicions he was infected with COVID-19. But that was kept secret by a hospital director who was also sentenced yesterday to a year in jail over the affair. —AFP

## Philippines' ex-president 'Noy' Aquino dies

**MANILA:** Former Philippine president Benigno "Noy" Aquino, the reserved scion of one of Asia's most famous political families, died yesterday from kidney failure. He was 61. Aquino, who was in office from 2010 to 2016, was the only son of the late former president Corazon Aquino and her assassinated husband, senator Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, both revered for leading the struggle to restore democracy in the archipelago nation.

President Rodrigo Duterte's spokesman announced Aquino's death hours after local media reported the former leader had been rushed to a Manila hospital. "We commiserate and condole with the family and loved ones of former president Benigno Simeon 'Noy' Aquino III," presidential spokesman Harry Roque said. "We are grateful to the former president for his contributions and services to the country."

The unmarried politician "died peacefully in his sleep", said Pinky Aquino-Abellada, one of Aquino's four sisters. He suffered kidney failure and also had diabetes. "No words can express how broken our hearts are and how long it will take for us to accept the reality that he is gone," said Abellada, reading from a statement outside the mortuary where her brother's body had been taken.

"Noy, mission accomplished." Foreign Secretary Teodoro Loacsin tweeted that Aquino was "brave under armed attack,



**In this file photo taken on November 4, 2012 shows Philippines' President Benigno Aquino smiling upon his arrival at Wattay airport to attend the ninth Asia-Europe (ASEM 9) summit in Vientiane. —AFP**

wounded in crossfire, indifferent to power and its trappings, and ruled our country with a puzzling coldness but only because he hid his feelings so well it was thought he had none".

Supreme Court Justice Marvic Leonen, who was Aquino's former peace negotiator with Muslim rebels, expressed "profound sadness" over the former leader's death.

"I knew him to be a kind man, driven by his passion to serve our people, diligent in his duties, and with an avid and consuming curiosity," Leonen said. The US embassy in Manila offered its "deepest condolences". Aquino, who was succeeded by populist strongman Duterte, waged an anti-corruption campaign during a term that ushered in key economic reforms. —AFP

Friday Times

# LIFESTYLE

FRIDAY, JUNE 25, 2021

[www.kuwaittimes.net](http://www.kuwaittimes.net)

**‘Traumatized’  
Britney Spears  
urges judge to  
end guardianship**

See Page 21



Guests are seen in the J Hotel, the world's highest luxury hotel, boasting a restaurant on the 120th floor and 24-hour personal butler service, located in the Shanghai Tower, in Shanghai. — AFP photos

## Shanghai opens world's highest hotel

The world's highest luxury hotel, boasting a restaurant on the 120th floor and 24-hour personal butler service, has opened in Shanghai to guests with deep pockets and a head for heights. Elevators whizz guests up the intimidating spiral-like skyscraper at ear-popping speeds of 18 metres per second to the J Hotel's 165 opulent rooms.

The hotel occupies the top floors of the 632-metre (more than 2,000 feet) Shanghai

Tower in the city's financial district, the second-tallest building in the world after Dubai's Burj Khalifa. Its opening was delayed partly by the coronavirus pandemic but the hotel has now started receiving well-heeled guests who can call on the services of a dedicated butler at any hour, day or night.

Patrons can also enjoy one of the hotel's seven restaurants, bars, spa, 84th-floor swimming pool, and all the other usual trappings of a top-notch hotel. It does not come

cheap. To celebrate its opening J Hotel is offering a "special experience rate" of 3,088 yuan (\$450) a night, but prices for its 34 suites sky-rocket.

A night in a "J Suite", complete with crystal chandeliers and sauna, this Saturday costs over 67,000 yuan. The hotel is part of Jin Jiang International Hotels, a major Chinese state-owned group, and officially opened on Saturday.

"On the day of our opening even the web

page was overloaded with so many visitors with strong interest and they have such (a) strong will to come and experience our hotel," said Renee Wu, sales and marketing director.

"Of course this is very encouraging to all of us, but at the same time, we are committed to making sure that all our guests are well taken care of." — AFP



Employees stand in the bar of the J Hotel.



View of Jin Yan restaurant in the J Hotel.



View of a suite room.

## Elton John extends farewell tour in US, Europe

Elton John's long-running farewell tour was extended on Wednesday with a slew of new dates that are slated as his last ever shows in Europe and North America. The 74-year-old rocket man added a series of concerts in Britain and six in Europe, and will follow that with 20 stadium dates in the US and Canada.

The Farewell Yellow Brick Road tour, which began in 2018, will conclude its US run at Dallas Stadium in Los Angeles, site of his legendary performances in 1975 when he was decked out in a shiny baseball uniform.

"I'll be going out in the biggest possible way. I can't wait to see you all on the road

one last time," the singer wrote on Twitter. Many of the original 300 dates had to be postponed due to the pandemic and have been pushed back to late 2021. Currently, the last shows are scheduled for Auckland, New Zealand in early 2023. — AFP



A life-size cardboard cutout of Britney Spears is seen as fans and supporters gather outside the County Courthouse in Los Angeles. — AFP photos



This courtroom sketch shows Judge Brenda J. Penny presiding over participants, virtually appearing on a screen, during the hearing of Britney Spears' guardianship case in the Los Angeles County Courthouse.

# 'TRAUMATIZED' BRITNEY SPEARS URGES JUDGE TO END GUARDIANSHIP

Britney Spears urged a judge in an emotional hearing Wednesday to end an "abusive" guardianship that gave her father control of her affairs in 2008. "I just want my life back. It's been 13 years and it's enough," Spears said in the 20-minute address via videolink as diehard fans chanted their support outside the courtroom.

The 39-year-old star's finances and personal life have been largely managed by Jamie Spears since her highly public breakdown more than a decade ago, leading some fans to launch a "FreeBritney" online campaign in recent years. In a speech where Spears barely stopped to catch her breath, the star said that, under the legal arrangement, she has been prevented from having a contraceptive implant removed, despite wanting more children.

The mother of two said it had left her "traumatized" and "depressed." "I'm not happy. I can't sleep. I'm so angry. It's insane," she said, adding that she cries every day. "I truly believe this conservatorship is abusive. I want changes, I deserve changes," Spears pleaded to Judge Brenda Penny.

The singer has rarely spoken directly about the guardianship but her lawyer Samuel Ingham said in April that Spears wanted to directly address the court, resulting in Wednesday's hearing. Spears has long had a

difficult relationship with her father. Last year, she filed to remove him from the conservatorship and give sole power over her estate to a financial institution. Her court-appointed lawyer said she was "afraid" of her father.

### 'Too, too much!'

Devoted Spears fans have long scoured her social media accounts for hints about her well-being, and any sign that she may be eager to throw off the guardianship. Confidential records published Tuesday by the New York Times said Spears told a court investigator that the conservatorship had "become an oppressive and controlling tool against her" as far back as 2016.

Spears reportedly said the guardianship system had "too much control... Too, too much!" and that she was prevented from making her own decisions on friendships, dating, spending and even the color of her kitchen cabinets.

According to the Times report, Spears told the investigator that she wanted the conservatorship terminated as soon as possible, and that she was "sick of being taken advantage of." Spears' revelation that the conservatorship is preventing her from removing a contraceptive IUD — despite her wanting to take authority of her own birth control medication in order

to get pregnant — sparked further outrage from fans and reproductive rights groups online.

"We stand in solidarity with Britney and all women who face reproductive coercion. Your reproductive health is your own — and no one should make decisions about it for you. #FreeBritney," Planned Parenthood president Alexis McGill Johnson tweeted Wednesday.

Spears is currently responsible for footing the legal bills for both sides — including the hefty fees charged by the attorneys opposing her in the case.

### 'Embarrassed'

The controversy surrounding Spears' legal case exploded following the February release of the documentary "Framing Britney Spears," which chronicled her initial mental health struggle and her father's ensuing appointment as her guardian.

Spears said she was "embarrassed" by her portrayal in the documentary, in which fans say she is essentially being held prisoner and claim she has been sending coded pleas for help. Following her 2006 divorce from Kevin Federline, and the loss of custody of her children the following year, Spears was snapped by paparazzi, barefoot and shaven-headed, at a gas station.

Under her father's guardianship, Spears swiftly returned to performing. She released three albums, appeared on various television shows and even took up a Las Vegas residency. But in January 2019 she abruptly announced she was suspending her performances until further notice.

She said her father and associates regularly threaten her. "If I don't do this, what they tell me to do, enslave me to do, they're gonna punish me," she said. Spears said doctors forcefully put her on medication that made her feel "drunk" and that she was not even allowed to get changed in privacy or drive her own car.

Jamie Spears' lawyers say he has done an excellent job of managing his daughter's finances. But a judge ruled in February that both Spears' father and wealth manager Bessemer Trust would oversee the pop star's finances, denying Jamie Spears' bid to keep sole power to delegate investments.

In a statement read in court, a lawyer for Jamie said he was "sorry to hear her in so much pain" and that he loved his daughter "very much." — AFP

# China gets to grips with PRO WRESTLING



Wrestler jumping on an opponent.

The crowd gasps and cheers as a bare-chested man grabs a chair and smashes it over the head of his opponent on the ground.

A referee in a black-and-white striped jersey rushes to his aid but the prone man is not really hurt — this is WWE-style wrestling in China, where the sport is attempting to take off. “It’s been barbarous yet fun,” said Su San, who is watching pro-

fessional wrestling for the first time and is among an audience of about 200 at the Middle Kingdom Wrestling (MKW) event in the southern city of Shenzhen, across the border from Hong Kong.

Alberto Curry, an American wrestler better known as “Zombie Dragon”, is doing his bit to grow this genre of wrestling — which is part sport, part entertainment — in the world’s most populous

nation. “Back in the States there is a lot of pro wrestling, but it’s kind of an over-saturated market... there’s just too much of it, it’s hard to consume all that wrestling,” said the 31-year-old.

“But in China, it’s very fresh, it’s very new, and a lot of people don’t know what it is. “Once they see the characters and the costumes and everything, they really get into it.”



Wrestlers rehearsing hours before a Middle Kingdom Wrestling (MKW) event.



Wrestlers doing push-ups in the dressing room.



Wrestler “Black Mamba”, whose real name is Zhang Wendong, carrying “The Slam” on his back during their match.

Wrestler “Black Mamba”, whose real name is Zhang Wendong (C), holding a chair to smash over his opponent “The Slam” (on ground) during their match.

Back in the ring, two Chinese fighters — one with the name “Black Mamba” scrawled in gold on his outfit — are exchanging kicks and punches. Black Mamba, whose real name is Zhang Wendong, strikes his opponent in the face with a clenched fist wrapped in a metal chain. Whoops go up from the audience as the tattooed 25-year-old reaches under the ring for a chair and then slams it over the head of his rival. Adrian Gomez, founder and president of MKW, which started in 2015, admitted that wrestling remains a niche sport in China.

But it has “very vocal and passionate” followers, he said, and Gomez believes that infusing wrestling with traditional Chinese martial arts can gain traction.

“I do think that Chinese culture lends itself so easily into professional wrestling to make it eventually a style in its own,” said the American, who hopes to send fighters one day to the United States, home to standard-bearer the WWE.

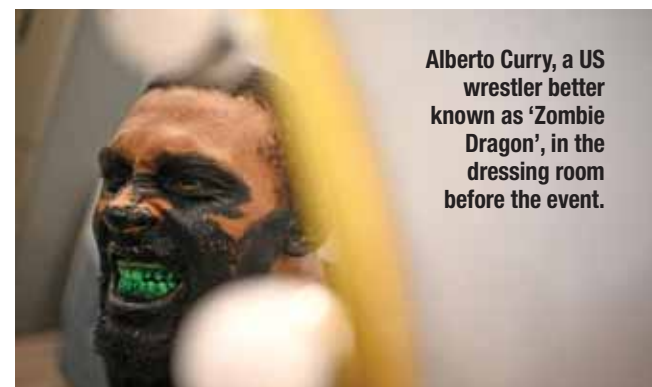
For now, it is about trying to spread the sport’s reputation in China beyond its current limited supporter base. “Unfortunately at this moment, we’re just in that little pond,” said Gomez. “But with every effort of pro wrestling, we’re going to keep growing that until wrestling is like an ocean in China.” — AFP



This photo taken on May 25, 2021 shows wrestlers peeking through a door during a Middle Kingdom Wrestling (MKW) event in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen in Guangdong province.



Wrestlers in the ring.



Alberto Curry, a US wrestler better known as ‘Zombie Dragon’, in the dressing room before the event.



Wrestler “The Slam” posing with his championship belt.



Farm manager Josip Subaric poses as he watches cattle grazing in a meadow in Udbina.

## Croatian farmers incensed by wolf attacks

The wolf corpse hanging from a road sign outside a small Croatian town warned that farmers had been pushed too far—attacks on their livestock were driving them to desperation. Nobody knows who strung up the wolf, but the incident in April came just days after a local farmer saw roughly 90 of his sheep slaughtered by wolves.

Images of bloodied sheep carcasses were splashed across the newspapers and social media, shocking many and prompting

increasingly strident calls from farmers for a cull on the predators. “It’s simply a plague,” says Ivan Tesija, a cattleman.

