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Amir congratulates citizens, residents on national days

Crown Prince thanks citizens, residents for sharing joy of national days

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday congratulated nationals and residents on the 60th anniversary of National Day and the 30th anniversary of Liberation Day. HH the Amir appreciated the atmosphere of joy shown by citizens on these two dear occasions. The Amir also expressed gratitude to the high national spirit that embodied loyalty of the citizens to the dear homeland and highlighted the unified Kuwaiti family.

HH the Amir recalled the founding fathers' efforts for the dear homeland and the late Amir

Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah's great and honorable endeavors and achievements for the dear country and citizens. In addition, HH the Amir recalled the late Amir's role in confronting the brutal Iraqi invasion that will remain in citizens' memory, and the country's martyrs, prisoners and missing persons who sacrificed their souls for the dear homeland.

Sheikh Nawaf urged nationals to feel the blessing of the liberation of the country, which enjoys security and tranquility, pointing to love of the state's people to harness all capabilities and efforts



HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

to revive the dear homeland. He also extolled coverage of the two



HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

occasions by official and private media outlets.

HH the Amir greeted the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab and friendly countries for sharing Kuwait's joy during its national days. The Amir commended these noble sentiments, praying to Allah to preserve the country and maintain its security, stability and prosperity. He also wished success for everyone in serving the country and upgrading its status.

Meanwhile, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah thanked citizens and residents yesterday for their sentiments during the celebrations of Kuwait's 60th

National Day and 30th Liberation Day. Sharing Kuwait's national days reflects the "spirit of the Kuwaiti family", HH the Crown Prince said, citing cables, phone calls and all expressions of joy.

Sheikh Mishal recalled with pride Kuwait martyrs who sacrificed their lives for Kuwait, praying to Allah the Almighty to bestow blessings upon them. He also prayed to Allah the Almighty to return this occasion with Kuwait enjoying further security and prosperity under the leadership of HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — KUNA

News in brief

Mahboula gambling den busted

KUWAIT: Detectives raided a flat where gambling was taking place in Mahboula and arrested 29 suspects, including 19 Arab and Asian women, the largest gambling den busted in the country. A security source said the mastermind and main suspect is a Filipino, adding that based on tips, a warrant was obtained and the flat was raided. The source said detectives found KD 5,000, in addition to display screens and other tools used in this international activity. — Al-Qabas

Jordan ministers sacked

AMMAN: Jordan's interior and justice ministers were sacked yesterday for breaching health regulations to stem the spread of coronavirus, with their replacements named by royal decree. The Jordanian news website Ammon claimed interior minister Samir Mobaideen and justice minister Bassam Talhuni had attended a dinner in a restaurant in Amman with a total of nine people, when the law allowed a maximum of six. Tawfiq Krishan, deputy prime minister and in charge of local administration, was appointed as the new interior minister. Ahmed Ziyadat, state secretary for legal affairs, was named as justice minister. — AFP

Vatican envoy COVID positive

BAGHDAD: The Vatican's ambassador to Iraq Mitja Leskovic has tested positive for COVID-19, two officials told AFP yesterday, just days before Pope Francis' historic visit. "Yes, he tested positive, but it will have no impact on the visit," an Iraqi official involved in the papal plans said. An Italian diplomat also confirmed the infection. As apostolic nuncio to Baghdad, Leskovic had been travelling across the country in recent weeks to prepare for the pope's ambitious visit. — AFP

Orban receives Chinese jab

BUDAPEST: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban was vaccinated with a Chinese-made jab days after Hungary became the first EU member to use the vaccine, which has not been approved by EU regulators. "I am vaccinated," said a post on Orban's official Facebook page alongside photographs and a video showing him receiving a jab from a medical assistant holding a Sinopharm box. President Janos Ader also received a Sinopharm shot Friday. — AFP

Iran seen behind Israel ship blast

TEHRAN: The "resistance axis" of Tehran and its regional allies may have been behind an explosion that hit an Israeli-owned "spy" vessel four days ago, an ultraconservative Iranian newspaper said yesterday. The MV Helios Ray, a vehicle carrier, was travelling from the Saudi port of Dammam to Singapore when the blast occurred on Thursday, according to the London-based Dryad Global maritime security group.

Citing unnamed "military experts", Kayhan, Iran's leading ultraconservative daily, wrote in a front-page report that "the targeted ship in the Gulf of Oman is a military ship belonging to the Israeli army". It was "gathering information about the (Arabian) Gulf and the Sea of Oman" when it was targeted, the newspaper said.

Continued on Page 2

Iran COVID deaths cross 60,000 mark

TEHRAN: Iran's coronavirus fatalities broke the 60,000 mark yesterday, official figures showed, as the Islamic republic battles the Middle East's worst outbreak of the illness. The grim milestone comes after several Iranian officials, including President Hassan Rouhani, warned of a COVID-19 "fourth wave" with cases rising in certain areas of the country.

Bloodiest day of protests in Myanmar

YANGON: Myanmar security forces opened fire on protesters yesterday, killing at least eight in the bloodiest action so far to smother opposition to the military coup four weeks ago. The junta is battling to contain a massive street movement demanding it yield power and release ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was detained along with top political allies at the start of the month.

Yesterday brought a significant escalation in force, with fatal shoot-

ings of protesters in at least four cities around the country, as police and soldiers attempted to bring the civil a campaign to heel. The United Nations condemned the deadly crackdown, saying it had received credible information that as many as 18 people may have been killed.

"We strongly condemn the escalating violence against protesters in Myanmar and call on the military to immediately halt the use of force against peaceful protesters," Ravina Shamdasani, spokeswoman for the UN human rights office, said. AFP could not independently confirm the UN toll. Three men were killed and at least 20 others injured when security forces moved on a rally in the southern coastal hub of Dawei.

Continued on Page 2



DUBAI: This picture taken yesterday shows the Israeli-owned Bahamian-flagged MV Helios Ray cargo ship docked at Mina Rashid cruise terminal. — AFP

"Sadly in the past 24 hours, 93 people lost their lives to COVID-19, and total deaths from this disease reached 60,073," health ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari said in a televised address. Iran has registered a total of 1,631,169 infections, according to the ministry. But some officials - including Health Minister Saeed Namaki - have admitted in the past that the actual numbers are likely higher than the official figures.

"We have to observe (virus) restrictions probably for months, and maybe for the whole of the next year," President Rouhani said at the country's weekly COVID-19 taskforce meeting on Saturday. He called on citizens to better observe health protocols in the new Iranian year starting on March

21, saying Iran will face a "more difficult" situation over the next year by having to battle "mutated strains of the virus".

The coronavirus taskforce spokesman Alireza Raisi on Friday said that Iran is "very concerned" about the more contagious British variant of the virus, which has already "circulated in the country". "We have identified 112 people infected with the British variant in the country, eight of whom have died," he said, according to the health ministry. He noted that the variant was seen in many provinces including the capital Tehran, and the virus' new focal point in the southwest, Khuzestan.

Continued on Page 2



YANGON: Protesters run after police fired tear gas to disperse them during a demonstration against the military coup yesterday. — AFP

Local

Kuwait's Amir sends letters to Bahrain's King, Oman's Sultan

Egypt's Sisi praises 'close ties' with Kuwait



MANAMA: This handout photo released by the Bahrain News Agency (BNA) yesterday shows Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah handing over a letter from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifah. — BNA and KUNA photos



Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah delivers to Oman's Deputy Prime Minister for Cabinet Affairs Fahad bin Mahmoud Al-Saeed a letter from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to Sultan Haitham bin Tareq of Oman.



Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets Omani Foreign Minister Bader Al-Busaeedi.



Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets his Bahraini counterpart Dr Abdul-Latif bin Rashed Al-Zayani.

MANAMA/MUSCAT/CAIRO: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent yesterday a written message to Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifah. The message is concerned with the strong and solid bilateral relations between the two brotherly countries and peoples, and means of supporting and strengthening them in various fields and at all levels. The message was delivered by Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah during his meeting with King Hamad in the framework of his official visit to Manama.

Earlier yesterday, Sheikh Dr Ahmad delivered a letter from His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to Sultan Haitham bin Tareq of Oman dealing with means of further cementing deep-rooted bilateral relations at all levels. Sheikh Dr Ahmad handed the letter over during a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister for Cabinet Affairs Fahad bin Mahmoud Al-Saeed yesterday.

Meanwhile, Omani Foreign Minister Bader Al-

Busaeedi held talks yesterday with his Kuwaiti counterpart on ways of further boosting cooperation to serve mutual interest. The two top diplomats reaffirmed keenness to strengthen cooperation in all domains. They have also exchanged views over a host of regional and international issues, as well as measures to cement the common GCC march following the Gulf Cooperation Council's summit that was held in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, last month. The meeting was attended by officials from the two sides.

Sheikh Dr Ahmad also held talks on with his Bahraini counterpart Dr Abdul-Latif bin Rashed Al-Zayani on the solid ties that bind the two countries. The discussions also dealt with regional and international issues and topics that need to be

addressed by the GCC during its current Bahrain-chaired session.

Close ties

In other news, Egypt's President AbdelFattah Al-Sisi praised the "closeness and exclusivity" of his country's relations with Kuwait during talks with its visiting Foreign Minister on Saturday. Cairo is keen to develop its close and distinguished cooperation with Kuwait, he said, as both look to preserve domestic as well as regional security, stability and development, according to presidency spokesman Bassam Radi. Egypt appreciates Kuwait's recent "sincere reconciliation efforts," and stands firmly behind endeavors that boost the solidarity and safeguard the national security of Arab nations, he added.

President Sisi asked for his personal greetings to be conveyed to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, as he congratulated the Kuwaiti government and people on their National Day. This came in response to a written message from His Highness the Amir, which discussed deep-rooted bilateral relations, and means to support these ties, delivered by the visiting Kuwaiti foreign minister. During the talks, Sheikh Dr Ahmad said Kuwait is proud of the strong historical ties that exist with Egypt and its people.

Kuwait is keen to strengthen cooperation with Egypt through periodic consultation and coordination on various issues, the Egyptian statement quoted him as saying. The minister praised Egypt's pivotal role in the region as a "pillar for security and stability" in the Arab world and its keenness to strengthen solidarity and encourage joint action amongst its nations. The encounter was held in the presence of Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and the Kuwaiti Ambassador to Egypt Muhammad Al-Thuwaikh. — KUNA

Iran seen behind Israel...

Continued from Page 1

"This spy ship, although it was sailing secretly, may have fallen into the ambush of one of the branches of the resistance axis," it added, without offering further details. The term "resistance axis" usually refers to the Islamic republic and its allied forces in the region. Israel's defense minister Benny Gantz said on Saturday that the Jewish state's "initial assessment" is that Iran is responsible for the explosion aboard the vessel. "This... takes into account the proximity (with Iran) and the context" in which the blast occurred, he added. "This is what I believe."

Rami Ungar, an Israeli businessman who owns the

Helios Ray, told Israeli state television Kan on Friday that the explosion caused "two holes about a meter and a half in diameter". It was "not yet clear" if the damage was caused by missiles or mines attached to the ship, Ungar added. He said that the explosion did not cause any casualties among the crew or damage to the engine.

Israel has long accused arch-foe Iran of trying to acquire nuclear weapons, a charge always denied by Tehran. Iran blamed the Nov 27 assassination outside Tehran of its top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh on the Jewish state. "The Zionist regime's attacks and crimes in the region, which have been going on publicly for some time, seem to have finally made it a legitimate target," Kayhan said.

The US and Saudi Arabia in mid-2019 alleged Iran used limpet mines to blow holes in Gulf-area ships, and then US president Donald Trump came close to ordering an attack on Iran in retaliation. Tehran strongly denied those allegations. — AFP

lion doses of Sputnik V, according to Jahanpour, and they will be delivered gradually. Iranian state media yesterday reported that 250,000 doses of China's Sinopharm vaccine were delivered to Tehran, a day after Jahanpour announced that they were donated by the Chinese government.

Health Minister Namaki has said Iran would also receive 4.2 million doses of the vaccine developed by Anglo-Swedish firm AstraZeneca and Oxford University, purchased via the international vaccine mechanism Covax. Iran is also working on locally developed vaccine projects, with the clinical trials of the second home-grown vaccine starting yesterday.

The jab, dubbed Razi Cov Pars, was developed at the Razi Vaccine and Serum Research Institute, which is linked to the agriculture ministry, and unveiled earlier this month. Its clinical trial began with two male volunteers receiving it at Tehran's Rasoul Akram hospital, state television showed. The Razi facility's deputy chief, Mohammad-Hassan Falah-Mehrabadi, told attendees at a ceremony at the hospital that 133 people have volunteered for the trial. The Islamic republic started clinical trials of its first locally developed vaccine in late December. — AFP

Iran COVID deaths cross...

Continued from Page 1

Similar to previous waves, Khuzestan is among the first areas to relapse into "red", the highest level on Iran's color-coded risk scale. The number of daily infections nationwide has hit 8,000 in recent days, a level still much lower than the record high of 14,051 infections registered on Nov 27. Daily deaths dropped below 100 in early January, the lowest level since June.

Tehran started a national vaccination campaign on Feb 9 using Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, with the first target groups being health workers, the elderly, and those with pre-existing health conditions. Head of health ministry public relations Kianoush Jahanpour told AFP yesterday that "110,000 vaccine doses have been distributed" in Iran so far, without specifying the number of people who had received the first jab. The second dose will start being administered on March 2, he added.

The Islamic republic has bought a total of two mil-

Bloodiest day of protests...

Continued from Page 1

Rescue worker Pyae Zaw Hein said the trio were "shot dead with live rounds", while the injured were hit by rubber bullets. "More wounded people keep coming in," he told AFP. Two teenagers were gunned down in Bago, a two-hour drive north of commercial capital Yangon. Ambulance driver Than Lwin Oo told AFP he had sent the bodies of the 18-year-olds to the mortuary at Bago's main hospital.

Officers in Yangon began dispersing small crowds minutes before the slated beginning of the day's protest, with a 23-year-old man shot dead in the city's east. "His wife is heartbroken," Win Ko, a social worker who visited the man's widow, told AFP. "She's three months pregnant." In Mandalay, an emergency doctor told AFP that two men had died from gunshot wounds.

Elsewhere protesters took up positions behind barricades and wielded homemade shields to defend themselves against the onslaught, with police using tear gas to clear some rallies. Hundreds of people had been arrested by evening and transported to the city's notorious Insein Prison, where many of Myanmar's leading democracy campaigners have served long jail terms under previous dictatorships.

At least one journalist documenting yesterday's assaults by security forces was beaten and detained further north in Myitkyina, a city at the headwaters of the Irrawaddy river, according to local outlet The 74 Media. Another reporter was shot with rubber bullets while covering a protest in the central city of Pyay, their employer said.

A spokesman for the ruling junta did not respond to phone calls seeking comment on yesterday's violence. Before yesterday, at least five people had died in anti-coup unrest since the army takeover, including three killed on Feb 20. One police officer

also died while attempting to quell a protest, the military has said.

Myanmar has been roiled by giant demonstrations and a civil disobedience campaign encouraging civil servants to walk off the job since the Feb 1 military takeover. Yesterday's crackdown followed a similar wave of violent action against angry but largely peaceful anti-coup rallies around the country a day earlier.

Several journalists documenting Saturday's assaults by security forces were detained, including an Associated Press photographer in Yangon. Human Rights Watch said medical volunteers helping to treat wounded protesters were also being targeted for arrest by security forces. More than 850 people have been arrested, charged or sentenced since the coup, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group.

But the weekend crackdown was expected to raise that number dramatically, with state newspapers reporting 479 arrests on Saturday alone. International condemnation of the military regime has been fierce, with the United States, European Union and others denouncing violence against protesters. "We are heartbroken to see the loss of so many lives in Myanmar. People should not face violence for expressing dissent against the military coup. Targeting of civilians is abhorrent," the US Embassy in Yangon tweeted.

Suu Kyi has not been seen in public since she was taken into custody during predawn raids in the capital Naypyidaw. A court hearing will be held today for the ousted leader, who faces obscure charges for possession of unregistered walkie-talkies and violating coronavirus restrictions on public gatherings.

But her lawyer Khin Maung Zaw told AFP he had still been unable to meet with Suu Kyi ahead of the hearing. "As a lawyer, I put my trust in the court," he said. "But in this period of time anything can happen." State media announced Saturday that the junta had sacked the country's United Nations envoy, who gave an impassioned plea for help on behalf of Myanmar's ousted civilian government. — AFP

Local

One year on, COVID fears still linger in Kuwait

Cases continue to climb despite vaccine's rollout

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: While the first waves of panic over the coronavirus pandemic have generally subsided, people remain fearful of contracting the virus. Despite the slow rollout of the vaccine, cases in Kuwait are climbing and the number of serious cases worsens daily. The virus has been with us for more than a year now, but cases of people contracting the virus are still increasing.

In the US alone, more than half a million people have been reportedly killed by the virus. As of yesterday, total cases around the world were over 114.4 million with over 2.5 million fatalities. Kuwait ranks 61 globally with 190,852 cases and 1,083 deaths as of yesterday. Kuwait Times asked some expats on how they perceive COVID-19 nowadays.

A 62-year-old Palestinian said the panic has subsided, but generally he is still fearful on what the end result will be. "Until governments all over the world stop being bearers of bad news and stop overreacting and being paranoid, we will not overcome this pandemic and it will continue until the end

of time," he said.

"Yes, we are all in trouble; we could be the next. If it's your time, it's your time. This disease is no less than ordinary flu or fever, but because we overreacted to it, we are all suffering," he said, adding he is still not ready to



Kuwait ranks 61 globally in cases

receive the vaccine himself. "I will see later. For now I am okay without the vaccine."

Bino, a 42-year-old Indian, said he is no longer afraid of the virus, but is very careful talking to people. "I will not talk to anyone unless they are wearing a facemask. Before I didn't care about riding the bus and sitting next to other passengers. Now if there are many people on the bus, I don't board it. I don't want to get this dis-

ease, so I follow the strict protocols set by the ministry of health," he said.

Job interruptions

Gary, a Filipino masseur at a five-star hotel in Kuwait, said he is no longer happy working as a masseur, as most of 2020 and now 2021 have only seen interruptions to his job. "I have been in this company for the past eight years now. Until a year ago, I was earning more than double my monthly salary from tips from my regular clients. Now I am literally destitute waiting until the government permits us to work," he said.

Noof, a 47-year-old Kuwaiti woman, said she no longer believes in science. "Before I thought any disease could be cured easily because of science. I was wrong! What happened to the projections of people claiming to be health experts? We have been in this situation since early 2020. We are in deep-deep trouble; our economy has sunk. The science said after the vaccine rollout, we will be OK. So what happened? Our country received the vaccine even before other countries. I have been depressed since 2020 till now," she said.

