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Amir urges cooperation to protect public funds

Court rejects petition against speaker's election, delays ruling on Dahoum



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receive HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and the new Cabinet members at Bayan Palace yesterday. — KUNA (See Page 3)

By B Izzak and Agencies

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah called on the government and parliament yesterday to have "constructive cooperation" to address pressing issues, protect public funds and promote rule of law in line with the constitution. "I call upon the legislative and executive authorities for constructive cooperation, armed by our social fabric and national unity, to achieve national goals, address pressing issues and protect public funds, in line with the constitution, and the decisive and transparent

application of law on all," HH the Amir said in a speech after Cabinet members took oath before him. HH the Amir told the new ministers they have "great responsibilities in this important time, and I am confident you are, Allah willing, capable of confronting them". He urged them to work "collectively with the one team spirit to push forward the national action towards reforms and development" in order to achieve aspirations of the Kuwaiti people at all levels. HH the Amir thanked HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah for his "great efforts" and urged the ministers to "redouble

efforts" and show dedication in their national duties in order to create opportunities and alleviate the burdens of citizens. The Amir also thanked former ministers for their service. Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled said the constitution and law will be the foundation of cooperation with the parliament with the objective reaching common goals between the two authorities. In its first official meeting yesterday, the Cabinet said it was alarmed by the sharp increase in the number of the coronavirus cases and called on the people to comply strictly with health measures. It urged certain sections of the population to get vaccinated to

help safeguard the country against the pandemic. The new Cabinet will take the oath at the National Assembly in the first regular session on March 18 when a one-month suspension ordered by HH the Amir on Assembly meetings will expire. Lawmakers have made few comments on the new Cabinet. MP Bader Al-Humaidi said the lineup is far from the "salvation" government the country needed urgently to resolve its political crises. He criticized the merger of ministries that are not related under one portfolio. MP Abdulkarim Al-Kandari said the establishment **Continued on Page 2**

Kuwait lists record 1,409 new COVID cases, five deaths

KUWAIT: Kuwait said 1,409 people tested positive for COVID-19 - a new daily record - with five related deaths yesterday, taking total cases to 194,781, while deaths rose to 1,097. The health ministry also reported that 1,077 more people recovered, raising total recoveries to 182,196. Ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad told a press conference the number of people hospitalized with the virus currently stands at 11,488, with 162 of them in intensive care units. Sanad said 10,554 swab tests were conducted over the past day, taking total tests to 1,811,181. He urged nationals and expatriates alike that abiding by health precautions, mainly, following social distancing rules, is the only way to halt the spread of the virus. On Tuesday, Kuwait recorded a daily high of 1,341 new coronavirus cases and seven deaths. — KUNA



Manpower authority eases most visa transfer restrictions

By Nawara Fattahova
KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Manpower yesterday eased most restrictions on the transfer of workers in certain sectors. The new decision allows expat government employees and those on depend-

ent visas to transfer to work in the private sector, a statement said. The new decree 142/2021 allows locally-employed expats to transfer to all sectors with the approval of the previous employer and without the condition of period (one year) set in article 5 of administrative decree 842/2015. The new decision also allows the transfer of expat employees to all activities within six main sectors: Industry, agriculture, fishing, cooperative societies, free trade zone (which is currently changing its legal status) and grazing, with the prior approval of previous employers. Employees in these professions were previously not allowed to transfer to a different employer.

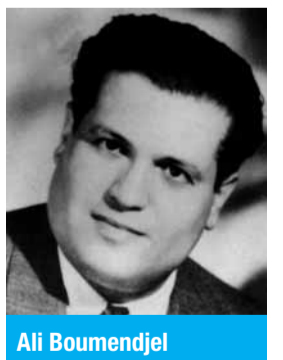
The new decision does not apply to workers on government contracts and small and medium projects. The manpower authority said the decision was taken to meet labor market needs because of the prevailing conditions during the coronavirus pandemic. Meanwhile, the rapporteur of the National Assembly's human rights committee MP Hamdan Al-Azemi yesterday accused companies with major government contracts of being involved in trafficking in persons. Azemi said some companies with large government contracts recruit thousands of workers from abroad and leave half of them on the streets after taking hefty fees from them.

France admits killing Algerian freedom fighter

PARIS: President Emmanuel Macron has admitted for the first time that French soldiers murdered a top Algerian independence figure then covered up his death in the latest acknowledgement by Paris of its

colonial-era crimes. Macron met four of the grandchildren of Ali Boumendjel and admitted "in the name of France" that the lawyer had been detained, tortured and killed in Algiers on March 23, 1957, his office said Tuesday. French authorities had previously claimed that he had committed suicide while in detention, a lie that his widow and other family members had campaigned for years to see overturned. "Looking our history in the face, acknowledging the truth, will not enable us to heal all of the still open

wounds, but it will help to create a path for the future," the statement from Macron's office said. As the first French president to be born in the post-colonial era, Macron has made several unprecedented steps to face up to France's brutal fight to retain control of its north African colony, which won independence in 1962. In 2018, he admitted that France had created a "system" that facilitated torture during the war and acknowledged that French mathematician Maurice **Continued on Page 2**



ICC opens Israeli war crimes probe

THE HAGUE: The International Criminal Court opened a war crimes probe yesterday into the situation in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories, a move that risks further inflaming one of the world's most bitter conflicts. The controversial investigation launched by the Hague-based court's chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda is to cover alleged crimes by both sides, mainly during the 2014 Gaza war. Israel, which is not an ICC member, swiftly

denounced the decision as an "act of moral and legal bankruptcy". The Palestinians, who have been a state party to the court since 2015, hailed the start of the "urgent and necessary" probe. "Today, I confirm the initiation by the office of the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court of an investigation respecting the situation in Palestine," Bensouda said in a statement. She said the formal investigation followed a "painstaking" five-year preliminary probe, and vowed it would be conducted "independently, impartially and objectively, without fear or favor." In the end, our central concern must be for the victims of crimes, both Palestinian and Israeli, arising from the long cycle of violence and insecurity that has

caused deep suffering and despair on all sides," the prosecutor said. In the summer of 2014, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge with the stated aim of stopping rocket fire into the country by militants of Islamist movement Hamas. Around 2,250 Palestinians were killed in the 2014 fighting, mostly civilians, and 74 Israelis, mostly soldiers. ICC judges paved the way for a war crimes investigation when they ruled a month ago that the court has jurisdiction over the situation due to the Palestinian's membership. Israel yesterday called the investigation's launch a "political decision". "Israel will take every step necessary to protect its civilians and soldiers from **Continued on Page 2**

Local

Amir receives top state officials at Bayan Palace

Sheikh Nawaf receives commemorative shield from Qatar



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

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday at Bayan Palace His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness also received, with presence of His Highness the Crown Prince, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and

later Speaker of the National Assembly Marzouq Al-Ghanem. Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince received Speaker Ghanem at Bayan Palace.

In the meantime, His Highness the Amir received Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah. Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali gave His Highness the Amir a commemorative shield from Qatar celebrating the opening of the Sabah Al-Ahmad Corridor in the fellow GCC nation. The Defense Minister briefed His Highness the Amir on the Sabah Al-Ahmad Corridor project, one of the major and important infrastructure projects in Qatar.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives from Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah a commemorative shield from Qatar.

His Highness the Amir expressed great pride and appreciation towards the Qatari government and people for naming the project after the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. He affirmed that this gesture would deepen and solidify the strong and historic relations linking the two brotherly nations especially during the era of Qatari Amir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. — KUNA

Eight missing Kuwaitis' remains identified



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs the Cabinet's meeting yesterday. — KUNA

KUWAIT: The Cabinet held its first weekly meeting after swearing in before His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday. In light of the Committee of Prisoners and Missing Persons' announcement that they identified the remains of eight missing Kuwaiti persons since the 1990/91 Iraqi Invasion through DNA tests, the Cabinet expressed condolences to the martyrs' families. The Cabinet was then briefed about the situation surrounding efforts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic by the Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah. Furthermore, the Cabinet called on all citizens and residents to fully adhere to health requirements to limit the spread of the pandemic.

His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah stressed his newly-formed government's keenness to embody the

desired cooperation with the National Assembly to achieve the country's advancement. His Highness the Prime Minister welcomed the newly-appointed ministers and thanked them for their acceptance of their roles at this stage with its various challenges. In turn, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, on behalf of the ministers, expressed his gratitude to His Highness the Amir, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister for their trust. The Cabinet also shed light on the recent regional and global political developments, where it expressed concern over the continued Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia. It also stressed Kuwait's solidarity with the Kingdom for all measures it takes to preserve its security and stability. — KUNA

Philippine Embassy thanks Kuwait Disabled Sport Club

KUWAIT: Philippine Ambassador to Kuwait Mohd Noordin Pendosina N Lomondot on Tuesday honored Shafi Al-Hajri, Chairman of the Board of the Kuwait Disabled Sport Club, for his unwavering support to the programs of the Philippine Embassy in Kuwait. This includes the ongoing mobile passport service that allowed Filipinos, especially those with expiring residence visas, to renew their passports at a bigger and safer venue. "Hajri's unbounded generosity and patience will always be remembered by the tens of thousands of Filipinos in Kuwait who benefited from the Embassy's programs that he has supported," Ambassador Lomondot said in praising the club's chief.



KUWAIT: Philippine Ambassador to Kuwait Mohd Noordin Pendosina N Lomondot honors Shafi Al-Hajri, Chairman of the Board of the Kuwait Disabled Sport Club.

ICC opens Israeli...

Continued from Page 1

legal persecution," Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi said in a statement. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last month condemned the judges' decision paving the way for a probe as "pure anti-Semitism".

The US State Department said at the time it had "serious concerns" about the ICC ruling, adding that Israel should not be bound by the court as it was not a member. The Palestinian Authority hailed yesterday's decision. "The crimes committed by the leaders of the Israeli occupation against the Palestinian people - which are ongoing, systematic and widespread - make this investigation necessary and urgent," Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad Al-Maliki said in a statement.

In 2019, Bensouda said in her initial application for the probe that there is a "reasonable basis" to believe crimes were committed by members of the Israeli Defense Forces, Israeli authorities, Hamas and

Palestinian armed groups. These include the IDF allegedly "intentionally launching disproportionate attacks" during the 2014 conflict and "willful killing and willfully causing serious injury", she said.

Hamas and Palestinian armed groups were accused of "intentionally directing attacks against civilians" and "using protected persons as shields" during the Gaza conflict. The ICC prosecutor also said there is scope to investigate the deaths of Palestinian demonstrators from 2018 onwards. Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the Six-Day War of 1967, and later annexed mostly Arab east Jerusalem. Today they are home to at least five million Palestinians defined by the United Nations as living under Israeli occupation.

The Gaza Strip is blockaded by Israel and ruled by the Islamist Hamas group. The Israel-Palestinians probe will prove the first major test for incoming ICC prosecutor Karim Khan, the British lawyer who was elected in February to replace Bensouda when her mandate ends in June. Bensouda is under US sanctions for her decision to investigate alleged US war crimes in Afghanistan, but Washington has also strongly criticized the Palestinian probe. — AFP

UK Secretary visits Kuwait for virtual meetings

KUWAIT: The Permanent Secretary for the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Sir Philip Barton, visited Kuwait for a series of virtual meetings. Sir Philip, the UK's most senior diplomat, met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, hosted a roundtable on climate change and launched a year-long campaign focusing on UK expertise in innovation, research and technology. After engaging with British Embassy staff, Sir Philip met with Assistant Foreign Minister Waleed Al-Khobeizi, where they discussed Kuwait's leading role in resolving the GCC dispute, bilateral co-operation and regional issues.

At a roundtable meeting, Sir Philip discussed the upcoming COP26 UN climate change talks which will be held in Glasgow in the United Kingdom in November. Sir Philip highlighted the UK's commitment to tackling climate change both through domestic policy and in international forums. Sir Philip heard from officials at the Environment Public Authority, and the Supreme Council of Planning and Development's Dr Khaled Mahdi. Also at the meeting were the Hideko Hadzialic, Resident Representative for the UNDP and

Ghassan Al-Khoja, regional representative for the World Bank.

The visit concluded with the launch of the British Embassy's Innotech 2021 campaign, which showcases UK's excellence in scientific research, collaboration and innovation. The launch included details of the logo, social media hashtags (#InnotechUKQ8) and schedule for events, details of which will be shared during the coming year. Also, Sir Philip met with Dr Samira Al-Omar, Director General of the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research and Dr Khaled Al-Begain, President of the Kuwait College for Science and Technology.

On conclusion of his visit, Sir Philip said "I was delighted to visit Kuwait virtually just after Kuwaitis marked the 60th anniversary of independence and the 30th anniversary of liberation. It was inspiring to hear the vital work being done by my colleagues at the British Embassy to advance the UK-Kuwaiti partnership. My discussions today showed we share a determination to tackle regional and global challenges such as climate change and security, as well as providing an exciting glimpse of future scientific collaboration through the Innotech 2021 campaign."



Sir Philip Barton

Amir urges cooperation to...

Continued from Page 1

of a ministry for integrity is good, but not enough to combat corruption, as fighting corruption requires practical measures.

Meanwhile, the constitutional court yesterday postponed its verdict on the membership of leading opposition MP Bader Al-Dahoum and rejected a petition against the election of the Assembly speaker. The court, whose rulings are final, was scheduled to

rule if it was competent to handle three petitions claiming the election of Dahoum to the Assembly was illegal and should be nullified. It delayed the verdict until March 14.

Dahoum was disqualified by an interior ministry commission to run in the Dec 5 election, but the court of appeals and the court of cassation overturned the ruling and allowed him to contest the polls. The constitutional court also rejected a petition claiming that the election of Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem was marred with irregularities and should be scrapped. The court said it is allowed by law to look into disputes over Assembly elections and not competent to look into disputes over the Assembly speaker's election, and accordingly rejected the petition.

France admits killing Algerian...

Continued from Page 1

Audin, a Communist pro-independence activist, was also murdered in Algiers.

In July last year, he tasked French historian Benjamin Stora with assessing how France has dealt with its colonial legacy. Stora's report in January made a series of recommendations, including acknowledging the murder of Boumendjel and creating a "memory and truth commission" that would hear testimony from people who suffered during the war. It did not suggest a formal state apology, however, and Macron has said there would be "no repentance nor apologies" but rather "symbolic acts" aimed at promoting reconciliation.

Boumendjel was a French-speaking nationalist lawyer and intellectual who served as a link between the moderate UDMA party and the National Liberation Front (FLN), the underground resistance movement. Macron praised his "humanism" and his "courage" in his statement, adding that Boumendjel had been influenced by French Enlightenment values in his fight against "the injustice of the colonial system".

In 2001, the former head of French intelligence in Algiers Paul Aussaresses published a book called "Special Services 1955-1957" in which he described how he and his "death squad" tortured

and killed prisoners, including Boumendjel. Aussaresses wrote that the government, notably the then justice minister Francois Mitterrand, who later became president, was informed about and tolerated the use of torture, executions and forced displacements.

Last month, Boumendjel's niece Fadela Boumendjel-Chitour denounced what she called the "devastating" lie the French state had told about her uncle, which had never been officially corrected. Macron also said on Tuesday that he would continue to open national archives and encouraged historians to continue researching Algeria's independence war, which saw atrocities committed by all sides.

Paris ruled Algeria for more than a hundred years and the independence war from 1954-1962 left 1.5 million Algerians dead, leaving deep scars and a toxic debate about the legacy of colonization. During his 2017 election campaign, Macron declared that the occupation of Algeria was a "crime against humanity" and called French actions "genuinely barbaric". But despite his outreach efforts, he has been criticized for ruling out a state apology, with the Algerian government calling the most recent report by Stora "not objective" and "below expectations".

On France's right and far-right, many politicians object to raking up the past, with French colonialism still defended as a "civilizing" enterprise that helped develop occupied territories. During his presidential run in 2017, Macron's comments on Algeria were denounced by his defeated rightwing rival Francois Fillon as "this hatred of our history, this perpetual repentance". — AFP

Local

Kuwait's Cabinet members take oath before Amir

Constitution, law foundation of cooperation with parliament: Prime Minister

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday at Bayan Palace His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, who took oath as head of the Cabinet. The members of the new Cabinet, accompanying His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled, were also sworn-in. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah attended the ceremony.