“Wolves are everywhere, they are fearless, and people don’t know how to defend themselves.” The animals have been protected by law since 1995 when they were on the verge of disappearing. Although a culling quota was allowed from 2005, ministers reintroduced the complete ban in 2013 to protect dwindling numbers.

The prohibition is strongly backed by ani-

mal protection groups. “We are the ones who created this mess, so we should be the ones to solve it and not make wolves pay for our mistakes,” says Luka Oman, head of the Animal Friends NGO.

### Wolf-dog threat

Almost 3,000 domestic and farm animals—primarily sheep—were killed or injured by wolves last year, slightly above average, according to official figures. About 160 wolves roam sparsely populated areas from

the Adriatic coast hinterland to the mountains on the borders with Slovenia and Bosnia, the economy ministry estimates.

But farmers and hunters say the real figure is around 300. Too many, they say, for the habitat of 25,000 square kilometres (9,652 square miles). The situation is complicated further by the presence of wolf-dog hybrids—estimated by scientists at some 10 percent of the current population.

“Hybrids are a huge problem—they are fearless, lack natural hunting instinct and go



Luka Oman, head of Animal Friends, an animal protection group.



Villager Kosa Galovic shows her mobile phone with images of her three sheep and five lambs which were killed by wolves.



## Lifestyle | Feature



Cattle graze in a meadow in Udbina central Lika region of Croatia.

for easier prey," says veterinarian and hunter Boris Katic. This means cattle or sheep rather than boars or deer, he explains.

Katic says some locals bred the animals as a hobby in the time of Croatia's 1990s independence war and its aftermath. Josip Kusak from Zagreb University points out, though, that hybrid populations explode when male wolves are being killed, forcing females

to mate with stray dogs.

But, they agree that wolf-dogs are bad news for the wolf genome. Katic says all hybrids, that according to him could make up around a quarter of the current wolf population, should be killed and then a culling quota be reintroduced.

But the economy ministry said the number of wolves had "significantly decreased" when

the quota was allowed before 2013, and culling did nothing to reduce attacks on livestock. Experts and animal protection groups say farmers can thwart attacks with better electric fencing, herding their animals at night and monitoring them during the day.

The number of attacks "does not reflect the number of wolves but rather how many poorly kept cattle there are", says Kusak.

**Unendurable torments**

The issue is not only scientific. It has strong emotional and economic elements. The farmers feel that their livelihoods are on the line. "These are torments no one can endure," Kosa Galovic tells AFP, recounting how six wolves killed three of her sheep and five lambs last month, imperilling her finances.

Ivan Tesija says roughly 100 of his cows have been slaughtered over the past 12 years, and showed a picture of a calf that died in a recent attack. The government offers compensation ranging from about 80 euros (\$95) for a sheep or a goat carcass to 10 times that amount for a pregnant cow—amounts dismissed as paltry by Tesija.

Animal protection groups, though, see it as a wider issue of humanity's relations with nature. "The co-existence of humans and wolves is not only possible, it is necessary," says Luka Oman. "If we want to preserve a genuine natural environment, it must contain wild animals too."



In this photograph shows a grey wolf in its enclosure at The Zagreb Zoo.

He argues that hunting could make the situation worse for farmers because killing a dominant male or female can destabilise the pack and lead to more attacks—a view shared by the ministry. But his appeals are unlikely to sway beleaguered farmers.

"You never know what the night will bring, people feel terrorised," Josip Subaric says, telling AFP that two of his calves were killed by wolves last month despite electric fencing. "In our business, the wolf is the master of life and death." — AFP



Cattle grazing in Bruvno.—AFP Photos

## America's cicada plague winding down

**T**hey've been everywhere, crawling up trees and flitting about clumsily in search of a mate, droning loudly, causing auto accidents and even daring to land on the neck of the US president. Now the curtain is coming down for the latest brood of cicadas, the disquieting insects that appear briefly in their trillions in the US every 17 years. These huge swarms that have been spawning headlines-and headaches, in some cases-for Americans are

The infestation began in April and May in some eastern and midwest US states such as Maryland and Ohio, and the capital Washington. For weeks these harmless thumb-sized bugs with striking red eyes and translucent wings did what cicadas are supposed to do: emerge from the ground as babies, molt, mate, lay eggs and die.

### 'It got me'

The "periodical" cicada waits underground as a nymph for almost its entire 17-year life cycle, making the journey to the surface when the soil reaches a perfect 64 degrees Fahrenheit (18 C). As they always do, the Class of 2021 made a bit of a nuisance of itself. They do not fly well, constantly bumping into windows, cars and people, making an angry hissing sound as if the collision were not their fault.

The brood had its most prominent 15 minutes of fame on June 9 when President Joe Biden swatted one from his neck as he waited to board Air Force One for his first trip abroad. "Watch out for the cicadas. I just got one - it got me," Biden said with a smile as he approached a group of reporters.



File photo shows cicada nymph emerges from a hole after 17 years underground at the Woodend Sanctuary in Chevy Chase, Maryland. — AFP

There were so many cicadas in the Washington area they would actually show up on weather radar screens. The night before the Biden incident, a swarm of the insects clogged the engines of a press plane due to accompany the president to Europe, delaying those journalists for hours until another aircraft was found.

And while cicadas do not bite or sting people, they do cause trouble, as happened in Cincinnati, Ohio. "Historically each time they emerge, there have been several car crashes attributed to their presence. This year is no different," Cincinnati police wrote on Facebook. The police went on to explain that a young man happened to drive through a swarm of cicadas with his window open and one of them hit him in the face, temporarily stunning him. "He then crashed into a utility pole," police said. The driver was not seriously injured.

"Remember to keep your windows rolled up until our little red eyed friends are gone."

### 'Every 13 years?'

Now, as the bugs die off, the drone of the cicadas has fallen silent in some regions that had been infested and the dried up, crunchy bodies of dead insects litter sidewalks. For the rest, it is just a matter of time. And for entomologists it is time to evaluate the latest chapter of this very rare event.

"In some places, they appear to have expanded their range, while in other places, their range has shrunk. It's going to take time to sort through the data," said John Cooley of the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology of the University of Connecticut in Hartford. He launched a project to map the cicadas.

"Where trees have been removed and surfaces built, cicadas are gone for good. However, where agricultural lands have reverted to parks or residential properties and trees have been planted, there are more cicadas," said Michael Raupp of the entomology department at the University of Maryland.

As for climate change, it will affect these bugs but it is not yet clear exactly how, said Cooley. "That's why our detailed mapping project is so important. We are making baseline maps to look at in the future," he said.

Raupp said global warming will allow cicadas to expand their range northward and emerge earlier in the year. Another hypothesis, he said, is that some cicadas could emerge every 13 years instead of 17. — AFP



Harrison Ford

## Harrison Ford injured in rehearsal for 'Indiana Jones'

**H**arrison Ford suffered a shoulder injury while rehearsing an action scene for a new "Indiana Jones" movie, Disney said Wednesday. "Production will continue while the appropriate course of treatment is evaluated, and the filming schedule will be reconfigured as needed in the coming weeks," Disney said in a statement sent to AFP.

It gave no details on how the 78-year-old was hurt or how badly. Filming of the untitled fifth and final movie about the intrepid archeologist played by Ford began in May in Britain under director James Mangold. Its release is scheduled for the summer of 2022.

In 2014 Ford was injured while filming a "Star Wars" sequel. He was crushed by a hydraulic door of the Millennium Falcon, the craft piloted by his character Han Solo. Production of the last instalment of the Indiana Jones franchise, announced in 2016, has been beset with delays. The return of Ford to play the lead was confirmed in December 2020 by Disney.

It was in 1981 that Ford first donned the famous Indiana Jones fedora in "Raiders of the Lost Arc," with director Steven Spielberg. It was a smash hit around the world and gave rise two popular sequels, "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" in 1984 and "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" in 1989, with the late Sean Connery playing his father.

A fourth instalment—"Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull"—came out in 2008. It was a box office hit but critics panned it, as did some fans of the earlier movies. — AFP



Chef Bun Lai, along with friends, collects cicadas and invasive edible plants to cook with at Fort Totten Park in Washington. — AFP photos

# Tahar Rahim, Maggie Gyllenhaal in the jury for Cannes



PARIS: This combination of file pictures created yesterday (from L, up to down) shows the Jury of the 74th Cannes Film Festival, including US director Spike Lee, French actress and director Melanie Laurent, US actress Maggie Gyllenhaal, French singer Mylene Farmer, Austrian film director Jessica Hausner, French actor Tahar Rahim, Brazilian Director Kleber Mendonca Filho, South-Corean actor Song Kang-ho and French movie director Mati Diop. — AFP

“The Serpent” star Tahar Rahim, US actress Maggie Gyllenhaal and “Parasite” lead Song Kang-Ho are part of this year’s Cannes Film Festival jury led by director Spike Lee, organisers announced yesterday. It will be a female-majority jury for the July 6 to 17 festival, which has faced criticism in recent years for its lack of female representation. Only one woman has ever won the Palme d’Or in its 73 years: Jane Campion for “The Piano” in 1993. This year’s jury will wade through 24 entries (only four by women) to decide the winner of the arthouse world’s most coveted film prize.

The nine members include French actor-director Melanie Laurent, best known abroad for her role in Quentin Tarantino’s “Inglourious Basterds”. The jury also features several international filmmakers: Brazilian Kleber Mendonca Filho, who competed at Cannes in 2016 with “Aquarius”, Austrian Jessica Hausner, who competed with “Little Joe” in 2019, and French-Senegalese director Mati Diop, whose debut “Atlantique” won the Grand Prix the same year.

French star Rahim made his name with indie favourite “The Prophet” and recently had an award-winning turn in Guantanamo drama “The Mauritanian” and a TV hit with BBC-Netflix show “The Serpent”. Gyllenhaal broke out alongside her brother Jake in “Donnie Darko” and made her name with indie hits such as “The Secretary” and her Oscar-nominated turn in “Crazy Heart”, as well as appearing in blockbuster Batman flick, “The Dark Knight”.

Song Kang-ho has appeared in 40 films and

is a favourite of his fellow South Korean Bong Joon-ho, who cast him in “Snowpiercer” and as the adorable father in “Parasite”, the last film to win the Palme d’Or (as well as Best Film at the Oscars) in 2019. The jury line-up is completed by French singing sensation Mylene Farmer, who has sold 35 million albums across a 35-

year career.

They have the pleasure of a bumper crop of entries that promises a stellar year for the world’s leading film festival after it was cancelled due to the pandemic in 2020. The selection includes films from US favourites Wes Anderson and Sean Penn, previous Palme win-

ners Nanni Moretti, Jacques Audiard and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, as well as Iran’s two-time Oscar winner Ashgar Farhadi. — AFP

## Neith Nyer designer on breaking free of Paris fashion calendar

Brazilian designer Francisco Terra of French upstart brand Neith Nyer says the COVID crisis has freed him from the need to follow the usual fashion playbook. Terra is organising one of the few live catwalk shows during men’s fashion week in Paris that began Tuesday-but he is doing it outside the official line-up and in his own style.

His intimate show, with around 100 guests, takes place today in the Consulat, an art centre based in a former electricity sub-station, to be followed by a four-day pop-up store to get direct feedback from

clients. “COVID has allowed me to see many things clearly... to free myself from the shackles of the calendar and seasons,” the 37-year-old told AFP at his apartment-cum-studio in Paris.

It is the first time since launching his label that Terra did not apply to be part of the official Paris calendar. And after more than a year of lockdowns and virtual gatherings, he said he had no interest in making video clips like the vast majority of fashion houses. “Clothes are meant for living. I’ve been very frustrated with these digital presentations of the past year. I couldn’t get into it,” he said.

While France’s fashion federation declares itself “democratic”, giving equal weight to all members, Terra said trying to match the huge shows of mega-brands was a struggle for fledgling labels like his. Another major obstacle has been the insistence on separating men’s and women’s weeks.

“That has been a problem for me since the start. I have freed myself from questions of gender, I’ve always mixed them up in my shows.”

### Celebrity image

The dates are also difficult, Terra added, since the pret-a-porter women’s shows fall in March and September when the “concept stores” that provide his biggest sales have often blown their budgets for the season.

There are other practical considerations, such as wanting to sell coats in September rather than wait for the winter shows when it’s already cold. And while it is financially important to present his work during fashion week, when the buyers are all in Paris, the

shows are less vital in terms of image.

“I don’t think we really need the calendar,” he said. “The image of a young brand is made on Instagram, with celebrities.” His sales have been boosted in the past by US singer Miley Cyrus wearing one of his pink silk dresses or model Bella Hadid appearing on social media in one of his silk skirts and asymmetric latex tops. There is also a very topical focus on the environment.

The new collection features hand-coloured denims, recycled cashmere for his second-skin tops, and vegetable leather jackets. “It’s a challenge,” he admitted. “When we speak to customers about recycling and bio, they think it will all be rough, ugly or sad.”