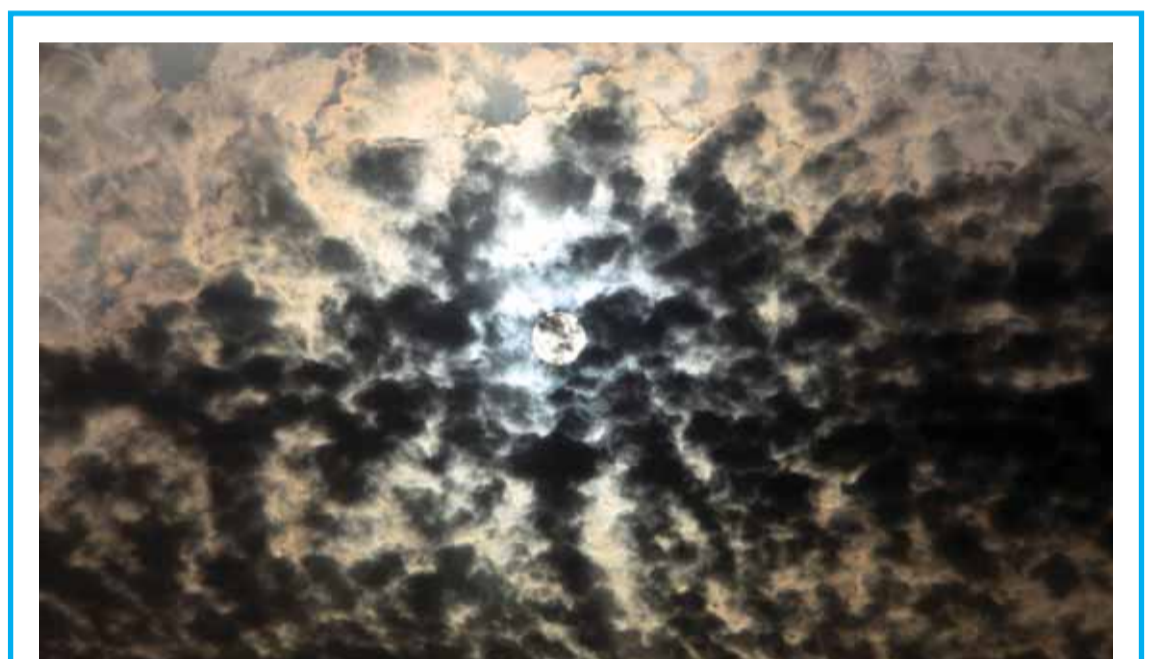
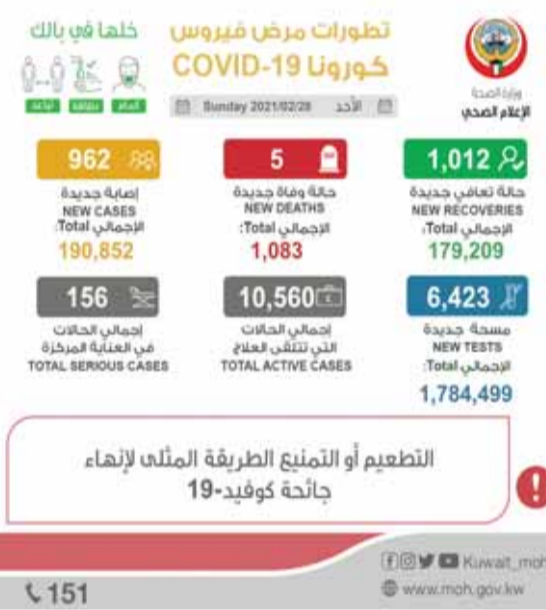


Vaccines in Kuwait arrived in December, with frontliners and Kuwaitis being vaccinated initially, along with expats. The jabs will continue until the end of the year or until 70 percent of the population is inoculated. On Feb 7, Kuwait implemented new regulations compelling all com-

mercial establishments to close from 8 pm to 5 am. The Cabinet also ordered barbershops, salons, gyms and massage parlors to close down completely until further notice. Just before the national holidays, the government ordered all restaurants to end dine-in services.

Kuwait lists 962 new COVID-19 cases, five deaths

KUWAIT: Kuwait said yesterday that 962 people tested positive for coronavirus and five patients died within the previous 24 hours, taking the total cases up to 190,852 as deaths rose to 1,083. The number of people hospitalized with the virus stood yesterday at 10,560, with 156 of them in intensive care units. Health Ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said, revealing that some 6,423 swab tests were conducted over the same period, bringing the total up to 1,784,449. The ministry had reported earlier that 1,012 patients have recovered during the same period, raising total recoveries to 179,209. Dr Sanad went on to urge the public to abide by health precautions, mainly social distancing rules, in order to help limit the spread of the virus. Kuwait had listed 844 new cases from 5,704 swab tests, six deaths



KUWAIT: A picture taken in Kuwait City yesterday shows the sun setting behind the clouds. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

and 1,064 recoveries on Saturday. The number of patients in hospital had stood at 10,615 as of Saturday, including 158 in intensive care units. — KUNA

In my view

Smoking and COVID-19



By Abdellatif Sharaa

local@kuwaittimes.com

Smoking will not prevent you from contracting COVID-19. Despite fake claims and rumors claiming otherwise, be they from the southernmost tip of Latin America, or up north in Europe! Man seems to have known tobacco from early on in history, including some who gave it respect and sacredness. The indigenous people of the Americas used it for spiritual rituals and medicinal purposes. Yes, smoking tobacco among them reflected the causes of death due to smoking complications, or so it's being claimed.

Tobacco may have a magic component in it, because I noticed those who start smoking become smokers by the tenth stick. The answer when you warn them is always the same: "I am just puffing, that's all." They soon become full-fledged smokers - addicts.

Back to the statement - do you believe that such a claim is made by some of those known to be scientists, and even doctors!! Strange, is it not? I once attended a conference, during which the panel alluded to passive or secondhand smoking - how bad it is, as it has the same effects as regular smoking, such as causing cancer, heart attacks, heart disease, respiratory infections such as pneumonia and asthma, and diabetes.

"Secondhand smoke is the combination of smoke from the burning end of a cigarette and the smoke breathed out by smokers. Secondhand smoke contains more than 7,000 chemicals. Hundreds are toxic and about 70 can cause cancer," says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In short, smoking is never good, and all must understand this. We must realize that nicotine addiction is very difficult to get rid of. Passive smokers have a high risk of getting COVID-19 too.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A shot of the Anjafa beach by photographer Daniela Buiting (Instagram: @pics_of_kuwait). To have your photo considered for Kuwait Times' Photo of the Day, send to local@KuwaitTimes.com or via direct message to Kuwait Times' Instagram account @kuwaittimes. Photos should be high resolution, with no processing or editing.

News in brief

Second semester starts

KUWAIT: More than 500,000 students will start the second school term today following a break of a month and a half. The education ministry has adjusted the teaching plan for the first three elementary grades, after a decision was made to have real-time classes and not recorded classes, as the case was in the first term, so there can be interaction between teachers and students. The ministry decided school timings from 9:30 am to 2:30 pm for the secondary stage, 8:00 am to 1:00 pm for the intermediate stage, and 8:00 am to 12:00 pm for the kindergarten stage. As for the elementary stage, work will be divided into two periods - mornings (8:00 am until 1:00 pm) and afternoon (2:45 pm until 5:45 pm). As for the administration (principal, assistant principal, administrative faculty), they will divide work between them in the morning and afternoon periods. — Al-Rai

Old cars' import ban

KUWAIT: Commerce ministry amended decision 59/2010 with regards to importing vehicles, which said after the amendment that "vehicles with 10 years elapsed from their manufacture are banned from import. The commerce and industry minister can disregard the time condition according to public interest. The minister can also delegate this authority to who he sees fit." The decision will be in effect from the date of its issuance and will be published in the official gazette. — Al-Anbaa

Kuwait, Qatar condemn Houthis' attacks on Saudi

KUWAIT: Kuwait on Saturday condemned in the strongest terms the Yemeni Houthi militias' repeated terrorist attacks with booby-trapped drones and ballistic missiles on civilian targets in the Saudi capital Riyadh and other cities, said the Foreign Ministry. The persistence of these Houthi terrorist acts is a dangerous escalation that threatens Saudi Arabia's security and the region's stability, the ministry said in a statement. It affirmed that these acts blatantly defy international and humanitarian laws and undermine international efforts to reach a political solution to the conflict in Yemen. The ministry also renewed Kuwait's call to the international community, mainly the UN Security Council, to assume its responsibilities in stopping this escalation to help maintain international peace and security. The State of Kuwait backs the Kingdom in all the measures it takes to defend its security, stability and sovereignty, the foreign ministry reiterated.

Qatar also condemned in the strongest terms the missile attack that targeted Riyadh, which contravenes all international norms and laws. In a statement, "Doha reiterated its firm position on rejecting violence, criminal and sabotage acts, regardless of the

motives and reasons." The Houthis have intensified their targeting Saudi Arabia with explosive drones and ballistic missiles, which the coalition confirmed that they were all shot down without any injuries.

Meanwhile, Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Nayef Al-Hajraf deplored the "terrorist" Houthi militias' attacks with ballistic missiles and drones on Saudi capital, Riyadh, and other cities. In a press statement, Hajraf stressed that the repeated attacks launched by Houthis show a blatant challenge to the international community and a violation of all international laws and norms. He called on the international community to take immediate and decisive stances to stop these repeated "terrorist" acts that target Saudi Arabia's civilian and vital facilities, and security and stability, according to the statement.

He lauded the vigilance and efficiency of the Saudi-led coalition supporting legitimacy in Yemen and the success of the air defense forces to intercept these "terrorist" assaults launched by the militias. Hajraf confirmed GCC solidarity and backing to Saudi Arabia in all steps it takes to defend its territories, and maintain security and safety of its citizens and residents. He stressed that the "Kingdom's security is part and parcel of the GCC member states' security."

In the meantime, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation has condemned in the strongest terms the Yemeni Houthi militias' firing of a ballistic missile towards the Saudi capital Riyadh and launching of five explosive-laden drones towards several other southern Saudi cities. In a press statement, OIC



RIYADH: A handout picture provided by the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) on Saturday shows damage to a home in Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh in the aftermath of a missile attack claimed by Yemen's Houthi rebels. — AFP

Secretary General Ahmad Al-Othaimen expressed support to the Saudi-led coalition to restore legitimacy in Yemen in all measures it takes to stop Houthi terrorist militias war crimes and targeting of civilian areas in the Saudi Kingdom. — KUNA

FRONTLINE HEROES OF KUWAIT

Student Art Competition 2021



It is our pleasure to welcome each and every youngster to our Student Art Competition. We hope that everyone is ready to create beautiful artworks and show support for our heroes of Kuwait! We're searching for great art – so get your paintbrushes, color pencils, crayons and markers ready. Let your talent flow and start painting. Good luck to our young artists!

- The competition is open to students aged 6-18 years with categories (6 - 8 years) (9 - 11 years) (12 - 14 years) (15 - 18 years) and special abilities students.
- The competition is open to all schools in Kuwait (government and private).
- Submissions are open from February 14, 2021 till March 31, 2021.
- 5 winners from each category will receive valuable prizes.
- All participants will receive a certificate of appreciation.
- All schools and individuals interested in participating in this competition are welcome.
- Participants in the ages 6 - 8 years may use marker colors only.
- You can use any drawing sheet, but of A3 size.
- All artwork must be hand drawn and not computer generated.
- All paintings should be submitted by email at painting@kuwaittimes.net in PDF format ONLY.
- Participant must include on the bottom of the artwork the following: name, age, email address, phone number and school in legible font.

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HUAWEI



Brussels Webinar underlines Kuwait's role in healing rift

BRUSSELS: Speakers at a seminar on the Gulf organized by the European Parliament's Delegation for relations with the Arab Peninsula (DARP) heaped praise over Kuwait's successful mediation role in the Gulf reconciliation process. The guest speaker at the online event, Dr Cinzia Bianco, Gulf Research Fellow on Middle East and North Africa Program in the European Council on Foreign Relations, said "Kuwait has played quite an important role in facilitating the reconciliation between the GCC partners." She outlined the positions of Oman and Kuwait in the region calling them "neutral countries" which are focused on mediation and de-escalation in the region. Kuwait has also been supportive of attempts to pursue dialogue with Iran in the framework of regional security, she said and stressed that Kuwait is a reliable partner for Europe. Bianco underlined that the Al-Ula declaration signed in December "was very important for ending the boycott and was the first step and normalization will take place step by step" among the six-member GCC.

The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is a pan-European think tank with offices in seven European capitals. The seminar was titled "geopolitical perspectives in the Gulf for 2021. Impact of the Al-Ula Declaration on 'Stability and Solidarity' and role of the new US administration in regional affairs." DARP Chair, Dr Hannah Neumann, in her introductory remarks said Al-Ula agreement "was concluded under the good offices of Kuwait and here again Thank you so much to Kuwait for working continuously and following up on that issue." She said a DARP delegation is expected to visit Kuwait this year to boost EU-Kuwait parliamentary cooperation.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's ambassador to the EU, Belgium and NATO, Jasem Al-Budaiwi, in his intervention expressed his pleasure that yesterday's virtual event coincided with the day when Kuwait was celebrating its National Day. Budaiwi, who is currently visiting Kuwait, said that an important point that needs to be discussed is the future relations between the EU and the GCC "We should capitalise on the great momentum we have in the GCC now," he said referring to the Al-Ula agreement. "It is time that we move on with some tangible results in this relationship which includes the Free Trade Agreement, the Association agreement, waiver of Schengen visa. This is what we would like to see," stressed Budaiwi. He lauded the "excellent brotherly agreement reached in December," and added that "we would like to see more engagement and visit from EU leaders and officials." — KUNA

In my view

Our heartfelt condolences to Italian president

By Azzah Al-Ghamdi

I would like to send my condolences to Italian President Sergio Mattarella on the death of Italian ambassador Luca Attanasio, who was a victim of terrorism in the Democratic Republic of Congo. May God have mercy on him. I want to focus on terrorism around the world and send a question to the UN Security Council: Until when will we see victims of terrorism around the world? Who gives these terrorists weapons to execute their crimes?

We can't ignore this issue - the entire world should face this phenomenon as a danger to global security. Why is the Security Council waiting to take serious steps to stop selling weapons to terrorist groups? We can't accept any excuse because our lives are threatened by these terrorist groups. No one can feel safe and live in comfort.

Our children are not safe because terrorists don't distinguish between children and adults. They execute their crimes without choosing the victims. I cannot accept the death of the Italian ambassador - the Security Council should demand the elimination of terrorism from the world.

There should be coordination between interior ministers of all UN states to make sure security is airtight, with surveillance of weapons manufacturers to make sure they are not selling weapons to terrorists. They should report violators to the authorities to take suitable actions towards them.

We will not ignore the victims of the Congo attack and will not forget them. We need serious steps from both the Security Council and the UN, to show us their measures to eliminate terrorism from around the world.

I really become sad after the death of the Italian ambassador because Italy and entire Europe mean so much to me. I will not stop demanding retribution. I always ask myself when can we live peacefully in this world? This is an important issue we should focus on because God did not put us on this planet to kill each other.

On the other hand, these crimes will not stop until we change criminal ideology, starting from schools and colleges. Regimes around the world should follow serious steps to eliminate terrorism. All governments should also control their states firmly to not allow terrorist groups to have a chance to execute their crimes. This issue is a universal one and we should find a suitable solutions for it.

- Al-Ghamdi is a law graduate from Kuwait International Law School



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SANAA: Fighters loyal to Yemen's Houthi rebels surround the coffins of fellow combatants killed in battles with government troops during a mass funeral ceremony at the capital Sanaa's Al-Saleh mosque yesterday. —AFP

Yemen rebels claim Saudi strikes

Saudi-led coalition pounds rebel positions in north of Yemen

SANAA, Yemen: Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels yesterday claimed the attempted strikes that targeted neighboring Saudi Arabia overnight and threatened more attacks, as fighting in the grinding civil war escalates. Houthi fighters have intensified operations against the kingdom as air strikes by the Saudi-led military coalition pound rebel positions in the north of Yemen, in a bid to stop their offensive to seize the government's last northern stronghold of Marib.

Years of war have already pushed Yemen to the brink of famine. Saudi Arabia—which has been backing the Yemeni government against the rebels since 2015—said Saturday it thwarted a Houthi missile that targeted Riyadh. "The operation was carried out with a ballistic missile and 15 drones... targeting sensitive areas in the enemy's capital of Riyadh," said Houthi spokesman Yahya Al-Saree, according to the rebels' Al-Masirah TV channel.

"Our operations will continue and will expand as long as the aggression and siege on our country continues." Fragments of the missile scattered over several Riyadh neighborhoods, damaging at least one home but no casualties were reported, Saudi's state-run Al-Ekhbariya television said.

AFP correspondents in the Saudi capital reported hearing multiple loud explosions, with state television footage showing the night sky light up with a bright flash. Separately, the coalition said it had intercepted six Houthi drones targeting the kingdom, including the southern cities of Khamis Mushait and Jizan. Saree on Sunday claimed those attacks as well, warning residents in the region to "stay clear from all military airports and sites."

'Catastrophe'

The Houthis have escalated cross-border attacks

on the kingdom even after the United States delisted the rebels as terrorists, reversing a decision by the administration of former president Donald Trump.

The designation had been widely criticized by aid organizations, who warned it would hamper their efforts to alleviate a humanitarian crisis in Yemen. US President Joe Biden halted support to Saudi offensive operations in Yemen's war, which he called a "catastrophe" that "has to end".

But he has also reiterated US support for Saudi Arabia in defending its territory. Yesterday, in the latest violence in Yemen, five civilians including a child were killed when their home was destroyed in a bombardment near the strategic rebel-held Red Sea port of Hodeida.

The warring sides traded blame over who was responsible, with the government accusing Houthis of firing a mortar bomb, and the rebels saying the

explosion was caused by twin air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition. Alongside the cross-border attacks, the Houthis are pressing ahead with an offensive to seize the government-held Marib region, where some of the country's richest oil fields are found.

Hundreds of fighters from both sides have been killed in recent ferocious fighting, government source say. The Houthis now control most of the country's north and the government has been struggling to defend Marib province and the city, which lies some 120 kilometers (75 miles) east of the rebel-held capital Sanaa. Yemen's conflict has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced millions, according to international organizations, sparking what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The UN hopes to raise \$3.85 billion to support millions of civilians and prevent famine in the country. —AFP

Tunisians protest amid standoff

TUNIS: Tunisia's main parliamentary bloc Ennahdha rallied thousands of people Saturday in a demonstration of support for the government amid a tug-of-war with President Kais Saied. The Islamist-inspired Ennahdha and liberal Qalb Tounes parties pushed for a reshuffling of the government by Prime minister Hichem Mechichi in mid-January, introducing 11 new ministers. Saied has strongly criticized the reshuffle—which was confirmed by parliament—saying he had not been consulted and charged that some ministers were suspected of corruption and conflicts of interest.

He also refused to confirm the new ministers, including interior, justice and health, leaving the government paralyzed, in a country already reeling from economic hardship and the coronavirus pandemic. Saturday's protest in the capital Tunis was called for by Ennahdha, and several protesters said they rallied in support of the moderate Islamist party as well as for unity and democracy. "We have a parliamentary system and it is not up to the president to decide who will govern," said protester Mohamed Khelif, who travelled from the coastal city of Sfax to take part in the rally. "Democracy and the constitution must be respected," he added.

Around him protesters, who came to the capital from across the country, chanted "the people want

national unity". The political standoff comes as Tunisia has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic and its social and economic repercussions. This "weakening governance" led international ratings agency Moody's this week to downgrade Tunisia's sovereign debt rating, complicating the country's borrowing power while it has not finalized its 2021 budget.

The International Monetary Fund too warned in a report published Friday that the "COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating Tunisia's socio-economic fragilities" and "led to an unprecedented economic downturn". The IMF called for urgent reforms to reduce the fiscal deficit, which it said was estimated to have reached 11.5 percent of GDP in 2020. It also made a series of recommendations, including for limits on energy subsidies and lowering the wage bill.

'Strengthened by visible support'

Ennahdha head Rached Ghannouchi addressed the protesters Saturday, calling for dialogue and unity among political forces. His party dominated the political scene after the 2011 uprising that toppled long-time leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali but has seen its base erode, now only controlling a quarter of the parliament. But the protest showed that Ennahdha "could still mobilize in large numbers" and this "allows (Ennahdha) to come to the negotiating table strengthened by this visible support", said analyst Youssef Cherif. The mobilization, however, risks complicating talks as Ennahdha leaders have "gained confidence" in the face of a

managed to escape and seek a safe haven," Mansour, 41, told AFP in a park near his home in the Washington area.

Mansour, who has a relaxed demeanor and sees his future for now in the United States, says his cousin is now allowed monthly visitations but has health problems and is regularly interrogated about his family's activities. A foreign ministry spokesperson in Cairo was not available for comment when contacted. Mansour said at least four other Egyptian families overseas have faced similar predicaments since last year. In one case raised by the State Department, US citizen Mohamed Soltan, who has filed a lawsuit alleging torture in Egyptian custody, said that plain-clothes officers raided the homes of six family members. Soltan is the son of a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood, the now-banned movement of elected president Mohamed Morsi who was deposed by then general Sisi in 2013.

'They fear the future'

Mansour sees common cause with Soltan even though he comes from a different background, describing himself as non-religious and a supporter of separating religion and state. Mansour's father,



TUNIS: Supporters of the Islamist Ennahdha party wave national and party flags during a demonstration in support of the Tunisian government on Saturday in the capital Tunis. —AFP

president hostile to any compromise, he added. Saied called the protest "a waste of money".

"We are not reacting according to their calculations and arrangements, but according to our principles and commitments to the people," Saied said on Saturday. Saied, an independent academic and constitutional law expert, has castigated the procedure for naming the new ministers, saying it was unconstitutional. Tunisia's constitution does not require parliamentary approval for regular reshuffles. But in the absence of a constitutional court in Tunisia, the political crisis has dragged on for six weeks with no solution in sight to ease tensions between the president, parliament and the government. —AFP

Ahmed Sobhy Mansour, who has also resettled in the Washington area, was a scholar at Al-Azhar in Cairo, the premier university of Sunni Islam, where he was a leading voice of Quranism, which deviates from much mainstream thought by deriving religious authority only from the holy book—not hadiths.