His Highness the Prime Minister said the constitution and law would be foundation of cooperation with the parliament with the objective reaching common goals between the two authorities. His Highness the Prime Minister, addressing His Highness the Amir after taking oath, said the speech of His Highness the Amir would "be our roadmap to work as one team serving Kuwait, interests of Kuwait and its citizens." His Highness the Prime Minister thanked His Highness the Amir for approving the cabinet line-up and prayed to Allah the Almighty's help to conduct this mandate. "We pledge before Your Highness to work as one team and to exert every effort to achieve progress, advancement and prosperity of our nation under Your Highness and His Highness the Crown Prince's leadership," he said.

The new Cabinet includes: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad

Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Nazaha (integrity) Enhancement Abdullah Youssef Al-Roumi, Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Essa Ahmad Mohammad Al-Kandari, Minister of Oil and Minister of Higher Education Dr Mohammad Abdullatif Al-Fares, Minister of Health Dr Basel Humoud Al-Sabah, Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Communication and Information Technology Affairs Dr Rana Abdullah Al-Fares, Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs Mubarak Salem Al-Harees, Minister of Interior Sheikh Thamer Ali Al-Salem Al-Sabah, Minister of Finance and Minister of State for Economic and Investment Affairs Khalifa Musaed Hamada, Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Baddah Al-Mutairi, Minister of Education Dr Ali Fahad Al-Mudhaf, Minister of State for Municipality Affairs and Minister of State for Housing Affairs and Urban Development Shaya Abdulrahman Al-Shaya, Minister of Commerce and Industry Dr Abdullah Issa Al-Salman, and Minister of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy and Minister of Social Affairs and Societal Development Dr Mashaan Mohammad Al-Otaibi.

Minister of the Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Ali



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah (center), His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah (left) and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah look on as Public Works Minister Dr Rana Al-Fares takes oath. —Amiri Diwan photos

Jarrah Al-Sabah, head of the Amiri Diwan Sheikh Mubarak Faisal Al-Sabah and Deputy Minister of the Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah Al-Sabah were present at the ceremony. Attendees also included head of His Highness the Amir's office and Undersecretary of the Amir

Diwan Ahmad Fahad Al-Fahad, head of His Highness the Crown Prince's office Lieutenant-General Jamal Al-Theyab, head of His Highness the Prime Minister's office Ahmad Mahmoud Al-Rahmani, and Acting Secretary General of the Cabinet Wael Issa Al-Asousi. —KUNA



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah swears in.



Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah swears in.



Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Nazaha Enhancement Abdullah Youssef Al-Roumi swears in.



Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Essa Ahmad Mohammad Al-Kandari swears in.



Minister of Oil and Minister of Higher Education Dr Mohammad Abdullatif Al-Fares swears in.



Minister of Health Dr Basel Humoud Al-Sabah swears in.



Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah swears in.



Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Communication and Information Technology Affairs Dr Rana Abdullah Al-Fares swears in.



Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs Mubarak Salem Al-Harees swears in.



Minister of Interior Sheikh Thamer Ali Al-Salem Al-Sabah swears in.



Minister of Finance and Minister of State for Economic and Investment Affairs Khalifa Musaed Hamada swears in.



Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Baddah Al-Mutairi swears in.



Minister of Education Dr Ali Fahad Al-Mudhaf swears in.



Minister of State for Municipality Affairs and Minister of State for Housing Affairs and Urban Development Shaya Abdulrahman Al-Shaya swears in.



Minister of Commerce and Industry Dr Abdullah Issa Al-Salman swears in.



Minister of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy and Minister of Social Affairs and Societal Development Dr Mashaan Mohammad Al-Otaibi swears in.

Local

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A wasp rests on a flower in a park in Kuwait City yesterday. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

News in brief

Outcry over kittens' killing video in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Police arrested a man who allegedly killed two kittens in Kuwait yesterday. A video had circulated on social media yesterday allegedly showing a man suffocating two kittens to death. The video triggered an outcry from animal activists and media in the country against the mistreatment and abuse of animals. The person allegedly euthanized the kittens with butane lighter gas, commenting in the video that after the mother of these kittens died, he tried to feed them, but they were not eating. He said he then decided to end the lives of these kittens mercifully.

KD 40,000 scam

KUWAIT: A Kuwaiti woman lost KD 40,000 after she responded to a bogus company that used the name of a popular company on Instagram, Al-Anbaa Arabic daily reported yesterday. The citizen, after transferring a large amount of money, contacted the official company, only to discover that her dealings had nothing to do with the legitimate company. A security source said the woman told police that a person called her from a local number claiming to be a representative of the major company that deals in shares and real estate in Britain. He asked her to invest KD 10,000 and told her contacts should be through Instagram. After she sent the money, he asked for KD 20,000 more due to "new laws." After she responded, a third person called and asked her for KD 10,000 more. She then called the company, only to be shocked to find out the callers do not belong to the company. Detectives are investigating.

Govt contracts main source of visa trading: Panel

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Rapporteur of the National Assembly's human rights committee MP Hamdan Al-Azemi yesterday accused companies with major government contracts of being involved in trafficking in persons.

Azemi said some of the companies with large government contracts recruit thousands of workers from abroad and leave half of them on the streets, taking hefty fees on them.

The statements came after a meeting by the committee with several government agencies and ministries concerned with the issue of trafficking in people like the ministries of interior, foreign affairs and justice in addition to the Public Authority for Manpower and the permanent national committee for the prevention of trafficking in people.

Hamdan said that several ministries are involved in the issue of trafficking especially the ministries of interior and social affairs and labor.

Azemi said that the biggest source for trafficking in labor is the government contracts, adding that some companies with such contracts recruit 2,000 workers at a time when they need only half the number.

He said that the other half is exploited to generate illegal money through fees by letting the workers go to the market, adding that some companies sharply reduce the value of the contracts and utilize the surplus laborers they recruit to generate huge sums. The lawmaker said that some companies recruit three or four thousand workers and make huge profits on them. He called for increasing supervision on government contracts to prevent the trading in visas.

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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Burgan Bank sponsors Ahmadi's art competition

KUWAIT: As part of Burgan Bank's long-standing partnership with Al-Ahmadi Governorate, Burgan Bank sponsors 'Nabeek Salem', the governorate's school art competition. The competition has launched in cooperation with Al-Ahmadi Supervision of Art Education. Burgan Bank's support comes as part of its long-term commitment to supporting different communities and educational causes. The competition targets a wide range of students of Ahmadi Governorate schools in all its three stages, from first grade to high school, to educate the community through artistic works that highlight the importance of adhering to the methods of prevention and physical distancing to protect from COVID-19, in addition, to highlighting the importance

of getting vaccinated.

Hessa Hussain Al-Najadah, Manager - Public Relations at Burgan Bank, said: "We are delighted to announce our partnership with Al-Ahmadi Governorate for the second year in a row. Sponsoring 'Nabeek Salem' art competition is a core part of our social responsibility and within Burgan Bank's keenness to spread awareness on protection against the coronavirus. It is important to inspire the youth through initiatives such as this competition to advocate the importance of prevention through their talented works and promote a shared responsibility on following strict safety guidelines and taking the vaccination. The bank would like to thank Al-Ahmadi's Supervision of Art Education for their rigorous efforts. We wish all of the participant's good luck in the competition." Participating students can submit their artworks starting from first of March till Thursday March 25th, through the 'Teams' educational platform, wherein the organizing committee has also provided various steps for participation on the platform. Winners will be announced and prizes will be awarded early next April.

IWG hosts event to celebrate national holidays

KUWAIT: Under the patronage of Sheikha Hanouf Bader Al-Muhamad Al-Sabah, spouse to Minister of Foreign Affairs and Honorary President of the International Women's Group - Kuwait, the IWG celebrated the 60th anniversary of Independence and the 30th anniversary of Liberation Day. Laila Boulos, master of ceremonies, eloquently and seamlessly managed the virtual program.

Ambreen Mustafa, spouse of the Ambassador of the Republic of Pakistan and President of IWG, delivered the welcome speech and congratulated the State of Kuwait, citizens and residents on this auspicious occasion. The event commenced with the National anthem orchestrated by Saint John's Scout, Orthodox Church.

Sheikha Hanouf, as guest of honor, in her taped speech highlighted loyalty and appreciation to the souls of martyrs who sacrificed their lives for Kuwait. Sheikha Hanouf also praised the efforts of the international community for their support during the liberation of the State of Kuwait, adding that Kuwait is forever grateful to the allied forces for their continued support to bring peace and stability to the region. She reiterated that the occasion is also an opportunity to commemorate women martyrs and recognize their invaluable role in the liberation of Kuwait and their sacrifice for the sake of peace and prosperity for future generations.

Sheikha Hanouf offered condolences to the families who have lost a loved one during the COVID-19 pandemic and extended well wishes to those in recovery and called on Allah for an end to this universal pandemic. She praised highly the commitment of the IWG board to adhering to the required health measures imposed by the Kuwaiti government and thanked all volunteers and various service men and women in Kuwait who fight on the front lines of this pandemic. She also thanked the IWG for service to the community and bringing awareness to the special attributes of Kuwait's society and cultural activities. Sheikha Hanouf concluded her speech by stressing that Kuwait will always be an oasis for humani-



Sheikha Hanouf Bader Al-Muhamad Al-Sabah

ty and prosperity and will continue to be the land of peace and friendship.

Dr Bassam Al Fali, founder and director general of Orbital Space and Director of Innovation and Enterprises Directorate at KFAS, delivered his address and described the efforts and achievements of his team with the international space program. Omar Kammourieh, one the students on this team, gave details of the project which entailed sending bacteria into space to be used in an experiment on how to reduce the effect of carbon dioxide on our planet. Professor Leila Vali also gave an enlightening presentation on Kuwait's participation in the space program and praised Omar and Mahlak Abdulla, the two students involved.

The event continued with a Kuwaiti folkloric dance performance by Braisa Al Roumi. The British School of Kuwait's orchestra La Camarata, the winners of the 2019 Bahrain music championship for the Gulf, performed "Watan Al Nahar", the patriotic symphony that was created during the Iraqi invasion. The BSK Camarata orchestra gave the auspicious occasion the grandeur it well deserved.

Qamar Al-Momin, a young Kuwaiti woman poet delivered a sonnet on women empowerment. And a gastronomic experience was enjoyed by watching chef Sadeqa Esmail from Dar Hamad restaurant present a step by step method to making a national Kuwaiti dish. The event concluded with special thanks to the distinguished guests, volunteers, board members and the event Al-Wazzan Hectar crisps company and the online participants and board members for making this event a great success.



'Nobody is safe anymore':
Afghans in shock after
media workers killed

Pandemic propels poor Mexican school students into digital age

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YANGON: A protester uses a fire extinguisher as others holding homemade shields run during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon yesterday. —AFP

Ten dead as Myanmar forces fire at protesters

Multiple rallies across the country descend into chaos

YANGON: At least 10 people were killed when Myanmar security forces fired on pro-democracy protesters yesterday as multiple rallies across the country descended into chaos.

Myanmar has been in uproar since February 1 when the military launched a coup and detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, ending the nation's decade-long experiment with democracy and sparking daily mass protests. International pressure is mounting—Western powers have repeatedly hit the generals with sanctions—and Britain has called for a United Nations Security Council meeting on Friday.

But the junta has ignored the global condemnation, responding to the uprising with escalating strength, and security services used lethal force on demonstrators again yesterday.

The military has also hit half a dozen detained journalists with criminal charges that could see them spend up to three years in jail if convicted. Three cities in central Myanmar saw bloody crackdowns on protesters by security forces yesterday, with Monywa in the Sagaing region registering the highest number of deaths with at least seven. "What we can confirm is seven people have died," said an emergency doctor, who declined to provide his name.

Multiple medics also said they saw two other individuals being dragged away by security forces, though they could not get close enough to confirm if they had died.

In neighboring Mandalay, Myanmar's second largest city, two demonstrators were killed, a doctor confirmed to AFP, adding that one of the victims was 19 years old and was shot in the head. And a protest in Myingyan turned deadly when security forces deployed tear gas, rubber bullets and live rounds against protesters carrying red home-made shields emblazoned with the three-finger salute—a symbol of resistance for the anti-coup movement.

Several medics confirmed a young man was gunned down. "Zin Ko Ko Zaw, a 20-year-old, was shot dead on the spot," a rescue team member told AFP, adding that his team had treated 17 people from the protest.

'Democracy is our cause'

Local media in northern Kachin state also reported similar scenes of violence, publishing images of police bearing down on protesters in Hpakant. "Some were hit with rubber bullets and some were suffocating because of tear gas," a doctor said, adding his private hospital treated 10 injured.

Two critically wounded people—one struck in the chest, the other in the neck—had to be driven to the state capital's hospital about four hours away. Parts of commercial hub Yangon were transformed, with protesters using makeshift tires and barbed wire barricades to block major roads.

Near the famed Sule pagoda intersection, protesters pasted print-outs of junta leader Min Aung Hlaing's face on the ground—a tactic aimed at slowing down security forces who will avoid standing on the portraits. In San Chaung township, which has been the site of intense clashes in recent days, tear gas and fire extinguisher clouds filled the streets as riot police confronted protesters, while a clash in Yangon's outskirts left at least 19 people injured.

"Some got hit with rubber bullets," an official told AFP. "We had to transfer one man to hospital for an operation because a rubber bullet hit his head." Sunday remains the bloodiest day since the military takeover, with the UN saying at least 18 protesters were killed across the country.

In Dawei Wednesday, one of four gunshot victims from Sunday was cremated. Mourners held floral wreaths and portraits of Lwin Lwin Oo, 33, as coffin bearers were flanked by hundreds chanting: "We are united, yes we are... Democracy is our cause."

Journalists charged

Yesterday's violence came on the heels of news that six Myanmar journalists would be charged under a law prohibiting "causing fear, spreading false news, or agitating directly or indirectly a government employee", according to their lawyer Tin Zar Oo. Among them is Associated Press photographer Thein Zaw, who was arrested Saturday as he covered an anti-coup demonstration in Yangon, while the other five are from Myanmar Now, Myanmar Photo Agency, 7Day News, Zee Kwet Online news and a freelancer. The maximum sentence for the offence has been increased from two years to three, following amendments made by the junta last month after it took power.

According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) monitoring group, more than 1,200 people have been arrested since the coup, with about 900 still behind bars or facing charges. But the real number is likely far higher—state-run media reported more than 1,300 people were arrested on Sunday alone. On Tuesday, media reported that about 500 have been freed in Yangon.

Some of Myanmar's regional neighbors have condemned the coup, with Singapore's premier Lee Hsien Loong this week saying the country's return to military rule was "an enormous tragic step". —AFP



BAGHDAD: A giant billboard bears portraits of Pope Francis and Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Baghdad yesterday ahead of the first-ever papal visit to Iraq. —AFP

In Iraq, Pope reaches out to top Shiite cleric

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis, on a historic trip to Iraq, will on Saturday hold a hugely symbolic meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, seeking to deepen his cautious dialogue with Muslim leaders. The 84-year-old pope will visit the top Shiite cleric at his home in Najaf. Sistani, 90, is never seen in public and rarely accepts visitors, but the Argentine pontiff, always happiest among the faithful, favors direct encounters.

Francis has long hailed the power of inter-religious dialogue, symbols of peace and tolerance, without dwelling on the theological subtleties advanced by his predecessor, Benedict XVI, who resigned as pope eight years ago, provoked years of

cool relations with the Muslim world when in 2006 he quoted criticisms of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) by a 14th-century Byzantine Christian emperor.

Two years ago in Abu Dhabi, Francis and leading Sunni cleric Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb, the grand imam of Al-Azhar, signed a document on "human fraternity for world peace". They made a joint call for freedom of belief, although what stands out from that trip — the first by a pope to the Arabian Peninsula — was the image of the leader of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics embracing a Sunni imam.

"It's certainly an unprecedented event and a big deal," said Marsin Alshamary, a researcher at the Brookings Institution. She said the Najaf school of thinking on Islam became involved in inter-religious dialogue in the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the bloody civil war between Shiites and Sunnis. Sistani has repeatedly stated that Muslims are forbidden from killing others. In 2014, however, as the Islamic State group approached Baghdad, he called on Iraqis to take up arms to drive the jihadists out. — AFP

One dead in rocket attack on Iraq base hosting US troops

BAGHDAD: At least 10 rockets slammed into a military base in western Iraq hosting US-led coalition troops yesterday, security sources said, leaving one civilian contractor dead.

The attack on the sprawling Ain Al-Assad base in Iraq's western desert comes after several weeks of escalating US-Iran tensions on Iraqi soil. It also comes just two days before the first-ever papal visit to the country by Pope Francis, who said he would still make the visit so as not to "disappoint" the Iraqi people. Ain Al-Assad hosts both Iraqi forces and US-led coalition troops helping fight the Islamic State group, as well as the unmanned drones the coalition uses to surveil jihadist sleeper cells.

