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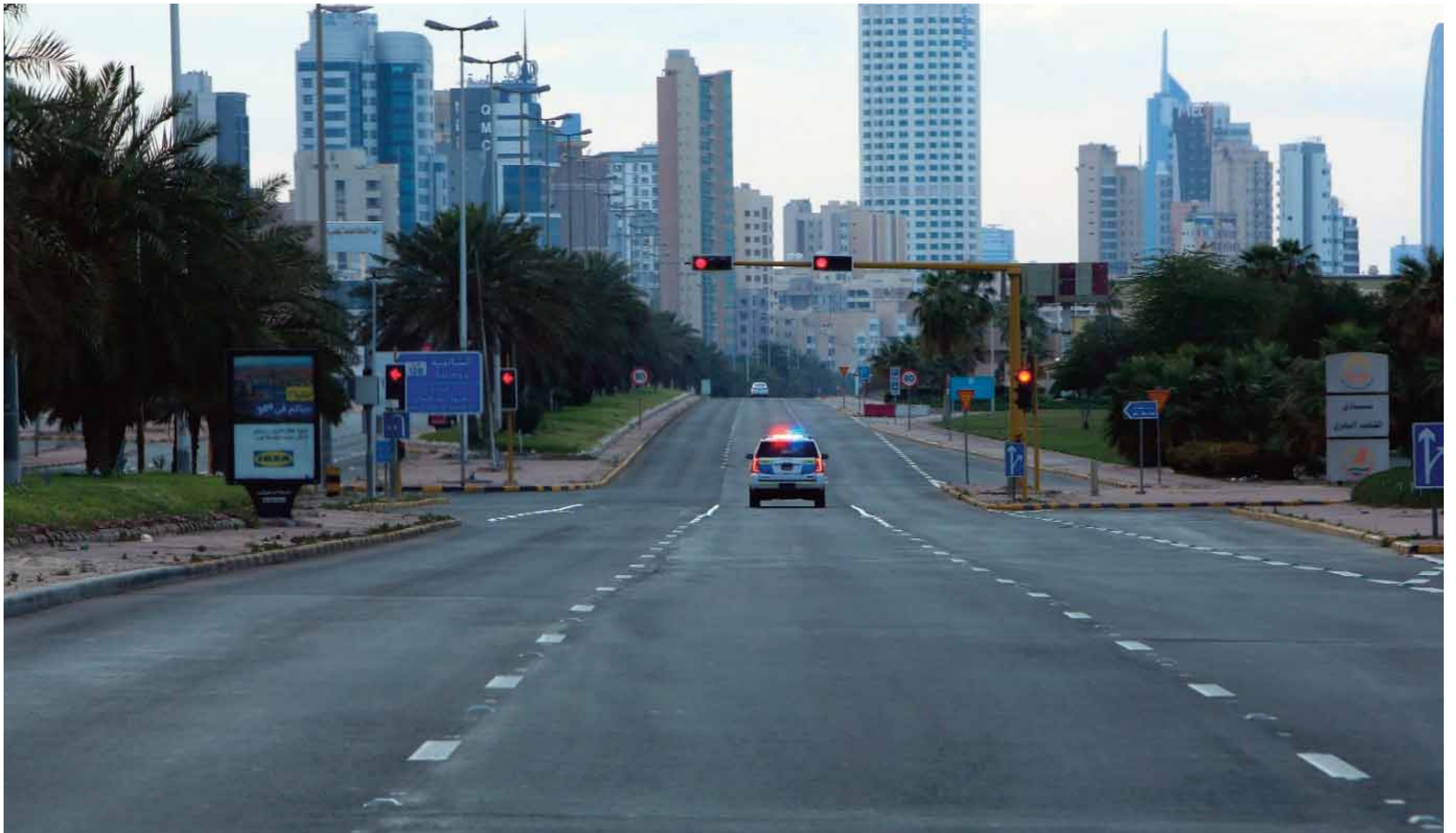


Kuwait Times
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for the **COVID-19 vaccine**

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Kuwait goes into partial curfew Sunday

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Local



AUTHORITIES TACKLE PROBLEM OF UNDERGROUND GAMBLING IN KUWAIT

By Ben Garcia

Kuwait police arrested several expatriates involved in an illegal gambling scheme in Mahboula recently. The men engaged in a variety of games including running numbers, poker and other card games organized at an apartment in Mahboula. They also took bets from gamblers across the country, especially for the numbers lottery.

Gambling and playing the lottery or numbers is a popular pastime in many Asian countries but is illegal in all forms in Kuwait. At the gambling location in Mahboula, a Filipino man reportedly ran the operation, relying on several associates to bring in clientele.

"I heard about the raid. I had long stopped associating with them because I was really afraid this will happen one day. I wasn't wrong," a former associate of those arrested told Kuwait Times on the condition of anonymity.

"It's a small-time numbers game, but the twist is that they let people believe it is Thai lottery and the winning numbers are from Thailand. However, they were only doing the draw of the numbers in Kuwait, managed by the Filipino," claimed the source.

The so-called Thai lottery is widely known in Kuwait and

the region, despite being illegal in Kuwait, and is popular among many nationalities. Besides the lotto, there were other gambling activities at the Mahboula den, including playing cards (locally known to Filipinos as lucky 9 and tong-its), along with mahjongg (a tile-based game). These were played separately with bets ranging from KD 1, KD 5, KD 10 and KD 20.

"I heard that before the raid took place, the Filipinos there had beaten up the Egyptian haris. In retaliation, the haris, who was playing cards with them, reported their illegal activities to the authorities. That is the reason why a few hours later, police came and arrested the Filipinos," the former associate added. At least 20 Filipinos were reportedly arrested during the raid in Mahboula. Kuwait Times could not verify the authenticity of the former associate's narrative, but he said he used to roam around Fahaheel, Salmiya and Kuwait City in search for would-be bettors.

A female gambler from Salmiya said she was encouraged to bet for the lottery twice a month. "I used to place a bet for the Thai lottery twice a month, as they announce winners on the 15th and towards the end of every month. I won several times already in the mixed numbers," she said. For the Thai lottery, a bettor can select three num-

bers randomly from zero to nine - if they get the correct three numbers (in order), they will win KD 400. In the event that all numbers are present but are not in order, they win only KD 80. Bets of KD 1 and KD 5 can be placed.

These illegal number games are popular not only among the Filipino community, but also in the Indian, Nepali and Bangladeshi communities. People can be found placing bets in open parking lots in Mirqab, Jleeb, Kuwait City, Salmiya and other areas of Kuwait.

"We have a similar numbers game (matka) and most of those lured to it are low-income workers," said Madu, an Indian expat.

Gambling in Kuwait is strictly prohibited and any person caught gambling will be arrested and deported. Despite this, underground gambling activities are regularly uncovered by authorities including betting on dog fights, underground poker games, lottery or numbers betting and betting on sporting matches.

"I think they are lured by the easy money. Also, in this pandemic, they need some extra cash. Perhaps that is why they are into it," Madu added.

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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Local

Sarah Malallah

Youngest Kuwaiti to win international piano competitions

Photo shows Kuwaiti pianist Sarah Maitham Malallah playing the piano at the Lina Bakir for Music and Art Consultancies Academy.

By Sahar Moussa

Sarah Maitham Malallah is the youngest Kuwaiti pianist to win major competitions outside Kuwait. The six-year-old girl won four competitions from Sept 2020 till Feb 2021. Sarah won first place in the following three countries, Azerbaijan at the Karabakh International Culture & Art Contest in 2020, in Kazakhstan at the II International Music Festival "Astana Stars" in 2020, in Poland and Germany at the Star Bridge International Contest in February 2021 in the under-6 category (baby) and she won second place in Turkey at the Russian III International Competition – Ca Ave Musica. Her talent and enthusiasm caught the attention of her piano teacher Lina Bakir. Bakir is a Kuwaiti pianist who graduated from Queens University in the US. Her love for children and music encouraged her to open the Lina Bakir for Music and Art Consultancies Academy, where Sarah studied hard to win international competitions. Sarah's success has brought honor to Kuwait and hope to children her age in this pandemic. The academy's high standards proved to be pioneering for graduate children of all ages and nationalities. Kuwait Times met Sarah and Bakir at the academy to discuss the importance of classical music in Kuwait. Some excerpts.

Kuwait Times: Sarah, at what age did you start taking piano lessons?

Sarah Malallah: I started taking piano classes at the age of five.

KT: Who encouraged you to play the piano?

Sarah: My parents noticed that I was musically-inclined. I love to sing and enjoy music.

KT: Why did you choose to play the piano?

Sarah: Because it is a soft and elegant instrument.

KT: What do you want to be when you grow up?

Sarah: I want to be an influential musician.

KT: Were you scared when you entered the competitions?

Sarah: No, I was not; I gave all my effort so people could enjoy what I was playing.

KT: Did you know you were going to win?

Sarah: I did not, but I practiced hard. When I heard the news I was surprised, and I felt so proud of myself.

KT: Who is your favorite composer?

Sarah: I really like Bach.

KT: Do you want to learn to play another instrument?

Sarah: No, because I already fell in love with one (piano).

KT: Did learning the piano affect your grades in school?

Sarah: I am good at school, and piano made me even better.

KT: How do you feel knowing that you are the youngest Kuwaiti to win in international competitions?

Sarah: I am very happy and honored.

'Lina Bakir, the piano teacher behind Sarah's success'

Kuwait Times: Lina, how old were you when you started playing the piano? Where did you learn it?

Lina Bakir: I started playing the piano in Kuwait at the age of five.

KT: How long have you been teaching the piano? What inspired you? Do you play any other instruments? Who is your favorite musician/composer?



Photo shows Kuwaiti pianist Sarah Maitham Malallah playing the piano and Kuwaiti pianist teacher Lina Bakir posing at the Lina Bakir for Music and Art Consultancies Academy.

— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Local

Bakir: I have been teaching the piano for the past 37 years in Kuwait. I always wanted to teach the piano and have my own school. I always knew from when I was only 10 years old that I wanted to teach and reach out. I love being on big stages, produce shows and perform. My voice is my second instrument and my favorite composers are Rachmaninoff and Bach.

KT: In your opinion, what do you think makes a good pianist?

Bakir: First and foremost, you must have the passion and love for the piano. Secondly, dedication, seriousness and good work ethics. In addition, of course practice, practice and practice.

Students that won international awards

1. Rawan Behbehani was the first student to win a competition. It was in Nice, France at the Concours International De Piano Cote D'Azur in 2017. Her first win was at the age of eight, when she took second place.
2. Dalal Esmaeel (second place), Jana Al-Kazemi (third place) and Kadi Dashti (certificate) won at the Polish Embassy Competition in Kuwait.
3. Dalal Esmaeel won two competitions in Kazakhstan at the II International Music Festival "Astana Stars" in 2020 and in Azerbaijan at the Karabakh - International Culture & Art Contest in 2020, where she won first prize in both competitions.
4. Roqayah Talal Dashti in Poland and Germany at Star Bridge International Contest in February 2021 won second place in the junior category (10-12 years old).
5. Noora Tin won an honorable award at the 2021 American Music Talent Competition for extraordinary and inspiring performances.

KT: When and why did you open your academy? Starting from which age can children start taking classes?

Bakir: The academy opened five years ago after the encouragement of my family and friends. This encouragement came from my teaching and concert production. I always loved to see kids achieve, not only locally but also internationally. We start teaching the piano for students at the age of three, and for sure we do take grownups aged 30 to 50 if they have the passion to learn. There is no age limit to learn music. After all, music is art, love, life and a stress reliever.

KT: What differentiates your academy from others?

Bakir: We do not just teach notes; we want to build the appreciation and enjoyment of classical music in the young Kuwaiti generation. We build respect, character and independence. We build strong foundations by utilizing my personal methodology. Once it is mastered, we move them to more challenging classical pieces. I am a big believer that teaching in a fun and engaging manner keeps young Kuwaitis connected, and at the same time we want to instill the discipline of learning that comes along with it to master



A group photo shows Kuwaiti pianist Sarah Maitham Malallah (fourth left), Kuwaiti pianist teacher Lina Bakir (Second left) and other students posing at the Lina Bakir for Music and Art Consultancies Academy.

the piano.

KT: How do piano classes benefit kids in general?

Bakir: Playing the piano increases focus and attention. It makes them excel in school and improves intelligence. Besides, it is a fun activity – it enhances children's reasoning skills. It puts them above their peers and is a stress reliever.

KT: What roadblocks did you face when starting out?

Bakir: There were no specialized piano teachers in Kuwait and it was difficult to get a work permit for our teachers because the government considers them as regular music teachers. The second roadblock was that it was difficult to hire specialized piano teachers, because Kuwait is not known to appreciate classical music.

KT: How do you get piano students to become competitors?

Bakir: When we start teaching them, we observe particular students who stand out more than others. Those students who have passion, dedication and excellent work ethics will be put on an advanced program to be prepared to compete in competitions.



KT: How did you know that Sarah has the talent to compete?

Bakir: When I started teaching her the piano, I knew there was something unique about her. She always came prepared to her classes. Moreover, her focus and discipline showed me her potential to become a competitor.

KT: What do you think about the music industry in Kuwait? Is it getting adequate support? If not, why?

Bakir: Concerning classical music, it is still very immature here, even though there are Kuwaiti clients who truly enjoy and appreciate classical music. That is why we focus on enhancing and advancing this industry at our academy by educating the younger Kuwaiti generation. The government's support is not adequate for classical music, because it does not believe that classical music is important for the advancement of the younger Kuwaiti generation.

KT: How can we encourage children to play music? What does Kuwait need in order to reach a global stage?

Bakir: The media should play a bigger role in promoting the importance of classical music to young generations. Also by promoting the success of young Kuwaiti children who have achieved local and international success. There are instant steps and measures that the Kuwaiti government needs to take action on – first to establish scholarship programs for Kuwaitis to study classical music overseas. Second, give financial support for Kuwaitis to compete in international competitions. Furthermore, a teacher must hold a master's degree in classical music and be specialized in a specific instrument.

KT: What advice would you give to children or someone who wants to start playing the piano?

Bakir: Definitely go for it – it is the most beautiful gift. Also, patience, patience, patience. Magic happens only to those who wait and see how their hard work pays off at the end. Music is easy to learn but takes a lifetime to master.



Small amounts of micro algal or algae blooms are seen on the beaches in Kuwait City and near Salmiya in these recent photos. Algae blooms occur in Kuwait's waters year round. Such blooms can be, under certain circumstances, harmful to marine life and to the environment. Toxic and biomass blooms in Kuwait's shoreline and coastal waters have been linked to high rates of fish deaths. Such blooms typically occur in spring and summer, during warmer temperatures.

— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Photo Feature

Local



Local

Kuwait Amir departs to US for regular medical tests

Sheikh Hamad recalls sacrifices on liberation anniversary



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is seen off at the airport. — Amiri Diwan photos



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is seen off by His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah left Kuwait for the US yesterday for regular medical tests. His Highness the Amir was seen off by His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal

Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and senior state officials. — KUNA

Manpower authority assists 54 Filipina workers



KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Manpower (PAM) helped finalize the procedure for 54 Filipina workers who were staying at the shelter for expatriate workers, to allow them to leave back to their home country soon. PAM stated that this step comes to protect the workers' human and labor rights.

Arab FMs laud Kuwait's efforts in achieving unity

CAIRO: Arab foreign ministers extolled endeavors made by Kuwait to achieve the Gulf and Arab unity and solidarity. The

Kuwaiti efforts were previously led by His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and were completed by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, said a statement by the foreign ministers council of the Arab League after the regular 155th session held in Cairo on Wednesday. These endeavors were crowned with the recent Arab reconciliation, it said. The statement pointed out that the outcomes made in this matter would serve the Arab issues, and unify Arab visions and stances to overcome challenges facing the region. — KUNA

News in brief

Boutiqaat funds unfrozen

KUWAIT: Attorney General Dirar Al-Asousi decided to unfreeze the funds and financial accounts of "Boutiqaat" with all local banks. The decision came after more than eight months since the funds were first ordered frozen in July 2020. The Attorney General requested that the Central Bank of Kuwait take the necessary action to inform all local banks and regulating authorities to implement the aforementioned decision.



Kuwait oil drops to \$62.03 pb: KPC

KUWAIT: Kuwait oil lost two cents during Wednesday's trading sessions to reach \$62.03 per barrel (pb), Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Benchmark Brent crude rose \$1.37 to \$64.07 pb and West Texas Intermediate jumped \$1.53 to \$61.28 pb.



Local

Kuwait imposes 12-hour nightly curfew as coronavirus cases jump

Government renews ban on entry of foreigners

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The council of ministers imposed a 12-hour nightly curfew from 5:00 pm to 5:00 am for one month starting on March 7 as the number of coronavirus cases has increased sharply with the health ministry recording a record high number yesterday.

At an extraordinary meeting yesterday, the council of ministers also extended a ban on the entry of foreigners into Kuwait "until a further notice," government spokesman Tareq Al-Mazrem said yesterday.

The council of ministers meanwhile allowed salons and health clubs to reopen during the day after a one-month closure but kept restaurants and cafes closed except for drive-through and delivery services. The cabinet also ordered all parks and public gardens closed in addition to shutting all public seating places. It allowed taxis to carry only two passengers.

During the curfew period, the cabinet allowed people to go to Fajr, Maghreb and Isha prayers at mosques only by walking. During the curfew hours, pharmacies, medical stores, cooperative societies and supermarkets to continue operation only through delivery services.

The health ministry yesterday reported 1,716 new coronavirus cases, the largest daily haul so far, in addition to eight deaths. Kuwait reported 7,949 cases in December, which rose to 14,673 cases in January and jumped to 25,595 cases in Feb-



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

ruary, according to official figures. The ministry of health reported as many as 5,645 new cases just in the first four days of March. In the past week, the number of cases rose by 30 percent to 8,473 cases over the previous month.

Mazrem called on the public to comply more firmly with health conditions and said that during the day, people should leave homes only when necessary. The cabinet statement said

that the partial lockdown will be evaluated at the end of the one month period, hinting at a possible extension.

Asked if the sharp increase in the number of cases was because of the discovery of a new strain, Mazrem said that health authorities have reported a new strain but did not explain. The council of ministers asked the interior ministry to implement the curfew and assigned the national guard forces to assist.

Kuwait sets new daily COVID cases record with 1,716

KUWAIT: Kuwait set a new record in daily COVID-19 cases for the fourth straight day yesterday, after the Ministry of Health announced that 1,716 people tested positive over the previous 24 hours, while eight patients died over the same period. Total cases rose to 196,497 and deaths to 1,105 as of yesterday. Kuwait had reported 1,409 new cases on Wednesday, 1,341 on Tuesday and 1,179 on Monday. Meanwhile, the number of patients of hospital climbed to 12,071 as of yesterday, including 167 in intensive care units; a notable increase from 157 ICU patients on Monday. Health workers took 11,208 swab tests over the past 24 hours, ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said yesterday, adding that the total number of swab tests taken since the start of the pandemic reached 1,822,389. The ministry had earlier revealed that 1,125 patients have recovered over the same period, raising total recoveries to 183,321. Dr Sanad went on to urge the public to abide by health precautions, mainly social distancing, in order to limit the spread of the virus.



Kuwait to receive 7th Pfizer vaccine batch next week

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health announced it will receive the seventh batch of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine early next week. Kuwait signed a direct deal with the US pharmaceutical company, Pfizer, to receive the vaccine, assistant undersecretary at the ministry Abdullah Al-Bader said yesterday. Vaccination and committing to safety measures is the only way to fight the spread of the coronavirus, he noted. The ministry's official spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad had previously announced approving 15 health centers across the country for the vaccinations. — KUNA



KUWAIT: People arrive to be vaccinated at Al-Naseem vaccination center in Al-Jahra Governorate, 40 kilometers north of Kuwait City, yesterday. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat





'Everything will be ok':
Myanmar mourns teen
killed protesting

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Lives of youth 'in jeopardy' in Middle East, North Africa



HONG KONG: A supporter plays a violin as others line up outside West Kowloon court in Hong Kong yesterday during court appearances by dozens of dissidents charged with subversion in the largest use yet of Beijing's sweeping new national security law. — AFP

Dozens of Hong Kong dissidents sent to jail

Verdict reignites international alarm over crackdown on dissent in HK

HONG KONG: Dozens of Hong Kong dissidents charged with subversion were sent to jail yesterday at the end of a marathon bail hearing that reignited international alarm over China's crackdown on dissent in the finance hub. Police charged 47 of the city's best-known democracy activists 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 wide cross-section of Hong Kong's opposition, from veteran former pro-democracy lawmakers to academics, lawyers, social workers and youth activists. What followed was an extraordinary four-day bail hearing that illustrated the profound changes Beijing's security law has begun making to the financial hub's legal traditions.