Hence all the bright colours. “The total pink look-maybe that’s my colour,” he said with a smile. “I’m determined to get people wearing colourful things in Paris, which is very chic but also very sombre and dark, especially in winter.” — AFP

Kids Page

Word Search

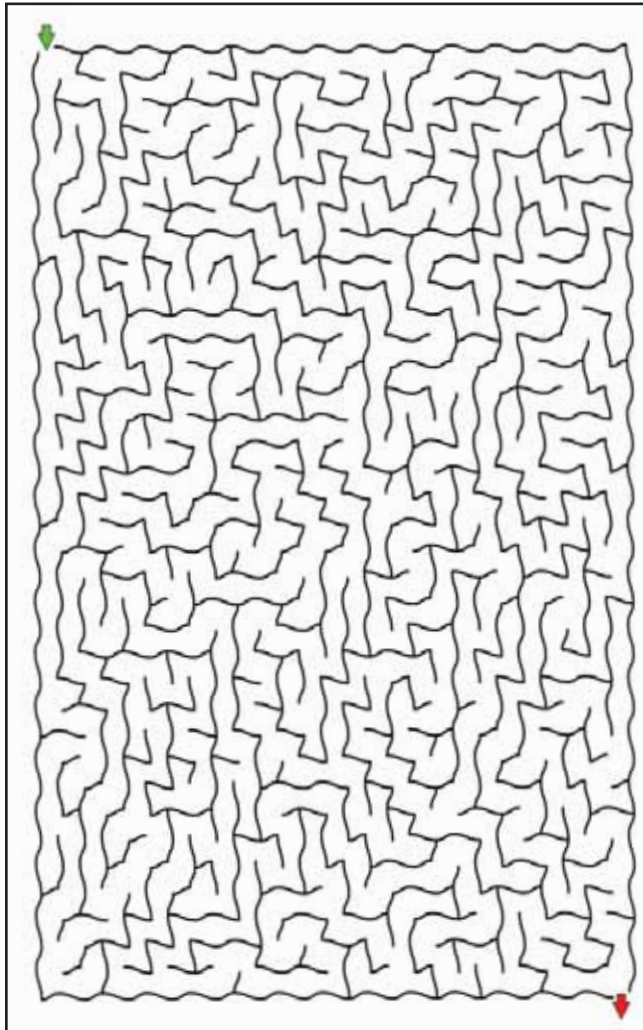
Across

1. What most people wear on the beach.
4. Allows you to breath underwater.
5. It's right next to the beach.
6. They wash in at the seaside.
8. Use this to dry off.
9. You might build this on the beach.
10. Lunch on the beach.
11. Helps you to see on a sunny day.
12. Protects your skin from the sun.
14. He or she watches swimmers.

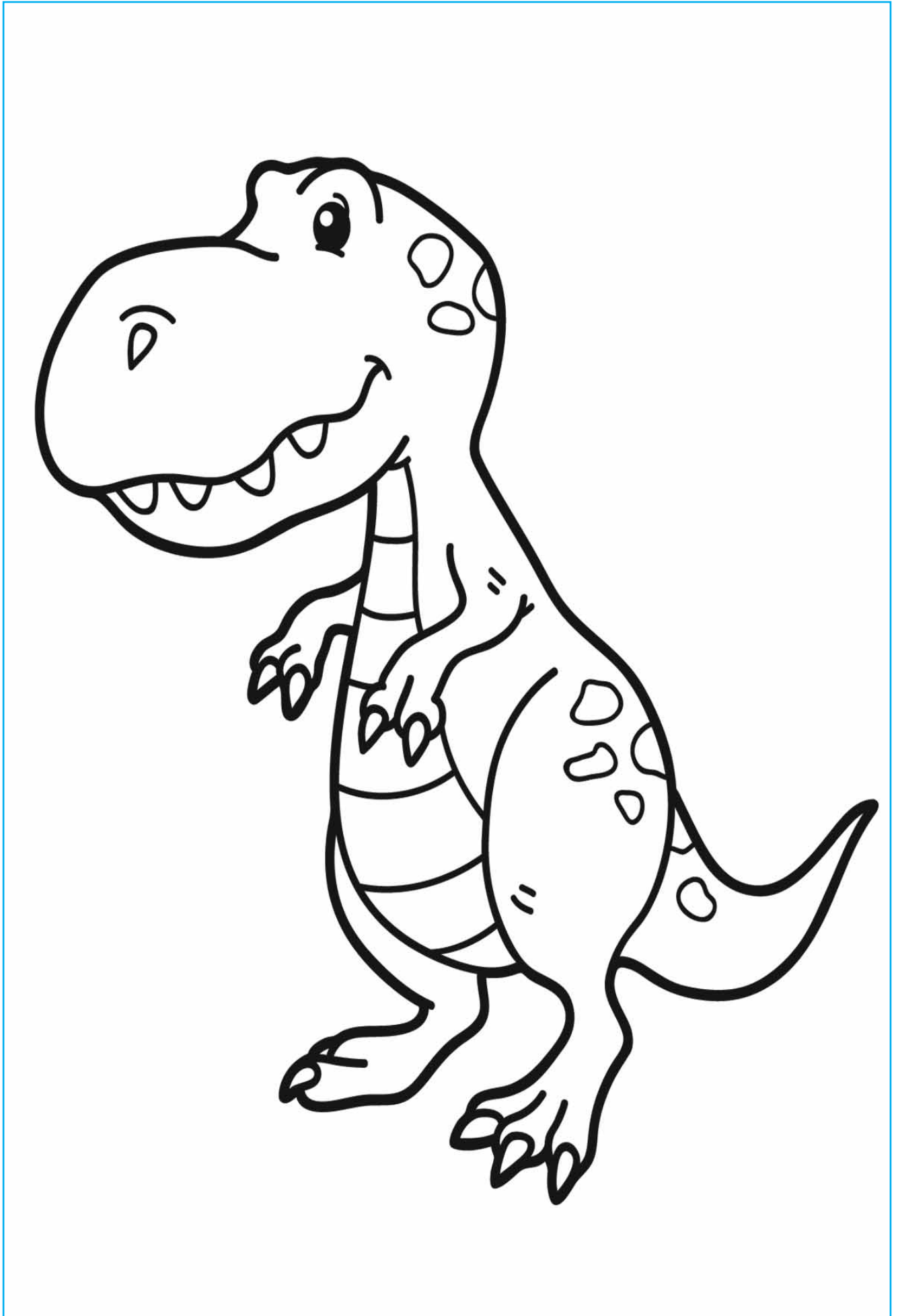
Down

1. Use this to ride the waves.
2. Used for digging.
3. Shoes for the beach.
4. The edge of the water.
7. Sea animal that stings.
9. Watch out! If you turn red, you have this.
10. Use this to collect sand, water, or shells.
13. Little animal with pinchers.

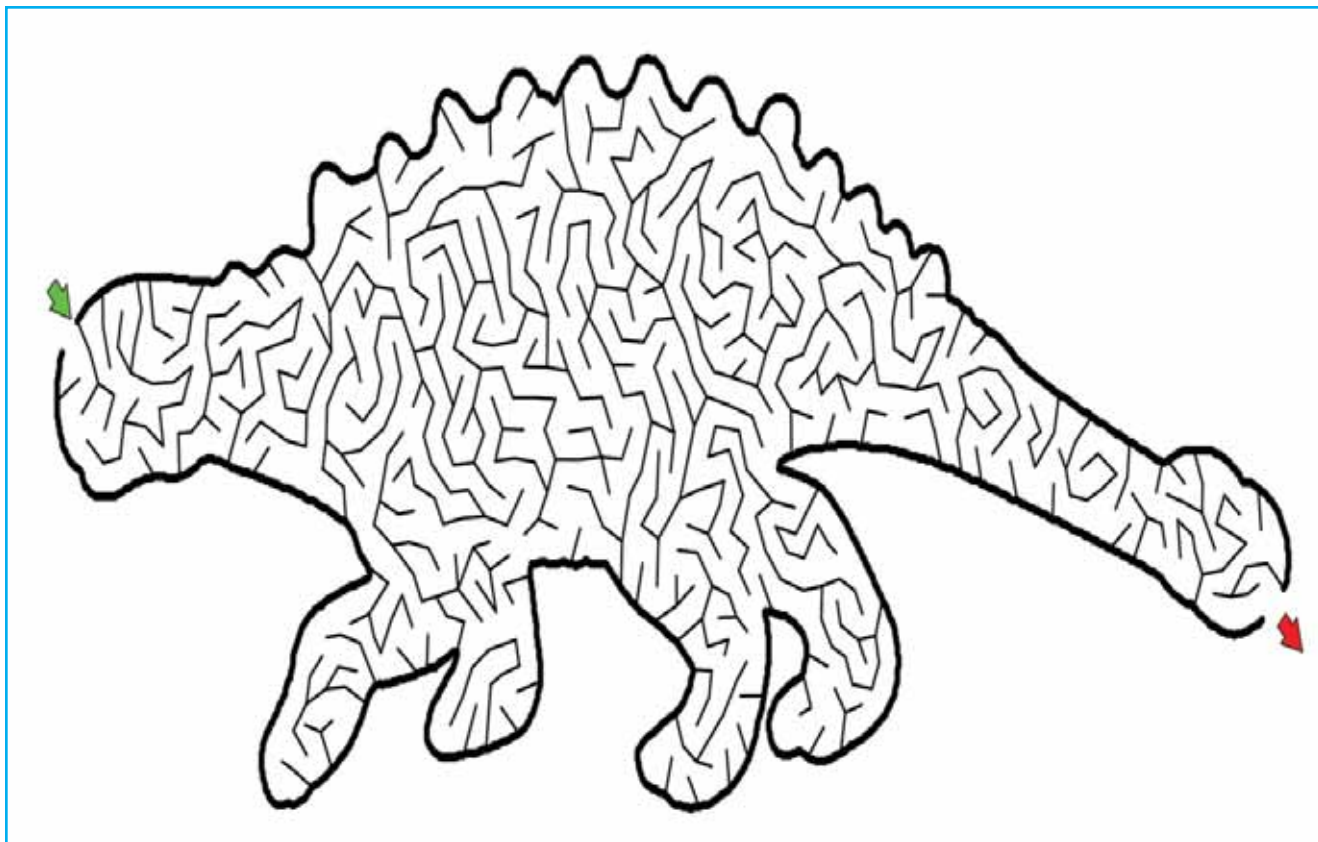
Kids Mazes



Color It



### Find the way



### Word Scramble

#### Signs of Spring



This spring Peony is going on a field trip with her class to the state park. Her teacher gave the class a list of things to look for in the woods and meadows, but the words got all mixed up. Can you help Peony unscramble her list?

1. OFGR            \_\_\_\_\_
2. FEUYRBTLT    \_\_\_\_\_
3. SRSGA          \_\_\_\_\_
4. ORMHTARWE    \_\_\_\_\_
5. SNTGLHUI      \_\_\_\_\_
6. UDB            \_\_\_\_\_
7. DDNLIAENO    \_\_\_\_\_
8. ORELWF         \_\_\_\_\_
9. EBE             \_\_\_\_\_
10. GLBDYAU      \_\_\_\_\_
11. OMLOB         \_\_\_\_\_
12. ERGEN         \_\_\_\_\_

### Join the dots



## Business

FRIDAY, JUNE 25, 2021

**31** KFH achieves a remarkable issuance of \$750 million Mudaraba Sukuk**32** China's crypto-miners look abroad as regulators tighten noose**33** Bank of England keeps low rate, sees 'temporary' inflation spike

# US lawmakers advance bills aimed at curbing Big Tech

## Stage set for a tough floor fight in Congress

**WASHINGTON:** US lawmakers advanced legislation yesterday aimed at curbing the power of Big Tech firms with a sweeping reform of antitrust laws, setting the stage for a tough floor fight in Congress.

In a marathon session that adjourned in the early morning hours, House Judiciary Committee members approved five of six bills which take aim at the business practices of Google, Apple, Amazon and Facebook.

One of the measures would ban online platforms from favoring their own products and services — responding to complaints that dominant tech firms discriminate against, and crush rivals.

In a session marked by numerous attempts to amend or water down the legislation, the committee also approved an “interoperability” requirement for platforms that would make it easier for users to switch services while keeping their data, and a separate bill banning takeovers of rivals by large tech firms. The committee was set to reconvene later Thursday to consider the last of the bills, which aims to limit the ability of dominant platforms to leverage their control across multiple business lines.

### Curbing ‘gatekeepers’

Judiciary Committee chairman Jerry Nadler said the package of bills is aimed at “a small set of online platforms (which) have become gatekeepers for much of the digital marketplace” and argued that “in many cases, businesses and consumers no longer have meaningful alternatives online.”

The bills head to the full House of Representatives where a contentious debate is expected, amid fierce opposition from the tech sector and allies. Any bills would need passage of both the House and Senate and the president’s signature. The legislation would restrict how online platforms operate, and potentially set the stage for a breakup by limiting their ability to offer services on the marketplaces they run.

Republican Representative Darrell Issa noted that the committee was considering “radical” reforms worthy of weeks of hearings rather than one marathon session. “I believe many of these bills are going to die in the Senate if they ever get out of the House,” Issa said. Clash points included whether it is right to target laws at four big tech companies and whether government agencies will hobble them instead of letting them adapt to competition.