Coalition spokesman Colonel Wayne Marotto confirmed that 10 rockets hit the base at 7:20 am (0420 GMT) while Iraqi security forces said they had found the platform from which 10 "Grad-type rockets" hit the Ain al-Assad base.

Western security sources told AFP the rockets were Iranian-made Arash models, which are 122mm artillery rockets and heavier than those seen in similar attacks. "One civilian contractor died of a heart attack during the attack," a high-level security source told AFP, adding that he could not confirm the contractor's nationality. The death marks the third fatality in rocket attacks in recent weeks, after rockets targeting US-led troops in the Kurdish regional capital of Arbil left two people dead.

Days later, more rockets hit a US military contracting company working north of the capital and the US embassy in Baghdad, but only injuries were reported. In response, the US carried out an air strike on February 26 against Kataeb Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Iraqi paramilitary force stationed along the Iraqi-Syrian border. Washington says it struck on the Syrian side of the border but Kataeb claims one of its fighters who was killed in the bombardment was protecting "Iraqi territo-

ry". Analysts have pointed to both domestic and international reasons for the sudden rise in tensions. Hardline Iraqi groups have an interest in ramping up the pressure on Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi following his pledges to rein in rogue militias.

They may also carry a message from Tehran to Washington, which under US President Joe Biden is offering to revive the Iran nuclear deal abandoned by his predecessor Donald Trump in 2018. Iran is demanding the US lift sanctions immediately, while the US wants Iran to move first by returning to previous nuclear commitments. Tensions between the two rivals peaked in January 2020, following a US drone strike on Baghdad airport that killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and top Iraqi paramilitary commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis. — AFP

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International

Pandemic propels poor Mexican school students into digital age

Around 30 million students not physically attending schools in Mexico

SANTA MARIA CHIMALHUACAN, Mexico: The coronavirus pandemic closed their school, but it also thrust a group of disadvantaged Mexican children living next to a giant garbage dump into the digital world. A project teaching the students how to use computers and the internet has given them hope of a life far from the trash mountain where their parents work recycling waste. Miguel Tejeda had never used a computer before COVID-19 arrived, because there were no machines in the 14-year-old's school in Chimalhuacan, located in the urban sprawl surrounding the capital.

But for the past six months, he and 200 other students aged between five and 21 have learned basic IT skills helped by a Mexican non-governmental organization, using old computers donated by a religious association. "Learning is much easier with the computers. We have a much better understanding of subjects," Tejeda said, wearing a mask and face shield. In a makeshift classroom in an unfinished house, an NGO called Utopia teaches the students reading, writing and math, as well as how to send files in the PDF format. The fetid smell of garbage wafts over from the nearby dump.

'Lose life plan'

Mexico, a country of 126 million people, has registered more than 186,000 known coronavirus deaths—the world's third-highest toll. After schools shut, the NGO added digital skills to its educational plan so that the students in the disadvantaged community could continue their studies remotely. Before the crisis struck, "for us it was more important to teach them to read than to use Word," said the NGO's founder, Jesus Villalobos. The impoverished community is located in one of the most populated and violent municipalities in the country. The dusty district of Corte Escalerillas, home to around 5,000 people working mainly to collect and separate 12,000 tons of garbage a day, has had public lighting and water supplies for barely a year.

Harassed by aggressive dogs, some children help their parents, scavenging for waste that can be recycled. If they stop studying, "the first thing they do is go collect garbage with a donkey, and there, among the trash,



MEXICO: Children attend a computer science class at the Escalerillas neighborhood in Chimalhuacan, Mexico. — AFP

they lose their life plan," said the NGO's coordinator, Yahir Ruiz. "Sometimes the first contact of these children with a computer is at 15 or 16 years old because the schools were not equipped," Ruiz added.

'Everything became easy'

Around 30 million students in Mexico are not physically going to school because of the pandemic, which prompted the government to start distance learning via television or the internet.

According to UNESCO, around a quarter of Mexican students between the ages of seven and 17 have no internet access and 4.4 percent have no television. High school student Norma Hernandez does not have a computer at home and can only get two channels

on her television because of the limited signal. Her mother recently had the internet installed so her brother could study online using his cellphone. "But the signal is so bad here that sometimes it's impossible to connect," the 13-year-old said.

The Mexican government has indicated that schools will reopen only when the risk of infection has dropped sufficiently. In the meantime, 17-year-old Armando Alvarado says he is no longer daunted by using a computer. "The first time, when they started teaching me here about computing, I was scared, that I was going to have to take it to pieces or something like that," said Alvarado, who learned to read at the age of 12 with help from the NGO. "When they began to teach me everything became easy," he said. — AFP

Tigrayans recount massacre by Eritrean troops

DENGOLAT, Ethiopia: It was well before noon, yet Beyenesh Tekleyohannes's house had already been buzzing for hours: more than 30 guests were singing, praying and sharing plates of shiro stew and lentils in honor of a major Orthodox Christian holiday.

The atmosphere on that November day was so lively that no one noticed the Eritrean troops approaching on foot down the winding dirt road into Dengolat, a village in northern Ethiopia's Tigray region, until it was too late. Wearing military uniforms and speaking in an Eritrean dialect of the Tigrinya language, the soldiers forced all the guests inside, yanked out the men and boys and marched them to a sun-scorched patch of earth down the hill. Beyenesh heard the first gunshots as she fled in the opposite direction to safety, and immediately feared the worst for her male loved ones down below: her husband, two adult sons and two nephews.

When she emerged from hiding three days later, Beyenesh discovered all five had perished in the massacre. The soldiers had tied their hands with belts and ropes and shot them in the head. "I'd rather die than have lived to see this," Beyenesh said, tears rolling down her face as she described how the annual festival of Saint Mary turned into a bloodbath.

Local church officials say 164 civilians were killed in Dengolat, with most of the deaths occurring on November 30, one day after the festival. That makes it one of the worst known atrocities in the ongoing conflict in Tigray. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government has tightly restricted humanitarian and media access to the region, and for nearly three months Dengolat residents despaired of sharing their story with the world.

AFP reached Dengolat last week, interviewing survivors and viewing mass graves that now dot the village, a collection of stone houses surrounded by Tigray's signature steep rock escarpments.

Human rights groups fear that instead of an extreme example of the violence in Tigray, what happened in Dengolat could turn out to be disturbingly typical. "There are so many spots of violence and massacres in Tigray. The full scale is yet to be known," said Fisseha Tekle, Ethiopia researcher for Amnesty International.

"That's why we are asking for a UN-led investigation. The details of the atrocities need to come out, and accountability should follow." So far only Addis Ababa has said it is probing "alleged crimes" in the region.



MEKELE: Women mourn the victims of a massacre allegedly perpetrated by Eritrean soldiers in the village of Dengolat, North of Mekele, the capital of Tigray. — AFP

No mistaking Eritreans

Abiy—who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 — announced military operations in Tigray four weeks before the festival, saying they came in response to attacks by Tigray's longtime ruling party on federal army camps. The powerful Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) dominated Ethiopian politics for decades, and tensions had soared with Abiy after he took office in 2018 and was accused of sidelining the party. As the war drags on and reports of atrocities mount, soldiers from neighboring Eritrea, widely reported to be backing up Ethiopian troops, are often fingered as culprits.

Addis Ababa and Asmara deny Eritrea's military is present in Tigray at all. Last week Amnesty published a report detailing how Eritrean troops "systematically killed hundreds of unarmed civilians" in the Tigrayan city of Axum, also in November 2020. Tigrayans in both places have said there was no mistaking the nationality of the perpetrators: In addition to their accents, they cited facial scars specific to Eritrea's Ben Amir ethnic group. Dengolat survivor Tamrat Kidanu, 66, said he was walking to his maize fields the morning the Eritreans arrived, and was shot in the right thigh.

Unable to move, he lay on the ground and listened as the soldiers mowed down other men, including his recently married 26-year-old son. Two decades ago, when the TPLF dominated the central government, Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a brutal border war that left tens of thousands dead. Many Tigrayans including Tamrat see Eritrean soldiers' present-day conduct as a form of revenge. "This kind of crime is to exterminate us, to humiliate us," Tamrat said from his hospital bed in the regional capital Mekele, where he is unable to sit up without the aid of a rope.

Church under fire

As Eritrean soldiers fired on men in the center of Dengolat, hundreds of other civilians covered in terror in a centuries-old Orthodox church up in the mountains.

The soldiers soon warned, though, that the church would be shelled if the men didn't walk out and surrender. Some tried to flee higher into the mountains, but Eritrean soldiers shot them dead before they could get very far. Gebremariam, 30, who requested his name be changed for fear of reprisals, was among the few who turned himself over to the Eritreans.

He was tasked with helping to bury the dead, transporting the bodies—their heads blasted open by bullets—on a makeshift stretcher to mass grave sites. Standing before one of the sites, situated behind a cluster of cacti, Gebremariam scoffed at officials' claims that the conflict has involved minimal civilian harm. "What you see in front of you proves that is a lie," he said. — AFP



PARIS: Leader of French leftist La France Insoumise (LFI) parliamentary group Jean-Luc Melenchon (left) and LFI Member of Parliament Clementine Autain (right) read a publication of French daily Liberation with a front page pertaining to the conviction on corruption charges of former French president Nicolas Sarkozy during a session of questions to the Government at the French National Assembly in Paris on Tuesday. — AFP

Defiant Sarkozy on offensive after conviction

PARIS: France's former right-wing president Nicolas Sarkozy yesterday launched a defiant offensive to clear his name after being handed a three-year sentence for corruption, lambasting the verdict and mulling a petition to Europe's top rights court.

Sarkozy, 66, gave a front-page interview to the newspaper Le Figaro and was due later yesterday to give a prime-time interview to the evening TF1 news bulletin. With three other legal cases also pending against him, commentators have said Monday's conviction should deal a terminal blow to any hope Sarkozy has of a political comeback. But true to his combative reputation, the man who ruled France from 2007-2012 as a self-styled "hyper-president" indicated that he would not be going quietly. "I can't accept being convicted for something I didn't do," Sarkozy told Le Figaro. Sarkozy, who will appeal, is not expected to go behind bars: the sentence includes two years suspended and the remaining year would be served at home with an electronic bracelet. The judgment was "riddled with inconsistencies", Sarkozy told Le Figaro. It "doesn't provide any proof, but just a bunch of circumstantial evidence", he said.

'Painful for me'

The court found that Sarkozy had formed a "corruption pact" with his former lawyer and friend Thierry Herzog to convince a judge, Gilbert Azibert, to obtain and share information about a legal investigation. The crime was "particularly serious having been committed by a former president who was the guarantor of the independence of the judiciary", Monday's judgment said.

"Perhaps it will be necessary to take this battle to the (Strasbourg-based) European Court of Human Rights," Sarkozy said. "It would be painful for me to have my own country condemned, but I am ready because that would be the price of democracy."

The judgment is also far from marking the end of Sarkozy's legal woes and on March 17, the ex-president is scheduled to face a second trial over accusations of fraudulently overspending in his failed 2012 re-election bid. In a strongly-worded editorial, the newspaper Le Monde urged Sarkozy to put an end to his confrontation with the French legal system and stop whipping up the anger of his supporters towards judges. "Today, he is reaping what he has sowed and must consider the advisability of continuing this populist excess, which has not only become a trap for him but a risk for the country," it said. — AFP

News in brief

Explosive goes off in Netherlands

THE HAGUE: An explosion occurred yesterday near a COVID-19 test center in the Netherlands, shattering windows but causing no apparent injuries, police said. "Near the local health service's testing center in Bovenkarspel, an explosive went off at 6:55 am. Police are investigating. The perimeter has been sealed off," the police said in a statement. A bomb squad was sent to determine whether any explosive material remained at the scene, public television network NOS reported. In January a COVID testing center was set on fire in the Dutch village of Urk as protests broke out over the start of an overnight curfew in the Netherlands introduced as part of measures intended to rein in the virus. — AFP

Transgender to join Miss Panama

PANAMA: The Miss Panama organization announced that starting this year, the pageant would include transgender women "who have completed all their legal and medical procedures" in its competition. The contest, which is responsible for choosing the country's representative for the Miss Universe pageant, said the decision was made "after plenty of conversations and in line with the rules of the Miss Universe organization." Miss Panama "will permit women officially legally recognized in the country," which will "open the door to transgender women who have completed all of their legal and medical procedures," the organization said. — AFP

Colombia military attack FARC

BOGOTA: A military bombing killed 10 guerrillas and injured three at a base of dissidents of the former FARC rebel group in southeast Colombia, official sources said Tuesday. Defense Minister Diego Molano said on Twitter the military action "neutralized" 13 FARC dissidents under the command of a man who goes by the alias "Gentil Duarte." These dissidents have distanced themselves from Colombia's 2016 peace pact, which ended a half-century civil war and saw the FARC disarm the following year. Molano did not say when the assault happened. A source told AFP 10 died and three were wounded. The bombing was conducted in the municipal area of Calamar in the jungle of southeastern Colombia, where former FARC dissidents still operate. — AFP

Slovakia imposes overnight curfew

BRATISLAVA, Slovakia: Slovakia imposed an overnight curfew from yesterday, the health ministry said, as the ex-communist country battles the world's highest Covid mortality rate. Slovaks will not be allowed out of their homes between 8:00 pm and 5:00 am, according to a government decree. During the day, Slovaks are being asked to stay in their homes with some exceptions, including medical visits, going to work and walks in nature or with pets. The curfew applies until March 19 but may be extended. The EU country of 5.4 million has the world's highest rate of COVID deaths, with 24 fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants over the last 14 days, according to a tally. — AFP

Four media workers freed after being held in Ethiopia

ADDIS ABABA: Four media workers recently arrested in Ethiopia's conflict-hit Tigray region were freed yesterday, said a translator working for AFP who was part of the group held. "They let us out today. They didn't say anything about why they let us go. But they said they have decided to free us," said the translator, Fitsum Berhane. Fitsum and Alula Akalu, a translator working for Britain's Financial Times newspaper, were arrested Saturday after three days of reporting on the conflict in Tigray.

The other two detainees were BBC journalist Girmay Gebru and Temrat Yemane, a local journalist. Officials have not given any reason for the arrests and did not immediately respond to requests for comment yesterday about the decision to free the men. Both AFP and the Financial Times had obtained permission from the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority and the Ministry of Peace to work in Tigray, where media access has been tightly restricted since hostilities began in November.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner, has said the military campaign is targeting leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the region's longtime ruling party. But while Abiy said in late November that military operations were "completed" after federal troops entered the regional capital Mekele, top TPLF officials remain on the run and fighting has continued. Meanwhile global concern is mounting amid reports of atrocities against civilians and fears of a spiraling humanitarian catastrophe. The United States voiced concern Tuesday over the arrests of the four media workers, saying the move was inconsistent with the government's commitment to allow international press to operate in Tigray. — AFP

International

'Nobody is safe anymore': Afghans in shock after media workers killed

Journalists, activists and judges ambushed by insurgents as violence unabated

JALALABAD, Afghanistan: Outrage rippled through Afghanistan yesterday as funerals were held for three female media workers gunned down in the eastern city of Jalalabad, with insurgent violence increasing as peace talks stall. Journalists, activists and judges have recently been ambushed by gunmen or killed by explosives attached to their vehicles as surging violence forces many into hiding—with some leaving Afghanistan.

The killings have escalated since peace talks began last year between the Afghan government and the Taliban, sparking fears that the insurgents are eliminating perceived opponents as negotiations stall. The three women were shot and killed in two separate attacks just ten minutes apart after they left the Enikass TV station on Tuesday in what one colleague described as an orchestrated hit.

An Islamic State affiliate later claimed responsibility for the murders, saying its gunmen carried out the killings of what it called "journalists working for one of the media stations loyal to the apostate Afghan government". Friends and family gathered at the women's funerals in Jalalabad where men took turns digging fresh graves with a shovel as others pleaded for an end to the deaths.

Rohan Sadat described his sister Sadia Sadat as "shy but active" who was also passionate about fighting for women's rights and had planned to attend university and study law.

"We have buried her with all her hopes here," Sadat said. Another colleague at Enikass TV who spoke on the condition of anonymity said the station was reeling from the murders, saying the three vic-

tims were like "family".

"Three innocent girls were shot dead in the daylight in the middle of the city. Nobody is safe anymore," said the colleague. In December, another female employee working for Enikass TV was murdered in Jalalabad in similar circumstances.

'Fear and terrorism'

Anger also simmered online with social media users lashing out over the latest killings. "It seems this war is not for Islam, it is just for power through spreading fear and terrorism," wrote Ghani Khan.

