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

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Exempting vaccinated arrivals from hotel quarantine mulled

All registered over-65s vaccinated • 12-hr curfew begins • PACI sets new timings



KUWAIT: Nine-martyrs in eight Kuwaitis and a Saudi - who had been missing since the 1990-1991 Gulf War, were buried yesterday after their remains were identified recently. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat (See Page 2)

KUWAIT: Health ministry assistant undersecretary for public health Dr Buthayna Al-Mudhaf said the ministry is contemplating excluding those who have received the coronavirus vaccine from institutional quarantine upon their return to the country, and they will only have to quarantine at home. She said technical committees are studying the issue according to a methodology based on the latest scientific studies and recommendations of international health organizations, adding that the report will be submitted as soon as the study is completed.

Meanwhile, Mudhaf said all people aged over 65 who had registered for the coronavirus vaccine have been inoculated - both citizens and expats. However, she said only 17.4 percent of those eligible to receive the vaccine have registered, calling upon citizens and expats to quickly register for the jab.

Kuwait yesterday said 1,318 people tested positive for COVID-19 with seven related deaths, taking total cases to 199,428, while deaths rose to 1,120, according to the health ministry. On Friday, 1,613 people tested positive with eight related deaths.

Kuwait will impose a 5 pm to 5 am curfew from today until April 8 in a bid to contain the coron-

avirus. Kuwait has since Feb 7 cut opening hours for non-essential retail shops and banned non-citizens from entering the country, but a steep increase in cases in the past week has forced the government to take more stringent measures.

People may walk to mosques to perform prayers during curfew hours, while pharmacies and food shops must use delivery services and all public parks and recreational areas will be closed. Those who break the rules, which also include mandatory use of face masks outside the home, can be fined as much as KD 5,000 and jailed for up to three months.

The country had imposed some of the strictest measures in the Gulf during the first wave of the pandemic over the summer, enforcing a nationwide lockdown with few exceptions. Like most Gulf countries, Kuwait's economy and state budgets have been hit hard by the economic fallout of the pandemic combined with the low price of oil.

Meanwhile, The Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI) announced yesterday the working schedule to receive the public during the partial lockdown approved by the Cabinet beginning today

Continued on Page 2

Rapid COVID tests sell out on first day in Germany

FRANKFURT: Germans flocked to supermarket chain Aldi yesterday to snap up the first rapid coronavirus tests to go on sale nationwide, with stocks selling out within hours. Rival discounter Lidl meanwhile saw its website crash after it started offering at-home testing kits for sale online. "We want to assure anyone who left empty-handed that new stocks are coming in the next days," an Aldi spokesman told the Bild newspaper.

The German government is relying heavily on rapid tests to steer country through the next phase of the pandemic as citizens tire of coronavirus shutdowns but the pace of vaccinations remains sluggish. From tomorrow, all Germans will be entitled to one free rapid test a week, carried out by a professional at pharmacies or designated testing centers.

Several manufacturers have also received regulatory approval for DIY tests meant for home use. The goal is to give people more freedom after months of closures and limits on socializing, but experts have stressed that the quick tests are less reliable than standard PCR testing and that the usual hygiene precautions should be maintained even with a negative result.

Aldi is limiting the purchases to one packet per person, containing five tests for €24.99 (\$30). The test is done with a nasal swab and delivers a result within 15 minutes. Lidl's offer is similar and costs €21.99. Tests will also go on sale at major drug store chains and other outlets in the coming days.

Health Minister Jens Spahn, already under fire over Germany's slow vaccination pace, has promised there will be "more than enough" rapid tests for everyone, including 50 million free tests a month. But critics have questioned whether local authorities are ready to cope with the expected huge demand.

Manuela Schwesig, the state premier of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, said supermarkets were better prepared than the federal government. "I fail to understand why rapid tests are now being sold by discounters but have yet to be ordered for daycares and schools," she said. Germany has struggled to bring down COVID-19 rates in recent weeks, with numbers plateauing and even rising on some days. The country added 9,557 new coronavirus cases yesterday and another 300 deaths, according to the Robert Koch Institute. —AFP

Pope, Sistani call for peace

BAGHDAD: Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, one of Shiism's top clerics, told Pope Francis in a historic meeting in Iraq yesterday that the country's Christians should live in "peace". The meeting, on the second day of the first-ever papal visit to Iraq, marked a landmark moment in modern religious history and in terms of Francis' efforts to deepen interfaith dialogue.

Pope Francis later addressed the rich spectrum of Iraq's religious com-

munities at Ur, traditional birthplace of the Prophet Abraham (PBUH), a central figure in the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths, where he made an impassioned plea for "unity" after conflict. The 84-year-old pontiff's trip to Iraq is an effort to both reassure the country's ancient but dwindling Christian community and expand his dialogue with other faiths.