Republican Representative Ken Buck, a supporter of the overhaul, said the legislation “represents a scalpel, not a chainsaw, to deal with the most important aspects of antitrust reform,”



in dealing with “these monopolists (who) routinely use their gatekeeper power to crush competitors, harm innovation and destroy the free market.”

But Republican Jim Jordan criticized the effort, renewing his argument that Big Tech firms suppress conservative voices. “These bills don’t fix that problem — they make it worse,” Jordan said. “They don’t break up Big Tech. They don’t stop censorship.” Steve Chabot, another Republican, called the initiative “an effort for big government to take over Big Tech.”

### Pushback from industry

Tech firms and others warned of negative consequences for popular 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.

Apple released a report arguing that one likely impact — opening up the iPhone to apps from outside platforms — could create security and privacy risks for users. Forcing Apple to allow “sideloading” of apps would mean “malicious actors would take advantage of the opportunity by devoting more resources to develop sophisticated attacks targeting iOS users,” the report said. Amazon vice president Brian Huseman likewise warned of “significant negative effects,” both for sellers and consumers using the e-commerce platform, and reduced price competition.

“It will be much harder for these third-party sellers to create awareness for their business,” Huseman said. “Removing the selection of these sellers from Amazon’s store would also create less price competition for products, and likely end up increasing prices for consumers. The committee is moving unnecessarily fast in pushing these bills forward.” — AFP

## Business

# KFH achieves a remarkable issuance of \$750 million Mudaraba Sukuk

## Al-Marzouq: The historic issuance is the largest in Kuwait in terms of volume

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Finance House (KFH) announced its successful issuance of \$750 million AT1 Mudaraba Sukuk. Chairman of Kuwait Finance House (KFH) Hamad Abdulmohsen Al-Marzouq said that the issuance received subscription orders exceeding \$2 billion, covering three times the targeted issue size, with an annual yield of 3.6 percent.

He added that Mudaraba Sukuk aims to support KFH's Tier 1 capital in accordance with Central Bank of Kuwait instructions and Basel III requirements. The new issuance gives KFH the opportunity to diversify its financing resources, increase its financial and investment capabilities, support the infrastructure projects and the local productive economic sectors as well as help customers with their expansion plans regionally and globally. The non-call 5-year perpetual instru-

ment will be listed on London Stock Exchange. Al-Marzouq said that this historic Sukuk is the largest issuance in Kuwait in terms of size and has the lowest yield for an AT1 issuance in Kuwait. "Acted as global coordinator and joint lead manager for the Sukuk issuance along with other financial institutions, KFH Capital has succeeded in strengthening its role in arranging Sukuk issuances regionally and globally," Al-Marzouq said.

He praised the success of the deal which was oversubscribed in one day receiving orders from investors from the Middle East, Europe and Asia, most of them banks, financial institutions and investment funds. Al-Marzouq explained that the high demand on Sukuk reflects the confidence of investors from different regional and international capital markets in KFH and its capabilities



Hamad Abdulmohsen Al-Marzouq

and strategies, in addition to their trust in the economy, the banking sector and the local market despite current challenges posed by COVID-19.

He added that the successful issuance of KFH Sukuk is a clear indication of the bank's strong credit,

financial position and the prestigious position it enjoys among regional and global investors, in addition to its efficient operations and reliable and outstanding performance as one of the leading banking groups in the region. Given the high demand of investors from all over the world on subscribing to Sukuk recently issued by GCC companies and Banks, Al-Marzouq stressed the importance of the Islamic financial instruments and their role in enhancing the global capital markets and helping issuers implement their future expansion and growth plans.



- Subscription orders cover 3 times the targeted issue size
- A high demand reflects customers' confidence and the strong credit position of KFH
- KFH Capital acted as a global coordinator and joint lead manager

## France takes Apple to court over 'abusive' practices

**PARIS:** A Paris court will hear in September a lawsuit supported by the French government against Apple that alleges the US tech giant uses abusive commercial practices against startups, a source said yesterday. The lawsuit, filed in 2018 by France's competition and anti-fraud agency in the name of Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire, seeks a halt to the practices and a fine of 2.0 million euros (\$2.4 million), the source said, confirming a report by the French business daily Les Echos.

The lawsuit follows three years of investigation by the competition and anti-fraud agency and a recent complaint by France Digitale, an association of French tech startups.

The Paris business court has set a trial date for September 17, the source said. The competition and anti-fraud agency, which contacted by AFP, would only confirm that legal proceedings are under way.

Le Maire complained in 2018 that French startups selling their apps to Apple and Google were having prices dictated to them by tech giants and were unilaterally modifying contracts. "Three months ahead of the French presidency of the EU, the result of this lawsuit will be historic," said Nicolas Brien, president of the European Startup Network, which groups national federations from 24 European countries.

"Either Apple is convicted of having violated existing



law, or Apple slips through the cracks and we've got proof that existing laws don't allow us to regulate systemic platforms," Brien told AFP.

Such a ruling would provide a major boost to efforts to put teeth in the Digital Markets Act. The EU is currently rewriting the rules of the game for tech giants with the Digital Markets Act and a companion law, the Digital Services Act. The goal is to set up special rules for systemic platforms, or "gatekeepers", in order to protect consumers, companies and potential rivals from their overwhelming market power.

Brien said the contractual conditions that Apple imposes on app developers to reach customers through the AppStore are tilted in Apple's favor. He said he hoped the court would force Apple to rewrite the contractual terms for app publishers. "It's time to cut open the straitjacket," Brien said. —AFP

## IMF chief warns of 'two-track recovery' in Africa

**WASHINGTON:** Warning the continent faces slower growth, rising debt levels and a shortage of COVID-19 vaccines, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva on Wednesday appealed for more aid to African countries to help them bounce back from the pandemic. "Africa is now facing the world's fastest growth rate for new COVID cases, with an exponential trajectory even more alarming than during the second wave in January," she said in an address to the African Development Bank's annual meeting. "It is a human tragedy—and an economic calamity."

While the global economy is expected to grow six percent this year, the Washington-based crisis lender forecasts Africa will see only a 3.2 percent expansion, excluding oil-rich Libya.

And while wealthy countries are rolling out COVID-19 vaccines to large shares of their populations, Georgieva said only 0.6 percent of Africa's adult population has been fully vaccinated. "The warning signs are clear: a two-track pandemic is leading to a two-track recovery. Africa is already falling behind in terms of growth prospects," she said. Many sub-Saharan African countries had high debt levels before the pandemic, and they've risen sharply since COVID-19's arrival, Georgieva said, climbing "more than six percentage points to 58 percent of GDP, their highest level in almost two decades." —AFP

## Business

# China's crypto-miners look abroad as Beijing regulators tighten noose

## Analysts see financial risks, energy goals as reasons behind clampdown

**BEIJING:** When a prefecture in northwestern China's Xinjiang region ordered a halt on cryptocurrency mining projects this month, Chris Zhu scrambled to move clients' machines southward, spending over a week to reassemble in Sichuan.

But after the shift, he received another notice—authorities in southwestern Sichuan were also putting a stop to the industry, in a turbulent year that has lost his company millions.

"We're thinking of ways to go abroad," said Zhu, whose company handles the maintenance of mining machines. He is among businessmen and miners now planning to seek their fortunes overseas—in countries ranging from the United States to Kazakhstan—as Beijing tightens the screws on the industry. Crypto-mining is the process by which computers generate a series of complicated hexadecimal number sequences needed to mint new virtual currency and validate financial transactions—a task that requires massive amounts of processing power.

Chinese mines power nearly 80 percent of the global trade in cryptocurrencies despite a domestic trading ban since 2017, relying on the competitive advantage of cheap access to power and hardware.

But several provinces have recently ordered the closure of mines. Mountainous Sichuan was China's second-biggest bitcoin mining province, according to data compiled by Cambridge University that tracked the world's largest digital currency.

Authorities have also ordered shutdowns in the coal- and hydropower-rich regions of Inner Mongolia and Qinghai, with citizens encouraged to report illegal operations. More than 90 percent of the country's bitcoin mining capacity has now been shut down, according to estimates

published by state media tabloid Global Times.

### Major relocation

Zhu estimates that 10 to 20 percent of miners in China have started their move abroad. "We spent around 10 days getting to Sichuan, only for operations to stop there too," he told AFP. "It's going to be tough to continue here." Zhu's company INBTC handled a 260-megawatt site in Xinjiang before being forced to pull the plug.

"With the hit on Sichuan, we had nothing left," he said. On Monday, US-listed Chinese firm BIT Mining announced it had delivered its first batch of 320 mining machines to Kazakhstan, after Sichuan authorities ordered power companies to stop supplying electricity to crypto-miners.

It will also ship its remaining mining machines abroad. Nic Carter, general partner at Boston-based venture fund Castle Island Ventures, considers the situation "an effective terminal shutdown on mining in the country". He said that 50 to 60 percent of the bitcoin hashrate—a measure of the overall computing power used in the bitcoin network—could be relocated out of China. "Everyone I've talked to, in China as a miner, is looking for hosting outside of the country," said Carter.

### Broadening horizons

Industry players say Central Asia and North America are popular destinations Chinese miners are considering. "When you could mine in China, many people were not willing to go abroad," said a Chinese miner surnamed Li, who has three mines in Kazakhstan. He said he moved his operations out in 2018 for cheaper electricity, and is now helping friends export "several thousand" bitcoin mining machines. But Alan Dor-

The economic sanctions are the most sweeping measures imposed against Belarus so far by the EU and come after Lukashenko sparked outrage by intercepting a Ryanair passenger jet in May to arrest dissident journalist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega.

The bloc on Monday added 86 more individuals and entities to a sanctions blacklist over the diversion of the Athens to Vilnius flight and the broader repression of opposition since Lukashenko claimed victory in an election in August deemed fraudulent by the West. That takes to 166 the number of people—including Lukashenko, two of his sons and a daughter-in-law—put on an asset freeze and visa ban blacklist since the crisis erupted in Belarus. The US, Britain and Canada also joined in with the bloc on Monday by imposing coordinated sanctions on the regime in Belarus.

In addition, the EU last month already banned Belarusian airlines from flying to the bloc and stopped its carriers using Belarusian airspace. Lukashenko—who has ruled the ex-Soviet state since 1994 — has so far shrugged off Western pressure with the support of key ally Russia. — AFP



Crypto-mining requires huge amounts of processing power, as is seen at this bitcoin mining data center in Canada. —AFP

jiyev, president of the Association of Blockchain and Data Center Industry of Kazakhstan, said that while interest is growing, Canada and the United States are more likely destinations. He cited "stronger cultural ties" through local Chinese communities, but said that Kazakhstan had a "less attractive" tax regime and jurisdiction. Carter said upstate New York is another popular destination, while Texas is often cited as a mining location. The southern state's governor also has an accommodating stance to mining. "Historically, the biggest risk to (miners) is not power prices... it's political risk," he said. For now, industry players say many are still looking for suitable destinations.

### Energy, financial concerns

Analysts have pointed to financial risks and energy goals as reasons behind China's crypto clampdown. Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies cannot be traced by a country's central bank, making them difficult to regulate. Beijing is also believed to fear the proliferation of illicit investments and fundraising, with crypto transactions threatening controls.

On Monday, China's central bank said it told five major banks and payment giant Alipay to halt crypto-related transactions. Another factor is energy consumption in mining, as Beijing forges ahead with plans to achieve net-zero emissions by 2060. —AFP

## EU imposes sanctions on key Belarus sectors

**BRUSSELS:** The European Union yesterday imposed sanctions on key sectors of the Belarus economy, ratcheting up pressure on the regime of President Alexander Lukashenko after the forced landing of an airliner. The new package looks to hit key sources of revenue for the authorities in Minsk by restricting trade in potash fertilizer, petroleum and tobacco products, a statement said.

It limits access for Belarus to the EU's capital markets and bans providing insurance to government and public bodies. There is also a prohibition on the sale of technology to Belarus that could be used to intercept phone or internet communications and "dual-use" military equipment that could be used to crack down on demonstrators.

## German business morale hits 3-year high

**FRANKFURT:** German business confidence rose to a near three-year high in June, a key survey showed yesterday, buoyed by reopenings and falling coronavirus infection rates in Europe's top economy.

The Munich-based Ifo institute's monthly confidence barometer, based on a survey of 9,000 companies, climbed to 101.8 points from 99.2 in May. The reading was slightly better than analysts had predicted and reached its highest level since November 2018.

"The German economy is shaking off the coronavirus crisis," said Ifo president Clemens Fuest.

Businesses were both more optimistic about their current situation and about the outlook for the second half of the year, the survey found. The

services industry was particularly upbeat as hotels and restaurants stir back to life after months of shutdowns, while the retail sector recorded the largest jump in sentiment since German reunification in 1990.

In manufacturing and construction the sunny mood was clouded by ongoing production bottlenecks blamed on shortages of key supplies including semiconductors and timber. "The general outlook for the German economy has improved," said ING bank economist Carsten Brzeski.

"The vaccination program has picked up speed and with currently more than 50 percent of the population having had a first jab, the reopening of the economy has gained momentum," he said.