"These girls were working to help their families. They were not [at] war with the Taliban. They were poor, they just worked to feed their family," said Rauf Afghan. Afghanistan has long been ranked as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists.

At least nine media workers have been killed since peace talks with the Taliban started in September, according to the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee. US officials have blamed the Taliban for the wave of violence, while the Kabul government said the insurgents routinely hide behind Islamic State claims to cover their tracks. The Taliban has denied the charges.

The assassinations have been acutely felt by women, whose rights were crushed under the Taliban's five-year rule, including being banned from working. Intelligence officials have previously linked the renewed threat against female professionals to demands at the peace talks for their rights to be protected. Many of the targeted hits are believed to take



JALALABAD, Afghanistan: Relatives and mourners perform funeral prayers over the coffin of one of the three female media workers shot to death in two separate attacks in Jalalabad yesterday. — AFP

months of careful planning—to catch officials off guard—and are increasingly more sophisticated than the formerly favored suicide bomb used by jihadists. The killings come as the US special envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad returned to Kabul this week for meetings with Afghan leaders, in a bid to

revive a flagging peace process as violence soars across the country and a deadline for US troop withdrawal draws closer. Donald Trump's administration, eager to end America's longest war, tasked Khalilzad with negotiating with the Taliban, culminating in a deal signed in Qatar on February 29 last year. — AFP

Africa virus fight boosted as jabs reach Nigeria, Angola

ABUJA, Nigeria: Millions of coronavirus shots from the global Covax scheme have arrived in Nigeria, Angola and Kenya, as African countries ramp up their vaccine rollouts. Richer countries have surged ahead with vaccinations but many poorer countries are still awaiting deliveries, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to warn that the crisis cannot end unless everyone can inoculate their populations. The Covax facility, run by the WHO along with health NGOs, is aiming to supply vaccines to dozens of countries in the first 100 days of 2021, and two billion doses by the end of the year. While the continent's most populous country Nigeria received almost four million jabs on Tuesday, Angola received more than 600,000 doses and DR Congo was scheduled to get a consignment later, following recent deliveries to Ghana and Ivory Coast.

Kenya received its first shipment of just over one million Covax-funded AstraZeneca/Oxford shots yesterday. However, there are still critical hurdles for the scheme's rollout in vast African

countries with sketchy infrastructure and an array of security challenges—a point addressed by Faisal Shuaib, director of Nigeria's primary health-care agency. "States without a functional airport will have their vaccines transported by road using vans with fitted cold cabins, from the nearest airport," he said. He called the delivery—which arrived around noon in the capital Abuja—a "good day for Nigeria" and promised the rollout would begin in earnest on Friday with frontline health workers the first to be inoculated.

Nigerian official Boss Mustapha urged traditional rulers, religious leaders, civil society groups and the media to spread the message that vaccinations were needed, adding: "This is a fight for everyone." In Angola, where some healthcare workers were vaccinated shortly after the doses were offloaded, the WHO's Djamilia Cabral said the arrival of vaccines brought a "stronger hope to save lives", but warned that everyone needed to continue respecting COVID restrictions to beat the pandemic.



ABUJA: The first batch of Oxford/AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine doses are offloaded from a plane during its arrival at the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, in Abuja. — AFP

70 percent goal

The almost four million AstraZeneca/Oxford doses received by Nigeria, made by the Serum Institute of India, are the first of 16 million shots that Covax plans to deliver over the coming months to the country of 200 million. The government said it hoped to vaccinate at least 70 percent of its adult population over the next two years and health officials said more than two million people had already registered for the jab online. "As the vaccines arrive in batches due

to limited supply we will inform Nigerians about who and where to receive the vaccine," Shuaib told reporters.

Nigeria has recorded 1,915 deaths from 156,017 cases since the start of the pandemic and Angola 508 deaths from 20,854 cases—though official figures in most countries are considered to be underestimates. A new virus variant has also been discovered in Nigeria, but researchers have not yet determined if it is more contagious or deadly than the original strain. — AFP

Uighur author tells of imprisonment and China attacks

PARIS: Gulbahar Haitiwaji knew that China would not be happy about her book describing nearly three years of imprisonment, brainwashing and harassment at the hands of the authorities simply because she is Uighur. But the ferocity with which Beijing has lashed out at the 54-year-old author exceeded her worst expectations. Branded "a terrorist," "a separatist" and "a liar" after publishing her book "Survivor of the Chinese Gulag" in France, Haitiwaji told AFP she was surprised that nothing seemed off-limits—even her personal life, which Chinese officials called "chaotic".

The book, co-written with French journalist Rozenn Morgat and currently being translated into English, tells the story of her detention in her home region of Xinjiang, in northwestern China.

Haitiwaji had been living in France for a decade when her former employer, a Chinese oil company, asked her in November 2016 to return home to deal with some formalities it said were linked to her pension rights. Her husband had come to France first, as a political refugee to escape ethnic discrimination. Haitiwaji joined him four years later. She kept her

Chinese passport to at times return home for holidays, and did not feel like a political refugee because she had "no interest in political work".

'Only the truth'

She was suspicious of the call from the oil company but still decided to go, planning to stay for two weeks. She did not return for nearly three years. Quickly deprived of her passport on arrival, she went through a series of traumatizing experiences, including prison, a re-education camp, interrogations, indoctrinations lasting 11 hours per day, and punishment from unforgiving guards for any "mistake" made. Chained by the ankles, she suffered from hunger and fear, and was forced to sit through a mock trial at which she was sentenced to seven years of "re-education". She was also forced to sign fake confessions which she says Beijing is now using as proof that she is lying about the whole experience.

"I've been telling only the truth," she said. "I expected China to deny everything, which is why I gave the context of the confessions in the book—how they made me repeat the same things day in and day out. I just wanted to get out of there and anybody else would have done the same."

After initially denying the existence of the Xinjiang camps, China later defended them as vocational training centers aimed at reducing the appeal of Islamic extremism. Beijing insisted last week that its treatment of ethnic minorities there

times violent protests against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government.

They were both detained under Bangladesh's Digital Security Act (DSA), which rights groups say is being used to silence and intimidate critics of the government in the country of 168 million people. Yesterday the High Court—after multiple refusals from lower courts—granted Kishore bail for six months "considering his long detention", deputy attorney general Md. Sarwar Hossain Bappi told AFP.

Kishore's brother Ahsan Kabir alleged that the cartoonist had been tortured in police custody, and had an eardrum infection and an injured leg. "His diabetes has worsened in custody... We fear for his life. We fear his injured left leg could get gangrene and may have to be cut off," Kabir said. Nearly 500 people protested yesterday, calling for justice for Ahmed and the scrapping of the digital laws, which have triggered concern from the United States, the



This photograph in Paris shows the book "Rescapée du Goulag Chinois" (Survivor of the Chinese Gulag), written by Gulbahar Haitiwaji. — AFP

and in Tibet "stood out as shining examples of China's human rights progress". But why, said Haitiwaji, would China need to "train" a university graduate living in France? — AFP

European Union and the United Nations.

They held a rally in front of the National Press Club and then marched towards Hasina's office, before police halted them in central Dhaka. On Monday, opposition activists clashed with police, leaving dozens injured as officers fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the protesters, who threw rocks. More than a dozen protesters, including a labor leader, were detained. Citing data from Bangladesh's Cyber Crime Tribunal, Amnesty International says nearly 2,000 cases have been filed under the DSA, with journalists particular targets. UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet on Monday urged Bangladesh to ensure a transparent probe into Ahmed's death. She also called on Dhaka to "conduct a review of the Digital Security Act...; suspend its application; and release all those detained under it for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and opinion". — AFP

Bail hearing for HK dissidents enters 3rd day

HONG KONG: A marathon bail hearing entered its third day as dozens of Hong Kong democracy activists returned to court yesterday in a mass subversion prosecution that has reignited international concern over Beijing's crackdown on dissent. Police arrested 47 of the city's best-known dissidents on Sunday for "conspiracy to commit subversion" in the broadest use yet of a sweeping national security law that Beijing imposed on the city last year.

The defendants represent a broad cross-section of Hong Kong's opposition, from veteran former pro-democracy lawmakers to academics, lawyers, social workers and youth activists. Beijing has moved to quash dissent in the semi-autonomous city after huge and sometimes violent pro-democracy demonstrations in 2019. With so many arrested at once, Hong Kong's judiciary has struggled to deal with the sheer caseload as well as the legal vagaries of the broadly worded security law, which removes the presumption of bail for non-violent crimes.

Under the new security law—which Beijing imposed directly on the city last June—defendants may only be granted bail if they can persuade a court they no longer pose any kind of national security risk. All those charged with a national security crime so far have been held on remand, despite agreeing to restrictive measures such as house arrest and making no public statements.

Prosecutors have asked the court to remand the group into custody for the next three months to allow police time to continue to build their case against them. Lawyers for each defendant have spent the last two days pushing for bail, arguing late into the night. "I don't believe our courts in recent times have had to deal with so many contested bail cases at once," Simon Young, an expert on the city's legal system at the University of Hong Kong, told AFP. "I think what has happened is most unsatisfactory in terms of both the treatment of the defendants and the efficiency of the process," he added.

'Most subversion charges since Tiananmen'

The alleged offence for the 47 facing subversion charges was organizing an unofficial primary election last summer to choose candidates for the city's legislature, in the hopes that the pro-democracy bloc might take a majority and stymie government legislation. Chinese and Hong Kong officials said this was an attempt to "overthrow" the city's government, and therefore a threat to national security. The first day's hearing only ended in the small hours of the morning when one of the defendants collapsed from exhaustion. She and three other defendants—including one with heart disease—had to be taken to hospital.

During Tuesday's hearing, lawyers and the defendants themselves complained they had barely had any sleep since the arrests on Sunday and had been unable to wash or change their clothes. The group were back in the dock yesterday to hear arguments for the legal teams of the last eight defendants that have yet to present their case. Experts say the case is China's largest subversion prosecution in decades, made possible by the recent expansion of mainland-style national security laws into Hong Kong. — AFP

Bangladesh cartoonist granted bail

DHAKA, Bangladesh: A prominent Bangladeshi cartoonist was granted bail yesterday as several hundred people staged more protests over the death of a fellow government critic also arrested under the country's harsh internet laws. Ahmed Kabir Kishore, 42, was detained in May after he drew cartoons mocking a powerful businessman close to the government and has since developed major health problems, activists said. Last week writer Mushtaq Ahmed, who was arrested together with Kishore, died in prison, sparking days of some-

Business

THURSDAY, MARCH 4, 2021

Britain slashes 2021 growth in pandemic-fighting budget

Tax on company profits will go up to 25% in 2023: Sunak

LONDON: Britain yesterday sharply cut the growth forecast of its virus-ravaged economy, warning the pandemic was still causing "profound damage" in an annual budget centered on safeguarding businesses and jobs. Finance minister Rishi Sunak said the economy would expand by 4.0 percent this year, down from the Conservative government's previous estimate of 5.5 percent growth but still better than the double-digit contraction of 2020.

Sunak warned parliament that the "coronavirus has done and is still doing profound damage".

"Our economy has shrunk by 10 percent—the largest fall in over 300 years," he said. "Our borrowing is the highest it has been outside of wartime." Sunak said tax on company profits would be hiked to 25 percent in 2023 from 19 percent currently. It comes as the state's emergency support package totals £407 billion (\$568 billion, 471 billion euros), resulting in surging government debt. Britain is the worst-hit country in Europe with more than

120,000 COVID deaths and four million cases.

But its economic recovery hopes have been boosted by its rapid vaccination program that has seen millions of adults receive a jab.

'We will recover'

England's third lockdown will start to be lifted from Monday, with the reopening of schools, followed by non-essential shops and hospitality in the coming months. "It's going to take this country—and the whole world—a long time to recover from this extraordinary economic situation. But we will recover," Sunak said. He said gross domestic product was expected to expand by 7.3 percent next year, which marked an upgrade from the prior guidance of 6.6 percent.

Sunak said that even after tax on company profits is hiked significantly, "the UK will still have the lowest corporation tax rate in the G7 bloc of wealthy nations. "Lower than the United States,

Canada, Italy, Japan, Germany and France," he insisted.

Furlough scheme

On the eve of the budget, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that it would extend its furlough scheme paying the bulk of wages for millions of private-sector workers. The multi-billion-pound furlough extension is until the end of September, five months longer than planned.

The budget also confirmed the launch of an Infrastructure Bank with £12 billion in capital.

The lender will be formed to finance projects in the green economy, focusing on areas such as carbon capture and renewable energy. The economy tanked in 2020 because of the impact of the pandemic, with activity also hampered by turmoil ahead of Britain's eventual exit from the European Union.

Reflecting the problems, UK unemployment has shot up to a five-year high of 5.1 percent. —AFP



LONDON: Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak poses with the Budget Box as he leaves 11 Downing Street before presenting the government's annual budget to Parliament in London yesterday. —AFP

PSA, Fiat Chrysler in black despite plunge in sales

PARIS: US-Italian automaker Fiat Chrysler and France's PSA, now merged in the Stellantis group, both managed to chalk up a 2020 profit despite falling sales due to the coronavirus pandemic, company results showed yesterday. The two automakers, which completed their merger in January, bring together marques such as Peugeot, Citroen, Fiat, Chrysler, Jeep, Alfa Romeo and Maserati.

Fiat Chrysler (FCA) eked out a net profit of just 24 million euros (\$29 million) last year, according to a Stellantis statement, holding up against multiple virus lockdowns which devastated the economy.

In 2019, Fiat Chrysler posted a net profit of 2.7 billion euros. For the fourth quarter of 2020, the company said net profit was 1.56 billion euros, down just one percent compared with the same period a year earlier as the industry picked up after virus restrictions were eased.

Sales however plunged 20 percent to 86.7 billion euros for the year, with volume down 22 percent to 3.43 million vehicles, reflecting the damage caused earlier in the first wave of the pandemic.

PSA meanwhile had a 2020 consolidated net income of 2.0 billion euros, according to Netherlands-based Stellantis. PSA revenues plunged to 60.7 billion euros, from 74 billion euros in 2019, with volumes slumping nearly 28 percent to 2.5 million vehicles, Stellantis said.

It said that despite the problems caused by Covid-19, both parts of the group had managed to keep prices steady, producing a profit margin of 4.3 percent at FCA and 6.1 percent at PSA.

"These figures demonstrate the financial soundness of Stellantis, bringing together two strong and healthy companies," group boss Carlos Tavares said. "Stellantis gets off to a flying start and is fully focused on achieving the full promised synergies" of the merger, estimated at five million euros a year, said Tavares, who previously headed up PSA.

The new company is targeting an operating profit margin of between 5.5 and 7.5 percent this year—as long as there are no further significant lockdowns. If that is the case, there should be a market rebound of 10 percent in Europe, 8.0 percent in North America, 20 percent in South America and 5.0 percent in China, it added. Like nearly all its auto peers, Stellantis is aiming to up its offer of electric vehicles—currently 29 models, to be increased by 10 this year—which it wants to make more affordable for the middle classes. Stellantis, based in Amsterdam, has nearly 300,000 employees worldwide. —AFP

How beers and Vikings gave Bluetooth its name

STOCKHOLM, Sweden: One of the best-known modern technologies owes its name and logo to a Viking-era king with a bad tooth: a quarter century ago, two engineers hatched the idea for the moniker "Bluetooth" over beers. At the end of the 1990s, Sven Mattisson, a Swedish engineer working at telecom group Ericsson, and Jim Kardach, an American employed by Intel, were among those developing the revolutionary technology.

In 1998, at the dawn of the "wireless" era, the two men were part of an international consortium that created a universal standard for the technology first developed by Ericsson in 1994.

But prior to that, they had struggled to pitch their wireless products. Intel had its Biz-RF wireless program, Ericsson had MC-Link, while Nokia had its Low Power RF. Kardach, Mattisson and others presented their ideas at a seminar in Toronto in late 1997.

"Jim and I said that people did not appreciate what we presented,"

Mattisson, now 65 and winding down his career at Ericsson, recalled in a recent interview with AFP. The engineer, who had travelled all the way to Canada from Sweden for the one-hour pitch, decided to hang out with Kardach for the evening before flying home. "We received a lukewarm reception of our confusing proposal, and it was at this time I realized we needed a codename for the project which everyone could use," Kardach explained in a long account on his webpage.