Successive Egyptian governments' targeting of the family "shows that they fear the future that we represent—a future that allows inclusion of everyone, allows freedom and equality for everyone and, from within the traditions of Islam, provides the basis for this for the general public," the younger Mansour said.

President Joe Biden has vowed a forceful line on human rights with Arab allies, a shift from his predecessor Donald Trump who famously was quoted as calling Sisi "my favorite dictator" and saw shared interests in targeting the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State group as well as working with Israel. In a first telephone call with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken "raised concerns over human rights, which he emphasized would be central to the US-Egypt bilateral relationship," the State Department said. —AFP

For Egyptian activists abroad, a growing fear

WASHINGTON: When Sherif Mansour was first summoned by Egyptian security at age 17, he recalls how his father, who had plenty of firsthand experience, gave him directions on how to go to the interrogation. Mansour has now lived in the United States for 15 years. But he remains an activist—and is again feeling the heat from Egyptian security, this time through the targeting of family members.

Mansour's cousin, Reda Abdelrahman, was detained in August and is due in court on March 2 on vague charges of supporting a terrorist group—part of what human rights campaigners say is a growing extraterritorial effort by President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi to muzzle critics. "After managing to silence everyone else inside the country, controlling media organizations' editorial lines and forcing many people into exile, they are trying to pressure those of us who

Bribes for votes at UN-led Libya talks: Expert panel

TUNIS: At least three participants in UN-led Libya peace talks were bribed for votes, experts from the world body found in a report for the Security Council seen by AFP yesterday. Interim prime minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah was selected early this month during Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) talks launched in Tunisia in November, the United Nations' latest bid to salvage the country from a decade of conflict and fragmentation. In a report set to be presented to the Security Council in March, UN experts found that during the Tunisia talks, two participants "offered bribes of between \$150,000 to \$200,000 to at least three LPDF participants if they committed to vote for Dbeibah as PM."

The report, which is yet to be made public, was prepared by UN experts tasked with examining breaches of an international arms embargo to the North African nation. In a passage of their report seen by AFP, the experts reported that one delegate "erupted in anger in lobby of the Four Seasons hotel in Tunis on hearing that some participants may have received up to ... \$500,000 for their Dbeibah votes, whereas he had only received \$200,000." One participant in the talks, who asked to remain anonymous, confirmed to AFP that he had witnessed the scene, voicing anger at "unacceptable corruption at a time when Libya is going through a major crisis".

The Tunisia talks aimed at creating a transitional administration to lead the country towards elections set for December. In February, the 75 participants hand-picked by the UN to represent a wide spectrum of Libyan constituencies themselves selected an interim administration led by billionaire Dbeibah and a three-member presidential council.

Dbeibah must now win a vote of confidence in his government from the Libyan parliament by March 19. He said Thursday he had submitted a "vision" for a cabinet line-up but that the names of proposed ministers would be disclosed in parliament during the confidence vote. The latest claims came after several Libyan organizations in November demanded an investigation into allegations of corruption over the selection of future officials. The UN's interim Libya envoy at the time, Stephanie Williams told delegates and journalists that she had launched an investigation into allegations of bribery. In a letter seen by AFP and dated February 20, LPDF participants Sayida Kamel Yaacoubi and Azza Mahmoud Assid called on Williams' permanent successor Jan Kubis to make public the expert report, saying the allegations were an affront to their "dignity, honour and transparency". —AFP

International

In pandemic e-work, Greece sees a chance to reverse brain drain

Some 500,000 people move abroad during Greek crisis

ATHENS: The pandemic was a wakeup call that reminded Christophoros Xenos of what he misses most in London—the Greek sun and pleasant Mediterranean way of life. The 36-year old risk manager left Greece in his early 20s for Britain, aiming to complete his studies, gain professional experience abroad and come back.

This never happened, as the decade-long Greek crisis that followed killed thousands of jobs. But during the first coronavirus wave, Xenos took advantage of remote work to return to Greece for three months—and homesickness hit him hard.

"I worked for three months from Athens and the Greek islands and really enjoyed the weather, the quality of life, the return to the homeland," he said. With thousands of employees like Xenos capable of working remotely, Greece sees an opportunity to bring back some of the minds the country lost during the past decade. "We want you back," Alex Patelis, chief economic adviser to Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, said at a recent Delphi Forum online event.

"Open offices, set up new companies or move part of your businesses to Greece. We have the sun, the technology, and we are by your side," he said. Some 500,000 people moved abroad during the Greek crisis. The economy shrank by a quarter and unemployment skyrocketed to 28 percent. Since then, job figures have improved, but unemployment remains more than double the European Union and eurozone average. The exodus of half a million people cost the Greek economy more than 15 billion euros (\$18 billion), according to a report by the Hellenic Authority for Quality in Higher Education (ADIP). Around 90 percent of those who left were college graduates and 64 percent held a postgrad-

uate degree, according to a survey by consulting firm ICAP.

'I want to return'

The government offers a hefty tax incentive to those who move back to Greece from abroad—a 50 percent exemption on income earned here for the next seven years. Xenos says taxation is one of the main issues still keeping people abroad and the new lower taxation policy will be a big incentive.

"I want to return. I know that the salary won't be the same, but I don't want to make a huge compromise that would make no sense professionally," he said.

However, there are other major issues that need to be tackled: low salaries, state bureaucracy and internet bandwidth that is both slow and expensive. According to a study by the EU's foundation for the improvement of living and working conditions, Greece significantly lags behind the European average in terms of creating high-quality jobs with good financial gains and prospects.

Greece also ranks among the worst-performing countries in the OECD in the employment of higher education graduates aged 25-64. Even so, some Greeks have started to return.

'Incredible things happening'

At the Athens Medical School, a dozen scientists have repatriated and so far, have not regretted it. "Incredible things are happening in Greece, the country lacks neither in brains nor in capabilities," said Ioanna Mourkioti, a 29-year-old biology PhD student. "It's just that everything is done more slowly due to the Greek

Tarek William Saab said authorities had arrested Nelson Saavedra, with officials believing him to be "responsible for the heinous outrage and serial homicide" of the two women.

Saavedra had reportedly confessed after being turned in by his wife and will be charged with femicide aggravated by sexual violence, which carries a maximum sentence of 30 years in prison in Venezuela, Saab said. The deaths follow that of 33-year-old Carmine Sosa, who was killed last week in northern Portuguesa state in a suspected domestic violence incident. The attorney general's office has recorded more than 610 cases of femicide since 2017, half of which have been resolved.

Many of the women who rallied in Acarigua on Saturday said they only wished to feel safe in their everyday lives. "We want to have the same right that men have to go quietly to the gym at 6:00 in the morning, to walk home alone after a Sunday mass, to return home quietly when it gets dark," said Daniela Duran, a performing arts student who spoke at the protest.

The 23-year-old, who has experienced street harassment, said such occurrences are "part of everyday life." "There is no need to wear low-cut clothes, you can go out covered and with your hair up and the men in the cars slow down and pull over." Venezuela suffers from a high rate of violent crime compared to other countries in the region. Almost 12,000 violent killings occurred last year, according to the NGO Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, approximately seven times higher than the world average. — AFP



ATHENS: In this file photo, Greek scientist Nefeli Lagopati works on samples at a laboratory in Athens. Some 500,000 people moved abroad during the Greek crisis. — AFP

bureaucracy," she added. Mourkioti worked on a team that managed to create a rapid COVID-19 antigen test. They hope that a Greek company will soon move ahead with mass production, allowing Greece to become more independent in testing.

All the members of the team have completed part of their studies or spent part of their professional careers

abroad. "Our work shows that Greece can lead in research as well. It might be more difficult for a Greek researcher, having to do all the logistics by himself and lacking in infrastructure, but it can be done and it is a sector that our country can grow," said Nefeli Lagopati, a 37-year old postdoctorate researcher in biology and nanomedicine. — AFP

Venezuelans protest femicide after 3 women killed

ACARIGUA, Venezuela: Hundreds of Venezuelans protested Saturday following the murders of three young women last week, in a rally against femicide in the South American nation. Human rights activists have warned that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened gender-related violence globally, with independent online initiative Monitor de Femicidios estimating there were 256 femicides in Venezuela last year, compared to 167 in 2019. Roughly 300 people gathered in the northern city of Acarigua, many holding balloons with the phrase "Not one more", while others rallied in the capital Caracas.

"We are afraid," 22-year-old psychology student Ariadna Gonzalez told AFP, holding up a banner with the message: "Being alive should not be an achievement." Last week two women were murdered in Turen, a town near Acarigua. Eliannys Martinez, 17, was killed February 21 after leaving her church and 20-year-old Eduarlis Falcon was murdered en route to her gym a day after.

Both women's bodies bore signs of sexual violence, local media reported. On Saturday, Attorney General



LA MISION, Venezuela: A girl along with other people carry white and purple balloons while participating in a religious event in memory of two young women murdered days ago in the town of La Mision in the state of Portuguesa, Venezuela on Saturday. — AFP

Pope Francis expects to spend his final days in Rome: Book

BUENOS AIRES: Pope Francis expects to die in Rome, still the Catholic pontiff, without returning to spend his final days in his native Argentina, according to a new book titled "The Health of Popes." In an interview granted to Argentine journalist and physician Nelson Castro at the Vatican in February 2019, the pope said he thinks about death, but does not fear it. Extracts from the book were published Saturday in Argentine daily La Nacion.

Asked how he sees his final days, Francis, who is 84, responded: "I will be pope, either active or emeritus, and in Rome. I will not return to Argentina." Francis has had to cancel some events in recent months due to a painful problem with sciatica, but is not known to suffer any other major ailments.

The Vatican has always been reticent about a pope's health. According to the new book, "this is the first time that a pope has discussed his health with the transparency afforded by Francis." The pontiff, formerly the archbishop of Buenos Aires, says he does not miss his native Argentina, where he was born Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the son of Italian immigrants.—AFP

Western Sahara returns to European Court of Justice

LUXEMBOURG: The European Court of Justice is next week to discuss EU-Morocco accords allowing Rabat to export goods from Western Sahara that are contested by the pro-independence Polisario Front. It is to hold two sessions on Tuesday and Wednesday but a ruling will take "several months", a spokesman for the Luxembourg-based court told AFP.

For the Polisario, Moroccan exports from the disputed territory amount to "looting of its natural resources", notably agricultural goods, phosphates and fish, according to the independence movement's French lawyer Gilles Devers. On the other side of the argument, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, quoted by the kingdom's MAP news agency, said Rabat would repel "this judicial harassment" and defend "the legitimacy of its partnership" with Europe. On the ground, tensions rose sharply in November when Morocco sent troops into a buffer zone to reopen the only road leading from Morocco to Mauritania and the rest of West Africa. The two sides have since exchanged regular fire along a UN-monitored demarcation line.

A 1991 ceasefire deal was meant to lead to a referen-



NEW YORK: Governor of New York Andrew Cuomo speaks during a press conference at the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) in this file. — AFP

Second woman accuses NY governor of sexual harassment

NEW YORK: A second ex-employee of powerful New York state Governor Andrew Cuomo has accused him of sexual harassment, charges the governor denied on Saturday. This time the allegations came from 25-year-old former health adviser Charlotte Bennett, who told The New York Times that the governor sexually harassed her in the spring of 2020.

According to Bennett, the 63-year-old politician said in June that he was open to dating women in their 20s, and asked her if she thought age made a difference in romantic relationships, the Times reported. While Cuomo never tried to touch her, "I understood that the governor wanted to sleep with me, and felt horribly uncomfortable and scared," Bennett told the paper.

She added that she spoke to Cuomo's chief of staff and legal counsel, who transferred her to another post in another building. Bennett was happy with the new job and decided not to insist on an investigation. Cuomo became a national star last spring with his straight-talking yet empathetic coronavirus briefings that contrasted sharply with then-president Donald Trump's dismissive approach to the pandemic. But the harassment allegations come as he faces a growing storm over his handling of the coronavirus in nursing homes in his state. In a statement Saturday, Cuomo said he "never made advances toward Ms Bennett nor did I ever intend to act in any way that was inappropriate." He said he wanted instead to support Bennett, who had told him that she was a sexual assault survivor. The governor, whose third term expires at the end of 2022, called for "a full and thorough outside review" of these charges, led by a former federal judge. —AFP

dum on self-determination for the Britain-sized former Spanish colony that is home to about one million people. Morocco has offered autonomy but maintains the divided territory is a sovereign part of the kingdom.

The Polisario, which fought a war for independence from 1975 to 1991, has said it is still willing to join UN discussions on the territory's future—but would not lay down its arms. The talks ground to a halt in March 2019.

'Economic fight'

Devers said the independence movement was also waging an "economic fight" to defend the territory's interests. Access to the European market was being used "to prolong (Moroccan) colonization", according to the longtime activist for the Sahrawi cause.

The trade figures are significant. In 2019, Morocco exported 434 million euros (\$524 million) worth of fish, tomatoes and melons from Western Sahara to Europe, the European Commission said last December, without giving a figure for phosphates.

In 2016, the Polisario won a European Court ruling that a trade deal between Morocco and the EU did not apply to the Western Sahara. But the European Parliament in 2019 extended trade preferences to products from the territory, which is the last on the African continent whose post-colonial status has not been settled. Extending preferential tariffs "contributed to the normalization and relaunch of EU-Morocco relations and, as such, to maintaining their dialogue and constructive cooperation on the protection of human rights", according to the European Commission.—AFP

News in brief

'VIP vaccinations' scam in Argentina

BUENOS AIRES: Thousands of people demonstrated in cities across Argentina on Saturday to protest the "VIP vaccinations" scandal that forced the health minister to resign. Gines Gonzalez Garcia quit a week ago at the president's request after it emerged that his friends had been able to skip the line for coronavirus inoculation. Protesters carrying signs reading "Give me my vaccine" and "Stop wasting our money" gathered outside the government headquarters in Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. "They started by vaccinating friends of the government. It is not appropriate. They are stealing someone else's life," protester Irene Marcet said. — AFP

Eight arrested at protest in Denmark

COPENHAGEN: Danish police said they arrested eight people in an anti-lockdown demonstration in Copenhagen late Saturday. Organized by a group calling itself "Men in Black", the rally of around 1,200 people in the Danish capital was the first since the government announced last week that it was extending many anti-coronavirus restrictions. Police said the rally remained largely peaceful, but eight people were arrested for allegedly using fireworks and for rowdy behavior. Initially, around 600 people took part in the demonstration, but the crowd had swelled to around 1,200 by the end of the evening on the square in front of Copenhagen's town hall, police said. — AFP

Swimmer dies in shark attack

NOUMEA, France: A 57-year-old man has died after a shark attack off an island in New Caledonia yesterday, officials said. The amateur yachtsman was swimming near his moored boat off Maitre islet in the French Pacific territory when the incident happened, according to an initial inquiry. "According to witnesses the man was bitten on the leg by a four-meter-long shark" and died before the arrival of a rescue helicopter, a civil official told AFP. The man is believed to have died from a heart attack after the incident, according to the newspaper Les Nouvelles-Caledoniennes. Maitre, a roughly 20 minute trip from the main island, is popular with tourists and was busy the weekend of the attack. — AFP

Cuba approves animal rights law

HAVANA: Cuba has adopted long-called for animal rights regulations, a groundbreaking victory for activists in the communist nation. It's an important step for a civil society marveling at its demands being translated into law for the first time, and signals a cultural shift on an island of contradictions between tradition and modernity. Late Friday, the Council of State approved the legislation, which provides for fines and potential prison terms for offenders. It comes into force 90 days after its official publication. — AFP

Social media 'awash' with lies

LONDON: Prince William has warned that anti-vaccination messages are rife on social media and urged those eligible to get jabs, following a similar appeal by his grandmother, Queen Elizabeth II. "Social media is awash sometimes with lots of rumors and misinformation," the Duke of Cambridge said in video footage released by Kensington Palace on Saturday evening. It showed him and his wife Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge, speaking to two women who are clinically vulnerable and eligible for first jabs soon. The royal family is speaking out as health officials have voiced concerns over lower take-up among ethnic minority communities. — AFP

International

Bangladesh police fire rubber bullets, tear gas at new protests

Rights groups demand swift probe into death of writer

DHAKA: Dozens were injured yesterday as Bangladeshi police fired rubber bullets and tear gas in a third day of protests sparked by the death of a prominent writer and government critic in jail. Mushtaq Ahmed, 53, collapsed in a high-security prison and died late Thursday, 10 months after being arrested under a "digital security" law that critics say is being used to silence dissent in the country of 168 million people.

Live footage yesterday from local television station Channel 24 showed a road and footpath in front of the National Press Club—a favorite protest site in Dhaka—turning into a battleground as police beat protesters with batons to disperse them. Student activists from the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) hurled rocks and attacked officers with bamboo and plastic pipes, prompting police to retaliate by "firing rubber bullets and tear gas", Deputy Commissioner of Dhaka police Sazzadur Rahman said.

"They did not take any permission (for the protests)," he added, defending the police's move to clear the protesters. BNP spokesman Rizvi Ahmed said about 30 student activists of the party, including a senior leader, were injured in the clashes. Several policemen were also hurt, including an officer who was rushed to hospital. Ahmed said more than 500 protesters were at the press club, trying to form a human chain.

He defended the party not having sought permis-

sion for the protests at the National Press Club, saying that historically no clearance was needed to hold rallies there. "As they stood there for a human chain, (police) baton-charged indiscriminately," he said. "It is a murder," he said of Mushtaq Ahmed's death. "We think the state is involved."

Swift probe

International and local rights groups have demanded a swift probe into the death of the writer, who was arrested over comments posted on social media criticizing the government's response to coronavirus. Ambassadors from 13 countries, including the United States, France, Britain, Canada and Germany, expressed "grave concern" over the case. He had been detained under the Digital Security Act, passed in 2018, which rights groups say has been used to silence critics with hefty fines and lengthy prison sentences.

Ahmed was denied bail at least six times. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Saturday shrugged off concern over the internet law, Ahmed's death and criticism of her government's rights record.

Demonstrators have marched at Dhaka University for several days chanting slogans condemning the government's treatment of Mushtaq Ahmed as well as other writers, journalists and activists.

At least eight people have been arrested since



DHAKA: Policemen clash with the activists of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) during the third day of protests following the death of Mushtaq Ahmed, in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka yesterday. — AFP

the protests erupted shortly after midnight following Ahmed's death on Thursday. Among them, seven were student activists from two left-wing groups and a labour leader in the southern city of Khulna. Ruhul Amin, 38, was detained on Friday over

charges that he shared Facebook posts by Ahmed and had slammed the writer's death, his lawyer Kudrat-e-Khuda said. "He has been charged under the Digital Security Act and remanded into police custody for two days," he said. —AFP

'Seedballs' giving Kenya's forests a helping hand

MASAI MARA, Kenya: At first glance, the round black pellets could easily be mistaken for animal dung. But these hardy little balls contain acacia seeds that are helping regrow Kenya's depleted forests. In a tranche of razed forest bordering the Masai Mara wildlife reserve, a team of rangers scatter generous handfuls of "seedballs" around the bald clearing to give nature a fighting chance to regenerate. It takes just minutes for the eight rangers from the Mara Elephant Project, a conservation group, to toss some 22,000 seedballs across this ravaged corner of the Nyakweri forest. "It is very simple," said Jackson Maitai, whose rangers discovered that loggers had illegally cleared this land during their routine patrols to protect elephants in the area.

"The seedballs are not actually heavy. We just throw them away everywhere we see there is deforestation, so it is not a big deal." Humble though they may be, seedballs are tackling a century-old problem in Kenya. Trees were felled en masse by colonial administrators to fuel a train across East Africa, while land today is cleared for agriculture and charcoal production as Kenya's population grows upward and outward. The forests bordering the Masai Mara, the legendary wildlife haven and savannah wilderness in the country's southwest, are no exception, chipped away for pasture, crops and



MASAI MARA, Kenya: Rangers from the Mara Elephant Project (MEP) help to disperse seed balls by hand at a section of Nyakweri indigenous forest destroyed for charcoal making in the Masai Mara ecosystem. —AFP

charcoal, a cheap fuel.