"New variants of the virus, however, could still spoil the reopening party." The pandemic-induced downturn saw the German economy shrink by 4.7 percent in 2020.

But the export powerhouse is expected to bounce back strongly, with Economy Minister Peter Altmaier forecasting up to 4.0 percent growth in 2021. — AFP



## Business

# Bank of England keeps low rate, sees 'temporary' inflation spike

## BoE echoes warnings from ECB, US Federal Reserve

**LONDON:** The Bank of England yesterday froze interest rates at a record-low but forecast a "temporary" inflation spike as the economy reopens, echoing warnings from the European Central Bank and the US Federal Reserve. The world's major central banks are grappling with fears of an inflationary spike, fuelled by commodity price gains, and worries over the health of post-COVID economic recovery.

The BoE's monetary policy committee (MPC) said in a statement that it held borrowing costs at 0.1 percent and also maintained the level of its stimulus measures—but warned inflation would likely top 3.0 percent. The pound dipped slightly against the dollar and euro after the news, which was in line with market expectations.

### 'Transitory' inflation bounce

"The committee's expectation is that the direct impact of rises in commodity prices on CPI inflation will be transitory," read minutes from the gathering. "More generally, the ... central expectation is that the economy will experience a temporary period of strong GDP growth and above-target CPI inflation, after which growth and inflation will fall back."

Consumer Prices Index (CPI) inflation was set to shoot further above the central bank's 2.0 percent official target. "Inflation is expected to pick up further above the target, owing primarily to developments in energy and other commodity prices, and is likely to exceed 3.0 percent for a temporary period," the BoE warned.

Both the Federal Reserve and ECB kept their own ultra-low rates and economic support measures intact in recent weeks, insisting also that high inflation would be temporary. UK inflation in May hit 2.1 percent—the highest level since before the pandemic—with clothing, fuel and oil prices rebounding as the economy gradually reopens. The BoE remains keen not to snub out any nascent economic recovery by raising rates too soon, following a raft of encouraging data for the period.

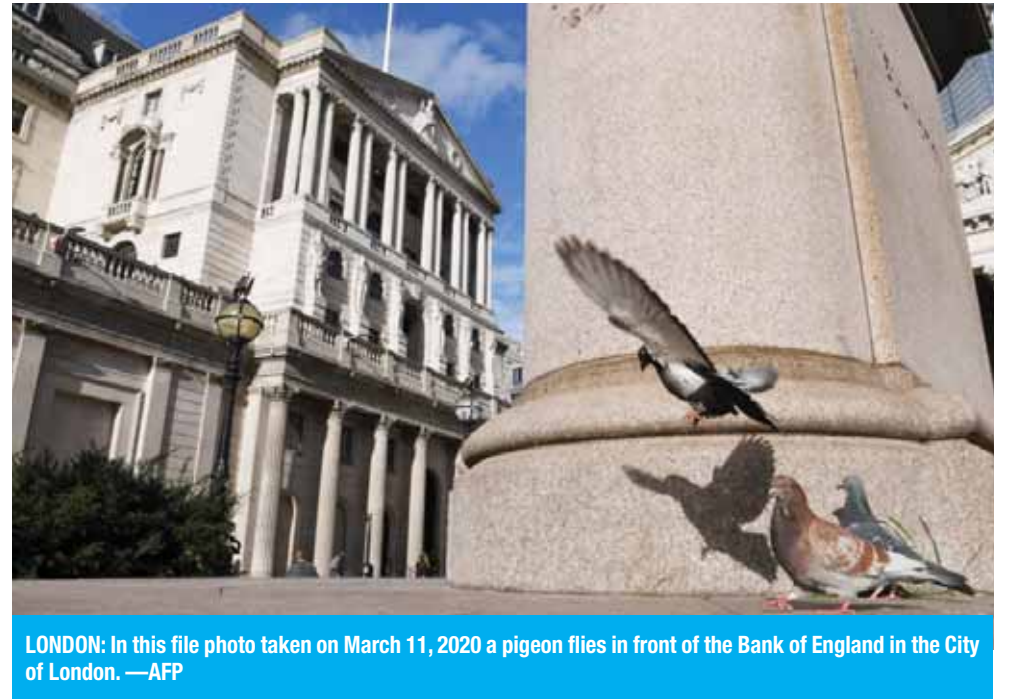
"The Committee does not intend to tighten monetary policy at least until there is clear evidence that significant progress is being made in eliminating spare capacity and achieving the 2.0 percent inflation target sustainably," it added yesterday. Inflation in Britain has nevertheless accelerated sharply since March, when the government began a phased lifting of coronavirus restrictions.

### Outlook upgrade

The BoE also forecast Thursday that the UK economy would surge by 5.5 percent in the second quarter or three months to June, up from prior guidance of 4.25-percent growth.

That would follow a 1.5-percent contraction in the first quarter.

"Bank staff have revised up their expectations ... as restrictions on economic activity have eased," the minutes added. "This recovery in activity has been most pronounced in the consumer-facing services for which restrictions



LONDON: In this file photo taken on March 11, 2020 a pigeon flies in front of the Bank of England in the City of London. —AFP

were loosened in April." Under a phased re-opening, bars and restaurants restarted outdoor dining in April and indoor services in May. Non-essential retailers meanwhile reopened their doors in April. The economy is set to fully reopen on July 19 after the government delayed the date

by four weeks due to surging infections of the Delta variant of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19.

The bank's chief task is to use monetary policy to keep inflation close to target, in order to preserve the value of money. —AFP

## India's Reliance unveils \$10bn green energy push

**MUMBAI:** Indian oil-to-telecom giant Reliance Industries unveiled plans yesterday to invest \$10 billion in renewable energy over the next three years as Asia's third-largest economy struggles to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels.

In a virtual address to shareholders, Reliance chairman and Asia's richest man Mukesh Ambani said the new business aims to "bridge the green energy divide in India and globally". The conglomerate's multi-billion-dollar fortune is powered by oil and petrochemicals businesses, but Reliance has aggressively diversified into areas including telecoms and retail in recent years.

As part of its push towards renewable energy, Ambani said the company had begun work on a 5,000-acre manufacturing facility in India's western state of Gujarat. The project will produce solar energy and green hydrogen that "will put Gujarat and India on the world's solar and hydrogen map", Ambani said.

"I envision a future when our country will be transformed from a large importer of fossil energy to a large exporter of clean solar energy solutions," the billionaire added.

Reliance aims to produce 100 gigawatts of solar power by 2030, nearly a quarter of the 450-gigawatt target set by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But in a sign of its continued focus on its core fossil fuel businesses, India's most valuable company also told shareholders that Saudi Aramco Chairman Yasir Al-Rumayyan would join its board.



Employees attend a customer at the Reliance Industries Petrol pump in Navi Mumbai yesterday.

The appointment will strengthen Reliance's "strategic partnership" with Saudi Aramco, Ambani said, with the two firms working to finalize a \$15-billion deal that will see the energy giant buy a 20 percent stake in the Indian company. India is the world's third-largest emitter of carbon dioxide with rising air pollution levels resulting in an estimated 1.7 million deaths in 2019, according to a study by medical journal The Lancet. —AFP

## Transportation orders return US durable goods to growth in May

**WASHINGTON:** Orders for big-ticket manufactured goods grew in May after contracting the month before, with transportation orders leading the increase, government data said yesterday.

Durable goods orders rose 2.3 percent to \$253.3 billion last month, the Commerce Department said, slightly less than expected but an improvement on the 0.8 percent upwardly revised decrease seen in April. Transportation equipment made up the majority of the increase, ending two months of declines with a 7.6 percent gain to \$74.2 billion. Orders for nondefense aircraft and parts, like Boeing's airplanes, grew 27.4 percent.

Excluding transportation, durable goods orders rose 0.3 percent, weaker than expected. "Total durable goods orders rose less than expected in May although the gain more than reversed a decline in April," Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics said.

"Strong demand and lean inventories are still supportive of the manufacturing sector. But supply bottlenecks and a rotation from goods to services could be constraints over coming months." Capital goods saw strong growth, with a 4.2 percent increase in orders. Defense capital goods rose 17.4 percent. Motor vehicles and parts, which are part of transportation equipment, grew 2.1 percent, even as the sector battles an ongoing shortage of semiconductors that fueled an 8.1 percent drop in April. —AFP

Stars

STAR TRACK



**Aries (March 21-April 19)**

Today is a day of reckoning in some ways, Aries. Attention to detail is important, but make sure it doesn't become your only focus. Situations are likely to crop up in which you've analyzed and considered every single detail but failed to see the big picture. This is a wonderful day to remedy such situations. Take care of anything that needs a broader perspective.



**Taurus (April 20-May 20)**

Be more sensitive to other people's space today, Taurus. Respect their feelings and give them room to breathe. This is a great day to pursue creative projects. Do things involving art or music. Sing, play an instrument, or give your music collection a boost. There are opportunities open now that involve other people who share the same interests as you.



**Gemini (May 21-June 20)**

Think about old times and people with whom you've had strong connections, Gemini. Remember the good times you shared with people of common interests and similar hobbies. Be sentimental and mushy. Mend bridges and bring resolution to sticky issues. Be harmonious with the people and situations around you. World peace begins with you. Incorporate more of this ideal into your life.



**Cancer (June 21-July 22)**

You may have to make some serious adjustments to your approach today in order to chime in with the energy of the group, Cancer. Adopt a more inwardly directed attitude and see what you can learn by tuning into others' subtle messages. The masculine and feminine sides of your nature are working harmoniously. You might find that they're both asking for a quiet night in.



**Leo (July 23-August 22)**

You should feel a renewed sense of confidence today that will help anchor your emotions and give strength to your thoughts and ideas, Leo. Don't take a pessimistic attitude toward everything around you. Look at the good instead of the bad. By maintaining a negative viewpoint about things, you're only adding to the problem. You have every right to be happy.



**Virgo (August 23-September 22)**

Many people spend their whole adult lives trying to discover their true self, Virgo. A great deal of social conditioning by parents and our environment plays a role in shaping our minds. Realize that many of these influences don't necessarily ring true with your inner self. Take this day to uncover some of those early influences and discard the ones that don't belong to you.



**Libra (September 23-October 22)**

Today is an extremely creative day for you, Libra. You should allot time and space to pursuing an artistic goal. You're like a magician who has the power to bring fantasies to life. Spread the magic to others and don't second-guess your incredible healing ability. You have a strong presence that radiates powerfully. Be charitable and generous to others.



**Scorpio (October 23-November 21)**

There's nothing worse than last-minute details, Scorpio. Concentrate on an important upcoming event. Make sure you have everything in line now so you don't get caught dealing with that one thing that ends up putting a monkey wrench in your plans later. Anticipate the problems that you're likely to encounter and take actions now that will nip these situations in the bud.



**Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)**

Your intuitive side is aligning with your rational side today, Sagittarius. Listen to your emotions. Take a sensitive approach to all people and situations. Your head may be up in the clouds. Take elements of this lofty perspective and incorporate them into your conscious mind. Run away with your fantasies. Nurture your loved ones.



**Capricorn (December 22-January 19)**

Slow down the pace today, Capricorn. This is a day to sit back and observe and contemplate. Your mind may go in a hundred different directions, and you may be unsure which route to take. Try to quiet the buzzing chatter within. Be receptive to the loving, sensitive forces around you. Try not to disturb the flow by bringing up unrelated issues and hurtful gossip.



**Aquarius (January 20- February 18)**

Your nurturing instincts are strong today, Aquarius. This is an excellent day to reveal your opinions. You've probably been sitting in the background, quietly observing and collecting data for quite some time. Now is the time to come out of the shadows and let your conclusions be heard. Don't let others push you around. Take a stand for what you know is right.



**Pisces (February 19-March 20)**

Things aren't necessarily going to go well today, Pisces. There is the potential for conflict. You may feel a bit lost in the fog. Strap on your compass and you will be fine. Realize that you will make it through this day much better if you approach every situation from the other person's perspective. Think more of others than of yourself. Be sensitive and receptive.