'Chauvinistic story'

To drown their sorrows, the two men headed for a local Toronto bar and ended up talking about history, one of Kardach's passions. "We had some beers... and Jim is interested in history so he asked me about Vikings, so we talked at length about that," said Mattisson, admitting that his recollection of that historic night is now somewhat foggy. Kardach said all he knew about Vikings was that they ran "around with horned helmets raiding and looting places, and that they were crazy chiefs." Mattisson recommended Kardach read a well-known Swedish historical novel about the Vikings, entitled "The Long Ships".

Set in the 10th century—"a chauvinistic story" about a boy taken hostage by Vikings, says Mattisson—one name in the book caught Kardach's attention: that of the king of Denmark, Harald "Bluetooth" Gormsson.



Unification

An important historic figure in Scandinavia in the 10th century, the king of Denmark's nickname is said to refer to a dead tooth, or, as other tales have it, to his liking for blueberries or even a simple translation error. During his reign, Denmark turned its back on its pagan beliefs and Norse gods, gradually converting to Christianity.

But he is best known for having united Norway and Denmark in a union that lasted until 1814.

A king who unified Scandinavian rivals—the parallel delighted those seeking to unite the PC and cellular industries with a short-range wireless link.

And the reference to the king goes beyond the name: the Bluetooth logo, which at first glance resembles a geometric squiggle, is in fact a superimposition of the runes for the letters "H" and "B", the king's initials.

Low-cost and with low power consumption, Bluetooth was finally launched in May 1998, using technology allowing computer devices to communicate with each other in short range without fixed cables. The first consumer device equipped with the technology hit the market in 1999, and its name, which was initially meant to be temporary until something better was devised, became permanent. —AFP

Milipol Qatar 2021 draws multi-national exhibitors line up

MILIPOL, Qatar: The 13th international event for Homeland Security and Civil Defense in the Middle East which will run at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre (DECC) from March 15-17, has attracted a multi-national exhibitor line-up representing 14 nations across the Middle East, South America, Europe, the UK, USA, Subcontinent, and Scandinavia.

The show, one of the first in the region this year to focus on homeland security and civil defence, is being held under the patronage of Amir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani and under the authority of Qatar's Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, His Excellency Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz Al-Thani. It will feature five national pavilions representing Brazil, France, Germany, the UK and the USA.

Organizers, Qatar's Ministry of Interior in partnership with Paris-based international event organizer Comexposium acting on behalf of the GIE Milipol headed by Civipol, the technical implementer of the French ministry of the Interior, say 68 percent of the companies registered for the biennial show is new to Milipol Qatar having been attracted by strong forecasted sector growth.

"The value of the Middle East homeland security market has been predicted by Frost and Sullivan to grow to US \$19.7bn by 2022," explained Prefet Yann Jounot CEO of Civipol and President of Milipol events. "This has fuelled great interest in the event and expanded its exhibitor outreach across the entire homeland security and civil defense spectrum including the growth areas of data, perimeter and private security as well as systems integration."

France will mount the largest of the national pavilions which will be supported by the French minister of the Interior. The pavilion organizer, the Paris Region Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said 77% of the 22 partner exhibitors will be new to Milipol Qatar with all being "major players in their fields with research and development units to present innovation for export. Among the pavilion exhibitors is the Nexter Group, a defense and security robotics solutions provider which is planning to promote its NERVA multi-mission robots. "We are eager to help the Qatari, and more generally Middle Eastern, police special units and military special forces improve their safety through high-end reconnaissance and explosive ordinance disposal robotics capabilities," commented Romain Le Berre, the Group's Sales Director.

French hi-tech solutions provider the CS GROUP says it will bring its most advanced defence and security innovations to the show including its Crimson hypervisor software and the Boreades C-UAV system; Tactical Data Link for homeland operations and high value training powered by simulation.

Though Milipol Qatar 2021 has a wealth of show newcomers, it has also attracted loyal support from regular exhibitors, including the German pavilion. Its organiser CCO Creative Consulting GmbH said Milipol Qatar has been the most important homeland security show for German companies in terms of creating business and establishing contacts with the Qatari government for over two decades.

"The whole Middle Eastern market continues to be in demand of cutting-edge technological applications and systems from all over the world to effectively counter terrorism attacks and provide safety for its citizens and critical infrastructure, said the company's Managing Director Nico Baumbach.

Meanwhile, the UK Defense and Security Organization, which is organizing the British



pavilion says Milipol Qatar is now a global leader for defense and security procurement with UK providers eyeing potential partnership agreements with local Qatari players.

"UK defense and security products have an outstanding reputation in Qatar and are already widely deployed within the security sector. UK companies are keen to develop industrial partnerships and joint ventures with Qatari companies and Qatari buyers are always keen to have visibility on the latest UK products and innovations," said an organization spokesperson.

Milipol Qatar 2021 will also feature a series of highly informative seminars featuring dialogues, case studies and debates focused on the future of the homeland security and civil defense industries and the way towards a safer world. The seminar program will feature international thought leaders who will explore cyber security and cyberthreats, civil defense and large events security management.

"The global industry will be keenly watching the outcome of these seminars as they will send insightful signals on the future of these important industries which will help ensure a safer world for all," added Prefet Yann Jounot. Milipol Qatar 2021 will take place under the governance of strict health and safety protocols designed to combat the spread of COVID 19.

Business

Snarl-ups to start-ups: Cairo's jams inspire tech solutions

Cairo ranked 30th worst city in the world for congestion

CAIRO: In gridlocked and heavily polluted Cairo, start-ups are searching for technological solutions to solve the transport headaches for an expanding megacity already struggling with over 20 million people. With only three metro lines and overcrowded, run-down buses servicing the capital, public transport is stretched to its limits. "The problem of traffic in Greater Cairo has resulted in very low average speeds, not exceeding 10 kilometers (six miles) per hour," said traffic expert Osama Okail, from Cairo University, who says the solution to the capital's woes must lie in fixing public transport.

Cairo, the most populous Arab city where a fifth of all Egyptians live, is ranked 30th worst in the world for congestion, according to TomTom, the Dutch vehicle navigations systems maker.

Runaway growth has pushed the ancient city to breaking point. Egypt's government has embarked on an ambitious urban transformation, but that is mainly focused on the construction of a new administrative city some 50 kilometers (30 miles) east of Cairo. In Cairo itself, several giant road flyovers have been built to avoid jams in densely populated suburbs, criticized by some for the architectural damage done in historic areas. For middle-class consumers, ride-hailing and delivery giant Uber and its Middle East subsidiary Careem have moved to plug the gap of poor public transport. But tech-savvy Egyptians are also looking for their own homegrown solutions.

Five days in traffic

They include the start-up Transport for Cairo (TFC), which launched a detailed mapping of the city's routes including informal transport networks to provide "actionable and high quality data."

The data is used "to improve urban mobility", to help commuters best navigate the city and cut down journey times. "By mapping large cities and using the data for future planning, we are hoping to change them for the better," said TFC co-founder Mohamed Hegazy.



CAIRO: This picture shows a view of vehicles stuck in a traffic jam in the central Attaba district of Egypt's capital Cairo. In gridlocked and heavily polluted Cairo, startups are searching for technological solutions to solve the transport headaches for an expanding megacity already struggling with over 20 million people. —AFP

"We are working with the authorities to change the way the system works."

For now, an informal system of minibuses, motorized rickshaws, taxis, and millions of personal cars clog the city's urban arteries bumper to bumper. TomTom calculates that a Cairo driver wastes over five days a year sitting still in traffic. That has a dramatic impact on work productivity, adding up to as much as \$8 billion lost each year, according to a 2014 World Bank study.

It estimates Cairo's traffic congestion could cost Egypt as much as four percent of its entire GDP.

Heavy cost of pollution

Making travel simpler is one way to get commuters out of private cars and onto public transport, reducing congestion on the roads. Another start-up, Ocra Wallet, is trying to digitise the estimated \$30 million circulating as cash daily in commuter fares through its phone app, creating contactless payment to pay for tickets. "We are working to make payments for transport

easier," Ocra founder Khalid Khaleel said.

Ocra, which means fare in Arabic, is subsidizing ticket prices by selling advertising to private bus companies. "The money that comes from that we use to help users as well as drivers," Khaleel said, adding he believes that by stopping the handling of cash, the app can help cut coronavirus transmission too. Meanwhile, ridesharing service Tink hopes to break into the carpooling sector, with an app that creates social networks of common friends going to the same destination.

"We have turned carpooling more into social gatherings," said one of Tink's founders, Adel al-Mahrouky. Traffic snarl-ups mean higher levels of harmful emissions, with air pollution costing some one percent of GDP, the World Bank estimated.

For Egyptian tech experts, the hope is online solutions can help make much bigger changes. Map-maker Hegazy believes his data can set Cairo on the path towards "the ultimate goal"—of decarbonizing the transport network. "Everything must be electric," he said. — AFP

Germany to fine firms for rights violations abroad

BERLIN: Germany yesterday took a step towards forcing companies to take responsibility for any labor or environmental abuses in their global supply chain, with a new law that allows for fines worth millions of euros. The law was spurred on by a deadly fire in a textile factory in Pakistan and a devastating dam collapse at a Brazilian iron ore mine that killed more than 250 people—both of which had links to German companies.

In a bid to prevent repeats of such workplace disasters, Chancellor Angela Merkel's cabinet agreed on the new rule which provides for companies with annual revenues of 400 million euros (\$484 million) or more to be fined up to two percent of that amount if their contractors abroad are found to breach human rights or environmental rules. Companies could also be excluded from public procurement processes in case of violations, the government agreed, at a time when allegations are also ratcheting up over Uighur forced labor in China.

"This law protects workers from exploitation across sprawling supply chains and protects human rights across the world," Finance Minister Olaf Scholz said yesterday. "In future, it will be clear that 'Made in Germany' also means respect for human rights," he added.

Compromise

The so-called Lieferkettengesetz—meaning "supply chain law"—obliges companies to track workers' rights and environmental standards, not

just in their own structures but also at their sub-contractors or suppliers at home and abroad. Companies will have to verify possible standards violations in their supply chain and take corrective measures.

"If you make profits globally, you should also take responsibility for global human rights," said Labor Minister Hubertus Heil yesterday. Though businesses will not be made systematically liable for any shortcomings, NGOs and trade unions will be able to bring lawsuits against German companies on behalf of foreign workers. This would give workers "in Bangladesh or the Congo a fair chance to defend their rights", said Heil.

Germany's economy ministry will also establish a structure to carry out checks and impose fines if necessary. The catalogue of fines agreed by cabinet yesterday includes penalties ranging from tens of thousands to millions of euros. A hard-fought compromise between conservatives and social democrats of Germany's ruling coalition, the law still must be approved by parliament later this year. It will at first apply only to Germany's largest companies with over 3,000 employees, before being expanded to include those with 1,000 employees from 2024.

The development and labor ministries initially wanted the law to also target smaller companies, but backed down in the face of strong opposition from the economy ministry and industry voices. A similar French law adopted in 2017 covers only companies with more than 5,000 employees. — AFP



Toyota Woven City



Woven City groundbreaking ceremony

Toyota breaks ground for 'Woven City'

TOKYO: Toyota Motor Corporation (Toyota) and Woven Planet Holdings, Inc (Woven Planet), the Toyota Group company responsible for a wide range of mobility development projects anchored in software, held a ground-breaking ceremony (Jichinsai) recently for the construction of Woven City at the old vehicle yard adjacent to the former Higashi-Fuji Plant site of Toyota Motor East Japan, Inc (TMEJ).

Along with the Governor of Shizuoka Prefecture Heita Kawakatsu, Mayor of Susono City Kenji Takamura and other guests represent-

ing the local community, the ceremony was attended by Toyota President Akio Toyoda, Woven Planet CEO James Kuffner, TMEJ President Kazuhiro Miyauchi and others involved in the project. Together, the leaders expressed their hopes for a safe and successful start to construction.

"The Woven City project has officially started," said President Toyoda. "Taking action as one has decided is never an easy task. I must express my deepest gratitude to all who have provided their whole-hearted support and cooperation to the project through today. The unwavering themes of the Woven City are 'human-centered,' 'a living laboratory' and 'ever-evolving.' Together with the support of our project partners, we will take on the challenge of creating a future where people of diverse backgrounds are able to live happily."

TMEJ President Miyauchi added, "I am deeply grateful for having had our Higashi-Fuji Plant

operate here for 53 years with the support of the local community. The knowledge and expertise we acquired from all of the people who worked at the plant must be carried on into the next chapter. With the conviction that Woven City will stand not on mere empty land but where the history of the Higashi-Fuji Plant lies, I will offer the greatest possible collaboration in the future."

Toyota announced the construction of the Woven City in January at CES 2020 in Las Vegas, United States, to prepare for an era in which all ecosystems that support everyday life are connected with data. Woven City aims to continuously create advancements that will help better society by accelerating the cycle of technology and the development of services.

The project aims to demonstrate a human-centered approach to community development. As part of Toyota's shift from an automobile manufacturer to a mobility company, Woven City will bring

new technology to life in a real-world environment across a wide range of areas including automated driving, personal mobility, robotics, and Artificial Intelligence (AI). It is expected to provide a number of exciting opportunities for businesses and researchers around the world.

Woven City will have three types of streets, which will be interwoven with one another on the ground level; one dedicated to automated driving, one to pedestrians, and one to pedestrians with personal mobility vehicles. There will also be one underground road used to transport goods. The community will start with roughly 360 residents, mainly senior citizens, families with young children, and inventors, and will eventually have a population of more than 2,000 individuals including Toyota employees. The infrastructure of Woven City aims to create an environment where inventions with the potential to solve social issues are created on a timely basis.



Business

Fly me to the Moon: Japan billionaire offers space seats

Eight people from around the world will join a private lunar expedition

TOKYO: It's the sort of chance that comes along just once in a blue Moon: a Japanese billionaire is throwing open a private lunar expedition to eight people from around the world. Yusaku Maezawa, an online fashion tycoon, was announced in 2018 as the first man to book a spot aboard the lunar spaceship being developed by SpaceX. Maezawa, who paid an undisclosed sum for the trip expected to launch in 2023 at the earliest, originally said he planned to invite six to eight artists to join him on the voyage around the Moon.

But yesterday, in a video posted on his Twitter account, he revealed a broader application process. "I'm inviting you to join me on this mission. Eight of you from all around the world," he said. "I have bought all the seats, so it will be a private ride," he added.

Maezawa, 45, said his initial plan of inviting artists had "evolved" because he came to believe that "every single person who is doing something creative could be called an artist." The Japanese entrepreneur said applicants would need to fulfil just two criteria: being ready to "push the envelope" creatively, and being willing to help other crew members do the same.

In all, he said around 10 to 12 people will be on board the spaceship, which is expected to loop around the Moon before returning to Earth. The application timeline for spots on the trip calls for would-be space travellers to pre-register by March 14, with initial screening carried out by March 21.

No deadlines are given for the next stages—an "assignment" and an online interview—but final interviews and medical checkups are currently scheduled for late May 2021, according to

Maezawa's website.

Musk 'highly confident'

Maezawa and his band of astronauts will become the first lunar voyagers since the last US Apollo mission in 1972 — if SpaceX can pull the trip off. Last month, a prototype of its Starship crashed in a fireball as it tried to land upright after a test flight, the second such accident, after the last prototype of the Starship met a similar fate in December.

But the company hopes the reusable, 394-foot (120-metre) rocket system will one day carry crew and cargo to the Moon, Mars and beyond. "I'm highly confident that we will have reached orbit many times with Starship before 2023 and that it will be safe enough for human transport by 2023. It's looking very promising," SpaceX founder Elon Musk said in Maezawa's video posted yesterday.

The mission will be the first private space flight beyond Earth's orbit, Musk said. Because it will not land on the Moon, but loop behind it, "we expect people will go further than any human has ever gone from planet Earth," he added. Maezawa, known for his eccentric comments and extravagant lifestyle including a penchant for pricey art, was last year valued around \$1.9 billion, making him one of Japan's richest people.

He made his fortune as founder of online fashion store Zozo, which he sold to Yahoo! Japan in 2019.

Maezawa has previously made headlines with an online ad for a girlfriend to join him on his SpaceX flight-only to abruptly cancel the hunt, despite attracting nearly 30,000 applicants.

US space agency NASA is intending to land



HAWTHORNE: This file photo shows SpaceX founder Elon Musk (left) and Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa (right) speaking before a Falcon 9 rocket during the announcement that Maezawa will be the first private passenger who will fly around the Moon aboard the SpaceX BFR launch vehicle, at the SpaceX headquarters and rocket factory in Hawthorne, California. — AFP

astronauts on the Moon, including the first woman, in 2024. One of the goals of its Artemis III voyage is to bring back a total of 85 kilograms

(187 pounds) of lunar samples — more than the average 64 kilograms brought back by Apollo missions between 1969 and 1972. — AFP

Honda Kuwait launches Refreshed Accord 2021 and All-New City

KUWAIT: Honda Kuwait has organized on Tuesday a 'Honda Virtual Launch' to formally introduce the All-New City, Refreshed 2021 Accord and the All-New CBR 600 RR. The event was arranged by the Middle East & Africa division.