Nyakweri, for example, has lost more than 50 percent of its forest cover in the past two decades, reducing key habitats for wild animals, according to Marc Goss, the director of the Mara Elephant Project. But forests, which cover just seven percent of Kenya's land mass, also act as water reserves and a powerful bulwark against climate change and desertification. Kenya's forests are cleared at a rate of 5,000 hectares a year, the environment ministry said in 2018.

For three years, Goss and his team have been giving nature a helping hand by scattering seedballs by any means possible—on foot, by car and

even dropped by helicopter. Developed by Seedballs Kenya, the casing of charcoal dust protects the seed inside from being eaten by mice, birds or insects before it germinates. The shell is semi-porous, giving it a fighting chance even in arid conditions. "You can throw them out year round. It would sit there, wait for the rain to come, it washes the dust away, and then the seed is back to its natural state, and will be able to start growing," said Teddy Kinyanjui, the co-founder of Seedballs Kenya. The idea is not entirely new: in ancient Egypt, seeds were coated in mud to protect them from the elements and hungry passersby, Kinyanjui said. —AFP

Dozens held over Kazakh political prisoner protest

ALMATY, Kazakhstan: Police in Kazakhstan detained dozens of protesters yesterday who were calling for the release of political prisoners in line with a resolution passed by the European Parliament. Government opponents were attempting their first protest since the resolution called for the European Union to prioritize rights in its relations with Kazakhstan, saying there had been a "worrying deterioration" in the oil-rich country. Roughly 50 protesters were detained in the largest city Almaty before they could gather near a city park, where the internet appeared to have been shut down.

Several of the protesters shouted "freedom to political prisoners" as they were manhandled into waiting vans. The Central Asian nation's new president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has styled himself as a reformer and last year signed off on a law easing restric-

tions on public assembly. But the European Parliament's non-binding February 11 resolution said "systemic shortcomings in relation to respect for freedom of association, assembly and expression" persisted.

It also criticized "secret court decisions" that have outlawed as extremist two opposition groups affiliated with former energy minister Mukhtar Ablyazov. Kazakhstan's foreign ministry said the resolution was "initiated by unfriendly politicians, fuelled by inaccurate information from destructive circles". The state prosecutor warned on Friday that anyone attending the protests-called in cities across the vast country—could face administrative detentions of between 20 and 50 days for joining unauthorized rallies.

In a Facebook post on Saturday, Ablyazov, who fled the country in 2009, called on Kazakhs "not to stay on the



ALMATY, Kazakhstan: Kazakh law enforcement officers detain a participant in an opposition rally in Almaty yesterday. — AFP

sidelines when democracies are ready to support the people of Kazakhstan in the fight against dictatorship". The ex-bank chief, who is wanted for embezzlement and organizing the murder of a banker in his home country, was granted

asylum by France. He insists the criminal cases are politically motivated retribution for his opposition to former president Nursultan Nazarbayev, who remains a powerful figure and is close to Russian leader Vladimir Putin. —AFP

Philippines receives first vaccines from China

MANILA: The Philippines received 600,000 vaccine doses from China yesterday, kickingstart the country's inoculation drive despite concerns over the Sinovac jab's effectiveness. Top government officials and health workers will be the first on Monday to receive the Chinese-made vaccine-called CoronaVac—just days after the drug regulator approved it for emergency use. President Rodrigo Duterte, whose government has been under fire over delays in procuring vaccines, oversaw the delivery of the doses at a military air base. Around 525,000 doses of the AstraZeneca jab were also due to arrive Monday as part of the COVAX global inoculation program and will also be offered to healthcare workers.

The regulator did not recommend CoronaVac for healthcare workers due to its comparatively low efficacy. An advisory group to the Philippine government allowed it to be offered to those willing to take it, but many nurses and doctors are reluctant and have opted to wait for other vaccines. In the Philippine General Hospital, one of the country's main facilities treating COVID-19 patients, only 10 percent of staff were willing to be inoculated with the Chinese-made vaccine, spokesman Jonas Del Rosario told AFP.

It was far from the 94 percent who registered to take the Pfizer-BioNTech jab, said Del Rosario, who himself opted not to take the CoronaVac shot. The hesitancy is not new in the Southeast Asian nation, which has struggled with vaccine programs in recent years. The Philippines was the first country in 2016 to deploy the dengue vaccine Dengvaxia, but a botched rollout led to unfounded claims that several dozen children had died from the jab.

Recent surveys have shown vaccine confidence remains low, with almost half of the population

reportedly unwilling to be inoculated against the coronavirus. To boost trust, several top officials—including the health minister—are expected to receive the CoronaVac jab. President Duterte, who has defended Chinese-made vaccines, suggested he will be inoculated in public, having previously said he would receive it in private. But the 75-year-old leader's doctors are still deciding which vaccine to use for him. The rollout came as the number of daily new infections in the Philippines hit a four-month high. More than 570,000 cases have been confirmed, including over 12,000 deaths. Aside from hospital workers, the military is set to receive 100,000 Sinovac doses.

Members of the Philippines armed forces are required to get vaccinated and those who refuse could be disciplined. The government is in talks with seven vaccine makers, including Sinovac, in the hope of securing enough doses to inoculate 70 million people—about 60 percent of the population—this year. But the bulk of the supply is not expected to start arriving until the summer. —AFP

Dozens of Hong Kong dissidents charged with security crime

HONG KONG: Dozens of Hong Kong dissidents were charged with subversion yesterday in the largest use yet of Beijing's sweeping new national security law, as authorities seek to cripple the finance hub's democracy movement.

Police arrested 55 of the city's best-known pro-democracy campaigners in a series of dawn raids last month. Yesterday, 47 were charged with one count each of "conspiracy to commit subversion"—one of the new national security crimes—with police saying the group would appear in court on Monday morning.

Democracy supporters described the move as a body blow. "Every prominent voice of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong now is either jailed, in exile, or charged for subversion of state power," activist Sophie Mak wrote on Twitter. The European Union's office in Hong Kong said the charges were of "great concern". "The nature of these charges makes clear that legitimate political pluralism will no longer be tolerated in Hong Kong," the office added. Beijing is battling to stamp out dissent in semi-autonomous Hong Kong after swathes of the population hit the streets in 2019 in huge and sometimes violent democracy protests. The broadly worded security law, imposed on the city last June, criminalizes any act deemed to be subversion, secession, terrorism or collusion with foreign forces. Those charged are routinely denied bail until trial and face up to life in prison if convicted.

'Remain strong'

The activists charged yesterday represent a broad cross-section of Hong Kong's opposition, from veteran former pro-democracy lawmakers to academics, lawyers, social workers and a host of youth activists. Joshua Wong, one of the city's most recognizable pro-democracy figures, was among those charged, visited by police inside prison where he is currently serving a sentence for organizing protests in 2019. John Clancey, an American lawyer and long-time Hong Kong resident who was with the initial group arrested, was one of the few not charged yesterday. Many struck a defiant tone as they prepared to report to police yesterday to hear the charges.

"Democracy is never a gift from heaven. It must be earned by many with strong will," Jimmy Sham, a key organizer of 2019's huge protests, told reporters outside a police station. "We can tell the whole world, under the most painful system, Hong Kongers are the light of the city. We will remain strong and fight for what we want," he added.

Former student leader Lester Shum said: "We have long decided not to bow our heads to totalitarian rule. I hope Hong Kong people can carry on with this decision." The alleged offence of those arrested for subversion was to organize an unofficial primary last summer to choose candidates for the city's partially elected legislature, in hopes that the pro-democracy bloc might take a majority for the first time. Many of those candidates were ultimately disqualified from standing, and authorities scrapped the election because of the coronavirus. But Chinese and Hong Kong officials viewed the primary as an attempt to "overthrow" and "paralyze" the city's government and therefore a threat to national security.

Critics say that declaration has effectively made opposition politics in Hong Kong all but illegal. Clifford Stott, a British academic who was hired by Hong Kong's government to sit on a short-lived advisory panel to the city's police watchdog after the protests, gave a stark assessment of yesterday's charges. —AFP

Business

MONDAY, MARCH 1, 2021

Women making inroads on Wall Street, but still a long way to go

Jane Fraser arrives as head of banking flagship Citigroup today

NEW YORK: Pin-up photos and smutty jokes have long been commonplace on trading floors, but the finance world is gradually opening up to women—underlined by the arrival today of Jane Fraser as the head of Wall Street banking flagship Citigroup.

Her elevation marks “a milestone,” according to Lorraine Hariton, director of Catalyst, an organization that promotes women in the workplace. “But there is also a long way to go,” she said.

Employment figures demonstrate the mountains that still have to be moved to achieve parity between men and women in the financial services sector. Women in 2019 made up more than 50 percent of employees in the field in the United States, but only 22 percent of managers—leaving aside the highest positions—according to a report by Deloitte.

Current trends predict that figure will rise to 31 percent by 2030. And male financial analysts earned 17 percent more on average in 2020 than their female counterparts. Several women told AFP that women have to work harder than men to climb the ranks, and have to be seen as beyond reproach.

Prestigious professions and those that pay the most, like investment bankers and traders, still remain strongholds of white men. And sexist remarks still come out from time to time. “For every Jane Fraser, there are hundreds, if not thousands, out there,” said Muriel Wilkins of the executive consultancy firm Paravis Partner. “Are they being provided with the opportunities to be able to advance?” she said. But the old certainties have started to shift.

Women's network

Vague promises about the need to diversify recruiting have gradually led to some real reflection on the issue. “Slowly more leaders... are starting to think and to talk about what it means to have equity

in their organization... and which structures they can put in place, so that it is not just on women,” said Muriel Wilkins. At JPMorgan Chase, America's largest bank by asset size, there has long been an informal women's network. In 2013, women at the most senior level started organizing women-only meetings while on business trips around the world so that they could hear employees' thoughts.

Company head Jamie Dimon wanted to formalize these various initiatives and so in 2018 the “Women on the Move” program was created, said project manager Sam Saperstein. “It allowed us to reinvent what we were doing with HR, with training and just pull everything together and elevate it in a clear strategy across the firm,” she said.

The initiative organized a career development program open to all women in the company. About 500 participated in the first session last year, and 2,000 have applied for the second.

Sponsorships

To tackle the citadel of asset management, which is still the preserve of men, the organization “Girls Who Invest,” founded in 2015, has set itself the goal of having 30 percent of the money invested in funds worldwide managed by women by 2020. Women currently represent only six percent of managers in venture capital companies, according to the group, and only three percent in hedge funds.



Jane Fraser



A woman walks on Wall Street in New York. —AFP

The organization wants to prove that contrary to popular belief, women are not at all turned off by the job: companies just have to go out and find them. It scours university campuses to recruit students, train them and offer them internships. “The industry had moved tremendously in the past five years,” said director Katherine Jollon Colsher.

“More and more firms are now having 50 percent female analyst classes and are focused on

those same numbers at the associate level.” “Measurement and holding people accountable is critical to make change,” said Lorraine Hariton of Catalyst. Michael Corbat, Jane Fraser's predecessor, was one of the first in the industry to release statistics on diversity within his firm. It is also essential, Hariton said, for companies to put in place support measures, whether it is sponsorship programs or parental leave. —AFP

China investment in Australia plunges as ties sour, virus bites

SYDNEY: Chinese investment in Australia plunged almost two-thirds last year to less than \$1 billion as the impact of coronavirus was compounded by increasingly fraught relations between the two countries. The reading marks the fourth straight drop and is just a fraction of the \$13 billion injected into the country in 2016, with Canberra growing increasingly wary of the Asian superpower's intentions.

Data from the Australian National University released yesterday showed direct investment plunged to US\$800 million last year, from US\$2.05 billion in 2019. The pandemic has almost halved investment globally according to United Nations trade body UNCTAD, but a much larger drop was seen in China-Australia flows, according to ANU economics professor Shiro Armstrong.

Last year China's direct investment to Australia focused on just 20 projects in three sectors—real estate, mining and manufacturing—the fewest in a decade. “Naturally, this kind of data is lumpy, because of big projects, but there is a pretty clear trend we can see, since the peak in 2016 it has fallen every year quite steadily, quite dramatically,” Armstrong told AFP.

In 2016 there were a number of large investments from the China Investment Corporation, a sovereign wealth fund, and China's State Power Investment Corporation bought Pacific Hydro.

While China remains Australia's largest trading partner, political relations are at their lowest in decades, with Canberra recoiling at Beijing's efforts to translate economic might into political and military power. China has slapped punitive sanctions on a range of Australian exports as the two countries clash on a range of issues from influence operations, national security rules, China's internal crackdowns and transparency over its handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

There is also growing concern in Australia that Beijing has used trade, investments and diaspora groups to gain political leverage, which has prompted a slew of legislation.

Armstrong said new Australian rules to screen investments for risks to national security had a particularly chilling effect and could help explain the decline. “There is a national security test now for foreign investment, there have been high profile cases of Chinese investments being withdrawn” he said. “That shakes confidence in foreign investors.” Australia has rejected Chinese bids for Japanese-owned Lion Dairy and local construction firm Probuild. —AFP

A look at three women in finance

NEW YORK: Women in the US finance industry applaud signs of progress at financial giants like Citigroup, which became the first big Wall Street bank to name a female chief executive.

Still, even as more women rise and some companies allow greater flexibility to working mothers, finance remains a challenging career domain and progress is coming more slowly than many women would like. “Never been easy” -

As a little girl, Hermina Batson was always curious when she saw cash exchanged. “I was always wondering when my parents paid for things, why we never got the same bill back,” Batson told AFP. “I wanted to know what was happening.” Batson's mother took her to visit the Federal Reserve Bank of New York when she was six.

She has been hooked on finance ever since, even while recognizing that the career, as an African American, “has never been easy.” “I did not feel rejected. I might have felt awkward,” she said.

Throughout her career, senior management or clients would sometimes hand Batson their coat when they arrived at a meeting. Eventually she learned to return the gesture. After high school, Batson, who goes by Nina, immediately began working for a bank. After studying securitization in college, she worked her way up to senior positions, eventually spending 25 years at Japanese bank MFUG.

“Though I'm currently in transition, I'm very much looking forward to staying in the financial industry,” she said.

Batson will take over as president of the Financial Women's Association in July. The group was established in 1956 after its founders were turned away from a men's club to share professional experiences

Europe less at risk of inflation and rate fears

PARIS: Investors are watching inflation carefully, worried that a boiling over of prices will ruin the expected strong pandemic recovery although analysts believe Europe faces much less of a risk than the United States. Fears that US President Biden's \$1.9 trillion stimulus plan—which was passed by the House of Representatives on Saturday—will stoke up the economy too much have unnerved investors in recent weeks.

A rise in yields on 10-year US Treasury bonds—a key indicator of expectations—shows the markets believe prices are set to rise much more sharply than last year's gain of 1.4 percent, which could force the US Federal Reserve to hike interest rates earlier than it says it

plans to do. Bond yields have risen elsewhere too, with 10-year French government bonds turning positive on Thursday for the first time in months while the benchmark 10-year German Bund has also risen although it remains negative. European inflation data for January showed a jump in prices of 0.9 percent compared to a minus 0.3 percent reading in December, as increased costs of raw materials fed through into services and industrial goods. After having slowed considerably in 2020, inflation is expected to rise this year in Europe as the economy picks up following the relaxation of measures to slow the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

But it is not so much a spike in inflation that worries investors but that the Fed would raise interest rates faster than it has communicated. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell pledged Tuesday that the US central bank will keep benchmark lending rates low until the economy is at full employment and inflation has risen consistent-

and further their knowledge. Batson applauded Citigroup's appointment of Jane Fraser as the first female chief executive of a giant Wall Street bank.

“For a woman, or anybody that's underrepresented, to be able to look and see someone that looks like them, or has a similar upbringing, is very, very important to moving the needle,” she said.

Transparency has improved following US banking regulations requiring data on employee diversity, but “we're not there yet,” she said. The wage gap especially is still too wide, Batson added.

Need 'a strong network'

Anna Zhou, 22, was undecided on her career path when she started at Yale University in 2016 after being recruited to the fencing team. She began exploring finance after one of her friends introduced her to Girls Who Invest (GWI), whose mission is to boost the number of women in portfolio management and executive leadership in asset management.

The organization helped Zhou line up a summer internship at Wellington Management in Boston.

She found support from women at different levels of the firm. Keeping in touch helped Zhou land a job at Wellington after she graduated. Zhou sees signs of progress on diversity in finance, but says there is “room for improvement.”

“Since my freshman year at Yale, more opportunities for women to enter finance have emerged,” she said. “Through my involvement with GWI, I both experienced and am currently promoting the importance of a strong network for females in the finance industry.”



Robin Prunty



Anna Zhou



Hermina Batson

Mentoring from senior colleagues has been crucial, she said, adding: “I have a clear view of my career path ahead.”

Grateful to work part-time

“Before it was even popular, S&P gave me the opportunity to work part time when I started having my family, in 1993,” recalled Robin Prunty. Prunty, 57, who has been at S&P Global Ratings since 1987, had originally expected to work the reduced schedule for six months, but “ended up working part-time for 17 years,” she said.

“I really appreciated that flexibility, and I think it really made a big difference to other women coming into the organization after me,” she said. “That really was a big factor in my decision to stay at S&P.”

Prunty kept gaining experience working part-time even if her career didn't advance as quickly as it might have. “When I came back full time and was ready to take on management responsibilities, they were fully supportive of that,” said Prunty, who currently manages analytics and research on US public finance.

Prunty is active in the women's bond club and applauds the more significant focus on diversity in recent years throughout the industry, but adds: “I think there's room for improvement.” —AFP

ly above its 2.0 percent target.

But bond yields continued to rise, indicating investor concern about a rise in interest rates that would make borrowing and investment more expensive and slow the economy. However, many analysts are skeptical that Biden's stimulus program will spark considerable inflation. “It isn't clear that Biden's recovery plan will create lots of inflation,” said Xavier Ragot, head of the French Economic Observatory think tank. For the European Union, there is no likelihood that its pandemic recovery program would, he believes. “The amounts of the European recovery plans pose absolutely no inflationary risk,” he said.

'No risk of overheating'

The European Commission's recovery program is worth 750 billion euros (\$920 billion), with several EU members also having their own national programs. “We have a European recovery program... considerably less strong, and a loss of growth that is much greater, so

there aren't the same risks of overheating as in the United States,” said Fabien Tripier, an economist at CEPII, a Paris-based research centre on the world economy. The US economy shrank 3.5 percent last year while the drop for the eurozone was nearly double that.

There is “no risk of overheating or a sustained rise in inflation” in the eurozone, the head of the Banque de France, Francois Villeroy de Galhau, insisted this past week. The French Economic Observatory's Ragot also does not believe that if the Fed is pushed by the markets into raising rates that the European Central Bank would be forced to follow suit. “It doesn't work like that in macroeconomics,” he said, noting that the monetary policy of the Fed and ECB had diverged considerably at the start of the last decade. “With loose financial conditions still necessary to support the economy, the ECB is unlikely to react to the coming inflation overshoot,” said Capital Economics economist Jack Allen-Reynolds. —AFP

Business

NBK adds Web/In-app payment to Samsung Pay, a first for Kuwait

Service allows customers to make online payments in one step

KUWAIT: As part of its constant endeavors to meet its customers' needs, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) strives to provide world-class cutting-edge payment solutions. In this context, NBK has added Web/In-app Payment feature to Samsung Pay, for the first time in Kuwait.

This service is the first of its kind in Kuwait that allows customers to make their online payments in one step using Samsung Pay Wallet, without the need to enter card data and wait for OTP, providing a quick, easy and secure payment method for Samsung Pay enabled customers.

The service is currently available through the websites of eligible stores for credit cards and debit cards. NBK offers the service for merchants who wish to provide customers with Samsung Pay Web/In-app check-out, as well as for customers from Samsung smartphone

users for seamless and secure payment experience.

NBK was the first bank in Kuwait to launch Samsung Pay last September, which is an innovative wallet payment solution, based on MST and NFC technologies, that allows customers to use their Galaxy smartphones to make their payments at most NFC-enabled POS terminals at their favorite stores as well as in online purchases. On this occasion, Prasad Srinivasa, Head of Payment Acceptance and Customer Loyalty, Consumer Banking Group, National Bank of Kuwait, said: "We always strive to provide cutting-edge payment solutions, as part of our keenness to provide a top-notch banking experience to our customers and to consolidate our leadership in providing digital banking services."