Yesterday evening, after hours of arguments from prosecutors and defense, chief magistrate Victor So ordered 32 members of the group to be returned to custody. "The court does not find it has sufficient ground to believe that you will not continue to commit acts that endanger national security," he told the court. The remaining 15 defendants were granted bail but the prosecution immediately appealed. As a result they were also ordered back to custody but will be allowed to take their case to the city's High Court within the next 48 hours.

Anger outside court

Emotional scenes erupted outside the court yesterday evening as news of the decision filtered out to dozens of relatives and supporters. "They want to silence all voices they don't like," a woman who gave her first name as Elsa and identified herself as the step-mother of defendant Hendrick Lui, told reporters. "These are the voices of justice that Hong Kong people need. But the evil regime is trying to cover their mouths, silence them and put them behind bars," she added.

Some of the city's most prominent Beijing critics will now remain in custody for months as prosecutors prepare for a mass trial in what one analyst has described as the largest subversion prosecution since the aftermath of the deadly 1989 Tiananmen crackdown.

The ruling also cements how the security law overturns the presumption of bail for non-violent crimes. Under the new law—which Beijing imposed on the city last June—defendants will only get bail if they can persuade a court they no longer pose any kind of national security risk.

Almost all have failed and the handful of bail requests granted so far have been immediately appealed by Hong Kong's prosecutors. Reporting limitations forbid detailing the minutiae of the legal arguments over the last four days after judge So declined a request to lift media restrictions.

Hospital visits

The alleged offence of those charged with subversion 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.

With so many arrested at once, the court struggled to deal with the caseload. The first day's hearing only ended in the small hours of the morning when one of the defendants collapsed.

Seven defendants had to be taken to hospital over the course of the hearing. Many complained of a lack of food, sleep, fresh clothes and showers. The length of the hearing—and the decision to bring charges despite the prosecution requesting a further three months to continue building their case—sparked criticism in some legal circles. "There is no reason at all to charge the defendants at this early stage," Johannes Chan, a law professor at the University of Hong Kong told AFP. "The only reason is to put them behind bars now." Jerome Cohen, a veteran expert on Chinese law at New York University, said the way the hearing was conducted risked damaging the reputation of the territory's independent judiciary. — AFP

International

Europeans drop plan to censure Iran at UN nuclear watchdog

Tehran hails European decision, says 'wisdom prevails'

VIENNA: European nations will not go ahead with a planned resolution criticizing Iran at this week's meeting of the UN nuclear watchdog, diplomatic sources said yesterday, as efforts were underway to revive an ailing 2015 deal between Tehran and world powers on its nuclear program.

France, Britain and Germany had planned to introduce a resolution at a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency's board of governors, with the support of the United States, criticizing Iran's suspension of some IAEA inspections. However, diplomats said the resolution, which had not yet been formally submitted, will now not be put forward.

The decision to hold off was taken "to give time to diplomacy", with one source pointing to "initiatives undertaken by (IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi) and signs of "good faith" on the Iranian side. Grossi announced yesterday that Iran had accepted holding a series of meetings with the UN nuclear watchdog in order to "clarify a number of outstanding issues". US President Joe Biden has said he is willing to bring the United States back to the landmark 2015 deal, known as the JCPOA. It has been unraveling since Biden's predecessor Donald Trump pulled the US out of the agreement in 2018. Iran welcomed the European decision not to go ahead with a resolution. "Today's developments can keep open the path of diplomacy initiated by Iran and the IAEA," foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said.

'Wisdom prevails'

Grossi said "a technical meeting which will take place in Iran at the beginning of April" as part of a new process aimed at clarifying queries the IAEA has raised about the possible presence of nuclear material at undeclared sites. He said it was his "intention to try to come to a satisfactory outcome for all of this in time for the next regular session of the board of governors" in June. The Iranian ambassador to the IAEA, Kazem Gharib Abadi, tweeted yesterday that "due to extensive diplomatic consultations ... a glimpse of hope is looming to prevent unnecessary tension".

"Wisdom prevails," he added. Earlier this week a report in the Iranian Vatan-e-Emrouz newspaper said Tehran had "temporarily suspended the production of uranium metal on the order of the President (Hassan Rouhani)". The government in Tehran has not disputed the accuracy of the report.

The production of uranium metal goes against a 15-year ban in the JCPOA on "producing or acquiring plutonium or uranium metals or their alloys". However, Iran says it has the right to breach this and a series of other constraints on its nuclear activities laid down in the deal in retaliation for the US withdrawal from the accord and subsequent imposition of sanctions.

Iran says the uranium metal production is part of its plans to provide advanced fuel for a research reactor in Tehran. But the topic is sensitive because uranium metal can be used as a



VIENNA: Rafael Grossi (right), Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), speaks during a press conference at the agency's headquarters in Vienna yesterday. —AFP

component in nuclear weapons.

Late last month Iran suspended some IAEA inspections as US sanctions had not yet been lifted, described by Grossi as a "huge loss" for the agency. However, after two days of talks between Grossi and Iranian officials in Tehran, a three-month arrangement was agreed under which Iran pledged to keep recordings "of some activities and monitoring equipment" and hand them over to the IAEA as and when US sanctions are lifted.

Iran had threatened to suspend that arrangement in the event of a critical resolution at the IAEA. European states and the US criticized Iran's suspension of inspections in their statements to the IAEA's board this week. "How does ending such monitoring serve Iran's goal of re-establishing confidence in its nuclear programs and intentions?" asked US Charge d'Affaires Louis L Bono. "These steps are counterproductive, and Iran should reverse them," he added. —AFP

UK police rule out probe into 1995 Diana interview

LONDON: UK police yesterday said they would not launch a formal probe into claims of underhand tactics by a BBC journalist to secure a 1995 television interview with the late princess Diana. The November 1995 interview was watched by a record 22.8 million people and saw Diana detail her collapsing marriage to heir-to-the-throne Prince Charles. Famously, she said "there were three people" in her marriage—her, Charles and his long-time lover Camilla Parker-Bowles—and also that she had been unfaithful. But rumors have swirled ever since about how reporter Martin Bashir secured the interview.

London's Metropolitan Police, however, said it was "not appropriate to begin a criminal investigation" into allegations of wrong-doing. Commander Alex Murray said detectives had received information about the interview, which had been assessed by specialists, lawyers and prosecutors. "No further action will be taken," he said in a statement. "In this matter, as in any other, should any significant new evidence come to light we will assess it." Last November, the BBC announced its own



Princess Diana

investigation, headed by a former Supreme Court judge, after calls from Diana's brother, Charles Spencer. Diana's eldest son, Prince William, called the independent probe "a step in the right direction".

The princess was killed in a 1997 car crash in Paris, a year after she and Charles formally divorced. Charles and Camilla married in 2005. Spencer has alleged that Bashir, who went on to work on US television networks, faked documents to persuade his sister to take part in the interview.

Others reports in recent months allege that Bashir claimed members of the princess' own staff were being paid to spy on her. Bashir, who returned to the BBC as religious affairs editor, has not responded to the claims. —AFP

20 migrants dead after thrown into sea off Djibouti

NAIROBI: At least 20 people drowned after smugglers threw dozens of migrants overboard during a crossing between Djibouti and Yemen, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said yesterday. "Survivors believe at least 20 people have been killed. There are still some unaccounted for. Five bodies washed up on-shore," said Yvonne Ndege, IOM regional spokesperson for the East and Horn of Africa, said.

At least 200 migrants, including children, were aboard the vessel when it left Oulebi in Djibouti in the early hours of Wednesday for Yemen, survivors told the IOM. About thirty minutes into the voyage across the Gulf of Aden the smugglers panicked, survivors said, throwing around 80 people overboard before turning the vessel back toward Djibouti. "Of the 80 people who were forced off, only 60 made it back to shore," Ndege said. Five bodies were recovered Wednesday and there are fears the death toll could still rise. —AFP

International

Lives of youth 'in jeopardy' in Middle East, North Africa

UN official: The situation resulted from conflict and fall of oil prices

AMMAN: A decade since Arab Spring protests rocked the Middle East and North Africa, many of its youth are in need and at risk, says the UN children's agency's regional director. "After 2011, the lives and futures of children and young people have been put in jeopardy," Ted Chaiban told AFP in an interview in the Jordanian capital Amman.

"This is a combined result of conflict and the fall of oil prices, which has narrowed opportunities for children and young people in the region." The MENA region counts 124 million people aged 10-24 — just over a quarter of the whole population.

Chaiban said there were 38 million children and adolescents requiring assistance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region—"the highest number of children in need in the world".

The region accounts for half of UNICEF's worldwide humanitarian response appeals—"a significant increase since 2011" due to the political and economic developments, he said. The region is also home to the world's worst youth unemployment rates — 25 percent in the Middle East, and 29 percent in North Africa—according to Chaiban. The jobless rates are higher for young females: 41 percent in the Middle East and 39 percent in North Africa.

'Tip of the iceberg'

The World Bank says the region will need to create 300 million new jobs by 2050, according to current demographic trends. Countries "will need to begin creating 800,000 jobs per month—starting right now—just to keep pace with new

workers entering the market", a World Bank official said in January.

From war-ravaged Libya to Syria and Yemen, the region has also been the scene of violence impacting thousands of young lives. Of 28,000 "grave violations" the UN documented against young people worldwide in 2019, almost half took place in just seven countries or territories in the MENA region, Chaiban said.

"This is an exponential increase in comparison to pre-2011 because of the conflicts in the region," he said. The UN considers the killing, maiming, sexual abuse or abduction of children, as well as their recruitment as child soldiers and denial of humanitarian access, among its definitions of "grave violations".

Figures for the region ballooned from more than 8,600 in 2017 to over 13,100 in 2019. "This figure is, however, the tip of the iceberg. The actual number of children killed and injured is likely to be much, much higher," said Juliette Touma, UNICEF's regional head of communications. The figures represent just "what the UN was able to verify through a very strict verification process".

'New relationship'

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitoring group, says more than 22,000 children have been killed in the country's civil war, which broke out a decade ago this month. The coronavirus pandemic has heaped further hardship on children from across the Middle East and North Africa, depriving 40 percent of their les-



A Syrian boy plays on a swing in a destroyed building in the rebel-held town of Douma, on the eastern outskirts of Damascus. A decade since Arab Spring protests rocked the Middle East and North Africa, many of its youth are in need and at risk, says the UN children's agency's regional director. —AFP

sons due to a lack of access to online learning, said UNICEF. "UNICEF is calling for schools around the region to reopen using shifts and appropriate safety and health measures," Chaiban said.

But, he said, there were some glimmers of hope. "More children are in school than ever before, more children are receiving their vaccines (against childhood diseases) and more children have access to clean water despite water scarcity," he said. Chaiban urged efforts "to reform the education sector around the region, to keep children and

young people engaged and equip them with the skills necessary to match the demands of the rapidly changing economy, market demands and jobs of the future".

But, he warned, "there is a crucial need for a new relationship between governments and young people". Children and young people must have "venues and space to express themselves, to raise their concerns freely and share their ideas in a constructive manner on issues of poverty, inequality, inequities and improved governance", he said. —AFP

Pope says he will visit Iraq as 'pilgrim of peace'

VATICAN CITY: On the eve of his historic trip to Iraq, Pope Francis paid tribute yesterday to those who have suffered from years of violence, saying he came as a "pilgrim of peace". In a video message, the 84-year-old offered his hand to "brothers and sisters of other religions", but also highlighted the heavy toll paid by Iraq's Christian communities, saying there had been "too many martyrs". "I long to meet you, to see your faces, to visit your land, ancient and extraordinary cradle of civilization," the pope said. "I come as a pilgrim, a penitent pilgrim to implore forgiveness and reconciliation from the Lord after years of war and terrorism."

"I come as a pilgrim of peace in search of fraternity, animated by the desire to pray together and to walk together, also with the brothers and sisters of other religions," he added. The pope, making his first foreign trip since the coronavirus pandemic swept Europe a year ago, will arrive in Iraq on Friday before embarking on a packed schedule of events through to Sunday. From central Baghdad to the Shiite shrine city of Najaf, welcome banners featuring his image and Arabic title "Baba al-Vatican" already dot the streets.

From Ur, the birthplace of the Prophet Abraham in the southern desert, to ravaged Christian towns in the north, roads are being paved and churches rehabilitated. Among the most extraordinary



NAJAF: A hoarding of Pope Francis and top Iraqi Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani is pictured in Iraq's holy city of Najaf ahead of the Pope's visit to Iraq, yesterday. —AFP

moments of the trip will be his one-on-one meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the highly reclusive cleric, who is a top religious authority for many of the world's Shiite Muslims.

Francis is fulfilling the dream of a predecessor, John Paul II, by visiting Iraq—despite a rampaging coronavirus epidemic and an upsurge in violence. The security challenges were highlighted Wednesday when a rocket attack hit a base hosting US-led coalition troops, which came after several weeks of escalating US-Iran tensions on Iraqi soil. The pope said on Wednesday he was determined not to "disappoint" the Iraqi people. But concerns over security and tight restrictions imposed to stop the spread of Covid-19 mean that most Iraqis will have to follow the trip on television. —AFP

Curfew in Nigerian town of abducted schoolgirls

KANO: A 24-hour curfew has been imposed in a northwestern Nigerian town and its market shut after violence marred the reunion of nearly 300 abducted schoolgirls with their parents, local residents said yesterday. The girls were abducted on Friday from their hostels by gunmen known locally as bandits, but were released early Tuesday after the latest mass kidnapping to target a school in Nigeria.

Violence erupted on Wednesday when the girls from Government Secondary School in Jangebe, Zamfara state were to be returned to their parents at a ceremony in the school's hall. They had been in the government's custody in Gusau, the state capital, receiving medical care.

"After the unrest yesterday a dust-to-dawn curfew was imposed and everybody was ordered to stay indoors," said Abubakar Zaki, a resident and father of two of the kidnapped girls. "But this morning after people had come out the DPO (Divisional Police Officer) went round, informing people the curfew has been extended to round-the-clock and asked everyone to return home," he told AFP. —AFP

International

Swiss to vote on 'burqa ban' plan Sunday amid mixed views

Government and parliament oppose a nationwide ban

GENEVA: Switzerland votes Sunday on whether to ban full facial coverings in public places, despite women in Islamic full-face veils being an exceptionally rare sight in Swiss streets.

Polls indicate a slim majority support the move, in a vote that comes after years of debate following similar bans in other European countries—and in some Muslim-majority states. The Swiss are voting on the publicly triggered proposal “Yes to a ban on full facial coverings”. It does not mention the burqa or the niqab—which leaves the eyes uncovered—but there is no doubt what the debate is about. Campaign posters reading “Stop radical Islam!” and “Stop extremism!”, featuring a woman in a black niqab, have been plastered around Swiss cities.

Rival posters read: “No to an absurd, useless and Islamophobic ‘anti-burqa’ law”.

The ban would mean that nobody could cover their face completely in public—whether in shops or the open countryside. There would be exceptions, including for places of worship. “It’s a question of

civilization. Free men and women present themselves with uncovered faces,” said Yes campaign spokesman Jean-Luc Addor, of the populist right-wing Swiss People’s Party (SVP).

“It is an extreme form of Islam,” he said. “Fortunately, there are not many” burqa-wearing women in Switzerland, he acknowledged, stressing though that “when a problem exists, we deal with it before it gets out of control.”

‘Mostly tourists’

The Yes camp remains ahead in the polls, but its comfortable lead in January shrank back in February surveys. The government and parliament oppose a nationwide ban. Their counter-proposal—automatically triggered if the initiative is rejected—would require people to show their faces to the authorities if necessary for identification, for example at borders. Fines of up to 10,000 Swiss francs (\$10,900, 9,040 euros) could be imposed on anyone who refused. Justice Minister Karin Keller-Sutter has stressed

that most women seen wearing full face veils are tourists. Under Switzerland’s system of direct democracy, referenda and popular votes occur every few months at the national, regional and local levels. Any topic can be put to a national vote as long as it gathers 100,000 signatures in the wealthy nation of 8.6 million people. The Egerkingen committee which brought forward the initiative is heavily backed by the SVP, but some liberal and left-leaning politicians have joined the Yes campaign in the name of protecting women’s rights.

‘Useless, racist, sexist’

However, many feminist organizations oppose the ban. “Besides being useless, this text is racist and sexist,” said Ines El-Shikh, spokeswoman for the Purple Headscarves feminist Muslim women’s group.

“In 2021, it is unacceptable for the Swiss constitution to have an article proscribing or prohibiting women from wearing whatever they want,” she said. “A burqa ban is not done for women, but against them. “Whether we’re in a mini-skirt, a burqa or topless, what we want is to be able to choose for ourselves.” El-Shikh said the proposed law created the impression of a problem, but “there are only 30 women in burqas in Switzerland”. A 2019 Federal Statistical Office survey found that 5.5 percent of the Swiss population were Muslims, mainly with roots in the former Yugoslavia. Switzerland has a history of voting against visible signs of its growing Islamic community. A 2009 vote banned the construction of minaret towers on mosques, sparking anger abroad. Two Swiss cantons already have full facial covering bans.

Yes spokesman Addor said the initiative was not about Muslims, but about women, “often against their will”, being transformed “into soldiers of extreme political Islam”. “We can’t talk about equality and then tolerate an ostentatious sign of the submission and alienation of women,” he said.—AFP

‘Despicable actions’

The suspect was a resident of the area and previously known to police, but in the past had only been accused of “petty crimes”, including small-scale cannabis use, according to local press. The extent of his injuries were also unknown but police said they believed they would be able question him.

Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven condemned the “horrific violence” in a statement published on his Facebook page. “We face these despicable actions with the combined force of the community,” Lofven said. “We are reminded of how frail our safe existence is,” Lofven added.

Swedish intelligence services said the terrorist threat was high. The Scandinavian country has been targeted twice by attacks in recent years. In December 2010, a man carried out a suicide bomb attack in the centre of Stockholm. He died after only slightly injuring passers-by.

In April 2017, a radicalised Uzbek asylum seeker mowed down pedestrians in Stockholm with a stolen truck, killing five people. He was sentenced to life in prison. — AFP



HADRUT: A boy looks on as he stands inside a University student residence in Yerevan, used for residents who were displaced from the city of Hadrut in the region of Nagorno - Karabakh during the war. — AFP

Karabakh displaced grapple with new life after war

YEREVAN, Armenia: Relatives, friends and neighbors from the town of Hadrut gathered at a military cemetery overlooking Armenia’s capital Yerevan to bury Arman Sarkisian, two days after his parents identified him. The 20-year-old was killed more than three months ago fighting against Azerbaijan for the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, and his body was recently reclaimed by his family.

But the mourners could only convene more than two hundred kilometers (120 miles) away from their hometown to lay its native son to rest this week. That’s because Hadrut no longer belongs to the Armenians of the self-proclaimed state of Nagorno-Karabakh. It was captured in the six-week war and is under Azerbaijan’s control.

“This is where we come together now as a town—at funerals for our boys,” said Margarita Karamyan, 58, as a military band played over the sobs of female mourners. “His family would have wanted to bury him back in Hadrut but that is impossible now.” The town’s more than 4,000 former residents are among those who may never go back home after the conflict last year saw Azerbaijan re-take swathes of territory won by Armenians in a war in the early 1990s.