The Virtual Launch Event held on their YouTube channel and the respective social media channels of the country wise distributors. The 2021 Honda Accord Gets Refreshed Styling, Updated features on all grades. 2.0 and 1.5 Sport grades are now more distinguishable with Piano Black accent trims and 18-inch machine cut alloy wheels, plus new interior color, advanced features added to enhance safety and connectivity.

The Refreshed and Redesigned 2021 Honda Accord

The 2021 Accord gets a refreshed styling with a new front bumper, restyled wider lower and upper grille, for even more sophisticated and sharper looks. The LED high and low beam headlights (2.0L Turbo) blend naturally to the solid wing and upper grille. For the Sports Grades there are Piano black accents added, starting with shark fin antennae, side mirrors, with the rear spoiler complementing the piano black grille and upper door trims. The 18-inch machine polished wheels (in the sports grades) also continue with the piano black theme, making the 2021 Honda Accord really stand out from the rest. The other grades boast of restyled 17" Alloy Wheels.

Spacious and Luxurious Interior Styling and Features

The Concert Hall Inspired Cabin allows for an uninterrupted view coupled with new advanced and sophisticated features that are convenient and easy to use. The 2021 Accord is now fitted with beige interior from the LX Grade Onwards along with leather in the top grades and black interior options. Refined, spacious and intuitively designed. The Accord's cockpit ensures that every feature is positioned just where you need it, to keep the driver in full control always. The 2021 Accord is now equipped with wireless charging (EX-L Grade Onwards) and 2 new Rear USB ports (EX Onwards) for easy and quick charging.

The clean and elegantly laid out dashboard presents advanced driving technology in the simplest of ways, placing essential information directly in the line of sight for instant readability such as the Head-Up Display which shows vital information such as speed, directions, incoming calls all in the drivers line of sight.

Audio and Connectivity

The 2021 Honda Accord is a technologically advanced vehicle, which offers the latest features in technology and connectivity. Some of the features on the 2021 Accord include:

- 8-inch Display Audio Touchscreen: Full colour 8-inch Display Audio Touchscreen offers the latest in, device connectivity and acts like a command centre allowing the driver and the front seat passenger to customize according to preference. It even has the Apple CarPlay app, and Android Auto equipped in its interface. For UAE and KSA Markets, the 8-inch Display Audio has new added feature known as Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB). Digital broadcasting allows crystal clear sound and greater information can be displayed on the screen of the music or the radio station.

- Rear USB Connector: The New 2021 Accord has added rear USB charging so that rear passengers can now charge their phones without any hassle. (EX Grade onwards)

- Wireless Charging: Phones supporting wireless charging can be easily charged, using the Wireless charging platform in the centre console on the EX-L



The Refreshed and Redesigned 2021 Honda Accord



The All-New Honda City 2021



Honda Accord interior

and 2.0 L Sport Grade.

- Rear Wide View Camera: It provides three different angles - normal, top-down and wide for a better view of what is behind you whenever you shift into Reverse.

Advanced Safety Features

The 2021 Accord in addition to its safety features such Advanced Front Airbags (Single for Driver, & Dual for Assistant), Side Airbags Front, Side Curtain Airbags (Roll Over), Driver's and Front Passenger's Knee Airbags, ACETM Body Structure, Honda Lanewatch (EX Grade Onwards), Heads Up Display (2.0L turbo grade only) has added on new safety features to make sure the occupants feel safe and secure. The new feature is The Rear Automatic Emergency Brake Assist which uses a sonar based parking sensors, the new system can sense solid objects below 10km/h such as in parking situations, and warn the driver or apply the brakes to help avoid or mitigate a collision. Another additional feature is The Rear Seat Reminder which is a new safety feature available in all grades (except LX) The driver is notified to check the rear seat, when the ignition is turned off.

The All-New Honda City 2021

Honda Motor Company also announced the All-New City 2021 for the GCC, Jordan and Egypt at virtual launch event. The All-New 5th Generation Honda City is the longest and the widest sedan in its segment and has exceeded the benchmark with its premium

design, technological prowess, unmatched comfort, advanced safety, with class leading fuel economy, rear a/c vents and advanced connectivity.

Grand Concept

The Grand Concept of the All New City 2021 is based on 'Ambitious Sedan' giving ambitious people seeking better living confidence to upgrade their lives. All New City is based on Our Grand Concept which is supported by the City's core values of Smart Style and Outstanding interior space. To this the value of 'Strong' was added based on the demand in the Middle East. The All New 2021 City is an authentic sedan form, which is confident and secure and an intelligent sedan.

Absolutely New Design and Exterior Styling

The All New City 2021's concept of exterior design is set as "STANDING on the EDGE" aiming for styling that can stand on the cutting edge of this era. With its sharp body character lines starting from the front Day Time Running Lights, which flows along the side just above the door handles and blending into the three-dimensional rear lights. This bold front is taken to the next level with the integration of full LED headlights with 9 LED Array Inline shell in the EX Grade Only, Integrated LED DRL in all grades and L-Shaped LED Turn signal in all grades which give it a sporty and advanced look and feel. The upper Chrome grille in the front presents the signature Honda Solid Wing Face and elevates the car to a sleek and sophisticated position. The EX Grade also boasts of LED Front Fog Lights and all Grades have the Rear LED Fog Lights.

The Katana Blade in Motion

Inspired by the Japanese Katana Blade, a type of curved sword used by the ancient samurai, the All-New City follows a continuity of lights with a sharp shoulder-line that accentuates its premium look and length. This character line runs right from the headlamp all the way to the taillights defining its shape and making the hood seem longer giving the car a distinguishably precise and aerodynamic impression. The All New City is longer and wider giving it a large stance, which elevates its image of being a luxurious sedan. Length has increased by 90mm, Width by 60mm and large trunk volume.

NBK announces winner of KD 125,000 in Al-Jawhara monthly draw

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) continues to reward its customers with an outstanding array of draws, prizes and offers all year round. In this context, the bank announced, Nasra Mansour Abdulsaid Al-Qalaf as the winner of Al-Jawhara monthly prize worth KD 125,000 for February 2021.



Hisham Al-Nusif

On the other hand, NBK announced the names of the winners of Al-Jawhara weekly draws worth KD 5,000 each including: Osamah Abdullah Eissa Ali Bash, Yousef Ibrahim Abdulla Al-Mutawa, Min Taiba Khalid A Aziz Al-Fouzan.

The draw was held live on NBK Instagram page in the presence of a representative from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, as well as representatives from NBK, noting that Al-Jawhara monthly and quarterly draws are conducted in the presence of a representative from Deloitte.

Al-Jawhara Account gives customers the opportunity to enter draws and win prizes of KD 5,000 weekly, KD 125,000 monthly as well as the grand prize of KD 250,000 quarterly. Every KD 50 deposited into Al Jawhara Account gives the customer a chance to be one the next lucky winners, and if no withdrawal or transfers occur on the account during the holding period, customers will receive an additional chance to enter the draw for every KD 50 held in the account, doubling their chance to win.

Commenting on Al-Jawhara monthly draw, Hisham Al-Nusif, Deputy General Manager of Consumer Banking Group at National Bank of Kuwait, said: "Rewarding our customers is a key pillar of our strategy, and Al-Jawhara Account represents a main part of our endeavors to providing them with exceptional rewards all year round."

Al-Jawhara Account represents a secure saving scheme, in addition to giving chances to enter periodic draws. The bank also ensures quick and easy opening account opening procedures for Al-Jawhara Account, whether by visiting the nearest NBK Branch, or simply through NBK Mobile Banking or NBK Online Banking, which comes in line with the bank's digital transformation strategy, he pointed out.

Al-Nusif added: "We are always closer to our customers under all circumstances, thanks to our constant communication with them through our digital channels, in order to identify their needs. We also seek to measure their satisfaction with the offered products, as part of our commitment to enrich their banking experience." Since 2012, National Bank of Kuwait has rewarded loyal customers with a total worth of prizes amounting KD 2,200,000 in Al-Jawhara weekly, monthly and quarterly draws.

In addition to providing top-notch, cutting-edge and highly secure banking services, NBK is keen to give customers a variety of offers, rewards and prizes that suit their expectations all year round.

CLINIC PAGE



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Lifestyle | Features



A vendor displays a rug at his shop in Bamiyan.



A vendor carries a rug for sale as he walks along the roadside at Chicken Street in Kabul.



Abdul Wahab, a tribal carpet collector holds rug wraps during an interview with AFP inside his shop at Chicken Street in Kabul.



A worker holds a rug for drying on the rooftop of a washing factory in Herat.

Rug hunters risk death in search for Afghanistan's last antique carpets

In his quest to track down the last of Afghanistan's antique rugs, Chari Allahqul has weathered high-country blizzards, suffered beatings from armed robbers, and skirted fighting with insurgents. Often on horseback with donkeys in tow, he travels deep into the jagged badlands of northern Afghanistan searching for hand-woven carpets made by the country's nomadic tribes. "The roads are dangerous, full of wolves and full of enemies. We have to spend nights in the forests or in the desert," explained Allahqul, who travels with a hardy Afghan sheepdog to keep him safe while he sleeps.

Rug hunters can spend weeks-if not months-passing through villages like sleuths along old caravan trails, offering cash or bartering with modern goods to amass a diverse selection of pieces they can later peddle in rug bazaars or to collectors. But the journeys are often full of peril. Allahqul, who began carpet hunting as a child, said he was once clubbed with a Kalashnikov by bandits who passed over his carefully collected rugs while looking for cash, dismissing his wares as aging junk. "They said, 'these rugs are old rugs and throw them away,'" he recalled with a grin, while admitting it took over two weeks to recover from the thrashing.

Dangers are nothing new to the job, according to Allahqul, who remembers his father telling the story of a friend who was eaten alive by wolves after being stranded in a snowstorm during a rug expedition decades ago. "The only thing they found

were his shoes and the rugs," he shrugged.

Hand crafted antiques

Afghanistan's carpet belt stretches west like a boomerang from northern Kunduz province along the Uzbek and Turkmenistani borders and down across the frontier with Iran. It is home to a smattering of nomadic groups who have specialized in making rugs for centuries. Going door-to-door in rural villages working off tips from local contacts, Allahqul bargains over what were once dowry gifts-handcrafted rugs made by a young bride's family to adorn her new home. The most sought after carpets are often decades old, embellished with tribal patterns, woven from handspun wool and made with dyes concocted from local ingredients such as roots, herbs and flower petals.

Once happy with their bounty, rug hunters head back to their homes where the carpets are washed and then dried on roofs for months, allowing the sun to bring out the colors. The rugs are then taken to cities like Kabul, where delicate repairs are made before they are sold. "Fixing or selling a carpet is like bringing up a child. It takes a lot of hard work," said Allahqul. A single carpet can take anywhere from six months to two years to make and can fetch thousands of dollars on the international market if it earns a place in the showrooms of premier rug dealers. Abdul Wahab, one of Kabul's top tribal carpet collectors, said his inventory has been amassed piece-by-

piece from a network of rug hunters like Allahqul. "We rely 99.9 percent on those people," he explained. "I love my carpets. I buy them one by one, not just for the sake of selling them."

Fakes and imitations

But decades of conflict, displacement and urbanization has forever changed the trade. Nomadic tribes have largely settled and abandoned their family-run looms, according to the rug sellers in Kabul's carpet bazaars. Imported wool and synthetic dyes, along with the proliferation of commercial workshops across the region, have flooded the market with cheaper rugs that can be produced en masse. "It's

a very sad thing," sighed Wahab. "Wool from Belgium, dyes from another country... Nothing is Afghan at all." Fakes and cheap imitations are rife, he complained, making the selling of a more expensive antique to a less discerning customer all the more difficult.

Unscrupulous carpet dealers have also been known to fabricate the faded patina seen on antiques, relying on chemical treatments, tea washing, and occasionally driving over new rugs with cars to give them a worn veneer-and a higher price. Experienced rug sellers say only careful inspection with a seasoned eye and delicate touch can reveal the true value of a rug. "The dyes, the design, the condition,

the age, the shape-everything together gives value to the piece," said Wahid Abdullah, owner of Herat Carpets in Kabul.

'It's all art'

Some rugs may not even be top quality, Abdullah said, but the uniqueness of the design or some other striking characteristic-even a flaw intentionally woven into a pattern-can distinguish them from modern, mass produced carpets. "It's all art. It's difficult to explain," he added. But the rug hunters combing Afghanistan's carpet heartlands complain that antique pieces are now increasingly difficult to find. The roads have also become more dangerous with international troops withdrawing from Afghanistan while lawlessness and the Taliban's influence grows. "The factory made rugs have hurt the hand-woven rug industry," Zalmi Ahmadi, a carpet hunter from western Afghanistan's Herat, told AFP.

"The journeys are very, very difficult and we come across the Taliban, government forces, and thieves-either they ask for money or you get killed." During two recent outings Ahmadi was only able to snag a couple rugs, compared to the dozens of pieces he could have easily collected a few years ago. "Whatever we wanted, we could get," he said. "But now we can't find them." — AFP



In this picture Chari Allahqul, a rug hunter displays a rug during an interview with AFP inside his shop at Chicken Street in Kabul. — AFP photos



A picture shows a view of Ariston Theater in Sanremo ahead of the 71st Italian song festival. — AFP

Italy's Sanremo festival: Singing, scandals and Zlatan

It's been dismissed as immoral, outdated and reality TV kitsch. It's also hailed as Italy's national treasure, a song festival that captures the soul of the country each year. Whether for the soaring melodies or the feuds, botched ballads and bad outfits, Italians delight in the annual five-day Sanremo Music Festival that began yesterday, a national pastime inspiring both nostalgia and derision. Coronavirus this year has made its mark-the orchestra, performers and presenters will play without a live audience, while supermodel Naomi Campbell was forced to pull out due to travel complications.

But AC Milan striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic has stepped in to provide some star power as a presenter on opening night, and the event-known to devotees and detractors alike as just "The Festival"-is again expected to draw in the viewers. Some 10 million Italians tune in each year to ogle the stars and delight in the inevitable controversies, whether accusations of lip-synching, plagiarism, celebrity feuds or wardrobe malfunctions. Paolo Soddu, who co-authored a 2001 book on the festival, calls Sanremo a "national ritual," a shared experience that reveals "the collective dream" of Italy. "Whether you like it or not, it's talked about," he told AFP. "Even if you hate it, you watch."

Kitsch galore

The festival began in 1951 as a way to boost tourism in the northwestern seaside town of Sanremo, with state broadcaster RAI subsequently using the new medium of television to present fresh-faced singers crooning to a bourgeois audience in their evening best. Today, it is more about offering up deliciously cringe-worthy moments-over-the-hill stars in black

leather screeching pop melodies, singers unveiling new tattoos and jokes that fall flat. An obligatory step for Italian singers, Sanremo has hosted the Who's Who of the country's popular music over the decades, from Gino Paoli, Lucio Dalla and Mina to Lucio Battisti, Ornella Vanoni and Bobby Solo-even Andrea Bocelli.

One of the first to be catapulted to fame by the festival was Domenico Modugno in 1958, whose refrain "Volare" captured the zeitgeist of a jubilant Italy reveling in its post-war economic boom. Although most of its singers are unknown to international audiences, Sanremo has welcomed over the years a smattering of foreign stars, from Shirley Bassey to Dusty Springfield and Sonny and Cher. Even Louis Armstrong was a contestant. Uproar is habitual. Singers have broken social mores-Adriano Celentano showed his back to the audience in 1961 before launching into Elvis-like hip thrusts-and viewers have deemed many songs in bad taste, like one about euthanasia in 2010. But there have also been genuinely dark moments, notably in 1967 when singer Luigi Tenco shot himself in the head hours after his song "Goodbye, love, goodbye"-sung with then-girlfriend Dalida-was voted out.