Country Codes

Afghanistan	0093	Iran	0098
Albania	00355	Iraq	00964
Algeria	00213	Ireland	00353
Andorra	00376	Italy	0039
Angola	00244	Ivory Coast	00225
Anguilla	001264	Jamaica	001876
Antigua	001268	Japan	0081
Argentina	0054	Jordan	00962
Armenia	00374	Kazakhstan	007
Australia	0061	Kenya	00254
Austria	0043	Kiribati	00686
Bahamas	001242	Kuwait	00965
Bahrain	00973	Kyrgyzstan	00996
Bangladesh	00880	Laos	00856
Barbados	001246	Latvia	00371
Belarus	00375	Lebanon	00961
Belgium	0032	Liberia	00231
Belize	00501	Libya	00218
Benin	00229	Lithuania	00370
Bermuda	001441	Luxembourg	00352
Bhutan	00975	Macau	00853
Bolivia	00591	Macedonia	00389
Bosnia	00387	Madagascar	00261
Botswana	00267	Majorca	0034
Brazil	0055	Malawi	00265
Brunei	00673	Malaysia	0060
Bulgaria	00359	Maldives	00960
Burkina Faso	00226	Mali	00223
Burundi	00257	Malta	00356
Cambodia	00855	Marshall Islands	00692
Cameroon	00237	Martinique	00596
Canada	001	Mauritania	00222
Cape Verde	00238	Mauritius	00230
Cayman Islands	001345	Mayotte	00269
Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
Chad	00235	Micronesia	00691
Chile	0056	Moldova	00373
China	0086	Monaco	00377
Colombia	0057	Mongolia	00976
Comoros	00269	Montserrat	001664
Congo	00242	Morocco	00212
Cook Islands	00682	Mozambique	00258
Costa Rica	00506	Myanmar (Burma)	0095
Croatia	00385	Namibia	00264
Cuba	0053	Nepal	00977
Cyprus	00357	Netherlands (Holland)	0031
Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
Czech Republic	00420	New Caledonia	00687
Denmark	0045	New Zealand	0064
Diego Garcia	00246	Nicaragua	00505
Djibouti	00253	Niger	00227
Dominica	001767	Nigeria	00234
Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
Egypt	0020	Northern Ireland (UK)	0044
El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
England (UK)	0044	Norway	0047
Equatorial Guinea	00240	Oman	00968
Eritrea	00291	Pakistan	0092
Estonia	00372	Palau	00680
Ethiopia	00251	Panama	00507
Falkland Islands	00500	Papua New Guinea	00675
Faroe Islands	00298	Paraguay	00595
Fiji	00679	Peru	0051
Finland	00358	Philippines	0063
France	0033	Poland	0048
French Guiana	00594	Portugal	00351
French Polynesia	00689	Puerto Rico	001787
Gabon	00241	Qatar	00974
Gambia	00220	Romania	0040
Georgia	00995	Russian Federation	007
Germany	0049	Rwanda	00250
Ghana	00233	Saint Helena	00290
Gibraltar	00350	Saint Kitts	001869
Greece	0030	Saint Lucia	001758
Greenland	00299	Saint Pierre	00508
Grenada	001473	Saint Vincent	001784
Guadeloupe	00590	Samoa US	00684
Guam	001671	Samoa West	00685
Guatemala	00502	San Marino	00378
Guinea	00224	Sao Tome	00239
Guyana	00592	Saudi Arabia	00966
Haiti	00509	Scotland (UK)	0044
Holland (Netherlands)	0031	Senegal	00221
Honduras	00504	Seychelles	00284
Hong Kong	00852	Sierra Leone	00232
Hungary	0036	Singapore	0065
Ibiza (Spain)	0034	Slovakia	00421
Iceland	00354	Slovenia	00386
India	0091	Solomon Islands	00677
Indian Ocean	00873	Somalia	00252
Indonesia	0062	South Africa	0027

## Sports

# New Zealand beat India in World Test final

**SOUTHAMPTON:** New Zealand enjoyed the greatest triumph in their cricket history as they beat India by eight wickets in the inaugural World Test Championship final at Southampton on Wednesday. Two years after their agonizing Super Over loss to England in the 50-over World Cup final at Lord's, the Blackcaps claimed their first major global title.

Set a modest target of 139 in 53 overs, New Zealand finished on 140-2 with time to spare in a match extended into a reserve sixth day following two days lost to rain. Off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin reduced New Zealand to 44-2 by removing openers Tom Latham and Devon Conway to the delight of India fans.

But New Zealand captain Kane Williamson and Ross Taylor, the team's most-experienced batsmen, settled any lingering nerves in an unbroken stand of 96. Williamson, who won plaudits for the sporting way he dealt with defeat in the 2019 World Cup final, was 52 not out. It was only the second fifty of the match after New Zealand opener Devon Conway's first-innings effort and followed Williamson's first-innings 49.

Taylor, who hit the winning boundary, was unbeaten on 47. India's last hope of turning the tide evaporated when, with New Zealand 55 runs shy of victory at 84-2, Cheteshwar Pujara dropped a regulation slip catch off the luckless Jasprit Bumrah to reprieve Taylor on 26. Taylor ended the match when he whipped Mohammed Shami off his pads for four.

## 'Great heart'

"It's a very special feeling," said Williamson

at the presentation ceremony as he paid tribute to a "formidable" India side. "It was just great the heart that our team showed to get across the line in what was a brilliant Test. We know we don't always have the stars — we rely on a few other bits and pieces to try and stay in games and be competitive and I think we saw that in this match."

In a match in which bowlers held sway, New Zealand's all-pace attack did most damage Wednesday by dismissing India for just 170 in their second innings as blue skies provided the best batting conditions of the game. Tim Southee took 4-48 in 19 overs, with longtime new-ball partner Trent Boult striking twice in an over during his 3-39.

The towering Kyle Jamieson, named player of the match, followed his first-innings 5-31 by snaring India captain Virat Kohli again during a miserly 2-30 in 24 overs. "We did really well with the ball in the first innings to pull things back nicely but this morning was the difference, where the Kiwi bowlers really executed their plans to perfection," said Kohli, whose side face England in a five-Test series starting in August.

New Zealand would have confronted an even smaller target had Rishabh Pant not been dropped on five during his innings of 41. Few cricket lovers would begrudge New Zealand, a country with a population of around five million compared with cricket powerhouse's India's 1.3 billion, their success.

They entered a final worth \$1.6 million to the winners, hardened by a recent 1-0 series win in England, while India were playing their first Test since March. The reserve day, the first time a Test has gone into a



**SOUTHAMPTON:** New Zealand's captain Kane Williamson (center) lifts the winner's Mace as New Zealand players celebrate victory on the final day of the ICC World Test Championship Final between New Zealand and India at the Ageas Bowl in Southampton, southwest England on Wednesday. —AFP

sixth day since the 2005 Super Series in Australia, was deployed in the hope a two-year effort to crown red-ball cricket's first official world champions would end with an outright winner.

India resumed on 64-2, with key batsman Kohli adding just five runs to his overnight eight when he again fell to Royal Challengers Bangalore team-mate Jamieson, edging to BJ Watling in the wicketkeeper's final match before retirement.

India's 71-3 became 72-4 when Pujara

edged Jamieson low to a diving Taylor at first slip. In came Pant, whose batting heroics helped India achieve a remarkable come-from-behind series win in Australia earlier this year.

But the wicketkeeper should have been out soon afterwards when he edged Jamieson, only for Southee to drop a routine slip chance. Pant eventually fell when his skied edge off left-armed Boult was brilliantly caught by Henry Nicholls, running back from point. —AFP

## Kohli calls for World Test final to be played over three matches

**SOUTHAMPTON:** Virat Kohli said future editions of the World Test Championship final should be played as a three-match series after his India side were beaten by New Zealand in the inaugural showpiece match at Southampton on Wednesday.

New Zealand triumphed by eight wickets in a final extended into a sixth day after two days were completely washed out. The Blackcaps, claiming a first major world title, chased down a modest target of 139 after their impressive pace attack restricted India to 170 in their second innings.

India captain Kohli, twice dismissed in the final by Royal Challenge Bangalore team-mate and towering New Zealand paceman Kyle Jamieson, the player of the match following a seven-wicket haul, insisted his comments were made "not because we're not on the winning side, but with the aim of creating an "absolutely memorable" saga.

While congratulating New Zealand on their victory, star batsman Kohli added: "I think it has to happen over a period of three

games minimum. It has to be a test of character over three Tests... (that) will be a good measure of how things really are."

India, who will remain in England for a five-Test series against Joe Root's men starting in August, recently won 3-1 at home to England after coming from behind to complete a stunning series win away to Australia earlier this year.

"We are not too bothered by this result because we understand as a Test side what we've done over the last three or four years, not just over the last 18 months," said Kohli. "This is not a measure of who we are as a team."

New Zealand captain Kane Williamson, having experienced the pain of defeat in two successive 50-over World Cup finals, with a 2015 thrashing by co-hosts Australia followed by an agonizing Super Over loss to England at Lord's two years ago, unsurprisingly took a different view.

"I suppose the exciting part to finals is that anything can happen," said Williamson, who steered New Zealand home with an unbeaten 52 to follow his first-innings 49. "We know how fickle cricket is," added Williamson, who shared an unbroken partnership of 96 with fellow senior batsman Ross Taylor (47 not out). The one-off factor does bring a unique dynamic, which does make it exciting. We've been on all different sides of that statement."

Scheduling a final two years in the making was difficult enough for the International Cricket Council, given the vast number of bilateral matches arranged by leading cricket countries rather than the global governing body. "I guess the challenge would be sched-



**SOUTHAMPTON:** India's Virat Kohli reacts before the presentation on the final day of the ICC World Test Championship Final between New Zealand and India at the Ageas Bowl in Southampton, southwest England on Wednesday. —AFP

uling that (final) series amongst a lot of cricket that's already on," said Williamson, who accepted a longer series would be more "revealing". Nevertheless, Williamson said there was no doubting both finalists' commitment to this match. "The first time that there's been this competition on and both teams were fully geared for the game, and it was a brilliant game of cricket," he said. —AFP

## Sports

# Verstappen ready to pounce as cracks widen in Mercedes armor

**SPIELBERG:** Max Verstappen will seek to extend his lead over Lewis Hamilton in the world championship at Sunday's Styrian Grand Prix as the cracks in Mercedes' armor widen. The 23-year-old Dutchman heads the defending seven-time champion by 12 points after beating him at last Sunday's French Grand Prix as the Formula One circus prepares for the second part of a triple-header of three consecutive races, two in Austria following the closely-fought encounter at Le Castellet.

Hamilton, 36, and his Mercedes team were unable to find an answer to Red Bull's competitiveness, speed and superior tactical acumen in France and their hopes of retaining their titles could be badly damaged if they cannot recapture form and fortunes. But after licking their wounds, they are determined to bounce back with an attacking response to prevent their rivals claiming a fourth straight win for the first time since 2014.

Last year, when the sweeping circuit in the Styrian Alps also hosted two successive season-opening events, Mercedes won both with Hamilton and Valtteri Bottas claiming one apiece. However, Verstappen won in 2018 and 2019 and he has been the dominant force since Hamilton's last win in early May.

If he can triumph again in the Styrian race, he will be well-placed for a repeat seven days later in the Austrian Grand Prix and might then have a comfortable cushion in points advantage before Hamilton's home British Grand Prix at Silverstone in July.

Both men and both teams will know, however, that the Red Bull Ring, a down-sized version of its old Österreichring predecessor, remains a majestic track with a habit of creating drama and, occasionally, controversy.

Red Bull go into the weekend with a 36-point lead in the constructors championship and, importantly, a straight-line speed ad-

vantage that they demonstrated at the Paul Ricard circuit, leaving Hamilton and his team baffled and frustrated. The Briton, 36, could not explain if this was due to 'drag' - the use of less wing - or power from the upgraded Honda engines introduced in France and faces the prospect of extending his winless streak to four races for the first time since 2016, the only year since 2014 when he was not champion. His erstwhile Mercedes team-mate Nico Rosberg won the 2016 title, when Hamilton went five without a win.

## 'Have to improve'

He also went six without winning from 2017 to 2018, three at the end of one season and the start of the next. Cracks are appearing in Mercedes' once-impenetrable performance armor as last Sunday's loss, after leading when Verstappen ran wide at the first corner, showed.

Strategic errors by the team undid both Hamilton and Bottas, as conceded by Mercedes team strategist James Vowles and boss Toto Wolff. "In a season like this, every point will matter and make a difference," said Wolff. "And we've left points on the table at the last few races. We've debriefed France and we understand where we have to improve. Now it's all about focusing on bringing those improvements to the next two rounds in Austria where, hopefully, we can swing the positive momentum back in our favor."

Verstappen, showing composure beyond his years, has ignored the title speculation. "I just want to go to the next race and try to win again," he said. "I know it's not always possible, but we try as a team every weekend to get the best out of it."

He shrugged aside a recent exchange of comments suggesting he was faster than Hamilton. "It's just a bit of talk from both sides, which is fine. You have to believe in your own capabilities. I believe



**LE CASTELLET:** Winner Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen celebrates after crossing the finish line during the French Formula One Grand Prix at the Circuit Paul-Ricard in Le Castellet, southern France, on June 20, 2021. —AFP

I'm the fastest, but he also believes he's the fastest. In Austria, we have to set up the car well again and read the conditions. I don't know what the weather forecast is, but I'm looking forward to it. For sure, it will be close again." —AFP

## British Grand Prix allowed to have 140,000 crowd

**LONDON:** The British Grand Prix in July will take place in front of a capacity 140,000 crowd, Silverstone officials announced yesterday. Following talks between the Government and Silverstone chiefs, the race will be watched by the biggest sporting crowd in Britain since the start of the coronavirus pandemic last year. The British Grand Prix takes place on July 18 and Silverstone bosses will be allowed to sell out for the entire weekend of qualifying and the race itself. The news is a major boost to Silverstone chiefs, with managing director Stuart Pringle understood to have stressed to Government officials that the circuit would go bust if fans were not permitted.

"It is fantastic news that Silverstone will be a full capacity event and it will be an incredible weekend with hundreds of thousands of fans being there to see our first event Sprint event on the Saturday and the main event on Sunday," said Formula 1 president Stefano Domenicali.