The losses set off the latest wave of forced displacement to hit this turbulent region since the Soviet Union crumbled. Karamyan and others from Hadrut fled with just documents and the clothes on their backs as Azerbaijani forces closed in, leaving behind their homes and possessions.

Now she lives in a rented flat in Yerevan with her husband, adult son and his family—and like the rest of her hometown is facing the prospect of having to rebuild a life from scratch far from the community she once knew. —AFP



SION: A picture in Sion shows Jean-Luc Addor, of the populist right-wing Swiss People’s Party (SVP) posing in his office ahead of a vote by Swiss citizen on Sunday on whether to ban full facial coverings in public places. — AFP

Sweden attacker identified as 22-yr-old Afghan

STOCKHOLM: The suspect in the stabbing that left seven injured in Sweden is a 22-year-old Afghan, who arrived in the Nordic country in 2018, media reported yesterday.

Swedish police are investigating a possible terror incident after a man stabbed and injured at least seven people in the city of Vetlanda on Wednesday. A police statement early Thursday revised the number of injured in the attack to seven from eight but did not give further details.

The suspect, who is in his twenties, was taken to hospital after being shot in the leg by police following the mid-afternoon attack in the southern city of 13,000 inhabitants.

Speaking to AFP, police said the man had used

a “sharp weapon,” while local media reported that he had brandished a knife. Police initially treated the incident as “attempted murder” but later changed it in a statement to include a “suspected terrorist crime”, without giving further details.

Police did not specify the man’s nationality, but according to several media reports, he was originally from Afghanistan and had arrived in Sweden in 2018. Three of those attacked were said to have suffered life-threatening injuries, while two others were in serious condition, according to the local health authority in Jonkoping where they were being treated in hospital. Regional police chief Malena Grann later clarified that a preliminary investigation was still under the designation “attempted murder,” but details had emerged that meant they were also looking into “potential terror motives.”

“There are details in the investigation that have led us to investigate whether there was a terror motive,” Grann said, without giving details. He added that the police were working closely with the Swedish intelligence service Sapo.

International

Russia's Sputnik V vaccine takes key step towards EU approval

Moscow says can provide Sputnik jabs for 50m Europeans

THE HAGUE: Europe's drug regulator launched an in-depth review of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine yesterday, putting it on course to be the first non-Western jab used across the 27-nation EU. Russia, which has pushed for a speedy approval, quickly said it was ready to provide jabs for 50 million Europeans as soon as the shot gets the green light from the Amsterdam-based European Medicines Agency.

Leaders in Europe have been warming to the idea of deploying the Russian-developed vaccine as the continent struggles with shortfalls of the three jabs currently authorized for use. "EMA has started a rolling review of Sputnik V, a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Russia's Gamaleya National Centre of Epidemiology and Microbiology," the Amsterdam-based European Medicines Agency (EMA) said in a statement. The watchdog said its decision was based on clinical studies and lab tests which "indicate that Sputnik V triggers the production of antibodies and immune cells that target the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and may help protect against COVID-19."

"EMA will assess Sputnik V's compliance with the usual EU standards for effectiveness, safety and quality," it added. The timeline for possible approval should "take less time than normal" due to the work already done during the rolling review, it said.

Concerns were initially raised about Sputnik

after a fast-track procedure that saw it approved for use in Russia last August and deployed in December ahead of large-scale clinical trials.

But the *Lancet* medical journal published results in February showing Sputnik V to be 91.6 percent effective, based on third-phase trials with more than 20,000 volunteers. Hungary has meanwhile broken ranks and become the first EU country to approve and order the vaccine, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia have also ordered Sputnik stocks.

'Inspection process'

The three approved for use in the bloc so far are the US-German Pfizer-BioNTech jab, US firm Moderna's shot, and the vaccine developed by British-Swedish firm AstraZeneca with Oxford University. US-based Johnson & Johnson has also applied for authorization while Novavax and CureVac are under rolling review. Russia and the EMA have rowed in recent weeks about the authorization process for Sputnik. Sputnik's makers insisted in February that they had applied for the start of a rolling review, urging the watchdog to hurry up. But the EMA said at the time that it had received no such application. As it would be the first non-Western developed vaccine deployed in the EU, officials have said that Sputnik production sites outside the bloc would need to be inspected.

"They are not producing in Europe, so of



GAZA STRIP: An employee of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) administers a shot of the Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine at the UNRWA clinic in the Rafah camp for Palestinian refugees in the southern Gaza Strip, on Wednesday. —AFP

course there should be an inspection process on the production sites," European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said on February 17.

Brussels has been wary of Russian and Chinese vaccines, concerned that Moscow and Beijing would use them as soft power tools. Von der Leyen herself raised questions about why Moscow was so keen to push the vaccine on the EU.

Russia said it will be able to provide its Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine for 50 million Europeans from June if it is approved by the European Medicines Agency. The European Union's drug watchdog earlier yesterday said it had started a "rolling review" of Sputnik V, which represented a key step towards approval for the vaccine's use across the 27-nation European Union. —AFP

Virus cases rising again in Europe, warns WHO

COPENHAGEN: The number of new coronavirus cases has risen in Europe after six weeks of decline, the World Health Organization said yesterday. "Last week, new cases of COVID-19 in Europe rose nine percent to just above one million. This brought a promising six-week decline in new cases to an end, with more than half of our region seeing increasing numbers of new infections," WHO Europe's regional director Hans Kluge told a news conference.

"We are seeing a resurgence in central and Eastern Europe. New cases are also on the rise in several western European countries where rates were already high," he said. "We need to get back to the basics. We need to enlarge" the vaccine portfolio, he said. WHO's Europe region comprises 53 nations and vaccination drives have begun in 45. According to an AFP tally based on official numbers, 2.6 percent of the European Union's population have received two doses of COVID-19 vaccines and 5.4 percent have got one dose.

Meanwhile, German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Wednesday unveiled plans to gradually ease coronavirus curbs in Europe's top economy, while President Joe Biden slammed "Neanderthal" decisions to drop mask-wearing mandates in some US states.

Merkel and Germany's 16 regional leaders revealed a step-by-step plan to relax restrictions, despite concern over the spread of more aggressive virus variants, as Merkel caved to political pressure and public discontent. —AFP

UK, others agree to fast-track adapted vaccines

LONDON: Modified vaccines designed to protect against emerging coronavirus variants will get fast-track approval under a pact announced yesterday by medicines regulators in Britain and four other countries. The agreement will avert the need for lengthy clinical studies if authorized vaccines are adapted in future, as long as the manufacturers offer "robust evidence" of their potency and safety, according to the agreement by the ACCESS Consortium. The consortium comprises Britain's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and counterparts from Australia, Canada, Singapore and Switzerland.?

"Our priority is to get effective vaccines to the public in as short a time as possible, without compromising on safety," MHRA chief scientific officer Christian Schneider said in a statement. "Should any modifications to authorized COVID-19 vaccines be necessary, this regulatory approach should help to do just that. "The public should be confident that no vaccine would be approved unless the expected high standards of safety, quality and effectiveness are met." The approach is based on the "tried and tested" regulatory process used for seasonal influenza vaccines, which need to be adapted every year to combat new strains, the MHRA said.

'Remain vigilant'

Britain began rolling out the world's first mass vaccination program for the coronavirus in December. But health experts are concerned that new variants of the disease, including one from Brazil, could prove more



LONDON: A video grab from footage broadcast by the UK Parliament's Parliamentary Recording Unit (PRU) shows Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson taking part in the weekly Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) at the House of Commons in London. —AFP

resistant to the vaccines. That would undermine plans by Britain and others to start unwinding lockdowns in the coming weeks, which hinge on the vaccines giving enough people protection and bringing down a winter surge in infections and deaths. In England, the latest wide-scale survey of more than 165,000 volunteers tested for COVID-19 showed that prevalence fell by two-thirds last month from January, with one in every 204 people infected.

The survey overseen by London's Imperial College showed the "R" number in England came to 0.86. Anything under 1.0 signals the virus is no longer growing exponentially in the population. But it also found that the rate of decrease was slowing, prompting Health Secretary Matt Hancock to urge continued caution as England prepares to reopen schools to in-class teaching next Monday in the first phase of ending its lockdown. —AFP

International

French court acquits ex-PM Balladur in corruption trial

Verdict comes a day after ex-president Sarkozy was convicted for corruption

PARIS: A French court yesterday acquitted former prime minister Edouard Balladur on corruption charges after he was accused of using kickbacks from an arms deal but handed a suspended jail term to his former defense minister. The verdict by the Law Court of the Republic (CJR), which sits to try serving and former ministers for alleged violations committed in office, came just days after ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy was convicted for corruption. Balladur, 91, had been accused of funneling illicit commissions from arms deals to his unsuccessful presidential campaign in 1995.

His former defense minister Francois Leotard, 78, was however convicted of complicity in the misuse of assets and handed a suspended two-year prison term and a fine of 100,000 euros (\$120,000).

Neither was present in court for the verdict. Balladur and Leotard, both right-wingers, were charged in 2017 with “complicity in the misuse of corporate assets” over the sale of submarines to Pakistan and frigates to Saudi Arabia between 1993 and 1995. The verdicts came hot on the heels of a corruption conviction for former president Sarkozy on Monday which stunned France and has led to a debate about the extent of political corruption.

That judgement meant that both of the last heads of states from France’s right-wing party now called The Republicans (LR) — Jacques Chirac and Sarkozy — have criminal convictions. Sarkozy has vowed to appeal and clear his name.

Swiss cash

The allegations against Balladur and Leotard came to light during an investigation into a 2002 bombing in Karachi, Pakistan, that targeted a bus transporting French engineers. Fifteen people were killed in the attack, including 11 engineers working on the submarine contract, with the Al-Qaeda terror network initially

suspected of carrying out the assault.

But the focus shifted and French investigators began to consider whether the bombing had been carried out as revenge for a halt in commission payments for the arms deals. Balladur lost his 1995 presidential bid to rival Chirac who allegedly cut off the payments negotiated by the previous government.

Leotard was accused of having created an “opaque network” of intermediaries who took commissions on contracts signed with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and then paid back some of the money with illicit cash transfers.

Prosecutors alleged that the commissions totalled 550 million francs, or 117 million euros in today’s money, some of which was funnelled back to Balladur’s campaign. At the center of the case was a deposit of 10.25 million francs in cash made into Balladur’s campaign account three days after his electoral defeat in 1995.

Balladur claimed the money came from donations from supporters and merchandise sales, but prosecutors linked the money to cash withdrawals in Switzerland made by a Lebanese-French intermediary who took commissions on the arms deals. Ziad Takieddine, long active in French right-wing circles, fled to Lebanon last June after a Paris court sentenced him and another middleman, Abdul Rahman El-Assir, to five years in prison over their role in the “Karachi” kickbacks.

Combative Sarkozy

Three others were also convicted but have announced appeals. “I have a completely free conscience,” Balladur told the court during his interrogation. Takieddine has also made — and retracted — claims that he delivered suitcases stuffed with cash from Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi to Sarkozy’s chief of staff to help with the ex-president’s 2007 presidential campaign. Those claims are the subject of a separate investigation into Sarkozy.

On Monday, the 66-year-old ex-president was found to



This file combo photo shows former French Prime Minister and President of the Foreign Affairs Commission at the National Assembly Edouard Balladur (left) and former French Defense minister Francois Leotard. —AFP

have formed a “corruption pact” with his lawyer Thierry Herzog to convince a judge to obtain and share information about yet another inquiry into his campaign financing. Sarkozy, who has been dogged with investigations since leaving office in 2007, denies the charges and has vowed to clear his name with an appeal.

In two interviews Wednesday, he lambasted the verdict and said he was mulling filing a complaint with Europe’s top rights court. “I never betrayed the trust of the French people,” France’s president from 2007 to 2012 told TF1 channel in a primetime interview on Wednesday evening. —AFP

Prince Philip has ‘successful’ heart procedure

LONDON: Queen Elizabeth II’s 99-year-old husband Prince Philip has undergone a successful heart procedure, Buckingham Palace said yesterday after he was transferred to a cardiac unit in London.

Royal officials said the Duke of Edinburgh, as he is formally known, “underwent a successful procedure for a pre-existing heart condition at St Bartholomew’s Hospital” on Wednesday. “His Royal Highness will remain in hospital for treatment, rest and recuperation for a number of days,” they added. Philip has now spent more than two weeks in hospital, his longest every stay, raising fears for his health because of his advanced age.

He will turn 100 on June 10. The prince was first admitted to the private King Edward VII Hospital in central London on February 16. Buckingham Palace said initially that he was expected to stay there for a “few days” after walking in unaided. Later, the palace said that he was being treated for an infection, without specifying further. But on Monday, he was taken to the state-run St Bartholomew’s Hospital near St Paul’s Cathedral for testing and observation of a “pre-existing heart condition”.

The hospital, known as Barts, dates back to the 12th century and has a renowned cardiac unit.

Philip had a stent fitted in 2011 after suffering a blocked coronary artery, undergoing treatment at the specialist Royal Papworth Hospital in Cambridge. His daughter-in-law Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, said Wednesday that Philip was “slightly improving,” but “hurts at moments.”

“We keep our fingers crossed,” she added. Camilla’s husband-Philip’s eldest son and heir to the throne, Prince Charles-visited him in hospital last month. Philip’s youngest son Prince Edward and grandson Prince William have both commented on his state of health. Edward said his father—a former naval officer—was looking forward to being discharged.

William said he was in good hands and being closely monitored. Queen Elizabeth II, who is 94, has herself continued her royal duties despite her husband’s illness. The couple have been married for more than 73 years. Philip’s illness comes as the royal family has come under fierce criticism from Prince Harry’s wife Meghan Markle. —AFP



In this file photo, Britain’s Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. Queen Elizabeth II’s 99-year-old husband Prince Philip has undergone a successful heart procedure, Buckingham Palace said yesterday. —AFP

Greece assesses damage from 6.3 magnitude quake

ATHENS: Engineers in central Greece yesterday were assessing the damage from a strong 6.3 magnitude quake that injured at least 11 people, damaged scores of buildings and spread panic.

The recovery work began as scores of people from the villages of Damasi and Mesochori, some 240 kilometers (149 miles) north of Athens, spent the night away from their homes after Wednesday’s quake. Civil protection officials said tents had been set up at a local stadium for temporary accommodation, in addition to five hotels in the nearby town of Trikala and the main city of Larissa.

Repeated aftershocks have struck the area, including a strong 5.2 magnitude tremor on Wednesday evening. Crews inspected schools, hospitals and other vital public buildings in the area, in addition to homes, state news agency ANA said, adding that schools were closed yesterday.

On Wednesday, the local governor said at least a hundred homes and other buildings in the broader area, including churches, had been damaged. Emergency services told AFP 11 people had been injured. —AFP

International

UN tells Myanmar military to 'stop murdering' protesters

At least 54 killed and over 1,700 detained since Feb 1 coup

GENEVA: At least 54 people have been killed and over 1,700 detained since Myanmar's February 1 coup, the UN rights chief said yesterday, demanding that the military "stop murdering" protesters.

The comments come after the deadliest day of protests in Myanmar, with at least 38 dead Wednesday in rallies where security forces were seen firing into crowds. UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet urged security forces to "halt their vicious crackdown on peaceful protesters".

"Myanmar's military must stop murdering and jailing protesters," she said in a statement.

"It is utterly abhorrent that security forces are firing live ammunition against peaceful protesters across the country," she added. Bachelet added that she was "also appalled at the documented attacks against emergency medical staff and ambulances attempting to provide care to those who have been injured".

The UN rights office said it had corroborated information that at least 54 people had been killed by police and military officers since February 1. "The actual death toll, however, could be much higher as these are the figures the office has been able to verify," it stressed. The killings have escalated sharply in recent days.

The rights office had verified 30 of the 38 deaths reported by other UN entities on

Wednesday, saying the killings by security forces had taken place in Yangon, Mandalay, Sagaing, Magway and Mon.

Another person was documented killed on Tuesday and 18 people on Sunday, with five prior to that.

It said it was difficult to document injuries, but that "at a minimum, hundreds have been wounded during protests". Since the coup, more than 1,700 people have also been "arbitrarily arrested and detained in relation to their participation in protests or engagement in political activity," the statement said. At least 700 people were detained on Wednesday alone, with many of them reportedly swept up as soldiers and police conducted door-to-door searches.

End military 'stranglehold'

Those arrested include parliamentarians, political and rights activists, election officials, teachers, healthcare workers, journalists and monks, it said. "Many of the arbitrary arrests and detentions that have been carried out since February 1 may constitute enforced disappearances," Bachelet warned, calling for the immediate release of all those who remain arbitrarily detained.

She also expressed alarm at the targeting of media workers, with at least 29 journalists ar-



YANGON: Protesters form lines as they take part in a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon yesterday. — AFP

rested in recent days, eight of whom had been charged with crimes, including inciting opposition or hatred of the government and attending unlawful assemblies.

"I urge all those with information and influence... to support international efforts to hold

military leaders accountable for the serious human rights violations that have been committed both now and in the past," Bachelet said. "This is the moment to turn the tables towards justice and end the military's stranglehold over democracy in Myanmar." — AFP

'Everything will be ok': Myanmar mourns teen killed protesting

MANDALAY, Myanmar: Kyal Sin always let her clothes do the talking—at one Myanmar anti-coup rally, she taped a sign onto the back of her black jacket: "We need democracy. Justice for Myanmar. Respect our votes." Weeks later, when the 19-year-old was gunned down Wednesday at a protest on the streets of Myanmar's second largest city Mandalay, her t-shirt read: "Everything will be ok".

The slogan has become a poignant refrain echoing across social media, and thousands turned out for her funeral in Mandalay yesterday. For Kyal Sin, nicknamed "Angel", restoring her country's fragile democracy trumped concerns about her own safety as she protested for an end to military rule.

The young dance enthusiast joined hundreds of thousands across the country calling for the release of civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been in detention since the military took over on February 1.

Before going to a demonstration this week, she listed her blood type on her Facebook page, her phone number, and said her organs were available for donation if anything were to happen to her. "If you need, you can contact me freely at this phone number any time," she wrote.

"I could donate (my organs) if I died. If someone needs urgent help, I can donate even if it causes my death." She was one of at least 38 people the United Nations said were killed on Wednesday, Myanmar's deadliest day since the coup. Footage posted on social media shows Kyal Sin's final moments during a demonstration that turned violent—crawling along the road and running for cover amid the sounds of gunfire and a plume of tear gas. A doctor confirmed to AFP she had been shot in the head. —AFP



MANDALAY: People attend the funeral procession for protester Kyal Sin, in Mandalay yesterday a day after she was shot in the head while taking part in a demonstration against the military coup. —AFP

NZ arrests two over mosque attacks anniversary threat

WELLINGTON: New Zealand police arrested two people yesterday over online threats against two Christchurch mosques targeted in a white supremacist attack two years ago that claimed the lives of 51 Muslims. Police in the South Island city announced the pair's arrest as Christchurch prepares for the second anniversary of the horrific attack on March 15, 2019.

They said no charges had yet been laid and did not provide further details. "We take all threats of this nature seriously and we are working closely with our Muslim community," police said. "Any messages of hate or people wanting to cause harm in our community will not be tolerated—it's not the Kiwi way." In March 2019, Australian national Brenton Tarrant targeted men, women and children who had gathered for Friday prayers in Christchurch, killing 51 and injuring dozens more.

The self-proclaimed white supremacist was jailed for life last year without the possibility of parole. — AFP

International

71kg of waste extracted from stray cow's stomach in India

Case highlights country's twin problems of pollution and stray cattle

FARIDABAD: Indian vets have extracted 71 kilograms (156.5 pounds) of plastic, nails and other garbage from a pregnant cow, but both the animal and her baby died. The case has highlighted the country's twin problems of pollution and stray cattle.

An estimated five million cows roam India's cities, with many gorging on the vast amounts of plastic litter on the streets. This cow was rescued after a road accident in late February by the People For Animals Trust Faridabad. A vet soon noticed the pregnant bovine was struggling. In a four-hour operation on February 21, vets found nails, plastic, marbles and other garbage in its stomach, said trust president Ravi Dubey.