His meeting with the grand ayatollah in Najaf lasted 50 minutes, and Sistani's office put out a statement shortly afterwards thanking Francis for visiting the holy city. Sistani, 90, "affirmed his concern that Christian citizens should live like all Iraqis

Continued on Page 2



NAJAF: Pope Francis meets top Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani in this Iraqi shine city yesterday. — AFP

Gaza girl dons mask to heal burnt face

GAZA: The moment Maram Al-Amawi gets back from school, she slips on the 3D-printed mask that covers her face and treats her severe burns from a blaze at a Gaza bakery. But she doesn't go out in the streets for fear of being made fun of. Eight-year-old Maram was severely burned a year ago in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nuseirat, in the central Gaza

Strip. The inferno, which local authorities said was caused by a gas leak, left 25 dead and dozens injured, and ravaged several shops.

Today, she and her mother, who was also seriously injured on the face and hands, wear transparent plastic masks developed by medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF). The 3D-printed mask puts pressure on the face and advances the healing process, explains Firas Suergo, head of physiotherapy for MSF in Gaza. The patient's face is copied using a 3D scanner, which then allows the printing of a customized plastic mask.

Since the launch of the project in April 2020, which has also been run in

Continued on Page 2



GAZA: Palestinian girl Maram and her mother Izzidhar Al-Amawi get fitted with a 3D-printed transparent face mask at a clinic run by Doctors Without Borders in Gaza City on Feb 22, 2021. — AFP

Perseverance Mars rover goes for 'spin'

WASHINGTON: The Mars rover Perseverance has successfully conducted its first test drive on the Red Planet, the US space agency NASA said Friday. The six-wheeled rover travelled about 6.5 m in 33 minutes on Thursday, NASA said. It drove four

meters forward, turned in place 150 degrees to the left, and then backed up 2.5 meters, leaving tire tracks in the Martian dust.

"This was our first chance to 'kick the tires' and take Perseverance out for a spin," said Anais Zarifian, Perseverance mobility test bed engineer at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California. Zarifian said the test drive went "incredibly well" and represented a "huge milestone for the mission and the mobility team."

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This image was captured when NASA's Perseverance rover drove on Mars for the first time on March 4, 2021. — AFP

Local

Nine human remains identified and returned after 30 years

Martyrs, including Saudi citizen, went missing during Iraqi invasion



KUWAIT: Nine martyrs - eight Kuwaitis and a Saudi - who had been missing since the 1990-1991 Gulf War, were buried yesterday after their remains were identified recently. Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Al-Ali Sabah and other senior officials attended the funeral ceremony. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: Under the Tripartite Commission's umbrella, nine human remains, including a Saudi citizen, among the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia missing persons list, gone missing during the 1990-1991 Gulf War and whose relatives have remained without news since were officially buried in the State of Kuwait. Finally, after 30 years of painful uncertainty, the families now have clarity on the fate of their loved ones - and our thoughts remain with all those still waiting for answers, hoping that they too

may gain closure in the near future.

This development follows conclusive DNA analyses conducted and matching with Kuwait's database of Prisoners of War (POW) and Missing persons and third-country nationals, led by the General Department of Forensic Evidences in the Ministry of Interior in the State of Kuwait. This enabled the closure of another 20 missing persons' cases among the State of Kuwait missing persons' list earlier this year. The human

remains in question had been found at a burial site in Iraq's Samawa district back in March 2019, thanks to the Iraqi and Kuwaiti authorities' joint efforts assisted by experts from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) within the frame of the Technical Sub-Committee.

The Tripartite Commission and its Technical Sub-Committee were set up in 1991 and 1994, respectively, to help ascertain the fate of people missing in con-

nection with the 1990-1991 Gulf War. They are chaired by the ICRC and composed of representatives of the Republic of Iraq, the State of Kuwait, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and the Republic of France. The UNAMI joined in 2014 as an observer. The Tripartite Commission members continue to work relentlessly to search for those still unaccounted for in relation to the conflict.

Pope, Sistani call for...

Continued from Page 1

in peace and security, and with their full constitutional rights," it said.

His office published an image of the two: Sistani in a black turban with his wispy grey beard reaching down to his black robe and Francis all in white, looking directly at the grand ayatollah. Sistani is extremely reclusive and rarely grants meetings but made an exception to host Francis. The pontiff had landed earlier at Najaf airport, where posters featured a famous saying by Ali, the fourth caliph, who is buried in the holy city. "People are of two kinds, either your brothers in faith or your equals in humanity," read the banners.

Francis then headed straight to the desert site of the ancient city of Ur, where Abraham (PBUH) is believed to have been born in the second millennium BC. "It all started from here," Francis said, after hearing from representatives of Iraq's diverse religious communities. There were Yazidis, whose ancestral heartland of Sinjar was ravaged by the Islamic State (IS) group in 2014, as well as Mandeans, Kakais, Bahais and Zoroastrians.

Shiite and Sunni sheikhs, as well as Christian clerics, were there. Each was wearing their traditional religious garb, with a dozen different types of robe and headdress on display in the red-carpeted pavil-

ion set up for the visit. Iraq is a Muslim-majority country of 40 million whose Christian population has shrunk in the past two decades to just one percent, with minorities still complaining of ostracism and persecution.