"I want to express my huge appreciation to The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, Secretaries of State, Oliver Dowden and Michael Gove and Silverstone Managing Director, Stuart Pringle for their tireless work to achieve this great outcome. All of the drivers and the teams are hugely looking forward to Silverstone and we can't wait to be there in July." Both last year's British and 70th Anniversary Grands Prix at Silverstone took place behind closed doors. —AFP

## Rossi hopes to rise again at MotoGP's 'Temple of Speed'

**PARIS:** As one of MotoGP's two great surviving stars unexpectedly blazed again last weekend, the other seems to be struggling against the inevitable slide into darkness, but the Dutch Grand Prix on Sunday could offer Valentino Rossi hope.

As the chequered flag fell at the German Grand Prix last Sunday, it seemed inevitable that six-time world champion Marc Marquez had taken it. He might have missed a year after an awful arm injury, but he had won the last 10 times he had raced at the Sachsenring.

If the same logic applies at Assen, then perhaps Rossi, who has won 10 times at the track, will produce an even bigger surprise. The Italian has won one more world title than Marquez, but at 42 he is struggling to outpace father time. Demoted to the Yamaha satellite team SRT this season, the Italian has not finished better than 10th in the eight races. He limped in 14th in Germany and sits 19th in the rider standings.

"We need to figure out what happened in Germany and work well to make some improvements before we are back on track this weekend," Rossi told the Yamaha web site. Assen's 'Temple of Speed' has long suited Rossi. His last victory, back in 2017, came at the Dutch circuit. That triumph, coming 20 years and 311 days after he won the 125cc race in the Czech Republic in 1996, gave him the longest winning Grand Prix career.

"Assen is a great track for me," Rossi said. "I like the layout a lot, it is very flowing. It is somewhere I really enjoy and you always feel some great emotion when riding there. So we need to stay positive, concentrate on the final round before the summer break



**SACHSENRING:** Honda Spanish rider Marc Marquez (right) steers his motorbike in front of Yamaha-SRT Italian rider Valentino Rossi during the third free practice session ahead of the German motorcycle Grand Prix at the Sachsenring racing circuit in Hohenstein-Ernstthal near Chemnitz, eastern Germany, on June 19, 2021. —AFP

and achieve a good result in Assen."

SRT announced on Wednesday that their other regular rider, Franco Morbidelli, would miss the race after injuring a knee training on Tuesday. The Italian will be replaced by American Garrett Gerloff. Marquez meanwhile downplayed surging expectations.

He pointed out after his first victory in more than 18 months, that the narrow, winding Sachsenring suited him and his Honda, in particular the preponderance of left-hand turns put less strain on his weak right arm.

"In Assen we will struggle again," the Spaniard said. "We have enjoyed our moment after the Sachsenring, with the team, with my family and with those who helped me," he told the Honda web site on Tuesday, before striking a cautious note about Assen. "We have had good results there but of course our situation is different now." —AFP

## Sports

# Young scores 48 to power Hawks over Bucks in NBA playoffs

**WASHINGTON:** Atlanta's Trae Young scored a career playoff high 48 points and the Hawks edged host Milwaukee 116-113 in Wednesday's opening game of the NBA Eastern Conference finals. Young, who also contributed 11 assists and seven rebounds, scored 12 points in the fourth quarter to spark a rally that baffled the Bucks. "We just keep fighting until the end, no matter what the score is," Young said. "That's what we're going to do. We're going to keep fighting."

Young had the most points by any player making his conference finals debut since the NBA adopted the conference format 50 years ago. The best-of-seven series continues Friday at Milwaukee with the winner advancing to an NBA Finals matchup against either the Phoenix Suns or the Los Angeles Clippers. John Collins scored 23 points and grabbed 15 rebounds while Clint Capela had 12 points and 19 rebounds. "People overlook this team, take us for granted, so for us to come out here and get a win is big time," Collins said.

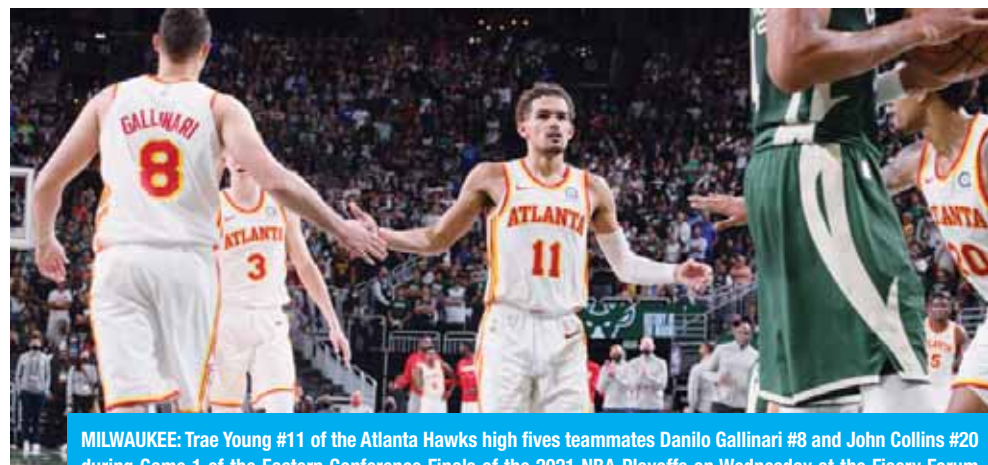
Greek star big man Giannis Antetokounmpo had 34 points, 12 rebounds and nine assists while Jrue Holiday had 33 points and 10 assists for the Bucks in a losing cause. "We'll get better," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said. "We'll get smarter game after game." It

was Milwaukee's first home playoff loss this season. "Young's a great player," Budenholzer said. "He had a great night. We feel like we can play better."

Collins scored eight points, six on dunks, and Young added seven in a 21-8 Atlanta run that gave the Hawks a 79-73 lead late in the third quarter before the Bucks rallied. Antetokounmpo scored six points to lead a 13-2 Bucks' run for a 105-98 lead, but Collins hit a jumper and Young, who hit 17-of-34 shots from the floor, added a 3-point play to lift the Hawks back within two points.

The game was poised on a knife's edge until Collins hit a 3-pointer and Capela scored on a rebound put-back that lifted the Hawks ahead 112-111 with 29.8 seconds remaining. Young grabbed a loose ball and sank two more free throws, then he and Antetokounmpo exchanged free throws in the final seconds to create the final margin.

Khris Middleton, who went 0-of-9 from 3-point range, missed an attempt to lift the Bucks level from beyond the arc in the final seconds to seal Atlanta's victory. "I believe in this team," Young said. "We knew we could get a stop. We just buckled down and got it. Our confidence never goes away. We put too much work in to stop believing in each other."



**MILWAUKEE:** Trae Young #11 of the Atlanta Hawks high fives teammates Danilo Gallinari #8 and John Collins #20 during Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Finals of the 2021 NBA Playoffs on Wednesday at the Fiserv Forum Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. —AFP

There more than 16,000 spectators in the Bucks' arena and about as many outside watching on a huge screen. The Hawks, who had lost their seven prior games in Milwaukee since 2016, were based in Milwaukee for four seasons in the 1950s. They won their only NBA title in 1958 while based in St. Louis. They last reached the NBA Finals in 1961 when based in St. Louis.

The Bucks lost to Toronto in the 2019 conference finals and to Miami in last year's conference semi-finals, with Antetokounmpo winning the NBA Most Valuable Player award both seasons. The Bucks have not reached the NBA Finals since 1974, when they lost to Boston in seven games. The Bucks won their only NBA title in 1971 when they swept Baltimore in the finals. —AFP

## Islanders beat Lightning to force NHL playoff showdown

**NEW YORK:** Anthony Beauvillier scored 68 seconds into overtime Wednesday and the New York Islanders forced a winner-take-all showdown for Stanley Cup Final berth by defeating defending champion Tampa Bay 3-2. The victory deadlocked the best-of-seven series 3-3 and set up a seventh game Friday at Tampa. The winner will face either the Montreal Canadiens or the Vegas Golden Knights in the Stanley Cup Final. Tampa Bay center Brayden Point stretched his playoff scoring streak to nine consecutive games, one shy of the NHL record, on a chip-in backhand from just outside the crease to open the scoring with 3:58 to play in the first period. Point moved one shy of the playoff goal streak record of 10 games set by Reggie Leach of the Philadelphia Flyers in 1976.

It was Point's 14th goal of the playoffs, matching his league-best total from last year's title run. The 25-year-old Canadian joined NHL legends Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux as the only players with back-to-back playoff runs of 12 or more goals.

Point also matched Buffalo's Pat LaFontaine from 1992 as the only players to score in each of the first six games of a playoff series. Tampa Bay's Anthony Cirelli, who assisted on Point's goal, gave the Lightning a 2-0 edge 12:36 into the second period on a breakaway goal, firing the puck between the legs of Islanders goaltender Semyon Varlamov.

New York answered 1:46 later on a backhand goal from Jordan Eberle that lifted the hosts within 2-1. Before the Lightning could manage a shot on goal in the third period, the Islanders had netted an equalizer, Scott Mayfield scoring the unassisted goal high into the near upper corner 11:16 into the third to lift the hosts level at 2-2, setting the stage for overtime and Beauvillier's winner. —AFP

## Durant to lead new US set of NBA stars at Olympics: Report

**NEW YORK:** Brooklyn Nets forward Kevin Durant will compete for a third Olympic title in Tokyo alongside a new group of NBA stars seeking gold, according to an ESPN report Wednesday. A story on the US-based sports television network's website said Durant, whose team was eliminated by Milwaukee in the second round of the NBA playoffs, will be the only player returning from the 2016 Rio champions.

USA Basketball finalized its roster on Wednesday with commitments from Chicago Bulls guard Zach LaVine and Detroit Pistons forward Jerami Grant, according to the story. Nets star guard James Harden was forced to skip the Olympics due to a hamstring injury, USA Basketball managing director Jerry Colangelo told ESPN. Those making their Olympic debut will include Portland's Damian Lillard, Washington's Bradley Beal, Miami's Bam Adebayo, Boston's Jayson Tatum and Golden State's Draymond Green.

The lineup reportedly also includes Cleveland forward Kevin Love, who helped the US to gold in London in 2012. Three other players on the reported roster remain in the NBA playoffs — Phoenix swingman Devin Booker and Milwaukee Bucks forward Khris Middleton and guard Jrue Holiday. All three could battle for an NBA title as late as July 22, the date of a possible NBA Finals game seven as well as the eve of the Olympic opening ceremonies.



**NEW YORK:** In this file photo taken on June 19, 2021 Kevin Durant #7 of the Brooklyn Nets grabs the loose ball as Jrue Holiday #21 of the Milwaukee Bucks defends in the first half during game seven of the Eastern Conference second round at Barclays Center in the Brooklyn borough of New York City. —AFP

Colangelo told ESPN that all three have agreed to fly to Japan by private plane in order to be in Tokyo when the Americans play their Olympic opener against France on July 25. The American Olympic squad will gather in Las Vegas on July 4 to begin a training camp and play exhibition games before departing for Japan. —AFP

## Sports

# Brazil eke out win against Colombia in Copa America

**RIO DE JANEIRO:** Brazil continued their winning romp through the Copa America Wednesday, eking out a controversial 2-1 victory against Colombia after struggling most of the match to answer a magnificent bicycle-kick goal by Luis Diaz.

The 11th-hour win gave the "Selecao" a perfect nine points from three matches in the South American championships, and extended their current winning streak to 11 matches. However, the victory was steeped in controversy: Brazil's second-half equalizer, a Roberto Firmino header, was preceded by a Neymar pass that glanced off Argentine referee Nestor Pitana.

Colombia heatedly argued afterward that play should have been stopped, but Pitana ruled neither side was hindered and allowed the match to continue. Disgruntled Colombia fans on social media turned the referee's name into a viral hashtag, joking he had played as "Brazil's 12th man." The resentment only grew when an unmarked Casemiro headed in the winner deep into stoppage time. However, Colombia, who are second in Group B with four points from four matches, still secured a spot in the quarter-finals.

## 'Sad' call

Porto winger Diaz opened the scoring in Rio de Janeiro in the 10th minute, when Juan Cuadrado lobbed an arcing cross from just outside the penalty area. Diaz executed a spectacular bicycle kick to rifle the ball past Brazil keeper Weverton. It was exactly the kind of play Brazil, which prides itself on beautiful football, has struggled to conjure recently, and even the home announcers hailed it as a "golaco."

Colombia looked content to play defense after that, and Brazil

dominated possession — but struggled to create opportunities. Then, in the 78th minute, Firmino finally found the equalizer with an authoritative header that sped past Colombian keeper David Ospina.

Colombia immediately erupted into protest, arguing Pitana's contact with the ball seconds earlier should have stopped play. But Pitana, who refereed the 2018 World Cup final, ruled the goal valid after checking the video.

"It's sad that with all the effort we made against one of the best teams in the world, we lost the match on a call like that," said Juventus striker Cuadrado. "A referee with that much international experience, who's refereed at the World Cup, makes a mistake and hurts the match. We never got past that play." Insult was added to injury 10 minutes into stoppage time, when Casemiro headed a Neymar corner past a distracted Colombia defense to give Brazil the win.