They also attempted a premature delivery. "The baby did not have enough space to grow in her mother's belly so she died," Dubey said.

Three days later, the cow also died. "In my 13 years of experience, this is the most garbage we have taken from a cow... we had to use muscle power to get it all out," Dubey said. Previous surgeries done by the organization based in the northern Indian state of Haryana have found up to 50 kilograms of waste in cows' stomachs. "The cow is very sacred for us, but no-one cares for their life. In every corner in every city they eat the waste," Dubey added.

US House passes police reforms, voting rights bill

WASHINGTON: A sweeping police reform package that bans choke holds and combats racial profiling cleared the US House of Representatives Wednesday, five days before the trial of a white officer charged with murdering African-American George Floyd. The bill is named after Floyd, who died last May 25 at age 46 when then-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin pressed his knee on the victim's neck for more than eight minutes.

The shocking killing was caught on video and sparked mass protests across the nation. The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act cleared the House last year but was blocked in the Republican-led Senate. With President Joe Biden in office since January, and the Senate narrowly controlled by Democrats, the bill was reintroduced last week and it passed Wednesday along party lines, 220 to 212.

Just one Republican supported the measure, while two Democrats opposed it. "Nearly one year ago, George Floyd gasped his last words, 'I can't breathe,' and ignited a nationwide reckoning on the racial injustice and police brutality in America," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said before the vote.

"This legislation will not erase centuries of

Revered

Cows are revered in Hindu-majority India. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, strictly enforced protection policies have resulted in more cows on the loose. Attacks on individuals suspected of trading in cows have increased under Modi, according to rights groups.

Hindu vigilantes have assaulted and even killed people—mostly Muslims and lower-caste Hindus—for transporting beef, or being suspected of doing so. As such, farmers have taken to abandoning rather than selling old or infirmed cows for slaughter.

Eating or slaughtering cows is banned in some states. Romula D'Silva, vice-president of the Karuna Society for Animals & Nature in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, said the problem of garbage-eating cows affects "every city in India, big or small".

"Wherever there are cows on the streets, you can be sure they are full of plastic. My heart breaks for them as they can have very painful deaths," she said. Around a decade ago, 35 cows suddenly came into Karuna Society's care, according to D'Silva.

One unexpectedly died and a post-mortem examination revealed a mess of plastic and other garbage in its stomach. Further surgeries on the

systemic racism and excessive policing in America," but it takes a "tremendous step" toward stopping the violence and improving relations between law enforcement and communities they serve, she added.

Later Wednesday the House also passed a bill aimed at lowering voting barriers nationwide, a top Democratic priority.

The For the People Act would expand no-excuse voting by mail, make voter registration automatic, outlaw partisan redistricting and impose new requirements on so-called dark money donations to political groups. The measure largely mirrors a House bill passed two years ago. This one carries added significance amid efforts by several Republican-controlled state legislatures to curtail voting access in response to Donald Trump's election loss and his repeated false claims of election fraud.

No Republicans voted for the bill, which House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy branded an "unparalleled power grab" designed by Democrats to "turn a temporary majority into permanent control."

The two bills now head to the Senate, with their fates uncertain in a chamber divided 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans. The voting rights effort is almost certainly dead on arrival because there is little chance it could overcome blocking tactics that require 60 votes rather than a simple 51-vote majority. Regarding the police reform measure, a watered down version has a higher likelihood of reaching Biden for his signature. — AFP



FARIDABAD: President of People for Animal Trust Faridabad Ravi Dubey feeds a cow at the organization's facility in Faridabad. —AFP

remaining animals found that all of them had plastic in their abdomens.

Karuna Society has performed rumenotomies on around 60 cows since then, she said. There is no official, nationwide data on how many cows

die every year from ingesting plastic. But in 2017, a Times of India report cited veterinary officials and animal welfare groups estimating that around 1,000 cows die annually just in the northern city of Lucknow from eating plastic. — AFP

Australia minister 'sorry' for calling rape victim a 'lying cow'

SYDNEY: Australia's scandal-hit government yesterday apologized for calling an alleged rape victim a "lying cow," sparking fresh claims of a "toxic" culture in the country's corridors of power. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Defense Minister Linda Reynolds "deeply regretted" the slur against her former staffer Brittany Higgins, who last month came forward with claims of serious sexual assault.

"I spoke to Minister Reynolds this morning about this matter," Morrison said. "She knows those comments to have been inappropriate and wrong... they were made in her private office in a stressful week." Higgins, 26, called the insult "incredibly hurtful" saying "that sort of behavior and language is never excusable."

"It's just further evidence of the toxic workplace culture that occurs behind closed doors in Parliament House." It is just the latest in a series of revelations and allegations about the conduct of top officials in Canberra that have plunged Morrison's conservative government into a weeks-long rolling crisis.

Reynolds is just one of two senior cabinet ministers currently on health leave after being caught up in separate rape allegations. Australia's attorney general Christian Porter is ac-

cused of raping a 16-year-old fellow student in 1988, an allegation he denies.

Reynolds is accused of mishandling Higgins' claim that she was raped in parliament by a colleague in 2019. Morrison has backed both ministers to stay in their jobs, and yesterday also rejected mounting calls for an independent investigation into the allegations against Porter. Porter was forced to come forward after senior lawmakers received a dossier setting out the claims of the alleged victim, who died last June without making a formal complaint to police.

Ongoing investigation

The woman's family issued a statement yesterday saying they "are supportive of any inquiry which would potentially shed light on the circumstances surrounding the deceased's passing," Australian media reported. Her death—reported to be suicide—is the subject of an ongoing coroner's investigation. Police said yesterday that after multiple contacts with the woman beginning last February, she told them the day before her death she "no longer felt able to proceed with reporting the matter, citing medical and personal reasons". Morrison claimed any further inquiry would go beyond "the rule of law" as police had closed the case after finding, what they called, "insufficient admissible evidence" to proceed. Morrison also insisted sacking Porter would create a precedent that put the rule of law at risk. "There is not some other process. There is not the mob process. There is not the tribe-has-spo-ken process," he said. — AFP

International

Taleban aid crackdown spreads fear over treatment of women

Female doctor killed in eastern Afghanistan

KABUL: Afghan women are being cut off from crucial aid because of a growing Taleban crackdown in areas controlled by the insurgents, more than a dozen relief workers have told AFP.

The militants have demanded an end to projects helping women to be more independent and have barred female staff from entering their territory in some areas. "So far the hypothesis is that the Taleban have changed, but this is really a concrete example that they haven't," said one aid worker who did not want to be named. Washington recently lambasted the insurgents for failing to abide by a landmark deal last year that committed them to honoring a number of security guarantees.

The agreement also called for the withdrawal of foreign troops by May and paved the way for peace talks between the Taleban and the Afghan government. The deal initially raised hopes the insurgents were open to moderating some of their hardline positions. But people working in pockets of territory under Taliban control, primarily in northern Afghanistan, say conditions in some areas deteriorated after the US accord was signed.

'They're not joking at all'

Fears are growing that the Taleban are waiting for the Americans to leave before attempting to re-take the country by force and reintroduce their draconian vision for Afghan society. The group ruthlessly oppressed women during their brief rule over the country in the 1990s, banning them from working outside the home and subjecting them to violent punishments for perceived infractions.

The jihadists have since made vague pledges to protect women's rights in Afghanistan. In an open letter published last month, Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar said the group was "committed to upholding and guaranteeing all rights of women afforded to them by Islamic law".

But on the ground, aid groups say the group are as uncompromising as ever. Some say their work is unravelling after years of building up delicate relationships with the insurgents to reach impoverished Afghan women and girls. In a letter addressed to aid groups, the Taliban warned it was unacceptable for them to "take women out of their homes in the name of women's economic empowerment, education and

sports programs". Pressure against these kinds of programs are not new, but are becoming "a lot more official and widespread", a senior humanitarian aid manager said. "When you receive a letter from the Taleban, they're not joking at all, you have to apply it," said another official working with an international aid group. After nearly 40 years of conflict, Afghanistan is almost entirely reliant on international aid and the Taleban appear set on bringing humanitarian workers to heel.

"Aid workers and the relief they provide seem to have fallen in the crosshairs of the Taliban's attempts to portray themselves as a governing entity," said International Crisis Group analyst Andrew Watkins. Afghan women working with aid groups who once regularly travelled to insurgent-held enclaves in the north say they have been blocked by the Taleban from entering certain areas to work.

Doctor killed

Meanwhile, a female doctor was killed in a bomb blast in the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad in what appeared to be another targeted hit, officials said yesterday, just days after three women media workers were gunned down in the area. Journalists, religious scholars, activists and judges have all been victims of a recent wave of political assassinations across Afghanistan, forcing many into hiding—with some fleeing the country. In the latest incident, the doctor was killed after a magnetic bomb was attached to the vehicle she was travelling in, according to a spokesman from the provincial governor's office. A child was also injured by the explosion. "She was commuting in a rickshaw when the bomb went off," the spokesman told AFP. Another spokesman from a provincial hospital also confirmed the incident and toll. No group has claimed responsibility for the blast. The attack comes two days after three female media workers were gunned down in Jalalabad in separate attacks that were just minutes apart. The local Islamic State group affiliate said its gunmen carried out the killing of what it called "journalists working for one of the media stations loyal to the apostate Afghan government". Afghan and US officials have blamed the Taleban for the wave of violence, but the group has denied the charges. — AFP



This photo taken in January 2020 shows late transgender South Korean soldier Byun Hee-soo at a press conference in Seoul.—AFP

Anger as S Korean transgender soldier found dead

CHEONGJU, South Korea: A transgender South Korean soldier who was forcibly discharged from the army after gender-reassignment surgery has been found dead, police said, prompting anger yesterday and calls for legal reforms.

Firefighters found Byun Hee-soo in her home in Cheongju after a mental health counsellor called emergency services to report that she had not been heard from for several days, Yonhap news agency reported. South Korea remains deeply conservative about matters of sexual identity and is less tolerant of LGBT rights than some other parts of Asia, with many gay and transgender Koreans living largely under the radar.

Byun, formerly a staff sergeant and in her 20s, enlisted voluntarily in 2017. She went on to have gender-reassignment surgery in 2019 in Thailand. The defense ministry classified the removal of her male genitals as a mental or physical handicap, and a military panel ruled last year that she would be compulsorily discharged.

At the time she waived her anonymity to appear at a press conference, pleading tearfully to be allowed to serve, wearing her fatigues and saluting the gathered journalists and cameras.

"I'm a soldier of the Republic of Korea," she said, her voice breaking. Reports said no note was found but the death was being treated as suicide, with Yonhap citing officials saying she had tried to kill herself three months ago.

Byun's death triggered an outpouring of grief and calls for South Korean MPs to pass an anti-discrimination bill. A memorial altar for Byun was set up at a local hospital where friends and activists paid their respects yesterday.

Wreaths of white chrysanthemums—a symbol of mourning in Korea—surrounded a portrait of a smiling Byun, in civilian dress. Tributes were presented by rights groups and liberal politicians including parliamentary vice-speaker Kim Sang-hee, who is the highest-ranking female parliamentarian in South Korea.—AFP



Women wearing burqas walk along a road in the Arghandab district of Kandahar province. The Taleban are increasingly cutting off rural Afghan women from aid and strong-arming NGOs to follow their harsh edicts, spurring fears women will again bear the brunt of the insurgents' growing influence.—AFP

7 ethnic Hazaras killed in eastern Afghanistan

JALALABAD: At least seven members of Afghanistan's persecuted Hazara ethnic group were brutally murdered in the country's restive east, officials said yesterday, in the latest attack to target the largely Shiite minority. The group of migrant Hazara laborers had their hands bound behind their backs and were shot to death late Wednesday, according to Nangarhar provincial council member Ajmal Omar.

Juma Gul Hemat-Nangarhar's provincial police chief-confirmed the murders, adding that four people had been arrested as part of an ongoing investigation. The incident occurred roughly 20 kilometers from the eastern city of Jalalabad near the Pakistan border—an area where a large number of militants are believed to have influence, including the Taleban and the local affiliate of the Islamic State (IS) group.

No group has claimed responsibility for the murders. Jalalabad has been hit hard by targeted killings in the last week with three female media workers gunned down in the city's streets on Tuesday in separate attacks that occurred just minutes apart. A female doctor was also killed by an explosion early yesterday after a magnetic bomb was attached to her vehicle.

For years, the Hazara have increasingly taken

the brunt of rising violence across Afghanistan with IS suicide bombers attacking their mosques, schools, rallies and hospitals. The Hazara make up roughly 10 to 20 percent of the Afghan population and have long been persecuted for their largely Shiite faith by Sunni hardliners in a country wracked by deep ethnic divisions.

The Taleban has also targeted the group over the years, kidnapping and killing Hazara commuters travelling on the country's perilous roads with near impunity. During the Taleban's brief rule of the country in the 1990s, the jihadists were also accused of massacring large numbers of the group.

The Hazara have also been targeted outside of Afghanistan. In January, a group of Hazara miners—most of whom were Afghan nationals—were brutally killed in another execution-styled massacre claimed by IS in Pakistan.—AFP

Friday Times Lifestyle

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A white lion catches a ball thrown by his trainer at the Al-Buqaish private zoo in the Emirate of Sharjah. — AFP

Egypt's 'Scorpion King' turns venom into money

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THE AL-BUQAISH PRIVATE ZOO IN THE EMIRATE OF SHARJAH



A trainer holds a lion cub as he places a snake around his neck at the Al-Buqaish private zoo in the Gulf Emirate of Sharjah. —AFP photos



A tiger cub plays with a ball at the Al-Buqaish private zoo.



A trainer feeds a bear at the Al-Buqaish private zoo.



A trainer throws a ball towards two white lions at the Al-Buqaish private zoo.



Two white lions at the Al-Buqaish private zoo.



A trainer throws a ball to a white lion at the Al-Buqaish private zoo.



Tiger cubs play together next to their trainer at the Al-Buqaish private zoo.

LOUVRE RECOVERS 16TH-CENTURY ARMOR, FOUR DECADES AFTER THEFT

The Louvre museum in Paris said Wednesday that it had recovered a set of gold and silver-encrusted Renaissance-era armor nearly 40 years after it was stolen. A military antiques expert alerted police after being called in to give advice regarding an inheritance in Bordeaux in January and becoming suspicious about the luxurious helmet and body armor in the family's collection. Police later identified the items from a database of stolen artworks as having been taken from the Louvre on May 31, 1983, in circumstances that remain a mystery. Bordeaux prosecutors are now investigating how they ended up in the family's estate.

The armor and helmet are thought to have been made in Milan between 1560 and 1580. They were donated to the Louvre in 1922 by the Rothschild family. "I was certain we would see them reappear one day because they are such singular objects. But I could never have imagined that it would work out so well—that they would be in France and still together," said Philippe Malgouyres, the Louvre's head of heritage artworks. "They are prestige weapons, made with virtuosity, sort of the equivalent of a luxury car today. In the 16th century, weapons became works of very luxurious art. Armour became an ornament that had nothing to do with its use," he said.

There are 100,000 objects on France's database of global stolen artworks, with 900 added last year alone. According to



Frederic Malon (left), deputy director in charge of the fight against organized crime at the French Central Directorate of the Judicial Police (DCPJ) officially returns an ancient breastplate to Jean-Luc Martinez (right), president of the Louvre Museum, in Paris.



This picture shows a breastplate and a ceremonial helmet during their official restitutions by the French Central Directorate of the Judicial Police (DCPJ) to the Louvre Museum, in Paris. —AFP photos

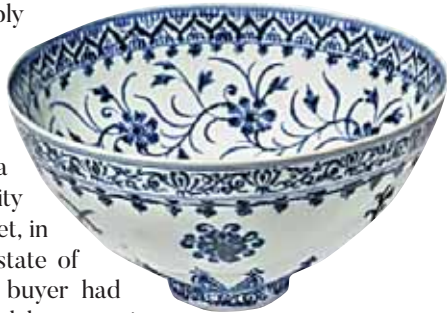
Jean-Luc Martinez, president-director of the Louvre, the last theft from the world's most-visited museum was in 1998, a por-

trait by 19th-century French artist Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot. "We're still looking for it," Martinez said. —AFP

Rare 15th century Chinese bowl found at US yard sale

How about this for bargain-hunting? A small bowl bought for \$35 in a yard sale in the US turned out to be a rare 15th century Chinese artifact possibly worth \$500,000.

The porcelain bowl—with delicate floral motifs—was acquired by a buyer, whose identity is being kept secret, in the northeastern state of Connecticut. The buyer had the item appraised by ceramics experts at Sotheby's, first by sending photos, then by taking it into the auction house for a closer look. Experts said it was painted for the court of Emperor Yongle, the third emperor of the Ming dynasty who ruled from 1402 to 1424. "There are only six (other) such bowls known in the world. It is a very exclusive group," Angela McAteer, head of Chinese artworks at Sotheby's in New York, told AFP.



Sotheby's will put the newly discovered seventh bowl up for auction on March 17, when it is expected to sell for between \$300,000 and \$500,000. Five of the bowls are in museums: two in Taiwan, two in London and one in Tehran. The sixth was last seen on the market in 2007, said McAteer, meaning interest in the auction from private collectors and institutions is likely to be keen. Many Chinese artworks entered collections in the West in the 19th century before being passed down through generations. But McAteer says experts are unlikely to ever know exactly how the bowl made its way from China to the junk sale. —AFP

MEGHAN MARKLE SAYS BUCKINGHAM PALACE 'PERPETUATING FALSEHOODS'

Meghan Markle says Buckingham Palace is "perpetuating falsehoods" about her and her husband Prince Harry, according to part of an interview she has done with Oprah Winfrey. The explosive claim is the latest salvo in an increasingly heated public relations battle between the British royal family and the US-based couple. The clip, released Wednesday, came hours after Buckingham Palace said it was investigating claims Markle had bullied household staff in the months after her fairytale wedding to the prince. "I don't know how they could expect that after all of this time we would still just be silent if there's an active role that The Firm is playing in perpetuating falsehoods about us," Markle told Winfrey.

"The Firm" is a sometimes-derisive name for the British royal family. Harry and Meghan announced last year they were stepping back from royal duties, in what became an increasingly acrimonious split from the family. Their permanent removal from duties was confirmed earlier this year, with the royal household and the couple jockeying to control the narrative of the separation—and public sympathies. The interview with Winfrey—one of US television's most bankable names—is due to air in the US on Sunday, and in Britain on Monday. In a clip released by US broadcaster CBS earlier this week Harry—who has frequently bemoaned press intrusion—said he was worried about "history repeating itself", in an apparent reference to the death of his mother.

Diana died in a high speed car crash after being relentlessly pursued by photographers through Paris. On Wednesday, Buckingham Palace said it was looking into newspaper reports of bullying by Markle against members of household staff. "We are clearly very concerned about allegations in The Times following claims made by former staff of The Duke and Duchess of Sussex... our HR team will look into the circumstances," it said. The Times said the allegations dated back to October 2018, a few months after the couple's spectacular wedding. "Members of staff involved at the time, including those who have left the Household, will be invited to participate to see if lessons can be learned," said the palace.

"The Royal Household... does not and will not tolerate bullying or harassment in the workplace." Markle earlier released a statement directly addressing the report. "The duchess is saddened by this latest attack on her character, particularly as someone who has been the target of bullying herself," her spokesman said. "She is determined to continue her work building compassion around the world and will keep striving to set an example for doing what is right." The couple said The Times was being used to "peddle a wholly false narrative" ahead of their television interview.

Ill grandfather

Harry, who is Queen Elizabeth II's grandson, married Markle in a glittering wedding at Windsor Castle in May 2018. The former



In this file photo Britain's Prince Harry and his fiancée US actress Meghan Markle pose for a photograph in the Sunken Garden at Kensington Palace in west London. —AFP

army officer's marriage to the mixed race television actress was seen as breathing new life into the centuries-old British monarchy. But relations soon soured and they moved to the United States, relinquishing their honorary titles and patronages.