Inspiration for Eurovision

In more recent decades, the festival's kitsch quotient has skyrocketed, as befits the festival that inspired the Eurovision Song Contest, considered the pinnacle of camp. Roberto Benigni, the Oscar-winning star of "Life is Beautiful," made his onstage entrance as host one year atop a white horse, Dita von Teese performed a striptease inside an oversized martini glass. Last year, rapper Achille Lauro unbuttoned a richly embroidered black velvet cloak to reveal a skintight, glittery and semi-transparent bodysuit-all intended, according to the platinum-blond, heavily tattooed performer, to mimic Saint Francis having stripped naked to renounce material wealth. Established musical stars called the "Big" dominate performances, singing songs by Italian authors never before heard in public, but there are also spots for lesser known. Winners are voted by juries of the public and journalists, as well as viewers at home.—AFP

Taiwan prepares white rhino 'Emma' to find mate in Japan

Emma, five years old, slim build with a gentle demeanor, is looking for love overseas. Hobbies include hanging with friends and studying Japanese. Seeks fellow rhino for companionship and mating. It's been a busy and exciting time at Taiwan's Leofoo Safari Park where zookeepers have been preparing to send one of their southern white rhinos over to Japan. Part of an attempt to widen the gene pool of Asia's captive-bred white rhinos, it is the first time Taiwan will send a rhino overseas to breed. The safari park scoured their 23 strong herd to find a suitable candidate and settled on "Emma" who ticked all the right boxes.

"Emma was chosen because of her mild personality... and her smaller size also makes it easier to ship overseas," Sean Wu, the park's chief veterinarian and animal manager, told AFP. "She seldom get into fights with other rhinos or snatch other's food." Visa and paperwork depending, Emma will soon travel to Japan's Tobu Zoo in Saitama where a 10-year-old fellow rhino "Moran" has been lined up to be her first suitor. To help her adapt to her future new home, zookeepers have started using Japanese instructions for commands such as "come" and "no". "We have added Japanese commands in our daily animal training so that



A staff member from Taiwan Hsinchu's Leofoo Village Zoo cleans Emma, with mud before it travels to Japan's Tobu Zoo for breeding. — AFP photos

slowly when she (Emma) arrives in Japan she can more quickly adjust to the new language," Wu added.

The rhino has also been trained to get used to "outdoor ambient sounds" such as airplane engines and trucks to prepare her for any noise during the upcoming journey. Her trip originally set for this month has been postponed to late April at the earliest due to Japan's border restrictions imposed over the Covid-19 pandemic, the park said. A vet and a zookeeper will fly from Taiwan two weeks ahead of her departure to undergo quarantine. They will stay in Japan for at least a week to ensure Emma adjusts to the new environment. The southern white rhino-found in the wild across southern Africa-currently number less than 19,000 according to the animal conservation group Save the Rhino. They were nearly wiped out in last century but managed to

recover thanks to conservation efforts.

Their northern cousins were not so lucky. Only two remain, both female, rendering the species functionally extinct. Other rhino species such as the Javan rhino and Sumatran rhino have less than 100 herds left. Zoo breeding programs played a crucial role in repopulating southern white rhino herds. Leofoo Safari Park imported eight rhinos from Africa in 1979 and now has the most successful breeding programme in Asia with 23 animals in its herd. Rhino poaching is fuelled by a market for their horns in Asia-especially China and Vietnam. Horns are made of nothing more than keratin, the same material as fingernails and hair. But scammers erroneously market horns as an aphrodisiac or cancer cure. — AFP



Emma stands in front of other rhinos before her travel to Japan's Tobu Zoo for breeding.

Sports

Photo of the Day



The Flying Bulls plane seen at Hangar-8 in Salzburg, Austria. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Hamilton says eighth F1 title not sole factor in his future

Briton looking to surpass Schumacher as most decorated driver

LONDON: Lewis Hamilton said Tuesday that winning a record-breaking eighth world championship in 2021 would not be the determining factor in whether he quits after the season. The attempt to land a drivers' crown that would move the 36-year-old Briton above Michael Schumacher to become the most decorated driver in the sport's history will go hand-in-hand with the issue of his future in Formula One.

"I've made a really important decision in my mind, that I don't want that to be the deciding factor," Hamilton said in a conference call at the launch of the

Mercedes car for 2021. "I got into racing because I loved racing and I think that's got to always be at the core of what I do. If all you're going for is accolades, if all you're going for is titles, I feel like you could potentially lose your way. Of course it's the ultimate dream, but I don't think that's necessarily going to be the deciding factor whether to stay or keep going."

Hamilton denied that a one-year extension to his contract had increased the possibility that the upcoming season could be his final one in the sport. "I am in the fortunate position where I have achieved most of

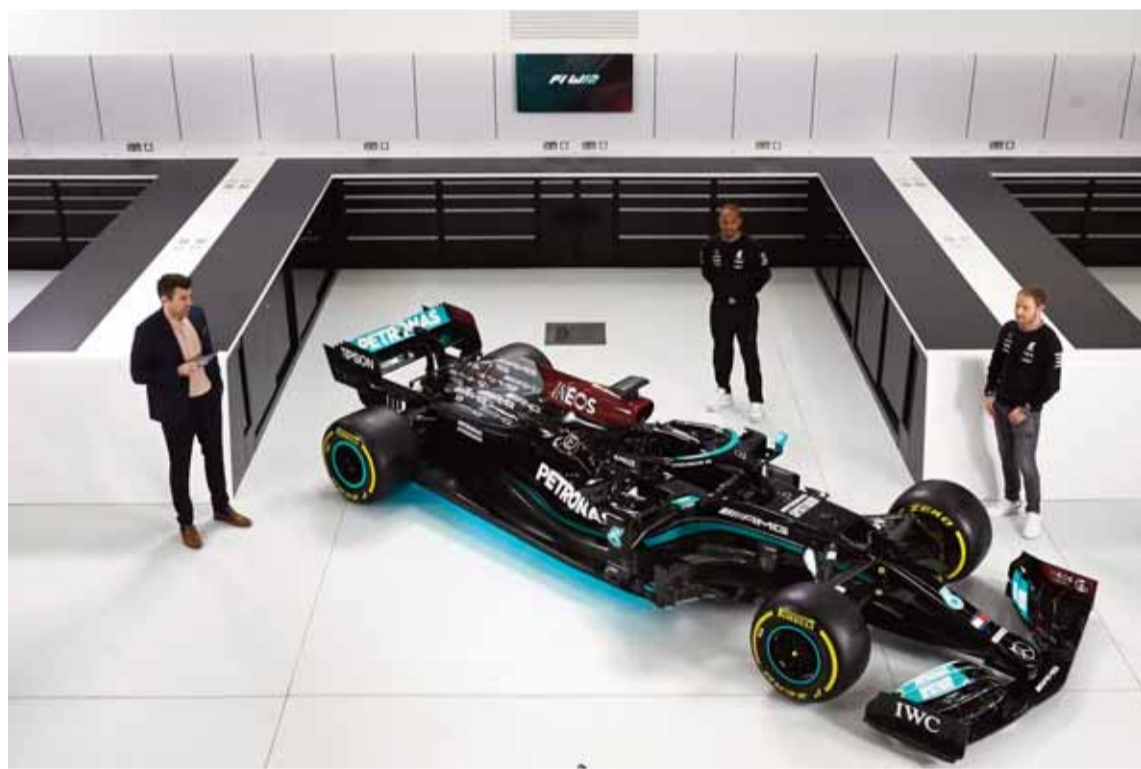
the stuff that I wanted to, so there is no real need to plan too far into the future. We are living in an unusual period of time. I just wanted one year, then we can talk about it if we do more and keep adding to it by one if we have to."

Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff insisted that despite seven successive constructors' titles the team had the "same fire, hunger and passion" as when he arrived in 2013. The Mercedes-AMG F1 W12 E Performance builds on the solid base of its predecessor but includes considerable aerodynamic changes alongside improvements to areas as such as the suspension, cooling system and power unit. It will be seen on the track for the first time in pre-season testing in Bahrain on March 12. The season-opening Grand Prix takes place on March 28.

"Every year we reset our focus and define the right objectives," said Wolff in a statement to mark the launch of the new car. "That may sound simple but it's damn hard and is probably why there are no sports teams out there with seven consecutive titles. So many things can happen and it's very natural to get used to success, and therefore not fight as hard for it. But this team has not shown any of that."

Wolff said Hamilton and Finnish team-mate Valtteri Bottas, who underlined Mercedes' dominance by finishing second in the 2020 drivers' standings, always have new challenges which keep them motivated. "I see the same fire, hunger and passion now as I did the first time I walked through the doors in 2013," he said. One of Hamilton's crusades has been to promote and develop more diversity in Formula One. As a result the car's black base livery remains for a second season "to underline the team's commitment to improving diversity and inclusion within the team and our sport."

Wolff said the team had set itself targets to back up its words with actions. "We've set ourselves the goal of at least 25 percent of all new starters coming from under-represented groups for the next five years," he said. "The latest step is a joint foundation that we will create together with Lewis to improve all aspects of diversity in motorsport. All of these measures are encouraging, but we know that real change takes time and we're at the start of a very long journey." — AFP



BRACKLEY: A handout photograph released by Mercedes-AMG Petronas F1 Team on Tuesday shows British driver Lewis Hamilton (center) and Finnish driver Valtteri Bottas (right) posing with the Mercedes-AMG F1 W12 E Performance car during a launch event in Brackley, central England. — AFP

LeBron eclipsed as Suns down Lakers

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James exploded for 38 points but it was not enough to prevent the Los Angeles Lakers from sliding to a 114-104 defeat against the Phoenix Suns on Tuesday. A testy clash between the Western Conference rivals saw Phoenix star Devin Booker ejected for two technical fouls during the second half before the Suns rallied to close out the win.

James led the scorers and chipped in six assists and five rebounds, but a Lakers offense still missing the injured Anthony Davis failed to fire consistently. The Suns' victory saw them leapfrog the Lakers into second place in the Western Conference with 23 wins and 11 defeats. The NBA champions Lakers are third at 24-12. Dario Saric led Phoenix's scoring with 21 points — including 10 in the fourth quarter — while Mikal Bridges added 19. Booker's ejection came midway through the third quarter, with the 24-year-old tossed for arguing and appearing to bounce a ball towards an official.

Elsewhere Tuesday, Nikola Jokic bagged the 50th regular season triple-double of his career as the Denver Nuggets halted the Milwaukee Bucks' five-game winning streak with a 128-97 drubbing. Serbian star Jokic dominated a one-sided encounter at Milwaukee's Fiserv Forum, as Denver never looked back after taking the lead midway through the first quarter before romping to victory.

Celtics roll on

Jokic's ninth triple of the season included 37 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds while Jamal Murray added

24 points for the visitors. The Nuggets improved to 20-15 with the win while the Bucks fell to 21-14 following the loss to remain third in the Eastern Conference.

Giannis Antetokounmpo led the Bucks' scorers with 27 points, but the home side were always struggling to get in the game after conceding a 37-23 lead at the end of the first quarter. In other games, Kemba Walker scored 25 points as the Boston Celtics rolled to a third straight win with a 117-112 victory over the Los Angeles Clippers.

Walker's points tally included six three-pointers as the Celtics' all-round offensive game subdued a



LOS ANGELES: Devin Booker #1 of the Phoenix Suns scores on a layup over Dennis Schroder #17 of the Los Angeles Lakers as LeBron James #23 and Markieff Morris #88 look on during the second quarter at Staples Center on Tuesday in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

Clippers team jolted by the sudden withdrawal of Kawhi Leonard shortly before tip-off at the TD Garden. Paul George led the scorers for Los Angeles with 32 points while Reggie Jackson — a late replacement for Leonard — added 25 for the visitors.

Six Celtics players finished with double-digit points tallies, including Jaylen Brown with 18, while Jayson Tatum and Payton Pritchard added 14 apiece. The Clippers suffered a blow earlier Tuesday when Leonard was ruled out after complaining of back spasms.

Hawks bounce back

Boston improved to 18-17 with the victory, leaving them in fourth place in the Eastern Conference table. The Clippers fell to 24-13 with the loss and remain fourth in the West. Celtics coach Brad Stevens expressed satisfaction at the way his team had responded after a rocky spell preceding their current winning streak when they lost three games on the bounce. "The team have stayed together when they easily could have been pulled apart by the noise," Stevens said. "You have to be able to resist that at this level when you're going through the roller coaster of the season."

In Miami, a late burst of scoring from Trae Young gave interim Atlanta Hawks coach Nate McMillan a winning debut over the Miami Heat, 24 hours after the dismissal of Lloyd Pierce on Monday. Pierce was sacked in the wake of Atlanta's loss to Miami on Sunday, but his unsettled squad responded with a battling 94-80 win over last season's NBA Finals runners-up. Young was pivotal in the win, rattling off 13 consecutive points in the fourth quarter to guide Atlanta to victory. "The fourth quarter is when I gotta make plays," Young said. "Tonight I just wanted to close the game out and get a win for us ... Everybody had a hell of a game. It was a great team win for us." — AFP

Alonso in 'best shape' of career

LONDON: Fernando Alonso said Tuesday he was in the best shape of his career as he prepares to end his two-year Formula One exile with the repackaged Alpine team. The double world champion had surgery on his broken jaw after he was involved in a cycling accident in Switzerland last month. But he said he was in the "best shape I've ever been before, both physically and mentally," following the virtual Alpine 2021 car launch in Britain.

The Alpine team, which was Renault — and will still race with a Renault engine — finished fifth in the constructors' championship last season with Daniel Ricciardo, who has been replaced by Alonso, coming fifth in the drivers' championship. "I've been preparing myself for this comeback for quite a while now and I have fresh motivation," said Alonso, who was world champion in 2005 and 2006 with Renault.

Alonso will team up with Frenchman Esteban Ocon, with former Red Bull and AlphaTauri driver Daniil Kvyat announced as the team's reserve driver. The 39-year-old left F1 in 2018 to set his sights on becoming only the second driver after Britain's Graham Hill to complete the so-called Triple Crown — winning the Monaco Grand Prix, Le Mans 24 Hours and Indy 500.

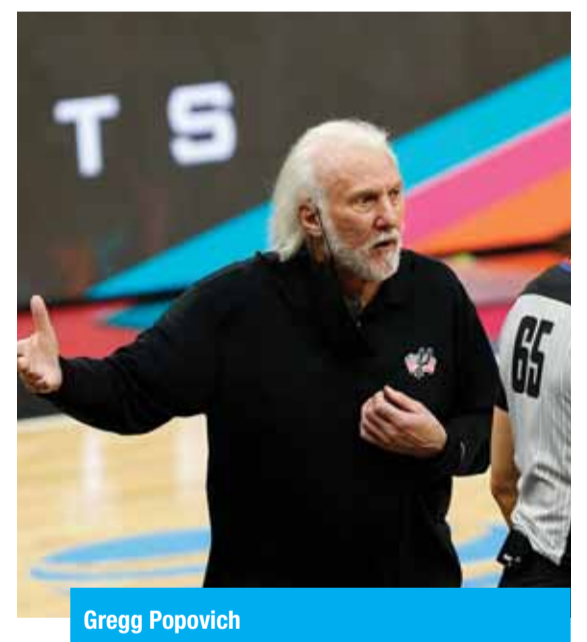
Although he tasted success in the famous sportscar endurance race in 2018 and 2019 he has not been able to crack the Indy 500. But Alonso, whose last drive in F1 was for McLaren in 2018, said he had become a more complete driver in his time away. "You constantly learn when you push yourself to new limits and when you are out of your comfort zone," he said. "Without a doubt, I'm a more competent driver now than two years ago."

Ocon finished 12th in the drivers' standings in 2020 but enjoyed his first podium at the Sakhir Grand Prix in Bahrain, where he finished second. "I am hungry to build on the success of 2020," he said. "I have that podium feeling and I am keen to get that back. We want to aim for more form across all type of tracks."

'Magnificent duo'

Renault chief Luca de Meo described the new Alpine line-up as a "magnificent duo." "Fernando Alonso, he has come back home 20 years after he made his debut with us," he said. "He's a two-time world champion and an international star. He brings us his speed, tenaciousness, his will, his talent, his experience, his commitment. Esteban Ocon is a star in the making. He brings his talent in full ascent as well as his fighting spirit and cool head, his humility and consistency."