## Ecuador, Peru draw

In the early match, Ecuador and Peru failed to settle who advances to the quarter-finals, drawing 2-2 in Goiania. Ecuador took the early lead from an own goal, the ball going in off the foot of Peru's Renato Tapia in a jostle in front of the goal in the 23rd minute.

Ayrton Preciado scored in stoppage time to close the first half with Ecuador ahead of Peru 2-0. Peru's Gianluca Lapadula answered in the 49th minute off a pass from Christian Cueva and Andre Carrillo netted the equalizer in the 54th minute.

Ecuador had come into the match with only one point, earned in a draw with Venezuela, while Peru had three. Each earned another point, putting Peru in joint second place with Colombia. Brazil now have nine



**RIO DE JANEIRO:** Brazil's Neymar (left) and Colombia's Wilmar Barrios vie for the ball during the Conmebol Copa America 2021 football tournament group phase match at the Nilton Santos Stadium in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Wednesday. —AFP

points and Ecuador and Venezuela two each.

Brazil were already through to the quarter-finals before Wednesday's matches, and are now joined by Colombia. The rest of the group's fate will be decided Sunday, when Brazil face Ecuador and Peru play Venezuela. The top four of five teams in each of two groups advance to the quarter-finals. —AFP

## Boost for La Liga as Spanish government removes ban on fans

**MADRID:** La Liga can take another step towards normality next season after the Spanish government confirmed yesterday it has lifted its ban on fans attending stadiums. The exact capacity allowed in each stadium will be determined by regional authorities, with some restrictions still possible, especially in the north of Spain. But the government giving permission for supporters to return is an important first step as La Liga clubs begin to recover financially from the COVID-19 pandemic.

La Liga president Javier Tebas said earlier this week he expects stadiums to be at least 70 per cent full at the start of the season in August. "We can return let's say to normality in terms of fans being allowed into stadiums," Spanish health minister, Carolina Darias, said yesterday, with the announcement applying both to La Liga and Spain's ACB basketball league.

"It will have to be, as it was before, the regional authorities who determine the capacity," Darias added. Fans were allowed to return for the last two rounds of La Liga last season but in only five regions and with a limit of 30 per cent capacity and 5,000 people. Spain is hosting four Euro 2020 matches in Seville at La Cartuja stadium, where a capacity of 30 percent has been allowed. Bilbao was Spain's original host city but local authorities were unable to commit to supporters attending Athletic Bilbao's San Mames. The UK government announced on Tuesday the tournament's semi-final and final will be able to be played in front of more than 60,000 fans at Wembley, which means the stadium will be at 75 per cent capacity. —AFP

## Rapinoe among 17 from World Cup champs on US Olympic roster

**LOS ANGELES:** Strikers Megan Rapinoe and Alex Morgan were among 17 players from the 2019 Women's World Cup championship team named Wednesday to the US women's football squad for the Tokyo Olympics.

US national team coach Vlatko Andonovski named an 18-player roster that featured 11 players returning from the 2016 Rio lineup that finished in fifth place after winning gold in 2004, 2008 and 2012. "It has been a long process to get to this point, longer than anyone thought it would be," Andonovski said. "We're confident that we've selected the team with the best chance for success in Japan."

Joining Morgan and Rapinoe on the US front line will be Tobin Heath, Carli Lloyd and Christen Press. Lloyd and Heath made their fourth US Olympic lineup, matching former captain Christie Rampone for the most in US women's team history.

Lloyd, who turns 39 on July 16, will be oldest-ever player on a US Olympic women's football roster, almost two years older than Rampone when she played in 2012. Those named to a third Olympic lineup included Rapinoe, Morgan and defenders Becky Sauerbrunn and Kelley O'Hara.

The US lineup also features goalkeepers Adrianna Franch and Alyssa Naeher, defenders Abby Dahlkemper, Tiarna Davidson, Crystal Dunn and Emily Sonnett and midfielders Julie Ertz, Lindsey Horan, Rose Lavelle and sisters Kristie and Samantha Mewis.

Dunn, Horan, Ertz, Press and Naeher will make their second Olympic appearance while Dahlkemper, Sonnett, Davidson, Lavelle, Franch and the Mewis sisters make their Olympic debuts. Kristie Mewis, the older sister of Samantha by 592 days, is the only player on the roster who was not on the 2019 Women's World Cup roster. Heath and Ertz are still recovering from injuries but are expected to be ready for the July 21 start of Olympic play. "We've got a balanced team with many players who can play several positions and that will be valuable as we try to play six games in 17 days in heat and humidity," Andonovski said. —AFP

## UEFA says scrapping away goals rule in all club competitions

**LAUSANNE:** UEFA said yesterday it will scrap the away goals rule for all of its club competitions from next season in favor of extra time and a penalty shootout. Introduced in 1965, the rule was used to determine the winner of a two-legged knockout tie in cases where the two teams had scored the same number of goals on aggregate over the two matches.

From the 2021-2022 season, if the two teams score the same number of goals over the two legs, the tie will be decided by playing two 15-minute periods of extra time at the end of the second leg. In the event that the teams score the same number of goals or fail to score at all during extra time, a penalty shootout will then be held to decide the winner.

Champions League, Europa League, Europa Conference League and Women's Champions League matches will no longer use the away goals rule. "It is no longer appropriate for an away goal to carry more weight," said UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin.

He said the away goals rule actually discouraged home teams from attacking, especially in the first leg. "Although there was no unanimity of views, many coaches, fans and other football stakeholders have questioned its fairness and have expressed a preference for the rule to be abolished," Ceferin said in a statement. "The impact of the rule now runs counter to its original purpose as, in fact, it now dissuades home teams - especially in first legs - from attacking, because they fear conceding a goal that would give their opponents a crucial advantage. —AFP

## Sports

# England showdown with Germany tops last-16 billing at Euro 2020

**PARIS:** A showdown between old rivals England and Germany at Wembley is the standout tie going into the last 16 of Euro 2020 after Joachim Loew's side scraped through on a dramatic final night of group-stage action. Germany needed a late goal from Leon Goretzka to draw 2-2 with Hungary in Munich on Wednesday and advance to the knockout phase in second place in Group F.

Had they lost they would have been condemned to an ignominious first-round exit just like at the 2018 World Cup in Russia, but now they could be galvanized heading to Wembley next Tuesday for the latest installment in their long-running rivalry with the English. "Yes!!!!!! Wembley calling!" wrote Bayern Munich midfielder Goretzka on Twitter after coming off the bench to score the equalizer against Hungary.

The match — overshadowed beforehand by UEFA's refusal to allow the Allianz Arena to be lit up in rainbow colors — was watched by a television audience of close to 26 million Germans who might now be confident their team can once again get one over on England despite their recent struggles. "We know that if we play to our potential we'll be strong," insisted Loew, who will step down after the tournament.

The tie brings back memories of the 1966 World Cup final at the same venue which England won 4-2 after extra time. However it also leads inevitably to mentions of Euro 96 when Germany beat England on penalties at Wembley in the semi-finals before going on to lift the trophy in the final against the Czech Republic.

Indeed, since 1966, Germany have prevailed

in all three meetings of the countries in the knockout stages, most recently with a 4-1 win in the last 16 at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. "Oh No Not The Germans Again" said the headline in the Daily Mail in England, summing up the feeling of fans there at the prospect of this latest meeting between the nations.

England have home advantage after topping Group D but there are concerns about the performances so far of Gareth Southgate's team, who edged Croatia and the Czech Republic 1-0 either side of a laborious 0-0 draw against Scotland.

## Portugal to face Belgium

Portugal scraped through after a 2-2 draw with France in Budapest on Wednesday, with Cristiano Ronaldo scoring two penalties to cancel out a brace from his old Real Madrid colleague Karim Benzema. That allowed Ronaldo to equal the all-time international scoring record of 109 goals set by Iran's Ali Daei.

Ronaldo can now break the record in the last 16 but the holders could scarcely have asked for a tougher tie than a meeting with Belgium, the top-ranked team in the world. Portugal, who only went through as one of the best third-placed sides, will have had two days fewer rest than the Belgians before the game in Seville on Sunday.

"Forty-eight hours difference, in temperatures of over 30 degrees, of course it makes a difference, but we are not going to go looking for a handicap," said Portugal coach Fernando Santos. "It is a good game on paper and I hope



**MUNICH:** Germany's forward Kai Havertz (left) celebrates with Germany's defender Mats Hummels (right) after scoring their first goal during the UEFA Euro 2020 Group F football match between Germany and Hungary at the Allianz Arena in Munich on Wednesday. —AFP

it will be a great game for Portugal."

World Cup holders France topped their group and they will now take on Switzerland in Bucharest on Monday. If they win that, they will face either Croatia or Spain in Saint Petersburg, in the same venue where they defeated Belgium in the semi-finals on the way to winning the World Cup three years ago.

"There is always a feeling of great satisfac-

tion when you fulfill your objectives," said France coach Didier Deschamps. Spain have a spring in their step too after thumping Slovakia 5-0 in Seville to make the knockout phase, ensuring that all of Europe's biggest nations remain in the competition. The last-16 ties begin on Saturday when Wales face Denmark in Amsterdam and Italy take on Austria at Wembley. —AFP

## Dumfries, Locatelli among five stars from Euro 2020 group stage

**PARIS:** The group stage of Euro 2020 came to an end on Wednesday, and with the last 16 starting at the weekend, AFP Sport looks at five stars of the tournament ahead of the knockout rounds:

### Manuel Locatelli (Italy)

Sassuolo midfielder Locatelli only started Italy's first two Group A matches due to the absence of the injured Marco Verratti, but he was one of the standout performers in the Azzurri's sumptuous displays against Turkey and Switzerland. The 23-year-old's dynamism in the middle of the pitch was exemplified by how he started and finished the move which gave Italy the lead in the 3-0 demolition of Switzerland, securing a knockout spot for Roberto Mancini's exciting side. "He's a playmaker, he's physical, has technical qualities, he has everything," Mancini said of Locatelli. Despite his brace against the Swiss, Locatelli was dropped for Italy's final group match with Wales for the returning Verratti, who will likely retain his place in the last 16 clash with Austria at Wembley. However Locatelli remains a potent weapon to bring off the bench and has firmly played his way into Mancini's selection decision-making.

### Denzel Dumfries (Netherlands)

The last time the Netherlands played at a major tournament was the 2014 World Cup. Back then, a teenage Dumfries had just made his interna-

tional debut for Aruba, the tiny Caribbean island off the coast of Venezuela.

Now 25 and a regular in the Dutch orange, the PSV Eindhoven captain and right-back named after the actor Denzel Washington has been one of the stars of their return to this level. In the 3-2 win over Ukraine he helped set up the first two goals before heading in the late winner. Then, against Austria, Dumfries won a penalty that was converted by Memphis Depay before scoring the second in a 2-0 win, securing a place in the last 16 for Frank de Boer's side. Born in Rotterdam, Dumfries is now inevitably being linked with a move to one of Europe's biggest leagues after the tournament and PSV will probably not be able to resist when the big money offers arrive at the Philips Stadion.

### Patrik Schick (Czech Republic)

Schick said he wanted to look like MMA fighter Nate Diaz when he posed with his muscles flexed and nose bloodied after scoring his third goal of the tournament from the penalty spot against Croatia.

But it was his stunning strike from nearly 50 metres, leaving Scotland floored on their return to the international tournament stage, that announced the Bayer Leverkusen forward as a breakout star of Euro 2020. Schick had already opened the scoring at Hampden with a towering header before his combination of vision and accuracy caught David Marshall flailing in one of the greatest goals ever seen at a European Championship. Now 25, Schick's nomadic club career promised much but has delivered little so far in spells at Sampdoria, Roma, RB Leipzig and Leverkusen. But an impressive return of 14 goals in 29 games for his country shows why he is the key man if the Czechs are to progress beyond the last 16.

### Robin Gosens (Germany)

Germany nearly suffered a repeat of their 2018 World Cup flop before scraping through to the last 16, but their qualification owed much to Robin Gosens' star turn against Portugal. The left-back who plays for Italian club

Atalanta took an unusual route to the national team, eschewing the typical academy pathway for a journey through amateur football before catching on with Dutch side Vitesse Arnhem at the age of 18.

Once an aspiring police officer, Gosens earned his big break with a move to Serie A in 2017 and hasn't looked back, making his Germany debut last September despite the rarity of never having played in the Bundesliga. Joachim Loew's switch to a 3-4-3 has brought out the best in the 26-year-old. He raided down Portugal's right flank and got involved in all four goals, scoring the fourth to round off arguably Germany's best display since winning the 2014 World Cup.

### Emil Forsberg (Sweden)

The RB Leipzig attacking midfielder has been Sweden's driving force as Janne Andersson's side topped their group for the second straight major tournament. The 29-year-old netted a penalty in the 1-0 win over Slovakia which eventually secured Sweden's last-16 place, before grabbing an excellent double in the 3-2 victory against Poland that wrapped up top spot in Group E ahead of Spain. At the 2018 World Cup, the Scandinavians' run ended with a 2-0 quarter-final loss to England, who they could face again in the last eight. —AFP



Manuel Locatelli



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