Their eagerly-awaited interview with Winfrey is being billed as a lifting of the lid on life inside the royal family. It comes as Harry's grandfather, the queen's husband Prince Philip, has been in hospital for several weeks being treated for an undisclosed infection, sparking fears for his health. The 99-year-old Duke of Edinburgh was transferred to a specialist cardiac unit on Monday for tests on a pre-existing heart condition. —AFP

Lifestyle | Features

When a pandemic gatecrashed the Berlin film festival

Coronavirus pushed this week's Berlin film festival entirely online, as the industry grapples with new realities and directors harness the drama of the pandemic. After Cannes was cancelled last year and this winter's Sundance went all virtual, the Berlinale has staged an event unlike any other in its 71-year history. Organizers pushed the event back by a month as the second wave of the virus rages in Germany, cut its length in half to five days and chopped it into two parts. They hope to welcome stars to the red carpet and audiences back into movie theatres—or at least open-air cinemas—at a June edition which will feature the current edition's biggest hits.

Sequestered jury

For now, critics, journalists and rights buyers stuck at home have been watching the movies of the future on their laptops. But the festival's artistic director Carlo Chatrain wanted to preserve the "cinema experience" for the jury choosing the Golden and Silver Bear winners today among 15 contenders. The panel, made up of the previous six Golden Bear laureates, all travelled to Berlin and are holed up at the same hotel, with the exception of dissident Iranian director Mohammad Rasoulof, who is watching the movies in a home theatre in Tehran while under house arrest. Pictures posted on Instagram show the jury seated far apart in a reserved cinema, consulting at a distance around a giant white table and patching in Rasoulof via video link.

Leaning into lockdown

All of the films in competition were made at least in part under

lockdown, carrying "beneath their surfaces the uncertain times we are experiencing," Chatrain said. Some directors such as Romania's Radu Jude said they decided to make the most of the pandemic to create a heightened atmosphere with an existing screenplay. He revamped the premise of his biting social satire "Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn", about a teacher whose sex tape winds up on the internet, after coronavirus created more social "aggressiveness". Rather than push back production, "my take was to do it as soon as possible and adapt to what is around", including casting anti-vaxxers in minor roles and choosing coronamasks like "costumes" for his characters. "I wanted it to feel contemporary and if there's this pandemic going now why not include it in the film," he told AFP.

'Shimmering gem'

France's Celine Sciamma, who won best screenplay in Cannes in 2019 for her critically adored "Portrait of a Lady on Fire", lists two "COVID consultants" in the credits of her new movie "Petite Maman". While "Portrait" was a sweeping historical costume drama that gave birth to countless internet memes, "Petite Maman" is an intimate tale about girlhood, just over an hour long, that was shot last summer in an empty house and the woods behind it. The Guardian's critic Peter Bradshaw called the new picture "spellbinding", as reviewers said lockdown had led Sciamma to compress the story into a small, "shimmering gem". She told reporters she hoped children would soon be able to watch the movie with their parents "and grandparents". — AFP



This combination of file pictures shows (Up left to right) Romanian director Adina Pintilie, Italian director Gianfranco Rosi, Iranian director Mohammad Rasoulof, (Bottom left to right) Hungarian director Ildiko Enyedi, Israeli director Nadav Lapid and Bosnian director Jasmila. — AFP

Poor diet in pregnancy can lead to child obesity

Children born to mothers who eat a lot of processed foods packed with sugar and salt face an increased risk of obesity late in childhood, researchers said Monday. "Children born to mothers who eat a low-quality diet—high in inflammation-associated foods—during pregnancy may be more likely to have obesity or excess body fat," Ling-Wei Chen from University College Dublin's School of Public Health, said in a statement. "Mounting evidence has pointed to the first 1,000 days of life—from conception to two years old—as a critical period for preventing childhood obesity." Obesity in childhood often carries on into adulthood and is associated with a higher risk of type-2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and other health problems.

To examine how maternal diet might affect childhood obesity, Chen and colleagues analysed data collected from 16,295 mother-child pairs in Ireland, France, Britain, the Netherlands and Poland. On average, mothers were 30 years old and had a healthy body-mass index (BMI), a standard measure for obesity calculated on the basis of weight, height and sex. The women reported the food they ate before and during pregnancy. The researchers graded the diets on a five-point scale. Participants with the healthiest diets—rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products nuts and legumes—were at one end of the spectrum. Those eating a lot of red and processed meats, along food stuffs larded with saturated fat, sugar and salt were at the other end. — AFP



In this file photo US singer Dolly Parton performs onstage during the 61st Annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles. — AFP

Dolly Parton tweaks hit 'Jolene' to urge COVID vaccine

From "Jolene" to "Vaccine"—country music legend Dolly Parton has received her first COVID shot, and urged Americans to follow her lead with a rewrite of her classic hit singing the vaccine's praises. "Vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, I'm begging of you, please don't hesitate," she sang to the tune of her 1973 hit. "Vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, because once you're dead, then that's a bit too late." In the short video posted to social media, the 75-year-old singer gets a shot of Moderna's vaccine, the development of which she helped fund. "I am old enough to get it (vaccine) and I am smart enough to get it.... I wanted to tell everybody that I think you should get out there and get it too," she said.

Revered by people from a variety of backgrounds for decades, Parton, a longtime philanthropist, has been popping up in the news of late, especially after donating \$1 million to Vanderbilt University. The funds went towards developing Moderna's coronavirus vaccine. Parton joins other US celebrities who have publicly supported the vaccine like actors Tom Hanks and Sean Penn. — AFP

Reality TV pioneer 'The Real World' reunites original cast

Widely considered the first major reality television program, MTV's "The Real World" is set to return nearly 30 years after its debut—with seven members of the original cast appearing in the same New York loft where they first gathered in 1992. The reunion series is set to premier Thursday on the new streaming platform Paramount+, from ViacomCBS. While several networks had dipped their toes in the reality television waters before 1992, none of the efforts resonated quite like "The Real World," which helped keep its US channel—which had been launched to play music videos—relevant to young audiences in the '90s.

The show's popularity caught the eyes of advertisers and in turn producers and other broadcasters, who then went on to replicate the formula ad infinitum into the new millennium. The program's conceit saw seven young strangers—age 19 to 26—live together for three months in a huge loft in Manhattan's Soho neighborhood, all the while being filmed. The format—in which participants famously "stop being polite and start getting real"—remains a reality TV classic. "The Real World"'s return will revisit that setup as a window into real life—a moment of authenticity when the vast majority of television offered more contrived options. And it offers a reminder of the gap between television then and television as it exists today, in which excess has prevailed above all else. —AFP



Lifestyle | Music and Movies

Friday, March 5, 2021

Disney's Asia-themed 'Raya and the Last Dragon' tackles division

Even as racist attacks on Asian-Americans have risen during the pandemic, Asian cinema is having a moment in Hollywood—something the stars of Disney's "Raya and the Last Dragon" say can't come soon enough. The Mouse House's latest animated adventure, out Friday, is set in a Southeast Asian-like land, where a young princess sets out to find the dragon who can save the world and reunite the bitterly divided realm of Kumandra. It features an A-list cast of stars of Asian descent such as Sandra Oh, Awkwafina, Kelly Marie Tran and Gemma Chan, marking another diversity landmark for Hollywood's most powerful studio.

But the film's release comes as studies show surging anti-Asian racism in the United States since the Covid-19 outbreak emerged from China, with a spate of attacks on Asian-Americans near San Francisco and elsewhere drawing widespread headlines and condemnation. "All of us have seen these attacks happening over and over and over... you do get to that place sometimes where you feel, 'Oh, this is a very broken world,'" Tran, who voices Raya, told a virtual event ahead of the film's release. The US actress of Vietnamese descent is no stranger to racist abuse, after becoming the victim of appalling trolling from misogynist "Star Wars" fans after the divisive 2017 movie "The Last Jedi."

Activists say broader anti-Asian discrimina-



In this file photo (from left) Dean Wellins, Awkwafina, Paul Briggs, Cassie Steele, Osnat Shurer, and Adele Lim attend Go Behind The Scenes with Walt Disney Studios during D23 Expo 2019 at Anaheim Convention Center in Anaheim, California. —AFP photos

tion has been fuelled by talk of the "Chinese virus" from former president Donald Trump and others. Racial motivation is hard to establish in many cases, but reported anti-Asian hate crimes more than doubled from 49 to 122 last year across 16 major US cities including New York and Los Angeles—even as overall hate crime fell, according to a California State University study.

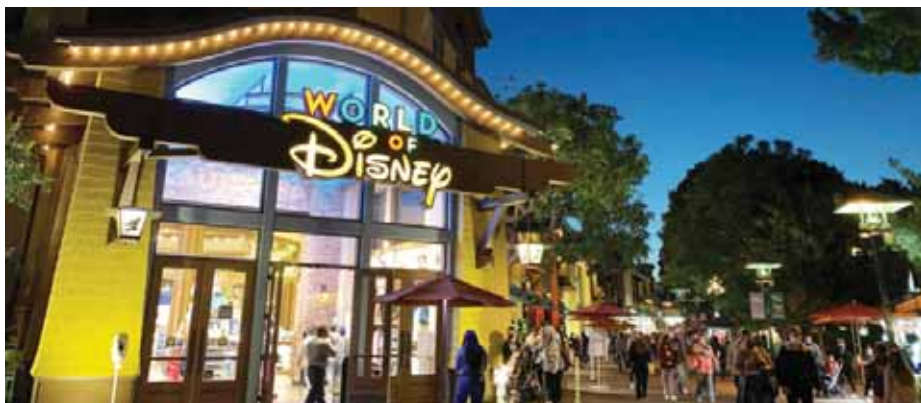
The report looked at events categorized as criminal in nature and showing evidence of ethnic or racial bias, using preliminary local police data. It aligns with another study from the Stop AAPI Hate advocacy group showing more than 2,800 incidents of racism and discrimination—including non-physical forms—targeting Asian-Americans and reported online across the United States be-



In this file photo US actor Kelly Marie Tran poses on the red carpet upon arrival for the European film premiere of Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker in London.

tween March and December last year.

The film's solution is simple. Only by abandoning self-interest and learning to trust one another again can the five quarrelling dragon lands—Fang, Heart, Spine, Talon and Tail—survive their impending doom. But besides the movie's sunny message, its stars hope that the unprecedented representation of Asian princesses, loyal companions and comedy sidekicks can have a direct impact. "Growing up in the 70s in the 80s, I didn't see anything (like this)... I feel like it has been the same way, representation-wise, for a very long time," said Oh, who plays Fang's formidable ruler. "All of these things are such a positive portrayal... it's exposure that brings understanding, and that understanding is what changes perception," added Daniel Dae Kim, who voices Raya's noble father. —AFP



In this file photo people wait in line to enter a store as people visit Disneyland where parts of the park opened today for more retail and dining as an extension of the Downtown Disney District in Anaheim, California. —AFP

Disney to close 60 North American stores in 2021

Disney announced Wednesday that it will close at least 60 of its North American stores this year in order to focus on its online sales activities. The closures are only a first step, with the world's number one entertainment company emphasizing in a statement that it intends to "significantly reduce its brick-and-mortar footprint" in order to focus on e-commerce. "While consumer behavior has shifted toward online shopping, the global pandemic has changed what consumers expect from a retailer," said Stephanie Young, Disney's head of consumer products, games and pub-

lishing, in the statement.

Disney hopes next year to develop its "shopDisney" sales platform, and expand its integration with mobile apps dedicated to its theme parks and with its social media presence. The changes will be accompanied by the creation of new products of different Disney-owned brands, such as adult clothing, "streetwear," home goods and collectible items, the statement said. Disney did not specify which store locations will close, nor how many jobs will be cut due to the closures. There are about 300 Disney stores worldwide. —AFP

Netflix serves up TikTok-style 'Fast Laughs'

Netflix on Wednesday added a "Fast Laughs" feature to its iPhone app, serving up comic clips in rapid fire, in a move taking on the popular video app TikTok. Tapping a Fast Laughs tab added to the mobile app will launch a stream of funny snippets from movies, sitcoms, comedy routines, and television shows, according to Netflix. "Wanna see something funny?" the streaming television service asked rhetorically in a blog post.

"On Netflix, this one little question opens up lots of possibilities from hilarious series and films to laugh-out-loud stand-up specials." Fast Laughs clips will come from the vast Netflix comedy catalogue, including shows such as Murder Mystery and Big Mouth and stand-up comedy from performers including Kevin Hart and Ali Wong, according to the Silicon Valley-based service. "This is the part where we have

to say that not all clips will be appropriate for all audiences," Netflix said in the post. Fast Laughs was available for iPhone users in select countries, and Netflix said it will soon start testing it on mobile devices powered by Google-backed Android software.

The new feature appeared crafted to appeal to fans of wildly popular TikTok and rides a trend toward viewers enjoying video entertainment in quick hits. YouTube Shorts—the video-sharing website's quick clips meant to compete with TikTok—were racking up 3.5 billion views a day during beta testing in India, the platform's head said last month. Facebook-owned Instagram responded to TikTok's popularity with their own short video format called Reels last August. And in November, Snapchat launched Spotlight, a public feed of content produced by users. —AFP



In this file illustration photo a computer and a mobile phone screen display the Netflix logo in Arlington, Virginia. —AFP



Asiatic lions are seen from a tourist vehicle at the Gir National Park and Sanctuary at Sasan Gir. — AFP photos

INDIA'S ENDANGERED LION PRIDES CONQUER DISEASE TO ROAM FREE

Three years after a deadly virus struck India's endangered Asiatic lions in their last remaining natural habitat, conservationists are hunting for new homes to help booming prides roam free. The majestic big cats, slightly smaller than their African cousins and with a fold of skin along their bellies, were once found widely across southwest Asia. Hunting and human encroachment saw the population plunge to just 20 by 1913, and the lions are now found only in a wildlife sanctuary in India's western Gujarat state. Following years of concerted government efforts, the lion population in Gir National Park has swelled to nearly 700, according to an official census last year.

But just three years ago, the conservation success looked to be in danger when several lions started to die in one part of the 1,400 square kilometer forest. The canine distemper virus—a highly infectious disease—was detected among dozens of the royal beasts, killing at least 11 of

them. "We picked all the lions from the area and isolated them," Dushyant Vasavada, the park's chief conservator of forests, told AFP. Authorities imported special vaccines from overseas and each animal was given three doses each, followed by a booster shot. Cattle and dogs living near the park were also inoculated as suspected carriers of the virus. "We vaccinated the lions in captivity and successfully controlled the disease and no new outbreak has been observed," Vasavada said, adding that park rangers were still closely monitoring their health.

'Very thrilling experience'

Lions are a source of pride for India, particularly in Gujarat's Saurashtra region, where man and beast coexist. A cattle-rearing tribe lives among the animals in the sanctuary, and it is not uncommon to see a pride of lions crossing a highway in the region as motorists wait and watch. The



An Asiatic lion at the Gir National Park and Sanctuary at Sasan Gir.



A small boy stands next to lions' photos made of cardboard at the Gir National Park and Sanctuary at Sasan Gir.

A shopkeeper arranging soft toys depicting lions, leopards and spotted deer near Sasan Gir Lion Safari at Sasan Gir.

king of the jungle is also a major tourist attraction, along with leopards, panthers and other big cats found in the sanctuary. Around 550,000 people visit the park each year, riding in open-top jeeps as they try to spot the predators prowling among pale yellow deciduous trees.

"It is a very thrilling experience to see the lions from close in the wild," said forest guide Dinesh Sadiya. But the 2018 virus outbreak was a reminder that the steady growth in the animal's population cannot be taken for granted.

New habitats

The lions have low genetic diversity due to their small population size, making them more vulnerable to epidemics. A 1993 outbreak of canine distemper virus in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park killed a third of its 3,000 lions. Wildlife biologist Ravi Chellam said that outbreak underscored the need to move a few prides to other sites nearby. "Translocation is a risk mitigation strategy akin to us getting health or life insurance," he told AFP.

"If something happens to the population in Gir, there is always going to be an additional free-ranging population of wild lions available." Chellam said the sanctuary was also now too small for its steadily growing lion population. "There are far more lions than what Gir can hold... these animals are not static, they are constantly moving outside and interacting with domestic animals and people," he added. Efforts to move some lions to other states have been mired in legal wrangles with the state government,



Asiatic lions at the Gir National Park and Sanctuary at Sasan Gir.



which wants to keep the animals in Gujarat.

Authorities have instead proposed finding new homes for some lions in other parts of the state. In the meantime, rangers keep a close watch on the wandering lions-which sometimes stray into villages and kill livestock-with the help of dozens of imported radio collars. "If a lion has not moved for 48 hours we can alert our staff," said Mohan Ram, the

park's deputy conservator of forests. The tracking collars are fitted around a lion's neck, helping rangers monitor their health and movements, reduce road and rail accidents, and lessen human-wildlife conflict. — AFP



Tourist vehicles are seen at the Gir National Park and Sanctuary at Sasan Gir.



A lion trekker walks in the Gir National Park and Sanctuary at Sasan Gir.



Asiatic lions at the Gir National Park and Sanctuary at Sasan Gir.

Egypt's 'Scorpion King' turns venom into money

Egyptian engineer Ahmed Abu Al-Seoud catches a scorpion.



Surrounded by thousands of live scorpions in a laboratory deep in Egypt's Western Desert, Ahmed Abu Al-Seoud carefully handles one of the curved-tailed arachnids before extracting a drop of its venom. A mechanical engineer who worked in the oil sector for almost two decades, Abu Al-Seoud decided in 2018 to strike a different path—producing scorpion venom for pharmaceutical research purposes. “I was surfing the internet and saw scorpion venom was one of the most expensive on the market,” said the 44-year-old, clad in a white lab coat. “So I thought to myself: Why not take advantage of this desert

environment where they roam around?”

Biomedical researchers are studying the pharmaceutical properties of scorpion venom, making the rare and potent neurotoxin a highly sought-after commodity now produced in several Middle Eastern countries. “Dozens of scorpion-derived bioactive molecules have been shown to possess promising pharmacological properties,” said a review published last May in the journal *Biomedicines*. It said labs are now studying its potential anti-microbial, immuno-suppressive and anti-cancer effects, among others, hoping to one day use or synthesize them for medicines.



Photos show Egyptian veterinary Iman Abdel-Malik catching a scorpion.

Egyptian engineer Ahmed Abu Al-Seoud extracts poison from a scorpion.

Lifestyle | Feature



Egyptian veterinarian Iman Abdel-Malik sorts scorpions at the Scorpion Kingdom laboratory and farm.



Egyptian pharmacist Nahla Abdel-Hameed catches a scorpion at the Scorpion Kingdom laboratory and farm in Egypt's Western Desert, near the city of Dakhla in the New Valley.-AFP photos



Egyptian engineer Ahmed Abu Al-Seoud catches a scorpion.



Egyptian engineer Ahmed Abu Al-Seoud catches a scorpion at his Scorpion Kingdom laboratory and farm.

Abu Al-Seoud is from the Dakhla oasis, located in Egypt's vast New Valley province and around 800 kilometers southwest of the capital Cairo. Sand dunes and towering palms surround his laboratory, which he affectionately calls the "Scorpion Kingdom". "Here, every family has a story about a scorpion sting," Abu Al-Seoud said. To get the animals to secrete venom in the controlled conditions of the lab, the scorpions are given a slight electric shock. Workers wait 20-30 days between extractions to obtain the highest quality venom. "What matters is the level of purity," Abu al-Seoud said, adding that one gram requires the venom of 3,000-3,500 scorpions.

Deathstalker

The liquid is refrigerated and transported to Cairo, where it is dried and packaged for sale as powder. The laboratory "is certified (by the government) and has the ability to export this unique product", said 25-year-old Nahla Abdel-Hameed, a pharmacist who works at the center. Abdel-Hameed referred to some scientific studies that explored the healing benefits of the venom in curing certain diseases. Mohey Hafez, a member of the pharmaceutical chamber at the Federation of Egyptian Industries, was more cautious in his assessment of its current uses. "Scorpion and snake venoms can be used in making antisera," he explained to AFP. "There is no ready-made medication that entirely depends on the venom as a direct ingredient, but there has been promising research into its uses". New Valley province boasts around five different species of scorpions, including the sought-after deathstalker (*Leiurus quinquestriatus*), whose venom sells for up to \$7,500 per gram, according to Abu Al-Seoud.