NBK's Digital Transformation Strategy yielded many advanced digital services and payment solutions, as



Prasad Srinivasa

part of the efforts to keep pace with the rapid technological advancement and to meet customers' needs, in view of the highly increasing reliance on digital channels and services for their transactions, as a result of the exceptional circumstances imposed by the coronavirus pandemic, he pointed out.

Srinivasa concluded: "We promise our customers more of the advanced digital services and solutions that meet their needs, enrich their banking experience, and reflect NBK's capabilities, tremendous technological

infrastructure, and strong partnerships with leading brands."

To activate Samsung Pay, you can download the Samsung Pay App from Galaxy Store, log in to your Samsung account from Samsung Pay App to set your PIN and fingerprint, then tap on "add card" and scan or manually enter the card number, and finally, verify your card through SMS/e-mail option and enter the OTP. It is worth mentioning that NBK was named "Best Consumer Digital Bank - Middle East" for 2020 by the reputable international magazine Global Finance, in the annual survey of the World's Best Digital Banks 2020. The New York-based magazine selects winners based on the evaluation of a world-class panel of judges at Infosys, a global leader in consulting and technology, whereas Global Finance editors are responsible for the final selection of all winners.



Ooredoo Kuwait honors its success partners

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, organized a ceremony to honor its success partners from retail distributors, sub dealers and a number of the company's sales managers, and thank them for their active participation in the successful prepaid sales campaign launched in November and ended in December 2020 and achieving the highest sales during this period. The ceremony took place at the company's headquarters in Ooredoo Tower on February 24, 2021.

During the ceremony, Senior Director, Consumer Sales, Ooredoo Kuwait, Ahmed Dardab, awarded the sub dealers and retailers shops with the highest sales figures on the latest prepaid sales products promotional packages and valued prizes worth more than \$600,000, including iPhone XS devices. This honor is a reflection of the dedication of the members and retail

shops and the tireless efforts they made during the last two months of 2020, in which Ooredoo Kuwait witnessed distinguished achievements in terms of both: the services provided and the percentage of sales during this period of time.

Ahmed Darbad, Senior Director, Consumer Sales, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "Despite the challenges the telecommunications market in the State of Kuwait has experienced, we will continue conducting exceptional promotional activities and support the various market sectors with all means in order to efficiently serve our customers, and provide what is commensurate with the customer base in Kuwaiti market."

Dardab added: "Ooredoo Kuwait embraces a group of individuals demonstrate exceptional efficiency in their interactions with customers and adequate knowledge of the local market, business methods and sales." Darbad concluded: "We are always keen on training and developing the staff of our sales department on an ongoing basis and enrich their skills, especially those related to dealing with customers and methods of discussion and dialogue." It is noteworthy that Ooredoo launched one of its largest campaigns in the Kuwaiti market to support more than 1500 sub-distributors, by offering unique products that suit all segments, including the prepaid plans and bundles.

What will US economic recovery look like?

WASHINGTON: The US economy is rebounding faster than expected from the COVID-19 recession, outperforming the most pessimistic estimates. But some areas remain largely shut down. So what will recovery look like?

How fast will the economy grow?

The International Monetary Fund estimates the GDP of the United States will expand by 5.1 percent this year, after contracting by 3.5 percent in 2020 as the pandemic forced lockdowns that shuttered businesses nationwide. But economists think the growth rate could accelerate further. The nearly \$3 trillion in government stimulus programs last year, including a \$900 billion measure approved in late December, were key to helping the US economy bounce back. And Congress is moving toward approving President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion rescue package, which will provide more support for businesses, families and state and local jobs. Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell acknowledged growth could hit 6.0 percent, while private forecasters like Gregory Daco of Oxford Economics said it could break 7.0 percent.

The quick recovery has raised concerns that price increases could spiral higher, but Powell tamped down those fears, saying inflationary spikes in coming months are unlikely to last. And the Fed has pledged to keep interest rates low until employment recovers and inflation stays above 2.0 percent for some time.

When will the jobs come back?

As businesses were able to reopen and adapt to new COVID-19 restrictions, the country regained about half of the 20 million jobs lost in the early weeks of the pandemic. Many of the remaining 10 million jobs are in the hardest-hit service sectors like hotels and restaurants—losses that fell especially hard on Black and Hispanic workers. And millions more have seen their hours cut or have left the labor force entirely, including large numbers of women who are taking care of children. Those jobs and hours likely will not come back until the vaccine roll-out reaches a critical mass of Americans, allowing people to resume normal activities without fear so businesses and schools can fully reopen. The official unemployment rate—known as U-3—hit 6.3 percent in January, a dramatic worsening from 3.5 percent a year earlier. For Black workers the rate was 9.2 percent.

But when including individuals who have been discouraged from looking for work, or who are working part-time but want a full-time position, the broader U-6



WASHINGTON, DC: US President Joe Biden speaks about the American Rescue Plan and the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) for small businesses in response to coronavirus, in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building in Washington, DC. — AFP

rate was 11.1 percent. "The aid and stimulus are critical to bridging COVID-tainted waters, stemming employment losses ... and priming the pump for a more robust recovery once social distancing measures are lifted," economist Diane Swonk of Grant Thornton said.

Moody's Analytics estimates Biden's stimulus plan would create 7.5 million jobs this year alone.

Which sectors are rebounding fastest?

The housing market, strong before the pandemic, paused only briefly before roaring back hotter than before. Fueled by rock-bottom mortgage rates—and with remote work perhaps starting a trend of people moving out of congested areas—sales of new and existing homes have jumped about 20 percent above the pre-pandemic level. But supplies have fallen as homebuilders struggle to keep up with demand, driving prices higher. Manufacturing, too, has recovered steadily since last summer, although output remains below where it was in early 2020. And even as consumers have been forced to curtail activities, they have opened their wallets to spend freely on autos, electronics, furniture, and building and gardening supplies. Online retailers have been the big winners, with a sales increase of just under 30 percent over the year.

Where is the damage still visible?

The most visible impact of the recession is in the travel, hospitality and entertainment industry, which likely will come back to life quickly once people are able to take vacations and enjoy concerts, movies or plays. But economists have warned about the potential for more permanent scars on the economy in the wake of the pandemic.

Thousands of shops and restaurants have closed permanently, and there is a risk of a wave of bankruptcies if the recovery doesn't come soon enough for some heavily indebted firms. State and local governments, which typically cannot borrow to finance their operations, are facing the possibility of slashing teachers, police and firefighters from the payroll to compensate for massive relief spending.—AFP

Kuwait Trend Micro launches Vision One™ platform

KUWAIT: Kuwait Trend Micro Incorporated, a global leader in cybersecurity, yesterday announced the launch of Trend Micro Vision One™, an innovative breakthrough in visibility and response that empowers security teams by eliminating security alert overload from a single console. The new platform, Trend Micro Vision One, has extended detection and response (XDR) at its core and raises the bar with new capabilities to help security teams to see more and respond faster.

Organizations are struggling with siloed tools, disjointed alerts and stealthy, sophisticated threats, whether they have a Security Operations Center (SOCs) or are relying on stretched IT security teams for SOC functions. Trend Micro has helped hundreds of organizations identify and reduce cyber risk by correlating alerts across the entire IT environment, with the industry-first XDR solution launched in 2019. Now, with Trend Micro Vision One, the company is solving more complex security challenges with enhanced XDR, new risk visibility, new third-party integrations, and simplified response to threats across security layers.

"The past year has seen escalating complexity in IT stacks, with environments across the region becoming highly hybridized," said Dr Moataz bin Ali, VP and Managing Director, Middle East and North Africa, Trend Micro. "XDR connects every aspect of infrastructure, from email and endpoints to cloud workloads and networks. And Trend Micro Vision One brings these capabilities together in a comprehensive view of the entire environment, ridding security teams of alert fatigue and providing them with a rich, contextual view that allows them to hunt down and contain threats more effectively."

With Trend Micro Vision One, organizations can maximize efficiency by making less sophisticated security resources operate at a more expert level. The new platform allows them to faster dissect security incidents, identify critical threat patterns and complex attacks and understand their overall security posture and trends, so organizations can proactively identify and assess potential security risks. According to Gartner, Innovation Insight for Extended Detection and Response, March 2020, "Two of the biggest challenges for all security organizations are hiring and retaining technically savvy

security operations staff, and building a security operations capability that can confidently configure and maintain a defensive posture as well as provide a rapid detection and response capacity. Mainstream organizations are often overwhelmed by the intersectionality of these two problems."



The holistic threat defense platform is true to its name, offering:

- Visibility & threat intelligence: Cross-layer detection models, along with security risk visibility supported by Trend Micro Research insights, enable enterprises to see complex attacks and particular points of security risk that siloed solutions miss. In preview, are new insights into SaaS application usage, their risk levels and trends over time.
- Purpose-built sensors: Native integrations with Trend Micro security stack across critical security layers.
- Fit with existing infrastructure: Out-of-the-box, API integrations with existing third-party solutions already in use to compliment workflows.
- Simplified management: Ability to adjust security policies and drive response actions across security layers from a single console instead of swivel chair management

In addition to the layered security from Trend Micro, customers can easily connect this new platform into other security technologies such as third-party endpoint protection platforms and SIEM and SOARS, including new integrations with Fortinet, Microsoft Sentinel and Splunk just to name a few. Early adopting customers are ready to act on the developing opportunity to integrate beyond SIEM and SOAR, with solutions like firewalls, ticketing solutions, identity and access management.

This new blog from IDC resulted from a briefing prior to launch and goes into further detail on the new Trend Micro platform. To find out more about Trend Micro Vision One, please visit TrendMicro.com.

Women fight for funding in man's world of tech startups

SAN FRANCISCO: Lauren Foundos has excelled at just about everything she has put her mind to, from college sports and Wall Street trading to her Forte startup that takes workouts online. Being a woman in the overwhelmingly male world of venture capital was still a barrier—but, like many other female entrepreneurs, she only worked harder to succeed.

"In some cases, before I even spoke, they were asking me if I would step down as chief executive," Foundos said of encounters with venture capitalists. "This was a whole new level." Men would speak past her in meetings, discussing whether she could emotionally handle the job as if she wasn't there, or wondering out loud who would take care of the books. "When that happens, I tell them I am right here," Foundos said. "I am the finance guy; I worked at big banks for more than 10 years. I've been the best at everything I have ever gone into."

Startups can only get by so long relying on friends, family or savings before eventually needing to find investors willing to put money into young companies in exchange for a stake in the business.

Money invested in startups in their earliest days, perhaps when they are no more than ideas or prototypes, is called "seed" funding. When it comes to getting backing

for a startup it is about trust, and that seems to be lacking when it comes to women entrepreneurs, according to Foundos and others interviewed by AFP.

"I don't think women need to be given things," Foundos said of venture capital backing. "But I think they are not seeing the same amount of deals." Forte has grown quickly as the pandemic has gyms and fitness centers scrambling to provide online sessions for members.

Foundos brought on a "right-hand man," a male partner with a British accent, to provide a more traditional face to potential investors and increase the odds of getting funding. She has taken to asking venture capitalists she meets if they have invested in women-led companies before, and the answer has always been "no."

Sex for funding?

A paltry few percent of venture capital money goes to female-led startups in the United States, according to Allyson Kapin, General Partner at the W Fund and founder of Women Who Tech (WWT). Being sexually propositioned in return for funding, or even an introduction to venture capitalists, is common for women founders of startups, according to a recent WWT survey.

Some 44 percent of female founders surveyed told of harassment such as sexual slurs or unwanted physical contact while seeking funding. And while last year set a record for venture capital funding, backing for women-led startups plunged despite data that such companies actually deliver better return-on-investment, according to Kapin. "This isn't about altruism or charity, this is about making a (load) of money," Kapin said of backing women-led startups.

Bar set higher

Prospects for funding get even more dismal for women of color. Black entrepreneur Fonta Gilliam worked overseas with financial institutions for the US State Department before creating social banking startup Invest Sou Sou. Gilliam took the idea of village savings circles she had seen thrive in places such as Africa and built it into a free mobile app, adding artificial intelligence and partnering with financial institutions. She created a Sou Sou prototype and started bringing in revenue to show it could make money, but still found it tougher to get funding than male peers.

"We always have to over-perform and overcompensate," Gilliam said. "Where startups run by men would get believed, we'd have to prove it 10 times over." Gilliam got insultingly low valuations for her startup, some so predatory that she walked away.—AFP



Allyson Kapin, General Partner at the W Fund and co-founder of Women Who Tech, peeks out of her back door before an interview with AFP in Washington, DC. — AFP

Business

KFH leads Kuwaiti banks and private sector as top recruiter of Kuwaitis

National staff made up 99% of hires in 2020 • 70% of new hires are fresh graduates

KUWAIT: Deputy General Manager HR Operations and Rewards at Kuwait Finance House (KFH), Talal Al-Mutairi, expressed his pride that KFH leads the Kuwaiti banks and the private sector as a top recruiter of Kuwaitis where citizens made up 99 percent of new hires in 2020. This reflects KFH's ongoing focus on building and developing the local talents as well as confirms the excellence in terms of local labor and Kuwaitization ratio.

As fresh graduates made up 70 percent of new hires in 2020, KFH confirmed its leadership in terms of employing and qualifying national youth talents. The Bank implemented a comprehensive training and development strategy for talents, providing all the success elements and opportunities that enable them to build a successful career and assume leadership positions in the future given that they are among the most important elements in achieving sustainable development, Al-Mutairi said.

He explained that in collaboration with the relevant authorities, KFH attaches great importance to boost its role in localizing employment, raising the educational and professional levels of employees in Islamic Banking industry, and developing their expertise with the highest global standards.

Virtual job interviews

Al-Mutairi mentioned that KFH is committed to the health requirements and employees' safety during the current exceptional conditions. Accordingly, it conducted more than 250 virtual interviews with candidates through digital platforms in innovative ways.

He explained that the procedures of job commencement did not stop during the pandemic and lockdown, pointing that KFH continued the recruitment process by delivering the recruitment documents such as contracts, Job IDs and laptops to the employee's address. In addition, KFH provided the new recruits with the necessary training programs through digital platforms to be fully prepared to commence their job.

Training programs

Al-Mutairi pointed out that over the past year KFH succeeded in designing and organizing training programs for 2950 of its staff through 13225 training seats and more than 330 training programs and over 575 sessions covering banking, technical and behavioral aspects. He stressed the importance of human resources to the success of the institution and of adapting to the developments in the banking industry.

Just as core assets and real power are to the success of the institution, the human resources are a major pillar in adapting to the developments in the banking industry, raising the performance indicators and improving the efficiency, Al-Mutairi stressed.



Talal Al-Mutairi

◆ **Al-Mutairi: Exceptional efforts in hiring Kuwaiti talents**

◆ **2950 employees participated in training programs during 2020**

◆ **Partnering with E-learning Platforms to deliver advanced courses**

Scholarship program

He added that, despite the pandemic, KFH granted in 2020 scholarships to 12 employees: 6 MBAs and 6 BAs. In addition, KFH celebrated the obtaining of 4 employees a master's degree and one employee a bachelor's degree in 2020 as part of the scholarship program being offered by the bank since 2013.

He confirmed that KFH adopts several professional standards to estimate and accurately study training, and business needs in line with new administrative decisions, products or systems that the bank launches for its customers. It also adopts advanced modern human resources systems through which the employee can request his/her training needs with ease and explore the available training programs that suit the functional requirements of the staff.

Maintaining its leadership at all levels, KFH is keen on the ongoing efforts to raise the productivity and efficiency of employees, providing them with advanced training programs that keep pace with the competitiveness and accelerated developments in the banking industry, he said.

Global partnerships

Al-Mutairi noted that development of KFH employees has been high on its agenda in 2020 where it has successfully concluded a series of virtual intensive courses with Harvard Business Publishing, INSEAD, and IMD to build staff's capabilities as KFH Group Future Leaders.

LinkedIn learning platform

Al-Mutairi indicated that KFH signed a partnership agreement with LinkedIn to launch the educational platform "LinkedIn Learning", for KFH employees in Kuwait, Bahrain and Turkey. The agreement is designed to develop and explore the employee's skills through an advanced and data-based educational experience.

As it supports initiative-taking and self-learning for personal and professional development, the platform also features a group of academics and international experts who focus on developing the various skills of individuals and getting acquainted with creativity and technology and the latest trends in the business environment.

The platform provides users with unlimited access to its contents, choosing from its collection of more than 5,000 tutorial videos and 13,000 training courses covering business, creative and technology topics. Enabling intelligence, LinkedIn Learning platform creates special recommendations, that help trainees efficiently explore the training courses most relevant to their goals or jobs. KFH can also use LinkedIn insights to prepare analyses and reports to help measure the effectiveness of learning efficiency, he added.

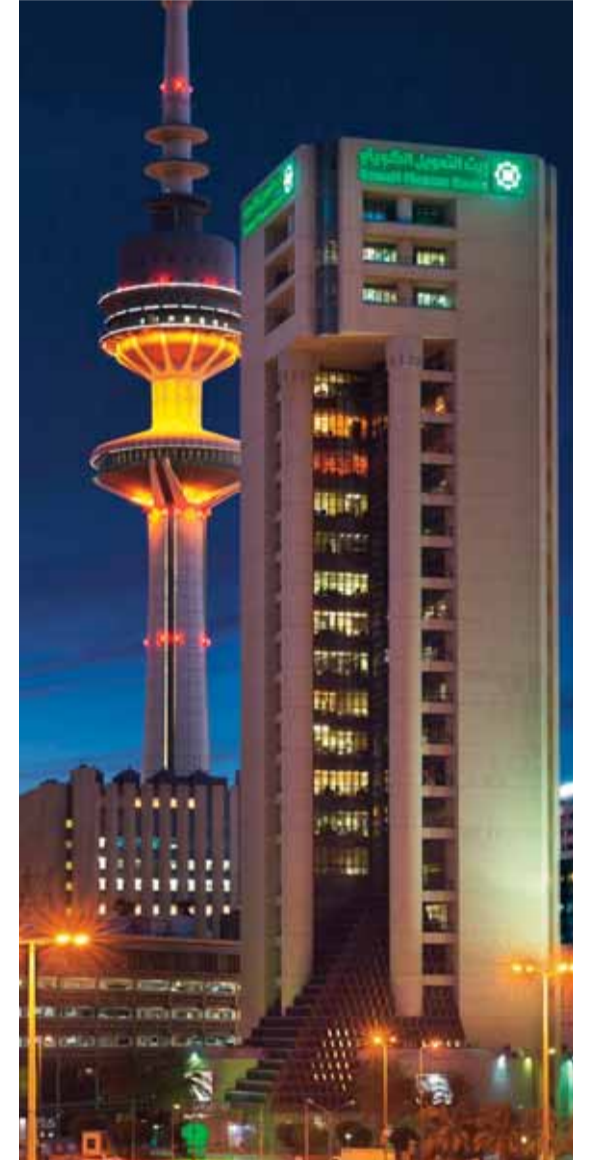
'Certified Sharia Auditor' certificate

Al-Mutairi explained that the Institute of Banking Studies (IBS) honored 10 KFH employees in appreciation of their obtaining the "Certified Sharia Auditor" certificate, which is one of the "Kafaa" initiative programs officially launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait in collaboration with Kuwaiti banks and the management of the Institute of Banking Studies. The Certified Sharia Auditor is accredited by the Central Bank of Kuwait, the Capital Markets Authority, and the Kuwait Center for Islamic Economy.

He expressed KFH's pride in the competence and capabilities of its Sharia auditors, as they completed the Certified Sharia Auditor program within one year only, despite the circular of the Central Bank for Kuwaiti Islamic banks in 2019 stipulating that a Certified Sharia Auditor certificate must be obtained within two years from the date of the circular.

Wellness year and engagement

Al-Mutairi pointed out that KFH has launched several initiatives focusing on employee health and wellbeing, and on the view that Better Health Leads



to a Better Life and a healthier organization. He added that KFH signed strategic partnerships with various health care providers as part of its wellbeing strategy for KFH Staff and to create a more dynamic, effective and efficient working environment.

Employee health and wellbeing is now a business value of strategic importance and is fast becoming a source of competitive advantage, asserting the relationship between employees' wellbeing and organizational performance, he said.

He explained that the KFH Group has achieved progress in employees' engagement at the group level, as strong positive results have shown in the survey conducted recently by "KFH" for the Group's employees in Kuwait, Turkey, Bahrain, Malaysia and Germany.