The chassis of the new A521, built in Enstone in Britain, which will be the team headquarters, is an evolution of last year's RS20. The most striking difference is a complete change in livery. Instead of the familiar yellow and black the cars are painted red, white and blue to reflect both the French and British flags. Pre-season testing takes place in Bahrain from March 12 to 14, with the season-opening grand prix in the kingdom on March 28. — AFP



Gregg Popovich

Popovich slams Texas 'ignorant' mask decision

LOS ANGELES: San Antonio Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said Tuesday his team would ignore Texas' decision to lift a state-wide mask mandate, branding the move by Governor Greg Abbott as "ignorant." Abbott announced Tuesday he was ending the state's mask mandate in a bid to open up Texas "100 percent," despite fears from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention it could lead to a resurgence of COVID-19. Speaking on the sidelines of San Antonio's 119-93 win over the New York Knicks on Tuesday, Popovich said the Spurs would continue to follow NBA protocols which require players, coaches and officials to wear masks. "As far as the players go, we listen to the NBA, not the governor," Popovich told reporters, condemning Abbott's ruling as a "mystifying decision." He criticized "act(ing) like the pandemic is over... when all the science tells us the opposite. We already went through this once, and now we're gonna do it again? There will be more infections one would think." "It puts a lot of businesses in a tough spot I think," the 72-year-old added. "They're trying to do a good job keeping everybody safe, of course they want to open up." Abbott imposed a mask mandate in the second most populous US state eight months ago. — AFP

Sports

Juventus boost hopes of 10th straight title with win over Spezia

Torino fail to turn up for Lazio match; Juve vs Napoli set for March 17

MILAN: Juventus gave their hopes of a 10th straight Serie A title a timely boost as they beat struggling Spezia 3-0 on Tuesday to move within seven points of league leaders Inter Milan. Andrea Pirlo's side were frustrated for long periods, but second-half goals from Alvaro Morata, Federico Chiesa and Cristiano Ronaldo clinched an important win.

"The gap is just the points that separate us," Juventus coach Pirlo, who took over at the start of the season, told Sky Sport Italia. "We know it will be a long chase, Inter have been playing together for two years, they have a well-drilled approach, whereas we just started this season. We still intend to be there right to the end."

The Turin giants have won the last nine Italian league titles, but have it all to do to deny either of the two Milan clubs from ending that remarkable run. "We are working to win, if we don't win this season, then we'll congratulate the champions, but as long as there's a mathematical chance, we'll give our all on the pitch," Morata said.

Juventus started slowly, as they had done in their weekend draw at Verona, with their only real opening in the first half seeing Chiesa having an effort ruled out for a clear offside. But the reigning champions were much better in the second period and Ronaldo was unlucky to see his 49th-minute strike hit the post.

Pirlo's men finally moved in front in the 62nd minute as Morata turned in Federico Bernardeschi's near-post cross, although the hosts had to wait for VAR to confirm the winger was onside. Bernardeschi was also instrumental in the second goal, as he got in behind the Spezia defence down the left-hand side.

He squared the ball for Chiesa, whose effort was saved by Ivan Provedel, only for the Juve man to tap in the rebound. There was still time for Rodrigo

Bentancur to launch a Juventus counter-attack, which was finished off by Ronaldo, with the Portuguese forward scoring his 20th Serie A goal of the campaign.

It is the 12th straight season Ronaldo has notched 20 league goals, dating back to his final term with Manchester United, when he netted 18 times in the 2008-09 Premier League season. Andrey Galabinov missed a penalty deep into injury time for Spezia, who remain in 16th place, seven points above the bottom three, but having played at least a game more than all of their relegation rivals.

Torino 'no shows'

Quarantined in Turin, Serie A team Torino failed to travel to Rome for their game with Lazio on Tuesday, with the hosts awarded victory after a 45-minute wait. Regional authorities in Turin placed Torino under quarantine after eight of their players tested positive for the UK variant of COVID-19, but the Italian league refused to postpone the match.

After a 45-minute wait following the scheduled 17:30 GMT kick-off, Lazio players were informed by the referee that Torino were considered to have forfeited and that the match had been abandoned. "The decision by the league to not postpone the Lazio-Torino game... speaks for itself," said Torino president Urbano Cairo, who accused the league of "ignoring reality".

"We're going to see what happens now. It's obvious we will appeal. We will take all possible recourse," he added. Conversely, Torino's meeting with Sassuolo, originally scheduled for last weekend, was called off just a week ago for the very same reason.

Head of the Italian football federation Gabriele

"Manchester United. That's all we care (about now)," he added. "The champions is Liverpool, the crown belongs to them. We are in the best position right now to take them out and we are going to try but they are the champions. There is 33 points to play for. Tomorrow our opponents will play, we have one or two days off and prepare for Manchester United at home."

Dominant City

The home side toyed with the visitors from the opening whistle, hogging possession as Wolves struggled to gain a foothold. City's dominance was rewarded when Dendoncker could only steer the ball into his own net in the 15th minute.

Mahrez made an incisive run down the right, getting behind the City defense and was brilliantly picked out by midfielder Rodri. The Algeria international whipped the ball across the face of goal and Dendoncker, with Raheem Sterling hovering menacingly behind him, inadvertently found the net.

Amyeric Laporte had an effort ruled out for offside and Bernardo Silva blazed over after Rui Patricio saved smartly from his header on the stroke of half-time. City nearly doubled their lead early in the second half but Patricio was again impressive, making a fingertip save from a Kevin De Bruyne shot and pushing away a Mahrez effort.

But incredibly, Wolves were level just after the hour mark when Coady headed in Joao Moutinho's free-kick that was clipped into the box. City upped the pressure and reclaimed the lead with 10 minutes remaining. Wolves failed to cut out a Kyle



TURIN: Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo prepares to shoot and score the third goal during the Italian Serie A football match Juventus vs Spezia on Tuesday at the Juventus stadium in Turin. —AFP

Walker had earlier called on the league authorities to clarify their position. "This is an act of God, there's no way they (Torino) can play, and the league needs to get their ideas straight," Gravina suggested. "Imagine if a team decides to go ahead and break their quarantine order, it would be breaking the law," he said.

Yesterday, the Italian football league announced that a Serie A match between Juventus and Napoli

abandoned in October following an outbreak of coronavirus has been rescheduled for March 17. Napoli failed to turn up to the October 4 fixture after being ordered not to travel by local health authorities following two cases of COVID-19 in their team. The club was handed a 3-0 defeat and a one-point deduction, but in December won an appeal at the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI), the highest level of sporting justice in Italy.

Man City equal unbeaten record in 4-1 Wolves demolition

MANCHESTER: Manchester City equaled their club record of 28 games unbeaten on Tuesday, hammering Wolverhampton 4-1 to open up a gaping 15-point lead at the top of the Premier League. Pep Guardiola shuffled his pack at the Etihad against the team who did the league double against them last season as he maintained his club's assault on an unprecedented quadruple.

The champions-elect were made to sweat after Conor Coady cancelled out an early own goal from Leander Dendoncker but two late goals from Gabriel Jesus and a Riyad Mahrez strike sealed the three points. City's 28-match unbeaten run in all competitions equals their run from April to December 2017 and they are red-hot favorites to wrap up a third Premier League title in four years.

The victory was their 21st in a row and their 15th straight Premier League win. City have not trailed for a single minute in any of their past 19 Premier League games — equaling Arsenal's record set in 1998/99. Guardiola hailed his "fantastic team" but said his only focus was on the next game, against cross-town rivals Manchester United, who are City's nearest challengers. "After 1-1 we suffered but we created lots of chances in the end," he told BT Sport.

Sancho fires Dortmund into German Cup semis

BERLIN: England winger Jadon Sancho hit the winning goal as Borussia Dortmund marched into the semi-finals of the German Cup with a 1-0 win at Borussia Moenchengladbach on Tuesday. Sancho slotted home the winner after the visitors launched a counter-attack from their own area in the second half of the quarter-final at Borussia Park. Dortmund finished with 10 men when midfielder Mahmoud Dahoud was sent off in added time for a second booking. "We fought hard right up to the last minute," Dortmund captain Marco Reus told Sky.

"That must be our base now, to come on the field with a different energy," he added, ahead of Saturday's Bundesliga match at Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich. "Not everything is working brilliantly, but we still didn't concede a goal. That's very important for us."

It was a frustrating night for Gladbach head coach Marco Rose against his future employers. Gladbach have lost all four games, including a 2-0 Champions League defeat by Manchester City, since it was announced Rose will leave at the end of the season to coach Dortmund. "It was the one mistake that led to the defeat and I have to compliment the team on their performance," said Rose.

Both sides had first-half chances and a goal disallowed. Gladbach striker Marcus Thuram was flagged offside after firing the ball into the Dortmund net just before half-time. Dortmund striker Erling Braut Haaland then beat home goalkeeper Tobias Sippel on 53 minutes but VAR spotted the Norwegian had fouled Gladbach defender Rami Bensebaini in the build-up.



MONCHENGLADBACH: (From left) Dortmund's English midfielder Jadon Sancho, Dortmund's Norwegian forward Erling Braut Haaland and Dortmund's English midfielder Jude Bellingham react after the German Cup (DFB Pokal) quarter-final football match between Borussia Moenchengladbach and Borussia Dortmund in Moenchengladbach, western Germany, on Tuesday. —AFP

With an hour gone, Dortmund goalkeeper Marvin Hitz pulled off a stunning save to push a thundering shot by Bensebaini around the post. Dortmund got the breakthrough when they scored with a quick break from their own area. Defender Nico Schulz dribbled the ball away from the penalty box, linking up with Haaland and then Reus whose pass freed Sancho to fire home inside the post on 66 minutes.

However, the goalscorer was subdued with his celebrations and immediately limped off with a thigh injury. Dortmund coach Edin Terzic said Sancho came off as a precaution ahead of Saturday's match with Bayern. Haaland had the



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's Brazilian striker Gabriel Jesus (left) scores his team's fourth goal during the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Wolverhampton Wanderers at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on Tuesday. —AFP

chance to put the result beyond doubt when he again got away from the Gladbach defence late on, but Sippel saved his shot.

Dahoud was sent off for clattering Bensebaini, having already fouled the Algerian in the first half. Gladbach came within a whisker of a last-gasp equalizer when Stefan Lainer's shot flew just wide moments before the whistle. Holders Bayern Munich were knocked out on penalties in the second round by second-tier Holstein Kiel. Tuesday's other quarter-final was postponed as second-tier club Jahn Regensburg went into quarantine after a COVID-19 outbreak before their home tie against Werder Bremen. —AFP

What is even more astonishing is that they started the season slowly, with many commentators forecasting the closest Premier League title race for years. Instead, Guardiola's men are turning the race into a procession. —AFP

News in brief

Arteta dismisses Barca speculation

LONDON: Mikel Arteta says he is fully focused on doing "much better" at Arsenal after he was linked with the Barcelona manager's job. Reports surfaced in Spain this week claiming presidential candidate Joan Laporta was eyeing a move for Gunners boss Arteta if he won the race to return to Barca. It was during his previous spell in the role that Laporta appointed Pep Guardiola as the head coach and ushered in an era of sustained success. Arteta went on to work under Guardiola at Manchester City and took over as Arsenal manager in December 2019. —AFP

Schalke name new coach

BERLIN: Bundesliga crisis club Schalke yesterday named Dimitrios Grammozis as their fifth head coach this season in the wake of a mass clean-out at the weekend. The 42-year-old Greek-German has signed a contract until June 2022 and inherits a team rooted to the bottom of the table and nine points from safety with only 11 games left. Schalke are in chaos after previous coach Christian Gross, sports director Jochen Schneider and team coordinator Sascha Riether were all sacked on Sunday amid reports of a players revolt. —AFP

Overseas fans at Olympics

TOKYO: Tokyo Olympics organizers will decide this month whether to allow overseas fans, the Games president said yesterday, while the number of spectators allowed in venues will be set by April. Tokyo 2020 chief Seiko Hashimoto told reporters that the safety of Japanese citizens "is the priority", after holding talks with top officials from the International Olympic and Paralympic Committees, the Japanese government and the Tokyo metropolitan government. —AFP

Pele gets COVID vaccine

SAO PAULO: Brazilian football great Pele, 80, received a COVID-19 vaccine Tuesday, a moment he described as "unforgettable" while urging people not to let down their guard against the deadly virus. "Today was an unforgettable day, I received the vaccine!" the man considered one of the greatest footballers of all time wrote on his Instagram account. The message included a photo of Pele wearing a mask and giving a thumbs-up while he received his shot. —AFP



Matches on TV (Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE	
West Bromwich Albion v Everton	21:00
beIN Sports	
Fulham v Tottenham Hotspur	21:00
beIN Sports	
Liverpool v Chelsea	23:15
beIN Sports	
ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE	
Parma Calcio 1913 v Internazionale Milano	22:45
beIN Sports HD 3	

Agar shines as Australia down Black Caps

WELLINGTON: Spinner Ashton Agar produced the best bowling performance in Australia's Twenty20 international history in a 64-run win over New Zealand in Wellington yesterday. Agar's match-turning six for 30, including three in one over, derailed a New Zealand fightback as Australia avoided a series loss in the third Twenty20 international.

Under-fire skipper Aaron Finch hit 69, his best T20 international score for more than two years, and Glenn Maxwell smashed 70 from 31 balls. The result leaves the five-match series at 2-1 in New Zealand's favour with two games to go. Finch said the Australians, who have rested stars such as David Warner, Steve Smith and Mitchell Starc for the New Zealand tour, were still targeting a series win. "To keep improving is all we can ask at the moment and we're still alive in the series," he said.

Australia finished their 20 overs at 208 for four after losing the toss and being asked to bat. In reply, New Zealand were bundled out for 144 in 17.1 overs thanks to Agar's heroics. "Once I started to have the courage to toss the ball up a little bit I got something out of it," he said. "That was a good lesson I can take out of today moving forward."

Only four players have taken six wickets in a T20 international before, none of them from Australia. In the face of the Australian onslaught, the Black Caps lacked the swagger of the opening two matches, with shell-shocked all-rounder Jimmy Neesham



WELLINGTON: Australian players celebrate their win during the third Twenty20 cricket match between New Zealand and Australia in Wellington yesterday. — AFP

conceding 28 runs in a single over as Maxwell ran riot. "It was an all-round performance from them that was outstanding and it's important for us that we move on quickly," New Zealand captain Kane Williamson said.

The focus ahead of the match was Finch's poor form. Critics including former great Mark Waugh had questioned Finch's place in the team but Australia selector George Bailey this week insisted Finch would remain captain for the T20 World Cup in

India later this year. The Australian captain was lucky to avoid an LBW dismissal on the first ball he faced.

But Finch responded to the close shave with controlled aggression, using his feet and attacking the ball to forge an 83-run partnership with Josh Philippe, who made a well-crafted 43. Finch repaid Bailey's faith with his highest score in T20 internationals since July 2018, including a 43-ball half century that was his first in more than a year.

Maxwell also shook off a lean spell bringing up a 25-ball half century. "It was pretty ugly at the start but once I was able to get a bit of a read of the wicket I was able to clear the rope and hit to the fence a few times," he said. Opener Martin Gupthill's 43 and a Devon Conway knock of 38 were highlights for New Zealand. But Agar snuffed out hopes of a home victory with six consecutive wickets that took the New Zealanders from 109 for four to 144 for nine. — AFP

Kohli says 'too much noise' about Test spin pitches

AHMEDABAD: India skipper Virat Kohli yesterday fuelled controversy over spin pitches that have dominated the Test series against England, saying criticism was "unfair." "There is always too much noise and too much conversation about spinning tracks," Kohli said on the eve of the fourth and final Test in Ahmedabad. India lead the series 2-1 after a crushing two-day, 10-wicket win on a viciously turning pitch at the same stadium in the day-night third Test last week. Some pundits said the pitch was not up to standard and even England coach Chris Silverwood said it had pushed England's batsmen to "our extremes".

Kohli called for balance in reporting on the state of the wicket. He said that if the media presented "views which say that it is unfair to criticize spinning tracks then I think it will be a balanced conversation. The unfortunate bit is that everyone sort of plays along that narrative and just keeps making it news till the time it is relevant." Kohli insisted that when India lost a Test in New Zealand last year in three days, "none of our people wrote about the pitch, it was all about how India played badly in New Zealand and none of the pitches were criticized."

Spinners claimed 28 of the 30 wickets to fall in the third Test with the pink ball, used for day-night games, skidding off the surface. Kohli insisted that the quick finish was due to "bizarre" batting by both teams. "If you make a cricket ball helping the bowlers a focus, or the pitch helping the bowlers a focus, you are not really reading the game properly," said Kohli. "It's just the case of the wicket having more pace and bounce and I don't think the red ball is going to change that whatsoever. I still maintain the result in the last game was purely down to bizarre batting."

India need a win or a draw to book a clash with New Zealand in the inaugural World Test Championship final. A win for England would put Australia into the decider at Lord's in June. But Kohli said Test final was "just a distraction." "If you want me to be brutally honest, it might work for teams who are not that motivated to play Test cricket," said Kohli. "I think for teams like us it's just a distraction when you start thinking of the World Test Championship." — AFP



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