While he himself also catches the creatures, he employs residents of nearby villages for the risky activity, equipping them with gloves, tweezers, boots, UV lights-and antivenom.

The scorpion hunters earn one to 1.5 Egyptian pounds (around six to 10 cents) per animal. Pharmacist Abdel-Hameed said the arachnids are caught in residential areas so as not to harm "the ecological balance". "I classify them according to the area where they were caught, the species and size," she said. Her colleague Iman Abdel-Malik said that although the scorpions could go without eating for long periods, they were given "food and protein to increase the toxin excretion"-comprised of cockroaches and worms twice a month in the summer, and less during the winter hibernation.

'Bad reputation'

There are plans to breed the scorpions in the future rather than catching them, the veterinarian aged in her 20s added. About 20,000 of the animals have been collected so far, according to business partner Alaa Sabaa, while the lab has a maximum capacity of 80,000. He said the first scorpion venom extractions took place in December and January after two years of preparations, and yielded "three grams of venom". The self-financed project has so far cost about five million pounds, or around \$320,000, he said, and has also attracted government support.

They also extract bee venom and sell agricultural products, including aromatic plants. While Egypt has been producing various types of venom for years, Abu Al-Seoud said, it was often done illegally or was of poor quality. He said he hoped his operation would one day be an antidote to the country's "bad reputation" in the sector. "We are trying to show off the country's capabilities... through a high-quality product that has been studied scientifically as well as produced and exported legally," he said. — AFP



Word Search

DIRECTIONS:
Find and circle the vocabulary words in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.

Fast Food Restaurants

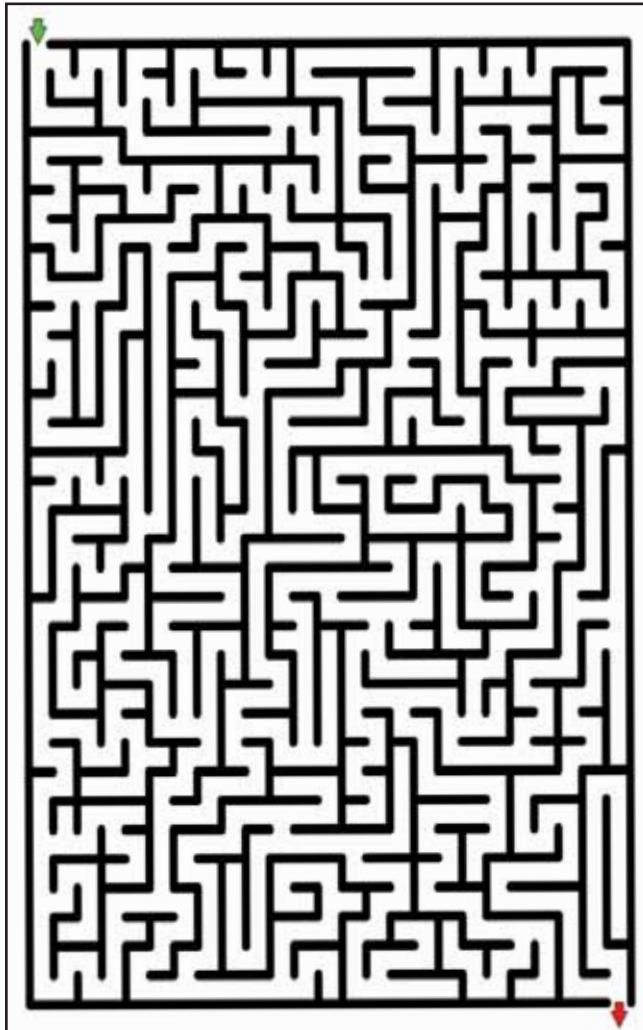


- A and W
- Arby's
- Burger King
- Carl's Jr.
- Chipotle
- Chuck E. Cheese's
- Church's Chicken
- Cinnabon
- Dairy Queen
- Domino's
- Dunkin' Donuts
- Five Guys
- Hardee's
- Jack in the Box

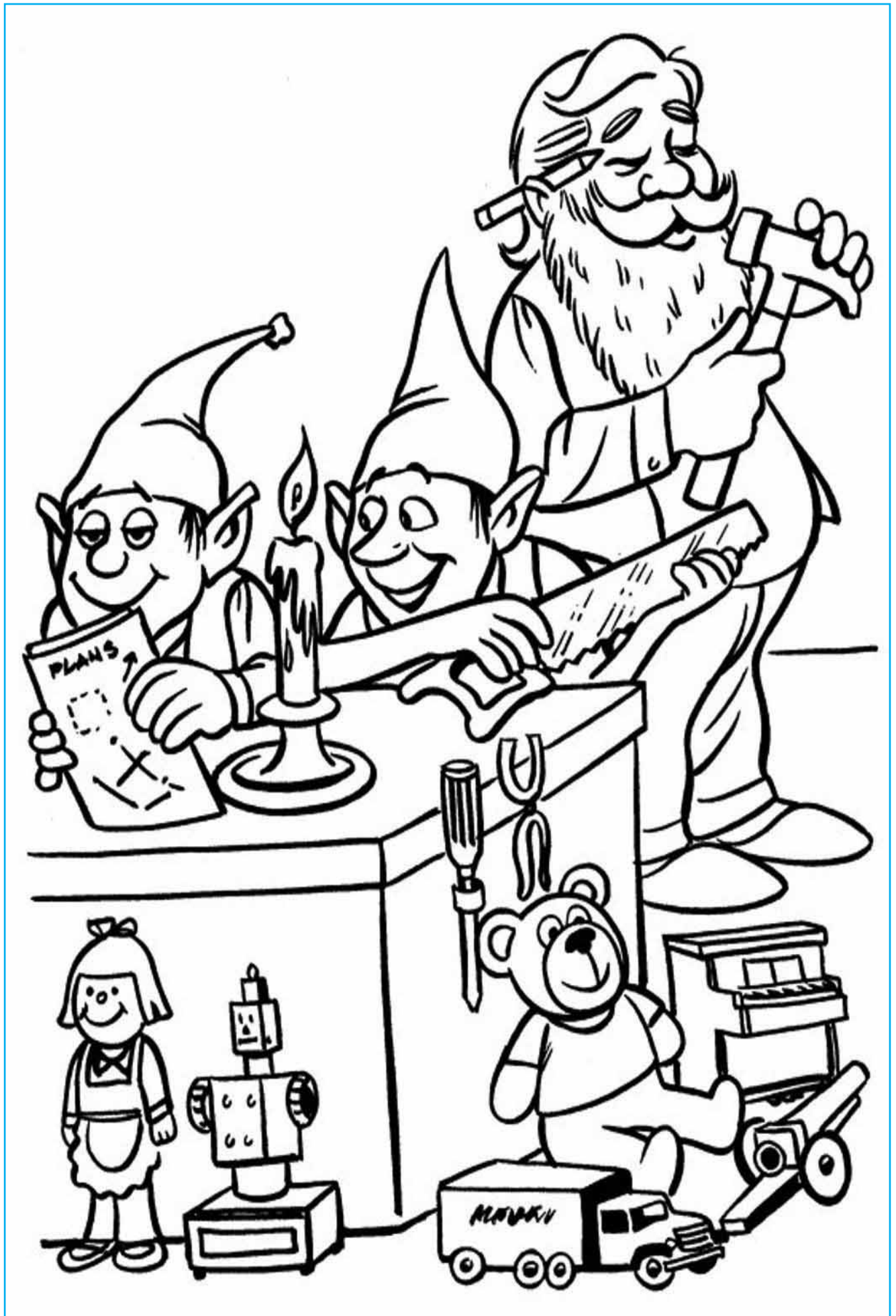


- Jollibee
- KFC
- Little Caesars
- Long John Silver's
- McDonald's
- Panda Express
- Papa John's Pizza
- Pizza Hut
- Popeyes
- Quiznos
- Starbucks
- Subway
- Taco Bell
- TCBY
- The Pizza Company
- Tim Hortons
- TKK Fried Chicken
- Wendy's
- WingStreet

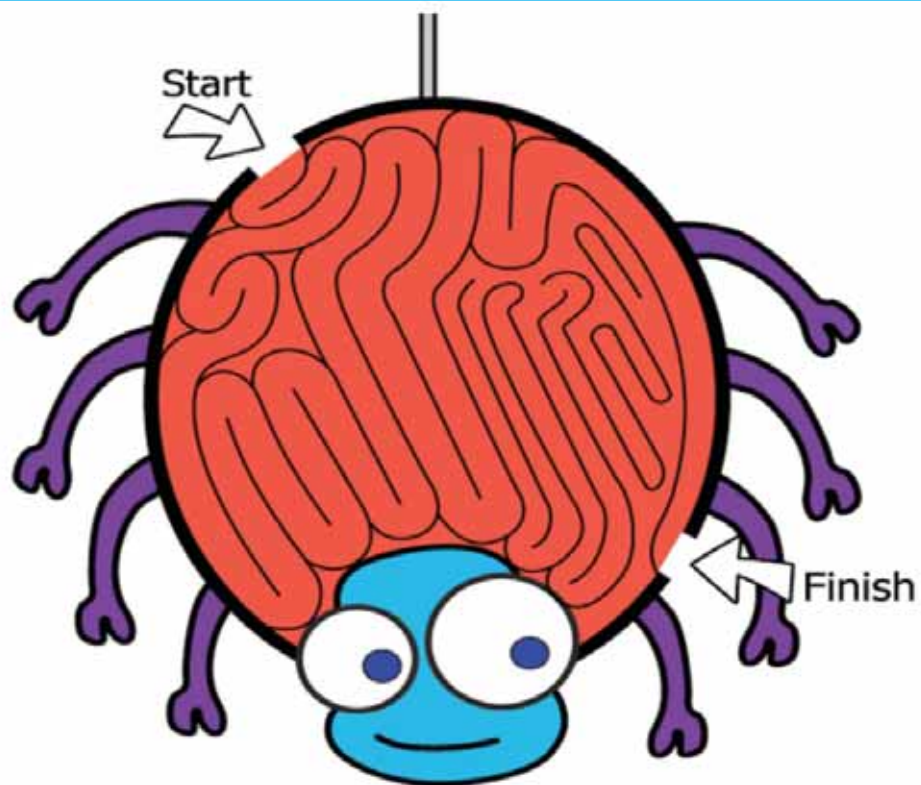
Kids Mazes



Color It



Find the way



Word Scramble



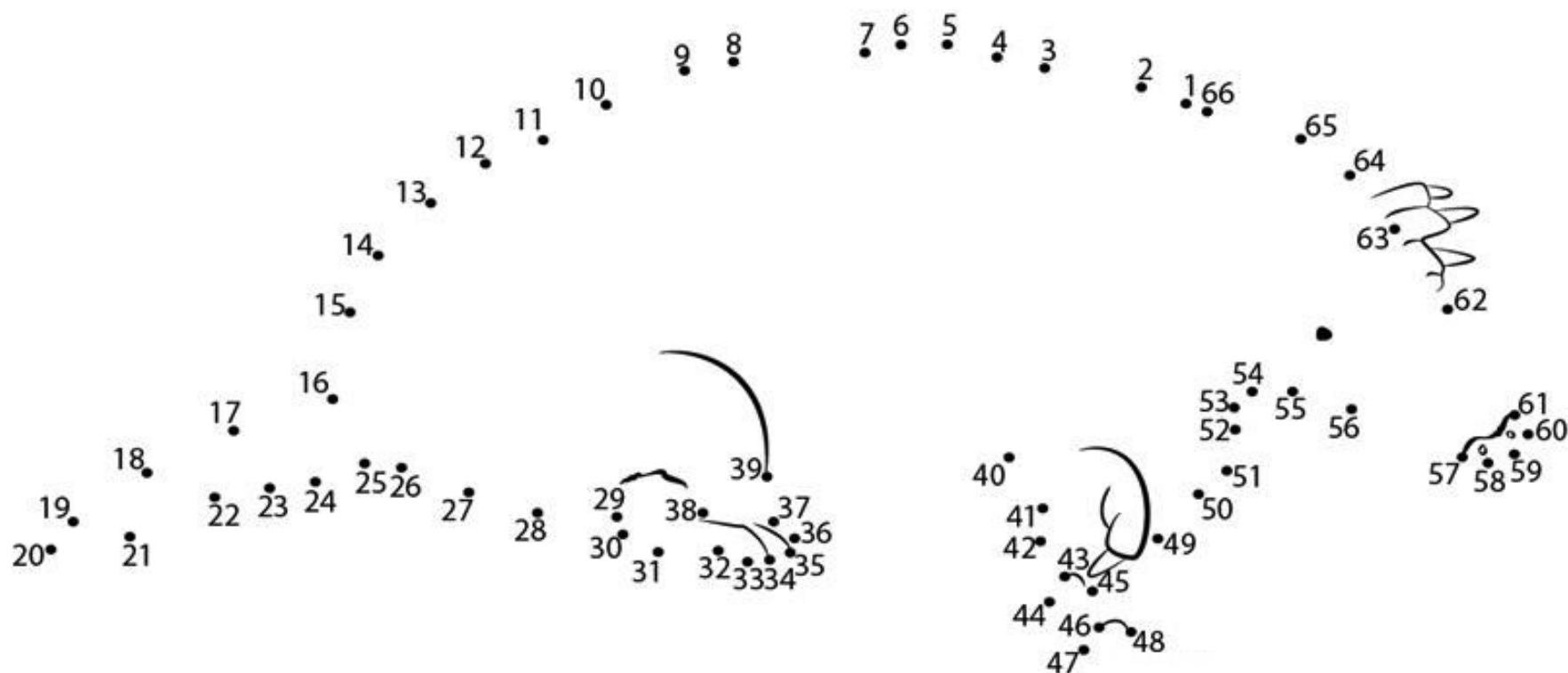
Computer Terms

Word Scramble

Help! The school computer had its memory scrambled and we need your help to get things back in order. Can you unscramble the computer terms and write the correct word on each line?

- | | | | |
|----------|-------|----------|-------|
| EITRNNE | _____ | KEERSAP | _____ |
| SAEHRC | _____ | UADOLP | _____ |
| LLCORS | _____ | NTERPRI | _____ |
| BOKEDYRA | _____ | IONC | _____ |
| UNMSAERE | _____ | SOTWRFEA | _____ |
| VSIRU | _____ | NLDDWOAO | _____ |
| EVRSER | _____ | SOEUM | _____ |
| FOTN | _____ | RSDAWSPO | _____ |
| MONORIT | _____ | EACCH | _____ |
| EENSRC | _____ | YEAGBTIG | _____ |
| HAKCRE | _____ | FODRLE | _____ |
| WSREROB | _____ | OEMUDNTC | _____ |

Join the dots



CLINIC PAGE



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Dr. Ahmad Alaeddine
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- Faculty member of (BEST).
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Classifieds

CHANGE OF NAME

286010100562 would like to announce that there is a minor correction in my name . It has been misprinted as "Shaikh" instead of "Sheikh". The correct given name is "Samir Mohammad Ali" and the correct surname is "Sheikh".
(C0226) 5-3-2021

I, **Samir** Mohammad Ali Shaikh, son of Mohammad Ali Sheikh, holder of Indian Passport number M6713212 issued at Kuwait on 10/06/2015 & Civil ID No.



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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Warm and Partly cloudy to cloudy with light variable wind to light to moderate freshening at times south easterly wind with speed of 08 - 40 km/h with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times and a chance

BY NIGHT: Rather cold and Partly cloudy with light to moderate freshening at times south easterly wind changing to north westerly wind with speed of 15 - 42 km/h with a chance for rising dust with a chance for rain that

EMERGENCY 112

Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

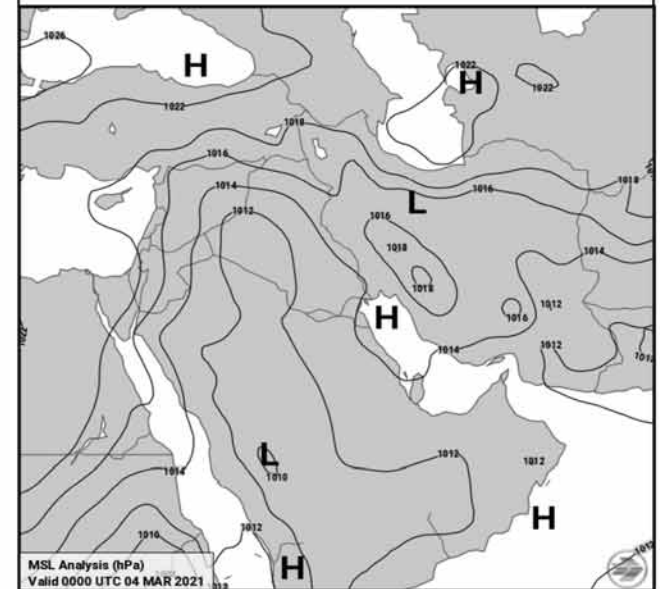
WEATHER WATCH

Fresh Wind + Thunder Rain

STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.
KUWAIT CITY	26 °C	18 °C
KUWAIT AIRPORT	27 °C	15 °C
ABDALY	28 °C	12 °C
BUBYAN	- °C	- °C
JAHRA	28 °C	16 °C
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C
SALMIYAH	23 °C	18 °C
AHMADI	23 °C	19 °C
NUWAISIB	23 °C	17 °C
WAFRA	27 °C	15 °C
SALMY	26 °C	15 °C

SFC. CHART

04/03/2021 0000 UTC



4 DAYS FORECAST

DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Friday	03/05	Warm with a chance for rising dust	24 °C	14 °C	NW	20 - 45 km/h
Saturday	03/06	Warm with a chance for rising dust over open areas	25 °C	12 °C	NW	15 - 45 km/h
Sunday	03/07	Warm	26 °C	11 °C	NW-VRB	08 - 40 km/h
Monday	03/08	Warm and some high clouds will appear	27 °C	12 °C	VRB-SE	06 - 26 km/h

PRAYER TIMES

Fajr	04:51
Sunrise	06:10
Zuhr	12:00
Asr	15:20
Sunset	17:49
Isha	19:06

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

MAX. Temp.	26 °C
MIN. Temp.	10 °C
MAX. RH	81 %
MIN. RH	12 %
MAX. Wind	NE 28 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

All times are local time unless otherwise stated.

UP.0

Business

FRIDAY, MARCH 5, 2021

34 Airbus says won't lay off staff in Germany, France or UK**35** Hong Kong removed from economic freedom ranking it once dominated**36** Takeaway meals app Deliveroo picks London for share listing

UK denies breaking EU treaty over N Ireland

Pro-UK militants in N Ireland renounce deal after Brexit

LONDON: Britain yesterday denied EU accusations it was violating the Brexit divorce treaty after announcing unilateral trade remedies for Northern Ireland. "These are sensible and practical steps," Prime Minister Boris Johnson's official spokesman told reporters after the government said it would extend a post-Brexit grace period and defer checks on agri-foods entering Northern Ireland from Britain.

"These types of operational measures are well-precedented and common in other international trade agreements, and are entirely consistent with our intention to fulfill our obligations under the (Northern Ireland) Protocol in good faith," he insisted. The spokesman denied that the EU and Ireland had been blindsided by the steps announced on Wednesday, which followed weeks of disruption for trade in Northern Ireland since the UK's definitive withdrawal from the bloc's single market and customs area.

They were given notice "earlier this week", he said, stressing the Brexit protocol for Northern Ireland had produced a "disproportionate impact" on the province. And Downing Street rejected complaints in Dublin that the UK had betrayed the EU's trust, prompting talk of legal action in retaliation.

"We wouldn't accept that characterization," the spokesman said.

"We remain committed to the Northern Ireland Protocol but we just want to address those areas where there are issues that have arisen," he said, highlighting food in supermarkets and customs problems with sending parcels from Britain across the Irish Sea.