NBK MONEY MARKETS REPORT

Powell: Economic recovery remains uneven and far from complete

KUWAIT: In his testimony before the US Senate Banking Committee on Tuesday, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said that the central bank would keep its attention focused on getting Americans back to work as vaccine related recovery proceeds. Powell pushed back on suggestions that loose monetary policy risked unleashing inflation and financial risks in what may be an emerging economic boom. He told Congress there was "hope for a return to more normal conditions" this year but signaled that the central bank intended to maintain its heavy support to the economy.

When asked about whether a faster than expected recovery still required crisis-level assistance, Powell replied "Monetary policy is accommodative and it continues to need to be accommodative ... Expect us to move carefully, patiently, and with a lot of advance warning before any changes." He continued to acknowledge the potentially fast growth to come as the coronavirus crises eases and vaccinations expand, saying that coming updates to the Fed's outlook may show the economy expanding "in the range" of 6 percent this year, and overall output returning in the next few weeks to the pre-pandemic level.

Powell's testimony offered one of his more optimistic assessments of economic conditions since the start of the pandemic, but stressed that there were still big downside risks to the recovery that justified the central bank's ultra-easy stance. "In recent weeks, the number of new cases and hospitalizations has been falling, and ongoing vaccinations offer hope for a return to more normal conditions later this year. However, the economic recovery remains uneven and far from complete, and the path ahead is highly uncertain," Powell said in his opening remarks. He then hinted to an improved outlook for later in the year.

Some economists have warned earlier that a burst in economic activity could trigger an unhealthy jump in inflation, which would force the Fed to start tightening its monetary policy sooner and more abruptly than expected. The Nasdaq Composite reacted to the warnings and was down 3.9 percent early on Tuesday prior to Powell's testimony, but it recovered after Powell spoke and closed 0.5 percent lower.

During the question and answer period with the senators, Powell said "Inflation dynamics do change over time, but they don't change on a dime," he added "we don't really see how a burst of fiscal support or spending that doesn't last for many years would actually change those inflation dynamics." Despite of the hope for a return to more normal

conditions expressed by the Fed, Powell stressed how far away the US economy remained from reaching full employment.

The Fed has said it would not raise interest rates from their current level close to zero until it achieved full employment, inflation hit 2 percent and was "on track" to exceed that target. It also said it would not begin to wind down its bond buying program until "substantial further progress" was made toward its objectives. During the testimony, Powell was repeatedly pressed by senators on the merits of Biden's \$1.9 trillion stimulus plan, but he declined to take a position. Powell had publicly pushed Congress to approve more government stimulus to support the recovery and complement the regulator's easy money policies as the pandemic ravaged the US economy in 2020. But in recent weeks, the Fed chair has switched to a more neutral stance on the need for more fiscal support, just as US President Joe Biden and Democratic lawmakers are trying to approve the additional \$1.9 trillion in government spending.

Powell's shift was apparent as he repeatedly refused to take a position on Biden's legislative priority. "It's not appropriate for the Fed to be playing a role in these fiscal discussions about particular provisions in particular laws," Powell told John Kennedy, a Republican senator from Louisiana. And as Kennedy pressed him further asking if he would find it "cool" or "uncool" if Congress failed to pass the stimulus bill, Powell did not flinch. "I think by being either cool or uncool, I would have to be expressing an opinion," he said. But he did dismiss concerns that the \$1.9 trillion package might lead to an unwanted jump in inflation this year. Although as he spoke to Congress he suggested that his preference would be for lawmakers to consider longer term investments at this stage, rather than an instant cash injection into the economy.

Powell's impartiality on the stimulus package marks a return to form for the Fed, whose top officials are averse to wade into tricky political terrain unless a crisis requires it, as it did in 2020 or during the last financial crisis. Powell's neutrality on the next round of stimulus means he is not actively endorsing Biden's plan, but it does not mean he disapproves either, just that he is trying to keep the Fed out of political tangle.

Stimulus package

In a significant milestone for president Joe Biden, the House of Representatives passed the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package. Biden has made the stimulus package his top legislative priority for his first

100 days in the White House. The package, which was passed early Saturday by the Democratic controlled House, includes \$1,400 direct payments, an extension of federal top-ups to unemployment insurance, and another \$350 billion for state and local governments. Biden last week said that the US economy would come "roaring back" if Congress approved his proposals, while Treasury secretary Janet Yellen this week told G20 finance ministers that they should also "go big" with fiscal support to help the pandemic ravaged global economy.

The stimulus package needs to pass both the House and the Senate -which Democrats control by a small margin- if it is going to be sent to Biden's desk to be signed into law. Democrats have set themselves a deadline of mid-March when the current round of emergency unemployment benefits runs out.

Market movements

Growing inflations concerns combined with some technical factors drove interest rates higher as the market went on a bond selloff. The developments intensified on Thursday as the 10-year US Treasury yield spiked higher by 23 basis points from the open to an intra-day high of 1.61 percent which fully reversed all of the move lower from February and March of last year when the negative COVID-19 shock first hit financial markets. But then the market started to question how long the Fed can stay on hold when the economy could come thundering back, and the 10-year US treasury retreated below 1.5 percent. Bond yields have been rising with each positive development on the vaccine front and decline in COVID-19 spread rates.

The dollar went back to gain some ground in light of the developments and closed the week at 90.879. While sterling, the best performing currency in February started to retreat its gains against the dollar, coming down from a near three year high at \$1.4237 to close the week at \$1.3932.

New US jobless claims

Initial jobless claims report showed new US unemployment filings fell last week to their lowest level in 12 weeks. The figure gave a hint that pressure on the jobs market is easing as COVID-19 infections slow. The figure dropped to a seasonally adjusted 730,000 claims from 841,000 during the previous week, below economists' expectations of an 838,000 reading.

UK unemployment

Data from the UK showed jobless rate rose 5.1 percent in the last three months of 2020, the highest reading in nearly five years but still lower than it would have been without the huge coronavirus jobs support scheme that finance minister Rishi Sunak is looking to extend next week. The data showed UK labor market had begun to stabilize by

the end of 2020, but unemployment edged up and a previous pick up in hiring slowed as the surge in COVID-19 infections put reopening on hold. The employment rate of 75 percent was 1.5 percent lower than a year earlier.

However, some signs of improvement were apparent. The number of payroll employees increased in January for a second consecutive month, the rate of redundancies has slowed, the number of vacancies continued to increase, albeit more slowly, and the Office for National Statistics said pay was growing in real terms in all sectors at the end of the year. "Throughout the crisis, my focus has been on doing everything we can to protect jobs and livelihoods," said chancellor Rishi Sunak in response to the data, adding that he would set out measures to support jobs through the remainder of the pandemic and recovery in his March 3 budget. He is expected to use the budget to extend the government's furlough scheme, which is currently due to expire in April, until June, according to people briefed on the plan.

The UK is now preparing to start easing. Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared that the end of the pandemic is "in sight" for England as the government is set out to ease restriction rules in a four-step plan. Schools will reopen March 8th while outdoor activities from mid-April and sports stadiums by mid-May. The Prime Minister aims to reopen all remaining businesses by June 21st.

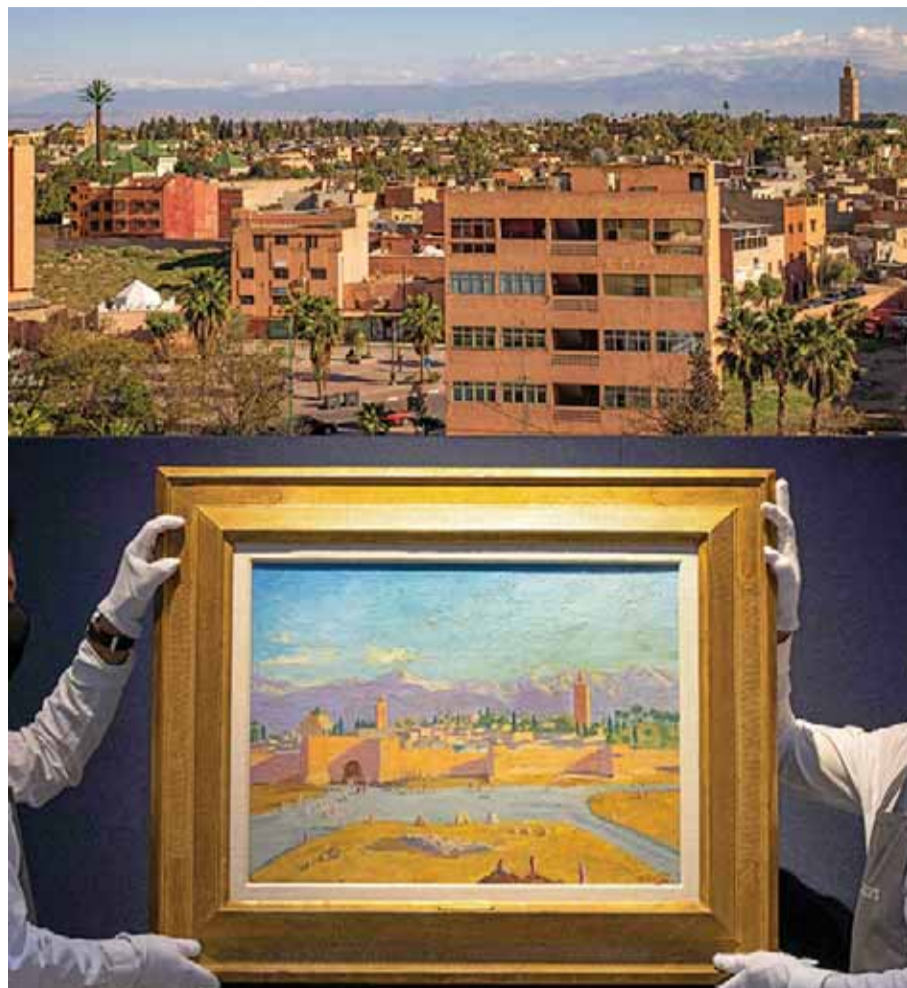
ECB eye on bond market

European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde claimed the bank is "closely monitoring" the bond market amid gains in yields which have recently sparked concern. Across the world, yields are on a rally as investors assess vaccination rollouts and the subsequent end to COVID-19 restrictions which could boost consumer spending and inflation. Though the higher trend suggests optimism regarding the economic recovery moving forward, it may also prove to be a costly risk as it boosts the cost of the public and private-sector debt burden. The ECB has pledged to keep financing conditions favorable until the crisis is past. European yields dropped following Lagarde's comment, with the 30-year German bond dropping to 0.15 percent, up from its -0.20 percent level at the start of the year.

Later on in the week, the ECB indicated that it will increase the pace of its emergency bond purchases, in a bid to counter the recent sell off in eurozone sovereign debt markets if borrowing costs for governments, companies and households continue to rise. On Thursday, ECB chief economist Philip Lane said that the central bank was "closely monitoring" the evolution of longer term nominal bond yields" and its asset purchases "will be conducted to preserve favorable financing conditions over the pandemic period."

Kuwaiti dinar USD/KWD closed last week at 0.30185.

Lifestyle | Features



This combination of pictures shows (top) a general view of the Moroccan city of Marrakesh on February 24, 2021, and (bottom) gallery workers pose with an artwork titled "Tower of Koutoubia Mosque" by Winston Churchill during a photocall at Christie's auction house in central London. — AFP

Hollywood, history combine in Churchill art auction

Hollywood's Angelina Jolie and Britain's iconic wartime prime minister Sir Winston Churchill, a keen artist who took inspiration from the Moroccan city of Marrakesh, are combining for a March 1 date at Christie's auction house in London. "The Tower of the Koutoubia Mosque", an oil painting Churchill produced during a World War II visit, is tipped to fetch between £1.5 million and £2.5 million (\$2 million and \$3.5 million), according to a Christie's estimate. Put up for auction by Angelina Jolie, it is vaunted in Christie's catalogue as "Churchill's most important work. Aside from its distinguished provenance, it is the only landscape he made" during the war.

A career army officer before entering politics, Churchill started to paint relatively late, at the age of 40. His passion for the translucent light of Marrakesh, far from the political storms and drab skies of London, dates back to the 1930s when most of Morocco was a French protectorate, and he went on to make six visits to the North African country over the course of 23 years. "Here in these spacious palm groves rising from the desert the traveller can be sure of perennial sunshine... and can contemplate with ceaseless satisfaction the stately and snow-clad panorama of the Atlas Mountains," he wrote in 1936 in Britain's Daily Mail newspaper.

He would set up his easel on the balconies of the grandiose La Mamounia hotel or the city's Villa Taylor, beloved by the European jet set of the 1970s. It was from the villa, after a historic January 1943 conference in Casablanca with US president Franklin Roosevelt and France's Charles de Gaulle, that he painted what came to be regarded as his finest work, of

the minaret behind the ramparts of the Old City, with mountains behind and tiny colorful figures in front. "You cannot come all this way to North Africa without seeing Marrakesh," he is reputed to have told Roosevelt. "I must be with you when you see the sun set on the Atlas Mountains." A newspaper photograph taken at the time shows the two wartime Allied leaders admiring the sunset.

'Truly remarkable panorama'

After the US delegation had left, Churchill stayed on an extra day and painted the view of the Koutoubia Mosque framed by the mountains. He sent it to Roosevelt for his birthday. "This is Churchill's diplomacy at its most personal and intense," said Christie's head of modern British and Irish art, Nick Orchard. "It is not an ordinary gift between leaders. This is soft power, and it is what the special relationship is all about."

Sold by the Roosevelt family in the 1950s, it changed hands several times before passing on to Hollywood dream couple Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt in 2011, well before their high-profile separation. A second Churchill landscape, "Scene in Marrakesh", painted on his first visit to Morocco in 1935, is also going under the hammer at Christie's today. That was painted while on a stay at Mamounia, where he marveled at the "truly remarkable panorama over the tops of orange trees and olives", in a letter to his wife Clementine. The hotel today has a suite and a bar named after its illustrious guest. — AFP

Nip, tuck, mask: Cosmetic surgery sweeps Albania along with virus

Pandemic stress, the focus on faces during video chats and the convenience of hiding under a mask are fuelling a cosmetic surgery boom in Albania-but rogue operators are putting some patients at risk. Doctors say the surge has been driven by demand from mainly young women such as Ana Kela, a 20-year-old student in Tirana who had her lips plumped in December. "Every time I looked at my face on the screen, I couldn't even say a word, I was gripped by anguish," Kela said of seeing herself during online classes at the University of Tirana, where she studies economics.

"I thought I looked ugly, dark circles under my eyes, my nose was too big, my lips were very thin, a real disaster." After an operation to increase the volume of her lips, she is pleased with the result. But in a country where the informal economy is vast, many patients are being lured into unprofessional and ill-equipped beauty centers who are touting cheap prices and promotions.

Unqualified operators

New salons are popping up daily with offers for a range of treatments without medical approval or supervision, said Dr Monika Fida, a professor at the University of Medicine in Tirana. Advertised on social media, the low-cost offers are attractive in a country where average monthly salaries hover around 420 euros. "Come as a group of four to enjoy a discount of more than 50 percent" on lip plumping and buttock lifts, reads one ad.

"Life isn't perfect, but your eyebrows are," says another. These salons "use equipment that should be handled only by specialists and licensed doctors", said Dr Brunilda Bardhi, who specializes in laser and mesotherapy treatments that tighten skin. According to field surveys carried out by an association of dermatology and cosmetic doctors that Bardhi leads, around 70 salons in Tirana have laser equipment operated by unqualified personnel.

Burns and scars

Eva Kola, a 21-year-old political science student, trusted a salon whose work she was following closely on Instagram. For 20 euros, she paid to have her ex's initials erased from her finger tattoo. But the quick fix did not go as planned. "For a week now, my life has been hell," she told AFP, holding back tears, in the waiting room of the dermatology department of



Luis Medical Centre director, surgeon Kostandin Balloma (right) conducts a plastic surgery intervention at the nose of a woman at his clinic in Tirana.

the University Hospital of Tirana. The badly calibrated laser caused a third-degree burn and a strong allergic reaction. She has fever and unbearable pain along her arm.

"In my clinic alone, I have five to seven cases, mostly young girls, with serious problems, burns, infections, scars as a result of procedures carried out" in beauty centers without professional medical staff, said Dr Fida, showing images of patients whose work went awry. Dr Kostandin Balloma, director of the Luis Medical Centre in Tirana, estimates that 30 percent of his clients are victims of "mistakes made by non-specialized establishments".

Albania's cosmetic sector is supposed to be regulated by a 2017 law, but doctors say it is too vague, lacking specificity on who can carry out which treatments and with which products and equipment. There needs to be "a strict regulatory framework where all the professional procedures and all the links in this chain are clearly detailed," the president of Albania's Order of Doctors, Dr Fatmir Brahimaj, told AFP.

Nose jobs doubled

Doctors say the top-selling treatments during the pandemic have been focused on the face-Botox injections, facelifts and other forms of reshaping-though breast and buttock surgeries continue to be popular. With obesity seen as a risk factor for

those who contract Covid-19, liposuction is also in demand among those who hope it could help. "The trend is clear. Nose operations have almost doubled" since the end of lockdown measures in July, said Dr Balloma. "Cosmetic surgery is seen as a comfort, a way to alleviate the insecurity of our daily lives and to take refuge in a world that smooths the face," he added.

Jorida Zegali, clinical psychologist at the University of Tirana, says that "the pressure of virtual communication" has heightened the focus on appearances, becoming an "obsession". There has also been pressure to re-emerge from long periods of confinement improved in some form. Neritla Rrahmani, 31, is a manicurist in Milan but returned to Tirana to undergo surgery on her nose because she was experiencing breathing problems.

She also took the opportunity to tweak its shape and pin back her ears so that they appear smaller. Still wearing the bandages post-surgery, she explained that the operation "will let me get rid of the psychological uneasiness that I've been stuck with for years." "Despite everything," she added, "the pandemic has not been able to prevent people from loving themselves and improving their appearance through aesthetic treatments to make them feel even more beautiful." — AFP



Dermatologist Brunilda Bardhi applies esthetic treatment to a woman at a clinic in Tirana.



Linda Krasniqi (left) and Neritla Rrahmani (right), chat as they wait for a check-up after an intervention plastic surgery at a clinic in Tirana. — AFP photos

Kosovo drama captures the rebellious work of war widows

After being driven out of her village in the midst of Kosovo's war two decades ago, Fahrije Hoti returned several months later to find her home destroyed and her husband gone. The mother of two was suddenly one of 140 new widows in the farming village of Krushe e Madhe, whose soil was the site of a massacre by Serb forces in 1999 that left 500 children without fathers, including Hoti's own. What happened next is now the subject of an award-winning film, titled Hive, that traces Hoti's struggle to rebuild a life amid the double injury of her personal loss and social prejudices about how widows should behave.

"The movie took me back 20 years," Hoti, now 51, told AFP from the southern village where she still lives. "The movie was not only about me, it was about all Kosovo Albanian women," she added

warmly. "It showed the situation we widows were in after the war." Written and directed by 38-year-old Kosovar filmmaker Blerta Basholli, Hive took home three prizes after its debut in the prestigious US Sundance film festival in January. It begins with Hoti's character-played with masterful restraint by Kosovar actress Yllka Gashi-struggling to tend to her missing husband's bee hives.

The bees are not producing enough honey to support the family, who keep their paltry income in a small kitchen tin. And so begins Hoti's efforts to bring other widows together to start making and selling ajvar, a tasty red pepper spread that is a staple of Balkan cuisine.

Driving was taboo

Made through a laborious process of roasting, hand-peeling, grinding and stewing large vats of the red peppers,

the ajvar production starts in Hoti's backyard. As in real life, the film tracks how the project is met with sneers and aggression from local men who are scandalized when Hoti learns to drive a car. Many of the widows are deathly afraid of the gossip they will invite. At the time, people thought "widows should only do housework and childcare," Hoti recalled. "We had lost our husbands, our children, and they called us whores," she remembered quietly. "That was the most hurtful."

The social pressures could have trapped her and others in a state of perpetual limbo, compounded by the lack of information about their loved one's fates. Some 1,600 victims of the 1998-99 war, including Hoti's husband, are still listed as missing, a painful ambiguity that complicates emotional closure. But despite the taboos, Hoti was determined to

become a breadwinner for her children. And it paid off-her business is now one of the town's biggest employers.

From the original collective of five widows, today she has some 60 women working for the cooperative, called Krusha, during the peak ajvar-making season. During the winter months a smaller staff jar pickle the vegetables, packing the products by hand as they sit on a circle of stools on the factory floor. The business is still growing, with increasing demand abroad, in countries like Switzerland, France, and the US, leaving little left to sell on the local market. The company's rise has been aided along the way by international donors and grants that have helped provide key training and equipment.