Meanwhile, pro-UK paramilitaries say they are abandoning support for Northern Ireland's 1998 peace deal because of a post-Brexit trading pact that has provoked crisis between London and Brussels.

In a letter Wednesday to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the Loyalist Communities Council said it was "hereby withdrawing support for the Belfast (Good Friday)

Agreement and its institutions until our rights under the agreement are restored". The LCC represents three militant groups that were responsible for many deaths during 30 years of conflict between pro-UK unionists and pro-Irish republicans, before the peace was sealed in 1998.

The council emphasized that unionist opposition to the Brexit deal's Northern Ireland Protocol should remain "peaceful and democratic". But its announcement offers more evidence that Northern Ireland's delicate balance of peace is being destabilized as a result of Brexit, with unionists furious over new border checks that they say are separating them by stealth from the rest of the UK.

The checks on goods at two ports in Northern Ireland were briefly suspended last month after graffiti appeared threatening staff, and senior police have said there is a "febrile" atmosphere in the province.

The protocol was agreed by London and Brussels to prevent a hard border emerging between Northern Ireland and EU member the Republic of Ireland, a flashpoint in the decades-long sectarian conflict.

The LCC said it would withhold support for the Good Friday Agreement until the protocol is amended to ensure "unfettered access for goods, services, and citizens throughout the United Kingdom". "If you or the EU is not prepared to honor the entirety of the agreement then you will be responsible for the permanent destruction of the agreement," it told Johnson.

Tensions surrounding the trading arrangements deepened on Wednesday when Britain unilaterally announced it would extend a post-Brexit grace period, deferring checks on agri-foods entering Northern Ireland from Britain.

The EU said the UK action amounts to a breach of international law, and Irish broadcaster RTE reported the bloc is considering legal action. Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney told RTE that the British move was "deeply unhelpful". — AFP



Migrant worker flower pickers from Romania harvest daffodils on Taylors Bulbs farm near Holbeach in eastern England, on Wednesday. — AFP

OPEC, allies eye output decision

LONDON: The OPEC group of oil producers and its allies met with all eyes on whether powerhouses Russia and Saudi Arabia can agree on output levels following a rebound in demand and prices.

While the so-called OPEC+ group is often at loggerheads over how much oil to pump into the market, a sudden plunge in prices triggered by the coronavirus pandemic early last year led members to agree on a dramatic cut in output to underpin prices. Now that vaccination campaigns are underway and demand from China, the world's largest oil importer, has bounced back to pre-pandemic levels, the group is expected to raise output.

But the success of the meeting will hinge on

whether heavyweights Russia and Saudi Arabia can agree on a way forward. "There is within the alliance a major difference of opinion on the capacity of the oil market to absorb new volumes" of crude, said Bjarne Schieldrop, chief commodities analyst at SEB research group.

The world's second-largest crude producer after the United States, Russia "leans for caution", Schieldrop explained, while number three, Saudi Arabia, "defends the increase in supply".

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on state-run Russian media that "the situation is much better than a year ago and this fall", but he warned that "many uncertainties and risks remain". On the sidelines of a technical meeting Tuesday, the head of OPEC, Mohammed Barkindo, pushed for the middle ground when he said the cartel must emphasize "cautious optimism" given persistent risks from the pandemic. But Stephen Innes, global markets strategist at Axi, said the meeting could drag on. — AFP

Business

Airbus says won't lay off staff in Germany, France or UK

European aircraft maker reels from fallout of COVID-19

PARIS: Airbus said yesterday that it would be able to avoid forced redundancies in Germany, France and Britain as the European aircraft maker reels from the fallout of COVID-19 on air travel.

The staff situation in Spain, another production site for the aircraft maker, is still uncertain because talks with unions had begun later than elsewhere, it said. "At this moment, and thanks to the effectiveness of all social measures deployed so far, Airbus does not see the need to implement forced redundancies in France, Germany and the UK," it said, adding however that this depended on the "successful deployment of ongoing internal mobility measures."

At the end of June, the company had said it was planning to cut around 15,000 jobs worldwide, or 11 percent of its total workforce. The company said the cuts were in response to the pandemic, which had triggered the "gravest crisis" the industry had ever seen.

It added at the time that government aid could help reduce the number of layoffs.

Earlier yesterday, the German metalworkers' union IG Metall said it had reached agreement with Airbus management to avoid thousands of forced redundancies in Europe's biggest economy. Airbus had previously announced plans to slash around 5,100 posts of its 55,000 in Germany, but the deal means no one will be forced to leave the company until the end of 2023.

Rather, the cuts will be achieved through voluntary redundancies and hours reductions, the union said.

"The threatened layoffs are no longer on the table," said IG Metall regional director Daniel Friedrich in a statement. He added that a "months-long marathon of negotiations" had ended with a decision in favour of "intelligent solutions rather than layoffs."

It includes the extension of the shorter hours furlough scheme until the end of 2021. "The decision of Airbus management to rule out forced redundancies is a huge relief for all of us," said Holger Junge, head of the Airbus workers' council.



CANCUN: An American Airlines Airbus 321 is seen at a gate at Cancun International Airport in Cancun, Quintana Roo State, Mexico. — AFP

Speaking at a press conference yesterday, Junge noted that jobs had been saved despite the "immense" economic blow that Airbus had suffered in the last year. Airbus, and the aviation

sector as a whole, has been hit hard by the coronavirus crisis and the resulting collapse in air travel, posting a net loss of 1.1 billion euros (\$1.3 billion) for 2020. — AFP

Japan's nuclear industry still remains stalled

FUKUSHIMA: Ten years after the Fukushima disaster, Japan's nuclear industry remains crippled, with the majority of its reactors halted or on the path towards decommissioning.

The government still hopes to revitalize the sector, in part to reduce the country's dependence on energy imports as well as help it meet a goal of carbon neutrality by 2050.

What is the situation at Fukushima?

Around 5,000 people are still working daily at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, where four reactors were severely damaged by the March 11, 2011 tsunami triggered by a powerful earthquake.

Tangled scrap metal can still be seen strewn around parts of the site, including at the top of reactor 1, whose roof blew off during the disaster. Three reactors melted down in all and even now mobile Geiger counters periodically beep throughout the site. So far, the reactors' surroundings have been cleared, intact fuel rods have been removed with giant cranes, and new concrete dikes are being built to protect against tsunamis.

But the most difficult part lies ahead: extracting nearly 900 tons of molten fuel mixed with other highly radioactive debris. Development in Britain of a special robotic arm for use in the operation was delayed by the pandemic, pushing back the start of the extraction process by a year to 2022. But that's barely a blip in a decommissioning process expected to take 30 to 40 years, at best.

What are the dangers at the site?

A 7.3-magnitude quake that hit the region overnight on February 13 this year did not spark a tsunami or cause major damage, including at the Fukushima plant. But it caused cooling water levels to drop in several reactors—though plant operator TEPCO said

the effect was limited, as the water is in a closed system that does not leach into the surrounding environment.

Mountain groundwater that leaks into the subsoil below the reactors and becomes radioactive was a major problem after the disaster. Seepage is now largely prevented by an "ice wall" of frozen soil that runs 30 meters deep and 1.5 kilometers long, completed in 2018.

Rain and other water used for cooling continues to pose a problem, with around 140 cubic meters of radioactive water generated by the site every day in 2020. The contaminated water is filtered to remove most radioactive material. For now it is kept in hundreds of blue, grey and cream tanks at the site—but space is running out. By summer 2022, there will be no more storage available and the government is expected to approve a controversial plan to gradually release the treated water into the sea.

What role does nuclear have now?

All of Japan's reactors were halted after the accident and nuclear safety regulations were tightened significantly. Just nine reactors are currently operational, compared to 54 before March 2011, and two dozen are set for decommissioning.

Nuclear accounted for just 6.2 percent of electricity generation in Japan in fiscal 2019, a fraction of the 30 percent before the accident, according to official figures. The government's current goal, which is being reviewed, is for nuclear to account for 20-22 percent of electricity generation by 2030 — a target viewed as impossible by many experts.

Why push for nuclear power?

A majority of Japanese remain opposed to nuclear power after the trauma of the Fukushima disaster, and dozens of lawsuits have been filed by communities near plants in a bid to prevent them restarting. Other obstacles include the astronomical costs of implementing new nuclear security measures, as well as the longer-term price tag for decommissioning and maintenance of both operational and halted plants. In early 2020, Japanese news agency Kyodo calculated these costs for all the country's reactors at 13,460 billion yen (\$129 billion). — AFP

UK competition regulator launches Apple probe

LONDON: Britain's competition regulator yesterday launched an investigation into US tech giant Apple that will focus on its App Store. The Competition and Markets Authority said in a statement that it will examine Apple's position regarding the distribution of apps on its iPhones, iPads and other devices in Britain.

Apple said in response that it looked forward to working with the CMA to explain how its "guidelines for privacy, security and content have made the App Store a trusted marketplace for both consumers and developers". Apple's App Store is the only way for developers to distribute their apps on the US company's devices to the public.

"The CMA's investigation will consider whether Apple has a dominant position in connection with the distribution of apps on Apple devices in the UK," the regulator said. The CMA will also examine "whether Apple imposes unfair or anti-competitive terms on developers using the App Store, ultimately resulting in users having less choice or paying higher prices for apps and add-ons".

Apple must first approve all apps before they are placed on the App Store and developers must agree to certain terms, the CMA noted. "The probe has been prompted by the CMA's own work in the digital sector, as well as several developers reporting that Apple's terms and conditions are unfair and could break competition law," the regulator added. The CMA said complaints highlighted also that Apple required "in-app" features, add-ons and upgrades to use the US group's payment system, rather than any alternative. — AFP

Business

Hong Kong removed from economic freedom ranking it once dominated

Heritage Foundation says the city is now controlled by Beijing

HONG KONG: Hong Kong has been removed from an annual index of the world's freest economies because the think-tank that compiles the league table said the city was now directly controlled by Beijing. The announcement is a reputational blow for Hong Kong and comes as Beijing ramps up its bid to quash dissent after huge and sometimes violent pro-democracy demonstrations in 2019.

The Heritage Foundation, a conservative US think-tank, publishes an annual Index of Economic Freedom ranking countries and territories for how business-friendly their regulations and laws are.

Over the last 26 years, Hong Kong topped the table for all but one year—a source of pride to the city's government which often used the accolade in its official press releases and investment brochures.

But when the 2021 ranking is released later, Hong Kong will not appear because the report's authors believe the city is no longer independent enough of Beijing to justify separate inclusion. "The loss of political freedom and autonomy suffered by Hong Kong over the past two years has made that city almost indistinguishable in many respects from other major Chinese commercial centers like Shanghai and Beijing," Edwin J. Feulner, the founder of the Heritage Foundation, wrote in the Wall Street Journal on Wednesday. "[Hong Kong's] ties to Beijing are increasingly forged

in steel," Feulner added, while its pre-handover "traditions of English common law, freedom of speech, and democracy have weakened significantly".

Hong Kong's financial secretary Paul Chan criticized the decision yesterday. "When they arrived at that decision, they must have been clouded by their ideological inclination and political bias," Chan said during an online conference, according to Radio Television Hong Kong.

Once embraced

The Heritage Foundation is one of the major policy think-tanks that influences fiscal conservatives in the United States. Feulner is also a vocal critic of Beijing and chairman of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation. Hong Kong's pro-Beijing government embraced the think-tank's league table each year it came out. Back in 2019 — when Hong Kong topped the table for the 25th consecutive year—finance chief Chan said it showed the city's "economic resilience, high-quality legal framework, low tolerance for corruption, high degree of government transparency, efficient regulatory framework and openness to global commerce". Last year the city fell from the top spot for the first time, replaced by rival Singapore, after Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law on Hong Kong.

The city's commerce chief at the time



HONG KONG: This file photo shows two pedestrians using umbrellas on a promenade that runs along Victoria Harbour in Hong Kong. Hong Kong has been removed from an annual index of the world's freest economies yesterday because The Heritage Foundation, the conservative US think-tank that compiles the league table, said the city was now directly controlled by Beijing. - AFP

brushed off concern and predicted Hong Kong would soon return to the top of the table.

Instead it—and neighboring Macau—will be counted as part of China which currently languishes in 107th place in the ranking, between Uganda and Uzbekistan, in a section where economies are rated as "mostly unfree." Beijing says the security law was needed to restore stability to Hong Kong.

But it has also dramatically altered Hong Kong's legislative and judicial relationship with the authoritarian mainland. Chinese leaders have announced they want to ensure only "staunch patriots" run the city, including within the city's independent judiciary.

That has created some jitters within the international business community, especially as Beijing falls out with a growing list of western powers. —AFP

Parler shifts courts in legal attack on Amazon

WASHINGTON: Parler social network popular with Donald Trump supporters took aim at Amazon in a state court Wednesday after dropping a federal lawsuit over the internet titan's decision to stop hosting its website due to user posts inciting violence. Parler filed the new lawsuit in Washington state, where Amazon has its headquarters, hoping the case will stand better chances under local laws regarding defamation, breach of contract, and consumer protection. However Amazon told AFP there was "no merit" to the claims.

"As shown by the evidence in Parler's federal lawsuit, it was clear that there was significant content on Parler that encouraged and incited violence against others, which is a violation of our terms of service," it said. Amazon Web Services (AWS)

stopped hosting Parler's website because Parler was "unable or unwilling to promptly identify and remove" such content, according to Amazon.

Parler claimed to have more than 20 million users before being pulled from the Apple and Google online marketplaces and effectively shut down when AWS cut ties over allegations the platform failed to stop incitement of violence by the ex-president's supporters ahead of the January 6 siege of the US Capitol. However since then Parler has come back online, relaunching with a new web hosting partner. Parler contended in the state suit that Amazon engaged in unfair business practices in its dealings with the social network, and that an email saying Parler was unwilling or unable to properly moderate content amounted to defamation. "The true reason why AWS decided to suspend and/or terminate its contract with Parler was not because of any alleged breach of contract, but because AWS did not want Parler to be able to provide a new platform for conservative voices, including Donald Trump, or to compete effectively against other microblogging platforms such as Twitter," lawyers argued in the Washington state suit. —AFP

Lufthansa posts record annual loss, sees long recovery

FRANKFURT: German flag carrier Lufthansa said yesterday it lost a record 6.7 billion euros (\$8.1 billion) in 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic wiped out demand for travel and left aircraft grounded.

Europe's biggest airline said it expects to book an operating loss again in 2021, although smaller than last year, as capacity runs at only 40-50 percent of pre-pandemic levels for the full year. Underlining the long road to recovery, it added that capacity will climb to 90 percent of 2019's level only in "the middle of the decade". After borders slammed shut as governments scrambled to halt the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, the airline faced an uncertain future.

In June, it was offered a lifeline by the German government, which pumped in nine billion euros for a 25 percent stake. "The past year was the most challenging in the history of our company—for our customers, our employees and our shareholders,"

said Lufthansa chief executive Carsten Spohr.

In the airline's home base, demand is sluggish with work from home orders curtailing lucrative business travel while official warnings are in place against leisure tourism in many countries worldwide. Across Europe, restrictions are also in place as governments continue to battle rising infection numbers. Lufthansa is currently flying about 20 percent of its capacity, with little improvement expected in the next one to two months.

But it expects demand to pick up again in the summer with a vaccination rollout progressing and more capacity for tests available. "Internationally recognized digital vaccination and test certificates must replace travel bans and quarantine," Spohr stressed, repeating calls by other airline bosses.

Lufthansa, which includes subsidiaries Swiss, Austrian, Brussels Airlines and Eurowings, operated only 31 percent of its overall capacity last year. Revenues sank 63 percent to 13.6 billion euros for 2020, compared to 36.4 billion euros in 2019. The operating loss came in at 5.5 billion euros, while a year ago, the airline's comparative adjusted earnings before interest and tax stood in the black at 2.0 billion euros. —AFP

Business

Takeaway meals app Deliveroo picks London for share listing

Major boost for Brexit-hit London financial sector

LONDON: Takeaway meals app Deliveroo yesterday said it had chosen London for its stock market listing, a major boost for the capital's financial sector which has been roiled by Brexit.

Deliveroo, in line with other home-delivery companies, has seen demand soar in the past year owing to lockdowns during the coronavirus pandemic. No date has been set for the initial public offering (IPO), while the group could be valued at more than \$7.0 billion (5.8 billion euros).

British finance minister Rishi Sunak welcomed yesterday announcement, which comes after London's financial sector, known as the City, recently lost its European share trading crown to Amsterdam following Britain's exit from the European Union. "The UK is one of the best places in the world to start, grow and list a business—and we're determined to build on this reputation now we've left the EU," Sunak said in comments included in the Deliveroo statement. "Deliveroo has created thousands of jobs and is a true British tech success story," he added.

Sunak said the government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson was meanwhile "looking at reforms to encourage even more high growth, dynamic businesses to list in the UK".

'Great place'

Deliveroo chief executive Will Shu said he

had no hesitation in choosing London for its upcoming listing. "London is a great place to live, work, do business and eat. That's why I'm so proud and excited about a potential listing here," said Shu, who launched the company in 2013 with a delivery in London.

"After eight years of operations and rapid expansion around the globe, choosing London underlines Deliveroo's commitment to making the United Kingdom its long-term home," the group added in the statement. Shu said it wants Deliveroo "to be the definitive food company, bringing consumers the best choice of foods, giving restaurants new opportunities to grow their businesses, and providing riders with great work". Deliveroo in January confirmed it was targeting a stock market listing after a fundraising round valued the company at more than \$7.0 billion.

Reports say the IPO could come later in the spring. Deliveroo yesterday said it expected to initially adopt a dual-class share structure "to enable the company to execute on its long-term strategic vision in order to create long-term shareholder value".

Deliveroo said such structures, which involve two different classes of shares with differential voting rights, are commonplace on exchanges in the US, Hong Kong and in Europe. "Alongside the dual-class share structure, Deliveroo intends to have a strong commitment to corporate gov-



PARIS: In this file photo, co-founder and CEO of Deliveroo, Will Shu, poses during the launch of first kitchen Deliveroo Editions in Saint-Ouen, outside Paris. — AFP

ernance standards including a majority independent board of directors as well as upholding diversity standards," the group added. Deliveroo works with 140,000 restaurants in 800 cities to deliver meals to customers' homes.

But its business has come under scrutiny, including in Britain, France and Spain, as its freelance delivery riders complain of working conditions, reflecting wider concerns over their rights in the gig economy. — AFP

Texas power grid operator fires CEO after chaos

HOUSTON: Texas' power grid operator has fired its president and CEO following last month's winter storm that left millions without electricity, media reports said. Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) has come under fire from customers and politicians over its apparent failure to prepare for the cold weather and the enormous bills some customers have faced due to a massive spike in energy prices.

President and CEO Bill Magness was fired late Wednesday after the ERCOT board held an emergency meeting and gave him 60 days' termination notice, CNN and other media reports said, citing an ERCOT statement. Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, who has called on the leaders of ERCOT and the Public Utility Commission of Texas to resign, welcomed the news.

"2 days ago, I called on ERCOT and PUC leaders to resign. Good news—now they are both gone," Patrick tweeted. "Next—one of my top 31 priorities—reforming ERCOT and fixing what went wrong."

Several board members of ERCOT have already resigned after millions of Texans were left without power in mid-February as freezing conditions overwhelmed local utility companies ill-prepared for such weather. PUC chairwoman DeAnn Walker resigned on Monday.

Texas governor Greg Abbott has ordered an investigation into the grid operator, and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission has also said it will probe the factors behind the power outages. —AFP

Swiss chocolate consumption melts away amid pandemic

ZURICH: Swiss chocolate makers were perhaps expecting a sweet spot as people turned to comfort food during the pandemic but are instead facing devastating 2020 figures showing consumption in Switzerland melting to a 40-year-low.

Chocosuisse, the national federation of Swiss chocolate makers, painted a bleak picture this week of the impact that the COVID-19 crisis had taken on the industry, with plunging production, exports and even consumption. And Lindt and Sprungli, one of the wealthy Alpine nation's most famous chocolate makers, published its annual results Tuesday detailing a nearly 11-percent drop in its 2020 revenues, to 4 billion Swiss francs (\$4.4 billion, 3.6 billion euros).