Recognition

When Basholli, then a film student in New York City, heard about Hoti's early struggles in the news around a decade ago, she was surprised and intrigued. After returning to her native Kosovo in 2011, she met Hoti in person. "I just wanted to encourage her for what she did... but I ended being the one encouraged because she didn't need my encouragement to be honest," Basholli told AFP with a laugh. After spending hours with Hoti to learn the details of her story, she wrote a script, secured funding from Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia and Switzerland and was able to start shooting in 2019.

Hive is her first feature-length film. After receiving the awards from Sundance, including a Grand Jury and

audience award, Basholli dedicated it to "all the women that really needed their voice to be heard". In Kosovo, views around women in the workplace have evolved since the post-war days, particularly in urban parts. But major inequalities remain, with property rights still mostly registered in the names of husbands,



Fahrije Hoti looks at the Koperativa Krusha, in the village of Krushe e Madhe.

while only around 13 percent of women are employed compared to more than 40 percent of men. Hoti, for her part, still overwhelmingly hires women, employing only five men, including her son and four others who also lost fathers during the war. "Among those who were born with these prejudices, some have kept them, others have changed their minds," she said when asked about the impact she has had on her own community. "What has really changed is my history," she added. — AFP



An employee packs pickled vegetables at the Koperativa Krusha.



Fahrije Hoti (first right) sits among her employees at the Koperativa Krusha, in the village of Krushe e Madhe. — AFP photos

Lifestyle | Features



A photo shows a detail of a large Roman four-wheeled ceremonial chariot after it was discovered near the The archaeological park of Pompeii. — AFP photos



A detail of a large Roman four-wheeled ceremonial chariot after it was discovered.



A large Roman four-wheeled ceremonial chariot after it was discovered.

ROMAN CHARIOT UNEARTHED 'ALMOST INTACT' NEAR POMPEII

An ornate Roman chariot has been discovered "almost intact" near Italy's buried city of Pompeii, the archaeological park announced on Saturday, calling it a discovery with "no parallel" in the country. The four-wheeled processional carriage was found in the portico to stables where the remains of three horses were unearthed in 2018, including one still in its harness. Pompeii was buried in boiling lava when Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, killing between 2,000 and 15,000 people.

"A large ceremonial chariot with four

wheels, along with its iron components, beautiful bronze and tin decorations, mineralized wood remains and imprints of organic materials (from the ropes to the remains of floral decoration), has been discovered almost intact," a statement issued by the archaeological park said. "This is an exceptional discovery... which has no parallel in Italy thus far - in an excellent state of preservation." The excavation site is known as the Civita Giuliana, a suburban villa that lies just a few hundred meters from the ancient city of Pompeii.

The excavation is part of a program aimed at fighting illegal activity in the area, including tunnel digging to reach artefacts that can be sold on illicit markets. Looters missed the room where the chariot had lain for almost 2,000 years, tunneling by on both sides, the park's statement said. Specialists took great care to unearth the vehicle, for example by pouring plaster into voids "to preserve the imprint of any organic material" that had decomposed, it added. The park said this had allowed it to emerge well preserved down to the imprints of ropes, "thus revealing the char-

iot in all of its complexity". "Pompeii continues to amaze with all of its discoveries, and it will continue to do so for many years yet, with 20 hectares (50 acres) still to be excavated," Culture Minister Dario Franceschini was quoted as saying.

'Parades and processions'

"It is an extraordinary discovery for the advancement of our knowledge of the ancient world," added Massimo Osanna, outgoing director of the park. "What we have is a ceremonial chariot, probably the Piletum referred to by some sources,

which was employed not for everyday use or for agricultural transport, but to accompany community festivities, parades and processions." Pompeii's remarkably well-preserved remains have slowly been uncovered by teams of archaeological specialists. It is Italy's third most visited tourist site, drawing more than 3.9 million visitors in 2019. The ancient city was closed after the coronavirus struck, and only reopened on January 18. — AFP



Bulgarian soprano singer Stanislava Momekova performs on the stage during the opera La Traviata by Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi, at the Sofia Opera, in Sofia.—AFP photos

As third wave rages, show goes on at Sofia opera

With an orchestra spread out across the entire parterre, audiences limited to the balconies, and no breaks but plenty of disinfectant, the Sofia Opera is one of the few music venues still hosting live performances in Europe. Across the continent, a third wave of Covid-19 infections is keeping opera houses and other cultural venues closed-loud singing poses a particular risk as the virus spreads through droplets-but in Bulgaria, classical music plays on, from "Tosca" to "La Traviata". "I

Opera director Plamen Kartaloff says. Even as Europe struggles with a third wave of infections, in part due to a number of mutations that spread more easily, Kartaloff expects the opera to remain open.

Acoustic challenges

Tragedy has touched the operatic community, and not just on stage: In November, Bulgarian tenor Kamen Chanev died of Covid-19, three weeks after he debuted Otello in the central Bulgarian city of Stara Zagora. Remembering him, soprano Stanislava Momekova, 36, becomes serious. "That's the risk of this profession-it holds us like a drug, it's stronger than fear," Momekova says. For American conductor Evan-Alexis Christ, who saw his performances in Germany cancelled, bringing "La Traviata" to the stage feels rewarding, despite a number of "acoustic challenges". From the pit, the orchestra had to move to the parterre, where musicians now sit far apart from one another.

The singers on stage are even farther away. "We are acoustically louder for the audience than normal so the orchestra has to play very quietly and listen even more to the singers," Christ says. "But overall I think everyone is very happy, also the musicians and the singers who are able to perform," he adds, praising the discipline of the musicians, who, with the exception of singers and tube instruments, perform with face masks on.

Luring younger audiences

To Christ, the opera in Sofia and in Madrid, which has also kept its doors open, are proof that it's still possible to play for a live audience. "My feeling is that people are incredibly hungry, they want to hear music," Christ says, adding that he hopes "to make a difference" for the 250 people in the audience that night. Thanks to Kartaloff's ingenuity, the Sofia Opera has found a number of ways to perform amid the pandemic: "Swan Lake" was staged on the pontoon of a lake near Sofia, while other operas reverberated through an old Roman fortress.

Some musical theatre performances were limited to adults with children, a way to focus on the audience of the future, Kartaloff says. As clubs and bars have mostly remained closed, Bulgaria's opera halls have become more alluring to younger audiences, including students who put on their prom suits to see "La Traviata". "It's a huge pleasure to have the chance to attend a nice event such as the opera," 38-year-old Nikolay Onufriev, who's only been to the opera once before, says. —AFP



An opera employee wearing a protective facemask arranges flowers on the audience seats prior to the opera La Traviata.

am hungry for music. And the risk, why think about it? It's not riskier here than in the supermarket or the subway," says 81-year-old Petya Petkova, who attended Verdi's "La Traviata" with her daughter last week.

Despite the disinfectant, social-distancing and staff taking people's temperature, a festive spirit reigns at the historic opera house in the Bulgarian capital, a stark contrast to its silenced counterparts in Paris, Vienna or Milan. Bulgaria first eased pandemic restrictions in June and allowed operas, concert halls and cinemas to reopen at 30 percent capacity, leading the Sofia Opera to arrange plastic and fabric flower bouquets as placeholders on the majority of the crimson plush seats. "We perform in front of 250 spectators, but it's better than not playing or performing." Sofia

SALT SPA SEEKS TO SOOTHE CRADLE OF LIBYA'S REVOLUTION

Libya's principal eastern city may be best known as the cradle of a revolution, but it has lately scored an improbable first for the conflict-riven country—a salt spa. The Opal center in Benghazi, where citizens rose up against dictator Moamer Kadhafi's rule a decade ago, opened Libya's first-ever artificial salt caves to clients last October. Established by two women entrepreneurs, the center offers soothing treatments in a zen-like atmosphere accompanied by soft music and subdued lighting.

"The inhalation of salt particles purifies the respiratory tract and brings benefits for the skin," says joint founder Iman Bugaighis, sporting a white blouse and a pink veil around her head. Armed with a shovel, the specialist in alternative medicine covers the body of a client in his 30s with salt, from his legs to his neck. Eyes closed and hands clasped around a ball of salt, the man relaxes, breathing slowly in a windowless but uncramped room. In another room, with crystal covered walls and resembling a cave, a machine propels iodine-laden salt particles through the air. An immersive session inhaling the concoction lasts 45 minutes and costs between 80 and 120 dinars (\$18 to \$27). Several sessions are required to yield results, says Bugaighis.

'Soothes my pain'

The Opal center, slap-bang in the chic



A receptionist waits for clients at the Opal salt treatment center in Libya's eastern city of Benghazi. — AFP photos

district of Dagadosta in downtown Benghazi, promises treatment of respiratory issues like asthma and skin conditions including eczema and psoriasis. Pockmarked walls and disfigured buildings are reminders of past conflict in the city, which in recent years has been the bastion of eastern Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar. Mustafa Ahmed Akhliif, a banker in his 50s, has suffered from acute sinusitis for a decade. "I've taken lots of painkillers and tried traditional medicine without it dulling my pain," he said. But in just four sessions of inhaling the salty substances he says he feels "80 percent" better.

Bugaighis herself discovered the therapy when travelling in Arab countries that offer the same treatments. She then studied alternative medicine in neighboring Tunisia. Convinced of the treatments' efficacy in tackling chronic illnesses, she returned to her home city and launched her business, alongside her friend Zainab Al-Werfalli.

Semblance of normality

The Opal "center has met its public," enthused Werfalli, even if the years of instability makes business success diffi-

cult to predict. The center's opening coincided with a ceasefire agreed in October by the main players in Libya's conflict-Haftar's eastern-based forces and rival authorities in the capital Tripoli. And a precarious new interim executive authority, approved by both parties to the conflict, tentatively got off the ground this month with a mandate to lead the nation to elections set for December. Werfalli is determined to "make this complementary therapy known to the medical profession" in her home city, starting with the doctors and medical staff.

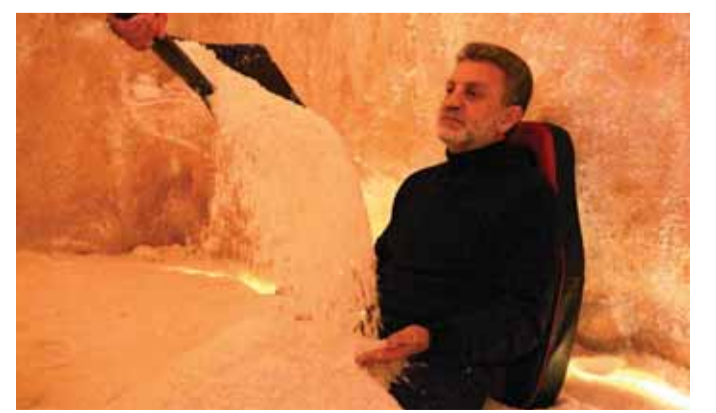
The two women are ready to treat patients of all ages and Bugaighis said one little girl with respiratory problems had improved considerably following sessions. Buffeted by repeated rounds of fighting and interruptions to oil output in the decade since Kadhafi's ouster and killing, Libyans are trying to rediscover a semblance of normality. Tucked away from the nearby urban commotion, Libya's first artificial salt caves invite clients to relax and forget, amid lungfuls of salty air, a chaos that otherwise all too often overshadows everyday life. — AFP



A specialist covers the body of a client with salt.



A specialist poses for a picture at the Opal salt treatment center in Libya's eastern city of Benghazi.



Sports

Photo of the Day



Alexander Titarenko performing in Alexandria, Egypt. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Alvarez crushes Yildirim to retain boxing super middleweight crown

'Canelo' eyes World Boxing Organization belt on May 8

MIAMI: Saul "Canelo" Alvarez demolished Turkey's Avni Yildirim in three rounds to retain his WBC and WBA super middleweight titles by knockout on Saturday. Mexico's Alvarez dominated underdog Yildirim from the opening bell and sent the Turk crashing to the canvas with a crisp left-right combination in the third round at Miami's Hard Rock Stadium.

The outclassed Yildirim then failed to emerge from his corner for the fourth round as Alvarez once again demonstrated why he is regarded as the best pound-for-pound fighter in boxing. "I wanted to have a great fight here and I did what I had to do," Alvarez said. "I needed a knockout and that's what I did. It doesn't matter if they're taller, if they've got more reach, or they've got a good trainer. I came to do my job, I came here to win."

Alvarez, who improved to 55-1-2 with 37 knockouts, had got back into the ring on Saturday a little over two months after beating Britain's Callum Smith in December. After the fight, promoter Eddie Hearn said the 30-year-old Mexican star will next seek to add the World Boxing Organization belt to his collection with a May 8 fight against Britain's Billy Joe Saunders.

The Saunders fight will be the next step in Alvarez's quest to become the first undisputed super middleweight champion in boxing history. "No one has done it," Alvarez said. "I want to make history. No-one has done it at 168."

Alvarez meanwhile brushed off suggestions that he wants to be remembered as the greatest boxer Mexico has ever produced. "I respect everyone but I want to make my own history," Alvarez said. Saturday's bout will give Saunders plenty of food for thought after Alvarez produced his trademark blend of technical skill and punching power to over-



MIAMI: This handout photo released by Matchroom shows Saul Alvarez (center) after winning his WBA, WBC and Ring Magazine super middleweight championship bout against Avni Yildirim at the Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida, on Saturday. — AFP

whelm mandatory challenger Yildirim.

The 29-year-old Turk, fighting for the first time in two years, looked hesitant from the outset as Alvarez landed an array of hooks to the body and uppercuts to easily win the first round. The second round followed an identical pattern, with Yildirim barely offering any kind of resistance as Alvarez worked his opponent's ribcage mercilessly.

The end came after a third round where Alvarez once again went on the attack against a passive Yildirim. A straight left from Alvarez smashed

through Yildirim's guard and landed on his chin and the following right sent the Turk rocking backward to the canvas.

Although Yildirim hung on for the remainder of the round, the end was nigh. As Yildirim slumped on his stool, trainer Joel Diaz could be heard telling his fighter he would give him only one more round before throwing in the towel. In the event, it never got that far as Yildirim failed to come out for the fourth to hand Alvarez victory by technical knockout. — AFP

Doncic's Mavericks halt streaking Nets

LOS ANGELES: Luka Doncic scored 27 points to lead the Dallas Mavericks to a 115-98 NBA victory in Brooklyn Saturday, snapping the short-handed Nets' eight-game winning streak. James Harden scored 29 points for the Nets but ran out of steam late as he carried the load in the absence of Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving.

Durant missed his seventh game with a strained left hamstring while Irving sat out to rest his surgically repaired right shoulder. Harden had just four points in the second half, sitting out most of the fourth quarter in which Dallas led by as many as 22.

The Mavs were buoyed by the return of Kristaps Porzingis, who scored 18 points in his first contest since missing three games with back trouble. "We played like a team today," said Doncic, who was able to celebrate the victory on the eve of his 22nd birthday. "They have an amazing team," added Doncic, who added that even with two stars out the Mavs knew the Nets remained a dangerous adversary. "We just kept going as a team," he said.

Brooklyn remained half a game behind Eastern Conference leaders Philadelphia, who fell 112-109 to the Cleveland Cavaliers in overtime in a rare home defeat. Guard Collin Sexton scored 28 points and Darius Garland added 25 with nine assists for the Cavaliers, who came into the contest missing half a dozen players due to injury or personal reasons.

Despite having just nine players in uniform, Cleveland led 28-23 after the first quarter and 56-47 at halftime. An 18-9 third-quarter run saw the Sixers pull level at 65-65 and the lead changed hands eight times in the fourth. Joel Embiid's dunk with 1:38 left in regulation knotted the score at 92-92, but he missed a potential game-winner at the buzzer.

The Cavs scored the first five points of overtime



BROOKLYN: Luka Doncic #77 of the Dallas Mavericks shoots the ball against the Brooklyn Nets on Saturday at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York. — AFP

and never trailed, claiming the win despite a 42-point, 16-rebound performance from Embiid. "I thought we had one quarter with energy, the third quarter," 76ers coach Doc Rivers said. "Other than that, they basically got the shots they wanted all game. If they didn't get the offensive rebounds. They got the back cuts when they needed them."

Jazz back in tune

The league-leading Utah Jazz wasted no time in bouncing back from a disorganized defeat to the Miami Heat, cruising past the Magic 124-109 in Orlando. Donovan Mitchell scored 25 of his 31 points in the second half as the Jazz improved to 27-7.

Joe Ingles, starting at point guard in place of Mike Conley, scored 17 points and handed out seven assists and Rudy Gobert chipped in 12 points and 16 rebounds for the Jazz, who had 18 points off the

bench from Jordan Clarkson. Center Nikola Vucevic led the Magic with 34 points, but Utah out-scored the hosts 70-59 in the second half to roll to victory.

In Washington, Bradley Beal scored 34 points and Russell Westbrook added 19 in his 10th triple-double of the season to propel the Wizards to a 128-112 victory over the hapless Minnesota Timberwolves, who lost their seventh straight. Westbrook added 14 rebounds and 12 assists to help the Wizards to their seventh win in eight starts.

Westbrook's 10 triple-doubles lead the NBA and with just 24 games under his belt since arriving in Washington he has a club record for most triple-doubles in a season. The Denver Nuggets routed the Oklahoma City Thunder 126-96 on the back of 26 points from Jamal Murray and a triple-double of 19 points, 11 rebounds and 13 assists from Nikola Jokic — his eighth triple-double of the season. — AFP

Porto, Sporting battle to goalless draw in Portugal

LISBON: Portuguese league leaders Sporting Lisbon extended their unbeaten run this season after grinding out a scrappy 0-0 draw at defending champions Porto on Saturday. Iran striker Mehdi Taremi, the joint-leading scorer in Portugal's top-flight last season, missed the best chance for Porto early in the second half at the Estadio do Dragao when he fluffed an attempted tap-in. A minute's silence was observed before kick-off in tribute to Alfredo Quintana, goalkeeper of the Portuguese men's national handball team, who died on Friday aged 32 following a heart attack. It was just the fourth time in 21 games Sporting have dropped points this season while Porto have now drawn four of their past five outings and remain 10 points off the pace. For Sporting the prospect of a first league title since 2002 is real, even if they have won just once at Porto in 14 years. Ruben Amorim's team also overcame Braga in the Portuguese League Cup final last month. Braga could cut the gap to nine points and climb to second on Sunday with victory away to Nacional. — AFP



David Beckham

Miami ready for big-name signings: Beckham

MIAMI: David Beckham says Inter Miami are ready to make big-name signings as they prepare for their second season in Major League Soccer under new coach Phil Neville. Speaking Saturday at an event to launch Miami's new jersey, Inter co-owner Beckham said the club saw home-grown talent as the cornerstone of the franchise's long-term success. However he acknowledged that Inter remained in the hunt for big-name players, citing the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, who have both previously indicated interest in playing in MLS.

"I have said from day one that our academy system is a massive part of this club and if we can bring players through here that have lived and breathed Inter Miami then that is the goal," Beckham told AFP. "But we also know that being in Miami, our fans want to see the big stars. We already have players like Gonzalo Higuain and Blaise Matuidi who add to the glitz and glamour but also going forward we want to have the opportunity to bring some great names in."

Asked about Messi and Ronaldo, Beckham refused to rule out a move for either player. "The player has to be right for the team, still have ambition and want to win," Beckham said. "So whatever player we talk to, we have to make sure that is a priority. Of course, we always want to bring in great players. Miami is a great pull for anyone and those kinds of players (Messi and Ronaldo) are the kind we aspire to bring here." — AFP

Jeremy Lin won't 'name, shame' in racism claim

LOS ANGELES: Jeremy Lin said Saturday he won't be "naming or shaming anyone" amid reports the NBA's G League is investigating his claim he was called "coronavirus" during a game. "I know this will disappoint some of you but I'm not naming or shaming anyone," Lin tweeted on Saturday. "What good does it do in this situation for someone to be torn down? It doesn't make my community safer or solve any of our long-term problems with racism."

Lin, a former NBA guard whose heroics for the NBA's New York Knicks sparked "Linsanity" in 2012, spoke in a Facebook post on Thursday of racism that the Asian-American community faces, a problem made worse in the coronavirus pandemic during which former president Donald Trump routinely referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese Virus."

"Being a 9 year NBA veteran doesn't protect me from being called 'coronavirus' on the court," wrote Lin, who is currently a member of the Golden State Warriors' Santa Cruz affiliate in the NBA's developmental G League. Lin became the first American-born NBA player of Chinese or Taiwanese descent to play in the NBA when he played for the Warriors in the 2010-11 season. He became a breakout star for the Knicks the following season, and became the first Asian-American to win an NBA title with the Toronto Raptors in 2019. — AFP



Jeremy Lin

Sports

Crisis-hit Schalke sack Gross in major clear out

Last-gasp winner caps fightback as Leipzig keep pace with Bayern

BERLIN: Bundesliga crisis club Schalke sacked almost their entire sporting leadership yesterday, including coach Christian Gross, after an alleged player revolt and a 16th league defeat plunged their nightmare season deeper into crisis.

"The decision had become unavoidable after results against Dortmund and Stuttgart," said Schalke chairman Jens Buchta in a statement following Schalke's 5-1 loss to Stuttgart on Saturday, a week after defeat to local rivals Borussia Dortmund. "The team now owe it to the club and the fans to be as successful as possible in the last third of the season."

Coach Gross, sporting director Jochen Schneider and team coordinator Sascha Riether were all relieved of their duties in Sunday's mass clear out. Gross' assistant Rainer Widmayer and fitness coach Werner Leuthard were also fired.

The move comes with one-time giants Schalke bottom of the league and nine points adrift of safety, having won just one of their 23 league games this season. Having been in the Champions League two seasons ago, Schalke are now hurtling towards their first relegation since 1988.

Player revolt

Veteran Swiss Gross, 66, had been in the job for only two months, having taken over from interim boss Huub Stevens at the end of December to become Schalke's fourth coach this season. Victory in his second game in charge saw Schalke narrowly avoid equaling a 54-year-old Bundesliga record of 31 games without a win, but Gross was ultimately unable to stop the rot.

The 4-0 victory over Hoffenheim remained his only win in 10 league games in charge, as Schalke remained rooted to the bottom of the table. Reports of a player revolt against Gross' leadership

surfaced in the German media last week in the build-up to Saturday's defeat.

Team coordinator Riether sought to play down the rumors, saying it was "normal that players are disappointed" but denying there was a "revolution" in the dressing room. Yet yesterday, both Gross and Riether were shown the door as Schalke made one last desperate bid to save their season.

The club have already begun to rebuild for the second division, handing over squad planning duties to loan director Mike Bueskens and youth director Peter Knaebel. Two weeks ago, they announced that sporting director Schneider would leave at the end of the season, a decision which has now been brought forward. Knaebel will now take on "overall responsibility", with support from Bueskens, Norbert Elgert and Gerald Asamoah, the club said. A replacement for Gross as head coach is yet to be announced.

Leipzig's fightback

Elsewhere, a last-gasp Alexander Sorloth goal sealed RB Leipzig's dramatic 3-2 comeback win at home to Borussia Moenchengladbach on Saturday and kept them in the thick of the Bundesliga title race. Leipzig fought back with second-half goals by Christopher Nkunku and Yussuf Poulsen before Sorloth's winning header in the 93rd minute after Gladbach had led 2-0 at half-time.

"We'll try everything to keep the Bundesliga exciting," said Leipzig coach Julian Nagelsmann. "We have to keep the momentum. It was an extremely important victory in terms of the table. We didn't look good when we conceded the goals, but were incredibly strong in the second half."

The victory keeps second-placed Leipzig two points behind leaders Bayern Munich, who earlier romped to a 5-1 home win over Cologne. Gladbach

were in complete control at half-time after Jonas Hofmann netted an early penalty and Marcus Thuram used his shoulder to guide the ball into the net from a Brel Embolo header.

However, Sorloth came off the bench and inspired the second-half fight back. The former Crystal Palace striker had a goal disallowed for handball before setting up Nkunku, who fired home Leipzig's first goal on 57 minutes. Poulsen smashed home the equalizer on 66 minutes. Leipzig had all the momentum and peppered the Gladbach goal before Sorloth's winning header deep into added time.

Goretzka shines

Earlier, Bayern moved back after taking just a point in their previous two league games as midfielder Leon Goretzka created three goals in their rout of Cologne. Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting headed Bayern into an early lead before Robert Lewandowski, the league's top scorer, struck twice to increase his league tally to 28 goals this season.

Serge Gnabry came off the bench to claim two late goals behind closed doors at the Allianz Arena on his first appearance since tearing a thigh muscle in Bayern's Club World Cup final win in Qatar. Coach Hansi Flick made just one change - Choupo-Moting for Kingsley Coman - from the side which beat Lazio 4-1 in the Champions League on Tuesday.

Bayern quickly built a 2-0 lead through Choupo-Moting and Lewandowski with Goretzka setting up both goals. Cologne midfielder Ellyes Skhiri chipped Manuel Neuer four minutes after the break to pull a goal back. With just over 25 minutes left, Flick settled nerves by bringing on Gnabry and Thomas Mueller, who made his first appearance a fortnight after testing positive for COVID-19. Mueller's pass split the Cologne



STUTTGART: Schalke's Swiss headcoach Christian Gross reacts during the German first division Bundesliga football match between VfB Stuttgart and Schalke 04 in Stuttgart, southwestern Germany, on Saturday. —AFP

defense and found Lewandowski who restored the two-goal cushion on 65 minutes.

Cologne midfielder Dominick Drexler hit the post before Gnabry made it 4-1 by converting a cross, then claimed his second just before the final whistle after an excellent pass from Goretzka. Wolfsburg remain third, seven points behind Bayern, after their 2-0 home win over Hertha Berlin, whose defender Lukas Kluefter turned the ball into his own net before Maxence Lacroix scored the hosts' second.

Wolfsburg defender Marin Pongracic was sent off in added time for a second booking. England winger Jadon Sancho converted a penalty and Brazil midfielder Reinier scored his first goal for the club as Dortmund stayed fifth with a 3-0 home win over Arminia Bielefeld. —AFP

Ronaldo scores as Juventus held in Verona

ROME: Cristiano Ronaldo scored his 19th goal this campaign but champions Juventus had to settle for a 1-1 draw at Hellas Verona in Serie A on Saturday. "We managed to take the lead, which was the hardest part, it's a pity not being able to hold it," said Juve coach Andrea Pirlo.

Pirlo's side paid for their many absences and a redesigned defence with Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini out injured and Danilo suspended. Also missing were Juan Cuadrado, Arthur and Paulo Dybala to injury with Alvaro Morata recovering from a viral infection. "We lacked experienced players, we had many youngsters on the pitch and there are details that they don't understand," continued Pirlo. "I asked Ronaldo and Alex Sandro to make their voices heard, but it wasn't enough."

Goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny and the post saved Juventus just minutes into the game at the Stadio Bentegodi following a Davide Faraoni header.

Ronaldo broke through four minutes after the break connecting with a perfect lay-off from Federico Chiesa to fire in.

Aaron Ramsey missed a chance for a second before the hour mark after a Dejan Kulusevski pull-back which the Verona defense closed down. Antonin Barak headed in an equaliser with quarter of an hour to go and the hosts were denied a late winner with Szczesny deflecting a Darko Lazovic effort onto the crossbar.

Immobile penalty miss

Lazio's European ambitions took a knock with a 2-0 loss at Bologna, days after a heavy defeat by Bayern Munich in the Champions League. Ciro Immobile missed a penalty with goals in either half from Ibrahima Mbaye and Nicola Sansone sealing all three points for Bologna who snapped their 15-match winless league run against the Romans. "The missed penalty set the tone for the game," said Lazio coach Simone Inzaghi.

Inzaghi's side showed signs of fatigue as they came off a 4-1 Champions League last 16, first leg loss to holders Bayern Munich. "We must forget about these two defeats which hurt. An ambitious team like ours needs to roll up our



VERONA: Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo reacts after Juventus conceded an equalizer during the Italian Serie A football match Hellas Verona vs Juventus Turin on Saturday at the Marcantonio-Bentegodi stadium in Verona. —AFP

sleeves and do better."

Lazio have lost momentum since losing to Inter Milan in the league two weeks ago, and next host Torino before travelling to Juventus. Last season's European golden shoe winner Immobile had a chance to score from the spot after Joaquin Correa was tripped in the box with goalkeeper Lukasz Skorupski easily holding

the striker's weak effort.

And 11th-placed Bologna got the breakthrough two minutes later when Mbaye tapped in a rebound after Pepe Reina parried a Riccardo Orsolini volley. Musa Barrow set up Sansone for the second after 64 minutes as Lazio's 19-game league scoring streak ended, two short of their record run in 1956. —AFP

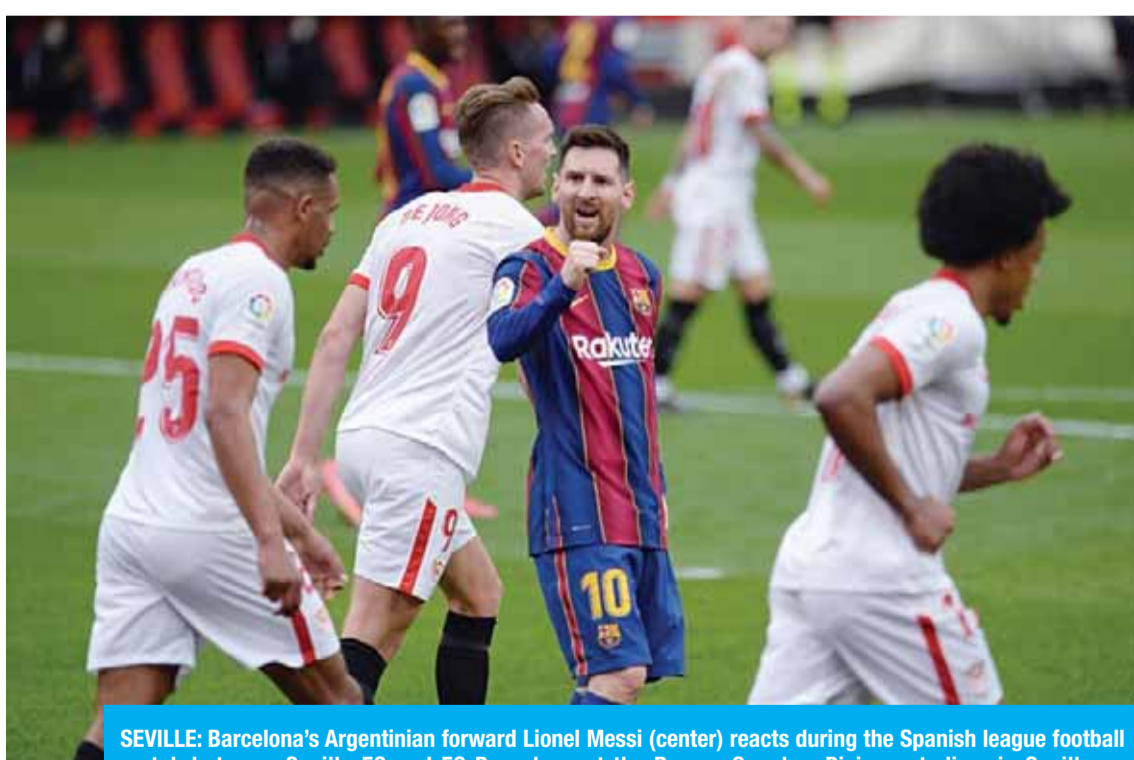
Barcelona brush aside Sevilla to reignite Liga hopes

SEVILLE: Barcelona reignited their title hopes after Lionel Messi and Ousmane Dembele scored in a 2-0 victory over Sevilla on Saturday to put them two points behind Atletico Madrid. Barca looked dead and buried a few weeks ago but this was their ninth win out of 10 in La Liga, a surge that has put them back in contention, with Atletico playing against Real Madrid next weekend. "We've taken some big hits and we have got up again," said Barca's Gerard Pique. "Of course the title race is on, there is confidence and a lot of hope in this team."

Sevilla started the day as arguably the form team at the top, having won all of their last six league games, the last five of those without conceding a goal. But they were second best at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan, a dominant performance from Barcelona exposing them still as slightly short of Spain's top three. It also creates an intriguing back-drop to Wednesday's Copa del Rey semi-final second leg when these two teams meet again, with Barca hoping to overturn a 2-0 deficit at Camp Nou. Although Pedri and Ronald Araujo could be doubts after both were substituted in the second half with injury problems. "We believe we can come back but Wednesday is a different game," said coach Ronald Koeman. "We have to play a perfect match, only then do we have a chance."

Koeman could well stick with his new 3-5-2 system, which saw Jordi Alba and Sergino Dest playing as wing-backs ahead of a back three and Dembele deployed up front alongside Messi. Without Antoine Griezmann, who dropped to the bench, Koeman sacrificed some creativity in the final third for control through the middle, not to mention the threat of Dembele in behind.

Certainly for the best part of an hour Sevilla struggled to escape Barcelona's press or establish any sustained pressure, even after Julen Lopetegui introduced three substitutes at half-time and switched formation to match their opponents.



SEVILLE: Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi (center) reacts during the Spanish league football match between Sevilla FC and FC Barcelona at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium in Seville on Saturday. —AFP

Marc-Andre ter Stegen was passed fit to play by the team doctor despite hurting his right thumb in the warm-up and in truth it was hardly tested in the first half. Barca controlled the game and while Alba and Dest never really advanced as much as Koeman might have liked, Frenkie de Jong and Pedri were a constant threat through the middle, with the speedy Dembele just in front.

Chances, though, were few and far between and it took a counter-attack for Barcelona to take the lead. Fernando gave the ball away cheaply up front and two passes were enough, Messi curling the decisive one through for Dembele to race clear and finish.

Lopetegui reacted with three changes at half-time and two more after the hour but even by matching

Barcelona's system, Sevilla struggled to gain a foothold. Alba came up just short of De Jong's cross, Dest slammed against the post and Messi blazed over after another surge from Dembele.

One of Lopetegui's substitutes Youssef En-Nesyri had Sevilla's best chance but headed over. Yet without a second goal, a nervy finale was always likely and En-Nesyri found the corner on the turn but had the goal ruled out for a handball, his tussle with Araujo seeing Barca's defender go off and he booted some chairs over in frustration. But Sevilla's push was brief, ended by Messi with six minutes left. He traded passes with Ilaix Moriba, nipped inside Diego Carlos and tried to finish with a chip. Bono saved but the ball came to Messi, one yard out. —AFP

Mbappe on target twice in PSG cruise

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe scored twice to take his tally to 18 goals in Ligue 1 this season as Paris Saint-Germain eased to a 4-0 victory at bottom club Dijon on Saturday to keep the pressure on leaders Lille in the title race.

Moise Kean and Danilo Pereira also scored for Mauricio Pochettino's team, who bounced back from a 2-0 home defeat by Monaco last weekend and moved back up to second in the table, a point behind Lille. "I am very proud. We were very professional and it was important for us to get back to winning ways," Pochettino told Canal Plus.

PSG, who go to Bordeaux in midweek, have now won seven and lost two of Pochettino's first 10 league games in charge. "The team needs to be more consistent in the league," Pochettino added. "Of course it is a mental thing, but it is also physical, it is about performance."

Former Monaco striker Mbappe had been kept quiet by his old club but he got back among the goals against the division's bottom side, who have now lost their last seven games. Mbappe scored twice when PSG beat Dijon 4-0 at home in October and repeated the feat here to move onto 23 for the season in all competitions.

The victory was achieved in the ongoing absence of Neymar, with the world's most expensive player missing a fourth consecutive game with a groin injury. He has returned to individual training but, having already missed the first leg, he remains a doubt for the Champions League last-16 return match at home to Barcelona on March 10.

Angel Di Maria, Marco Verratti, Mauro Icardi, Leandro Paredes and Alessandro Florenzi were also missing at the Stade Gaston-Gerard along with long-term injury victim Juan Bernat. "We have a big squad and we need to show that everyone can fight for their place," replied Pochettino.

Kean makes mark again

On-loan Everton striker Kean kept his place and he opened the scoring inside six minutes, taking a touch and poking home from close range after being set up by Abdou Diallo. Kean, who was also on target twice in the last meeting of the sides, has now scored 15 times for PSG, who could well be convinced to make his loan move into a permanent transfer come the season's end.

Mbappe made it 2-0 in the 32nd minute, converting a penalty awarded for a Bersant Celina handball. Julian Draxler had another goal disallowed for offside but Mbappe scored again six minutes into the second half, sweeping a low, first-time shot into the corner from a Rafinha pass to finish off a flowing move.

Daniilo, on loan from Porto, wrapped up the win late on as he headed in Draxler's corner for his first goal in French football, before being replaced by 17-year-old midfielder Edouard Michut who was making his senior debut. Dijon are eight points adrift at the bottom and nine points from outright safety.

Saturday's other game saw Metz win 2-1 at Bordeaux thanks to a stoppage-time goal by Cape Verde international Vagner Dias Goncalves. Metz are fifth, a position which brings with it qualification for the inaugural UEFA Europa Conference League next season. —AFP

Man Utd draw blank again at Chelsea

Bale stars for Spurs • Arsenal hit back to beat Leicester • Fulham held at Palace

LONDON: Manchester United were left frustrated by a VAR penalty controversy in their 0-0 draw at Chelsea, while the revitalized Gareth Bale struck twice in Tottenham's 4-0 rout of Burnley yesterday. Second-placed United had hoped to close the gap on Manchester City with a victory at Stamford Bridge. But instead they now sit 12 points behind the Premier League leaders as their title hopes fade following a run of one win from four games.

Chelsea boss Thomas Tuchel is unbeaten in nine matches in all competitions since replacing the sacked Frank Lampard, but the stalemate was a blow to his team's top-four challenge. The fifth-placed Blues are one point behind fourth-placed West Ham and four ahead of sixth-placed Liverpool, who visited Sheffield United in yesterday's late game.

Neither side could claim they deserved to win in a game of few clear-cut chances. The biggest talking point came in the first half when United's appeal for a penalty was rejected by referee Stuart Attwell after he consulted the pitchside monitor when Callum Hudson-Odoi appeared to handle in a challenge with Mason Greenwood.

After five defeats in their previous six league games, Tottenham eased the pressure on Jose Mourinho with a significant contribution from Bale, who made just his third league start of the season. The Wales forward's most impressive display since his season-long loan move from Real Madrid gave him four goals in his last four appearances.

Bale, who had clashed with Tottenham boss Mourinho over his fit-

ness earlier in February, took just 68 seconds to score with a clinical close-range finish from Son Heung-min's cross. In the 15th minute, Bale's superb long pass picked out Harry Kane's run and the England captain's shot deflected off James Tarkowski for his 22nd goal of the season.

Lucas Moura netted with a predatory finish after Sergio Reguilon's cross was deflected into the Brazilian's path by Tarkowski in the 31st minute. Bale, in his second spell with Tottenham after leaving for Madrid in 2013, scored again with a cool strike from Son's 55th-minute pass. Tottenham are up to eighth, six points behind the top four with a game in hand.

"Sometimes you (the media) like to say things that are not really true but there is not one single manager in the world that doesn't play Gareth Bale if Gareth Bale is in very good condition," Mourinho said. "There is not one, but now he is better than ever. It's not just about the two goals he scored, it's fundamentally about his physical performance."

Arsenal down Leicester

Arsenal delivered a hammer blow to Leicester's faint hopes of winning the title with an impressive 3-1 win. Mikel Arteta's side fell behind to Yuri Tielemans' early goal at the King Power Stadium, but David Luiz equalized and Alexandre Lacazette's penalty gave Arsenal the lead. Nicolas Pepe's second-half goal sealed the Gunners' second win in their last six league games and their first success at a team in the Premier



LONDON: Chelsea's English midfielder Mason Mount (center) runs with the ball during the English Premier League football match between Chelsea and Manchester United at Stamford Bridge yesterday. — AFP


League's top three since 2015. Leicester remain in third place and trail City by 13 points with 12 games remaining. After Thursday's shock Europa League exit against Slavia Prague, it was a week to forget for Leicester manager Brendan Rodgers. With Arsenal stuck in mid-table, Arteta has prioritized winning the

Europa League as his side's only hope of qualifying for next season's Champions League.

Having picked his best team for the come-from-behind win against Benfica in the last 32 second leg on Thursday, Arteta left Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Bukayo Saka on the bench after the long trip back from the neutral venue in

Greece. After the gamble paid off, Arteta said: "Coming into this game I was concerned. They're one of the most dangerous teams in the league to play once you go behind against them. "The reaction was terrific, the team looked really mature." Third-bottom Fulham are three points from safety after a 0-0 draw at Crystal Palace. — AFP



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