Amid lockdowns and a pandemic-fuelled economic crisis last year, it may not be surprising that Swiss chocolate makers overall saw their production fall, shrinking 10 percent compared to 2019, to 180,000 tons, according to Chocosuisse.

And exports, which account for nearly 70 percent of Swiss chocolate makers' revenues, fell by more than that, slumping 11.5 percent in 2020, to 126,000 tons. More surprising perhaps is that the country renowned for its love of high-quality cocoa products, where people gobble up

more chocolate per capita than anywhere else in the world, also saw consumption drop.

Lowest since 1982

In fact, annual consumption fell to below the symbolic threshold of 10 kilograms (22 pounds) per person, dipping to 9.9 kilos—the lowest level since 1982. A major contributor to the drop, Chocosuisse chief Urs Furrer told AFP, was the steep decline in foreign tourists, who tend to tip the consumption scales. The per capita chocolate consumption in a country is calculated by dividing the volumes sold by the number of inhabitants, leading to inflated figures in Switzerland, where chocolate treats are a favorite souvenir.

"It would be impossible to calculate the exact consumption of residents, because in shops, the salespeople do not know if their customer lives in Switzerland or is a tourist," Furrer said. But the absence of tourists is not the whole explanation for last year's decline. In Switzerland as elsewhere, the health crisis and accompanying restrictions including forced teleworking, has had a clear impact on consumption habits. "Consumption also dropped in areas that are usually crowded with passers-by, like train stations and city centres," Furrer said, pointing out that chocolate was often an impulse buy by people on the move. Physical distancing requirements have also taken a toll on social occasions where handing over a box of chocolates might be expected. "The sale of gift boxes of pralines has also declined," Furrer said.

At the same time however, the sale of raw products like chocolate masse usually used by chocolatiers, bakeries and patisseries rose last year as more amateurs delved into making their own sweets at home. —AFP

Sports

Nets' Harden triumphs in return to Houston, 76ers silence Jazz

LOS ANGELES: James Harden returned to Houston for the first time since his tumultuous departure from the Rockets on Wednesday, posting a triple-double to lead the Brooklyn Nets to a 132-114 victory over his former NBA team.

Harden, greeted by a first-quarter video tribute, cheers and a smattering of boos, delivered 29 points, 10 rebounds and 14 assists to fuel Brooklyn, where he finally landed in January after demanding a trade. "I'm excited. I mean, we got a win," Harden said. "We've been playing very, very good basketball, and to finish out strong like this going into the All-Star break means a lot to us."

Harden was grateful for the tribute video that showcased his accomplishments in Houston, including the 2018 NBA Most Valuable Player award and the league scoring title the past three seasons. He became just the sixth player in NBA history to record a triple-double in his first game against his former team, ably helping the Nets overcome the continued absence of Kevin Durant.

"As far as playing in Houston, a lot of mixed emotions with the fans, but I knew that was going to happen," he said. "I just wanted to come out here and give them a show. For me, once I get on that court, it's just 'Try to win.' I'm not really worried about anything else. So that was kind of my feeling: win the game and do whatever it takes and do what you've been doing."

In Philadelphia, Joel Embiid scored 40 points and pulled down 19 rebounds to lead the 76ers to a 131-123 overtime victory over the Utah Jazz in a clash of the top teams in the East and West. The Cameroonian

center drained a three-pointer to knot the score at 118-118 with 6.5 seconds left in regulation and Tobias Harris scored 11 of his 22 points in overtime to lift the Sixers to victory over the league-leading Jazz.

Utah star Donovan Mitchell finished with 33 points, eight rebounds and six assists but was ejected after receiving his second technical in the extra period. A frustrated Mitchell lashed out at game officials.

"I'm never, ever one to blame a ref, blame an official, but this is getting out of hand," Mitchell said of calls he felt should have gone Utah's way but didn't. There have been games like this we've won, games we've lost. We're nice, we don't complain, we don't get frustrated, we fight through things.

"But the fact that we continuously get screwed in a way by this... it's getting ridiculous," added Donovan, who stormed off the court after his second technical for arguing with officials, kicking a water cooler toward a security guard as he departed.

Kings top Lakers

Two West Coast games came down to the wire, as the Portland Trail Blazers edged the Golden State Warriors 108-106 and the Sacramento Kings beat the short-handed Los Angeles Lakers 123-120. The defending NBA champion Lakers were again without injured forward Anthony Davis and missing LeBron James for the first time this season as he sat out with a sprained left ankle.

In their absence Germany's Dennis Schroder led the Lakers with 28 points and nine assists. But Schroder came up empty on a drive to the basket



HOUSTON: James Harden #13 of the Brooklyn Nets shoots the ball during the game against the Houston Rockets on Wednesday at the Toyota Center in Houston, Texas. —AFP

with 5.9 seconds remaining and the Lakers down by one. Montrezl Harrell grabbed the rebound but missed the putback attempt, Kyle Kuzma extended the Lakers' possession but also couldn't score and Harrison Barnes sealed it for the Kings with a pair of free throws.

McConnell steals show

Indiana point guard TJ McConnell was the star in the Pacers' 114-111 victory over the Cavaliers in Cleveland, putting up an unconventional triple-dou-

ble comprising 16 points, 13 rebounds and 10 steals. McConnell broke the NBA record for steals in a first half with nine and just one shy of the best mark in a game, which stands at 11.

It was the 11th triple-double including steals since steals were recognized as a statistical category in the 1973-74 season. "I was just playing with our defensive principles and trying to help run the team, I wasn't going out of my way to make steals," McConnell said. "We kind of dug ourselves a hole, so I'm happiest about the win." —AFP

Pakistan Super League cricket suspended over coronavirus cases

KARACHI: The Pakistan Super League was suspended yesterday after seven players tested positive for the coronavirus, the country's cricket board said. The Twenty20 competition, which started on February 20, was put on hold "with immediate effect", a Pakistan Cricket Board statement said. "The decision was made after seven cases were reported in the competition," a statement on the Pakistan Cricket Board website said. The PCB "will focus on the safe and secure passage of all participants, and arrange repeat PCR tests, vaccines and isolation facilities to the six participating sides," it added.

The seven players included Australian spinner Fawad Ahmed, England's Tom Banton and Mohammad Faizan, who represents Lahore. Australian all-rounder Daniel Christian withdrew from the competition over fears of catching the virus and planned to fly out yesterday. The coronavirus has proved yet another hurdle for the Pakistan Super League, which is now in its sixth edition but was held entirely in Pakistan for just the first time last year. Previous editions were hosted wholly or partially by the United Arab Emirates over security fears following the deadly 2009 attack on the Sri Lanka team bus in Lahore. Last year, three play-offs and the final were cancelled after England's Alex Hayles showed symptoms of COVID-19. —AFP

Overseas fans likely to be barred from Tokyo Games

TOKYO: Overseas spectators are likely to be shut out from the Tokyo Olympics, Japanese media reported yesterday, after organizers said that public safety would be the "top priority" at the coronavirus-delayed Games. The Japanese government, Tokyo metropolitan government and Tokyo 2020 organizing committee are leaning towards holding the massive event in front of a domestic audience only, the Yomiuri Shimbun and other outlets said.

Officials fear that an influx of visitors from abroad will endanger the Japanese public. "As the spread of coronavirus continues in every country, they have decided that allowing visitors from overseas on a large scale will only make people anxious," the Yomiuri report said.

The three parties met with International Olympic and Paralympic Committee heads on Wednesday and agreed to take a decision on spectators by the end of the month, ideally before the nationwide torch relay begins on March 25.

But comments made by organizers before and after the talks hinted that overseas fans will be locked out, with games president Seiko Hashimoto saying public safety is the "top priority". IOC chief Thomas Bach said organizers will "focus on the essentials of the Games", while Japan's Olympic Minister Tamayo Marukawa said "a cautious decision is necessary".



TOKYO: President of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics Organising Committee Seiko Hashimoto attends a Tokyo 2020 executive board meeting in Tokyo on March 2, 2021. —AFP

Reports said Japanese organizers will soon make their position official and convey it to IOC and IPC chiefs. Bach said last week that a decision on overseas fans would be taken in late April or early May, but Hashimoto said Wednesday that fans, hotels and travel operators needed to know sooner.

Around 900,000 tickets have reportedly already been sold outside Japan. Organizers also said Wednesday that they will take a decision on the number of spectators allowed in venues in April. Hashimoto said "scientific insight" would be used to determine venue capacities, and that the ruling would be in line with government policies on attendance. —AFP

Sports

Extra-time winner lightens mood as Barcelona reach Spanish Cup final

MADRID: Barcelona needed extra-time to reach the Copa del Rey final on Wednesday, with a 3-2 aggregate win over Sevilla coming just two days after a police raid on the club and the arrest of their former president. Having trailed 2-0 from the first leg, Danish international Martin Braithwaite hit the crucial goal in the fifth minute of extra-time with a diving header off a Jordi Alba cross.

Gerard Pique had equalized in the fourth minute of stoppage time with virtually the last play of the game to save Barca. The veteran international headed in at the near post after a fine cross from Antoine Griezmann. That was after Ousmane Dembele, who scored in the 2-0 win at Sevilla in La Liga at the weekend, had given the 30-time Spanish Cup winners a 12th-minute lead in the second leg with a right-foot drive from outside the area.

Sevilla could have killed the game off in the 73rd minute to deny Barca their place in the final for a 42nd time. They were awarded a penalty when Lucas Ocampos was brought down by Oscar Mingueza. However, Ocampos saw his tame right-foot effort from the spot saved by Marc-Andre ter Stegen. Flagging Sevilla were then reduced to 10 men in injury time when Brazilian Fernando was red-carded for a foul on Francisco Trincao.

AC Milan salvage Udinese draw with last-gasp penalty

MILAN: Franck Kessie scored a 97th-minute penalty to rescue a 1-1 draw for AC Milan at home to Udinese on Wednesday, giving Serie A leaders Inter Milan the chance to pull six points clear at the top. Rodrigo Becao's second-half header at the San Siro completely deceived Milan goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma and Stefano Pioli's faltering side looked destined for a third defeat in four games.

But a needless handball from Udinese substitute Jens Stryger Larsen offered Milan a lifeline, with Ivorian international Kessie converting the penalty with the final kick of the match. "Penalties are not easy," Kessie told broadcaster DAZN. "When you get there, you have two choices: you mustn't feel fear or uncertainty, otherwise you will get it wrong. I was not afraid and I scored."

Milan struggled to create many genuine chances in the absence of top scorer Zlatan Ibrahimovic, the Swede sidelined by a groin injury picked up in last weekend's victory over Roma. Ibrahimovic will miss Milan's trip to his former club Manchester United in the first leg of their Europa League last 16 tie, but of greater concern is the club's

"The team deserved to qualify," said Barca coach Ronald Koeman. "For their work and honesty. We are more aggressive, we've always created chances, the team has improved enormously. This is a very important result for the club, for the players, and for me of course as well. This is an important step in earning a title."

It was a much-needed win for Barcelona after former president Josep Maria Bartomeu, current chief executive Oscar Grau, head of legal services Roma Gomez Ponti and Bartomeu's advisor Jaume Masferrer were arrested by Catalan police, who searched the club's offices on Monday morning.

They were all questioned in relation to last year's "Barcagate" scandal. The club holds its presidential elections later this week. The search of Barcelona's stadium was part of a probe into allegations the club carried out a defamation campaign against current and former players who were critical of Bartomeu.

Spanish radio station Cadena Ser claimed in February 2020 that Barca covered up inflated payments to a company called I3 Ventures which it had hired to boost the image of the club on social media. Part of the social media campaign included criticizing current and former players like Lionel Messi and Xavi Hernandez, and iconic coach Pep Guardiola.

dip in form domestically.

Udinese goalkeeper Juan Musso made good saves from Kessie and Samuel Castillejo early in the second half, but it was the visitors who should have taken the lead when Ilija Nestorovski's header was cleared off the line brilliantly by Alessio Romagnoli.

Brazilian center-back Becao nodded Udinese ahead at a corner on 68 minutes, Donnarumma seemingly distracted by two players jostling in front of him as the ball floated past the Milan keeper. However, the hosts snatched a point at the death through Kessie to stay within three of city rivals Inter.

Atalanta roll

Robin Gosens, Jose Luis Palomino, Luis Muriel, Josip Ilicic and Aleksei Miranchuk all scored for Atalanta in a 5-1 rout of bottom club Crotone. Atalanta occupy the final Champions League spot and are two points clear of Roma, who needed a late winner from Amadou Diawara to secure a 2-1 victory at Fiorentina after Leonardo Spinazzola had scored at both ends.

"It was very important that we get the win this evening," Roma boss Paulo Fonseca told Sky Sport Italia. "After the defeat to Milan, the team reacted well. It's important for us to understand what we need to improve and how we must react to setbacks."

Francesco Caputo's stoppage-time penalty earned Sassuolo a dramatic 3-3



BARCELONA: Barcelona's Spanish defender Gerard Pique (second left) celebrates after scoring his team's second goal during Spanish Copa del Rey (King's Cup) semi-final second leg football match between FC Barcelona and Sevilla FC at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona on Wednesday. —AFP

Barcelona will face either Athletic Bilbao or Levante, who are 1-1 in their semi-final, in the final on April 17 in Seville. Before that, however, Barcelona will attempt another comeback effort when they take on Paris Saint-Germain in the second leg of their Champions League last 16 tie next week. Barca trail 4-1 from the first leg.

Sevilla coach Julen Lopetegui admitted Wednesday's defeat was a "bitter pill to swallow." "We are disappointed and sad to be deprived of a final. "We experienced the most crushing feeling in football, conceding with the last kick of the game (in normal time)." —AFP



MILAN: AC Milan's Ivorian midfielder Franck Kessie (C) challenges Udinese's Brazilian midfielder Wallace during the Italian Serie A football match AC Milan vs Udinese Wednesday at the San Siro stadium in Milan. —AFP

draw against Napoli, as Gennaro Gattuso's side dropped vital points in the race for the Champions League places. Sassuolo twice led through a Nikola Maksimovic own goal and Domenico Berardi penalty. Piotr Zielinski's fine strike had levelled for Napoli who then went in front courtesy of Lorenzo Insigne's 90th-minute penalty following an equaliser by Giovanni Di Lorenzo.

Cagliari, who sacked Eusebio Di Francesco last week after a 16-match winless run, recorded their second victory in a

row under his successor Leonardo Semplici as they defeated Bologna 1-0. Benevento continued their slide down the table following a 3-0 loss against Hellas Verona, while Genoa and Sampdoria drew 1-1.

On Tuesday Juventus gave their hopes of a 10th straight Serie A title a timely boost as they beat struggling Spezia 3-0 to move within seven points of Inter. Cristiano Ronaldo added a late third as the Portugal star notched 20 league goals for the 12th straight season. —AFP

Sports

Man Utd lose ground on leaders City with fog-bound Palace draw

LONDON: Manchester United were left a huge 14 points behind Premier League leaders Manchester City as Crystal Palace held them to yet another goalless draw on Wednesday. The stalemate at a foggy Selhurst Park was United's third successive goalless draw in all competitions ahead of Sunday's Manchester derby against City, who are on a record-breaking 21-game winning streak. Elsewhere, third-placed Leicester had captain Kasper Schmeichel to thank for a point in a 1-1 draw at Burnley.

Aston Villa missed the chance to move to within two points of the top four as they suffered a shock 1-0 loss to bottom-of-the-table Sheffield United, who held on for the final half an hour with 10 men. A point in south London left second-placed Man United just one ahead of Leicester, with the main aim now for Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side to cling on to a top-four place that will secure Champions League football next season.

"We have to do much better, we have to risk more in attack to create more chances," United midfielder Nemanja Matic, who almost broke the deadlock with a deflected shot, told Sky Sports.

"We are Manchester United, we have to win this kind of game. On Sunday we have a big game against Manchester City. We have to refocus for that."

Leicester's challenge for a return to the Champions League next season has been badly hit by injuries to key players, with Chelsea, Liverpool and Everton all able to close in on the Foxes. Matej Vydra smashed home his first league goal in nearly 12 months to give Burnley the lead after just four minutes.

However, Kelechi Iheanacho's splendid volley drew Leicester level in the 34th minute. Schmeichel then produced two fine saves to deny Chris Wood early in the second half, parrying the New Zealander's powerful header before getting down low to his right to turn a shot wide.

Ashley Westwood then rattled the post for Burnley, but Leicester finished the stronger. Leicester manager Brendan Rodgers lauded Schmeichel, saying: "He's been brilliant for me in my time here, there's moments where it looks like it's going



LONDON: A shot from Manchester United's English striker Mason Greenwood goes over the bar during the English Premier League football match between Crystal Palace and Manchester United at Selhurst Park in south London on Wednesday. — AFP

to be a goal and he pulls off a save."

Blades hero McGoldrick

Sheffield United secured just their fourth league win of the season as David McGoldrick scored the only goal against a Villa side desperately missing the inspiration of injured captain Jack Grealish. Although the Blades had Phil Jagielka sent off for denying a

clear goalscoring opportunity when hacking down Anwar El Ghazi, ninth-placed Villa failed to make their advantage count.

The Blades are still 12 points from safety despite this win but manager Chris Wilder said: "Any result in this division is a huge result for Sheffield United. "Obviously it was made a little more difficult going down to 10 men, but we showed good character — as I've spoken about all season regarding my team." — AFP

Man Utd to join Liverpool in not releasing internationals

LONDON: Manchester United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer said it "doesn't make sense" for his players to travel for international duty later this month if they have to quarantine on their return and miss games as a result. Arrivals in Britain from "Red List" countries are subject to 10 days' hotel confinement.

South American countries and Portugal are among the nations on that list meaning United stars Bruno Fernandes of Portugal and Uruguayan striker Edinson Cavani could be missing for World Cup qualifiers. Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said his club will also withdraw players if they are forced to quarantine, casting the participation of Brazilian trio Alisson Becker, Roberto Firmino and Fabinho and Portugal forward Diogo Jota into doubt.

In normal circumstances, clubs must release players for international duty on specific dates. However, FIFA has given clubs dispensation to

prevent players who may be affected by the regulations from joining up with their countries for the matches. "It doesn't make sense to travel, when we are paying them, if they come back and are away for 10 days," said Solskjaer. "That's a chat we'll have with the players."

Fernandes is among the United stars who looks like he needs a break in any case as the Red Devils' main man put in another jaded performance in a dismal 0-0 draw at Crystal Palace on Wednesday. In foggy conditions at Selhurst Park, United failed to see a clear route to goal as they were involved in a sixth goalless draw in 27 Premier League games this season and a third in a row in all competitions. A point edges Solskjaer's men back a point clear of Leicester in second place, but the gap to runaway leaders Manchester City is now 14 points ahead of a derby clash between the two on Sunday.

United's priority is now just clinging onto a place in the top four as a run of two wins in eight league games, allied to City's record-breaking 21 game winning streak, has ended any semblance of a title race. "It's not what we want, but we need to play better to win games" added Solskjaer. "We know we are in a battle to be as high in the table as possible. "We know we are in a fight and need every point we can. It'll definitely be a difficult challenge (against City) and we need to be better to win that one."



LONDON: Manchester United's Norwegian manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer gestures from the touchline during the English Premier League football match between Crystal Palace and Manchester United at Selhurst Park in south London on Wednesday. — AFP

Nemanja Matic's deflected effort came closest to breaking the deadlock as Vicente Guaita produced a brilliant save to turn the Serb's shot behind before Cavani fired over from the resulting corner. United's record unbeaten run away from home in the Premier League stretches to 21 games, but a deluge of draws is doing little to aid their chances of ending the season on a high.

That run nearly came to an end in the final minute when Patrick van Aanholt fired straight at Dean Henderson with just the goalkeeper to beat with the best chance of the game. "That's a Man Utd goalkeeper," said Solskjaer. "Sometimes you have to keep concentration and he's growing into that. I thank him for the one point." A draw takes Roy Hodgson's men 11 points clear of the drop zone in 13th. — AFP



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