During his address, the pope said freedom of conscience and of religion were "fundamental rights" that should be respected everywhere. "We believers cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion," Francis said, in a message of solidarity with the minorities persecuted under IS rule. He also made an impassioned plea for "unity" after conflict. "Let us ask for this in praying for the whole Middle East. Here I think especially of neighboring war-torn Syria," he said.

Following the prayer service in Ur, the pope headed back to Baghdad to celebrate his first public mass in the country, at the Saint Joseph Cathedral. In front of a sparse gathering of faithful and officials, with attendance limited by coronavirus precautions, he delivered his first-ever liturgy in the Eastern rite.

Francis, a strong proponent of interfaith dialogue, has met top Sunni clerics in several Muslim-majority countries, including Bangladesh, Morocco, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. Sistani, meanwhile, is followed by most of the world's 200 million Shiites - a minority among Muslims but the majority in Iraq - and is a national figure for Iraqis. In 2019, he stood with Iraqi protesters demanding better public services and rejecting external interference in Iraq's domestic affairs. Pope Francis made a similar plea in Baghdad on Friday. "May partisan interests cease, those outside interests who don't take into account the local population," he said. — AFP

ing in South Surra for the citizen registration office is from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm, expatriate registration office from 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm, documentation, private registration and electronic signature from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm and the office to receive cards from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm.

At PACI's Jahra governorate building's citizens registration office, timings are from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm and card collection from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm. At PACI's Ahmadi governorate branch in South Sabahiya, timings are also from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm. Asousi stressed the need to book an appointment to attend personally, which is available on the authority's website.

Exempting vaccinated...

Continued from Page 1

from 5:00 pm until 5:00 am. PACI Director General MUSAED AL-ASOUSI said dates have been set to receive the public to record transactions that require personal attendance at the PACI headquarters and cannot be completed through the website.

The working hours at the main head office build-

Perseverance Mars rover...

Continued from Page 1

"We're going to do some longer drives," she added. "This is just the beginning."

NASA engineers said they were studying possible routes for longer rover voyages on the surface of Mars. The rover can cover 200 meters per Martian day, which is slightly longer than a day on Earth. And it goes five times faster than Curiosity, its predecessor, which is still functioning eight years after landing on Mars.

Perseverance deputy mission manager Robert Hogg said engineers were also preparing for the first flight of a helicopter drone carried by the rover. Hogg said the rover team was working out flight zones and hoped to conduct the first flight in late spring or early summer. He said the mission had not experienced any major problems so far. "It's all just minor stuff," he said. "Everything we've tried has

worked beautifully."

Perseverance was launched on July 30, 2020 and landed on the surface of Mars on February 18 on a mission to search for signs of past life on the Red Planet. The rover's primary mission will last just over two years but it is likely to remain operational well beyond that. Over the coming years, Perseverance will attempt to collect 30 rock and soil samples in sealed tubes to be sent back to Earth sometime in the 2030s for analysis.

About the size of an SUV, the craft weighs a ton, is equipped with a seven-foot-long robotic arm, has 19 cameras, two microphones and a suite of cutting-edge instruments. So far it has sent back more than 7,000 photographs, including one of a light brown rock that was used to test a device called SuperCam: An ultra-sophisticated French-made camera the size of a shoe box that can shoot a laser beam at rocks up to seven meters away to analyze their makeup.

The rover is only the fifth to set its wheels down on Mars, all of them American. The feat was first accomplished in 1997. The United States is preparing for an eventual human mission to the planet, though planning remains very preliminary. — AFP

Gaza girl dons mask to heal...

Continued from Page 1

Jordan and Haiti, around 20 people have been fitted in Gaza, an enclave of two million Palestinians wedged between Israel, Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea. The fitted mask, with adjustable straps to hold onto the face, has to be worn for between six months and a year, depending on the severity of the lesions.

Even though her mask is transparent and fits perfectly with the contours of her soft face, Maram is afraid of being pointed at in the playground. "The mask has made my burns better, but I'm afraid people will laugh at me if I wear it outside the house," the girl shyly confesses, dressed in the black-and-white striped lace uniform of her school, which is run by the

UN agency for Palestinian refugees. "I put it on as soon as I get home from classes."

In fact, she wears it eight hours a day. As for her mother Izdihar Al-Amawi, 31, she keeps her mask on for 16 hours, only removing it during the day to eat. At night, she wears another mask, and she also has special gloves for burns on her hands. "Our wounds have improved thanks to the mask," says Izdihar, who now manages to go about household chores like before the accident. "We were waiting for the taxi after shopping and we suddenly heard a big explosion, then saw fire everywhere," she recalls.

Izdihar and Maram spent two months in hospital undergoing operations. Accepting their disfigured complexions was not easy. "My family refused to look at my face after the accident," says Izdihar. "I only saw my face 50 days after the operation, in the elevator mirror while going to get my mask at the clinic." The mother of four hopes the scars will disappear "in two or three years, as the doctors told us". — AFP

Local

Kuwait registers nearly 3,000 COVID-19 cases in two days

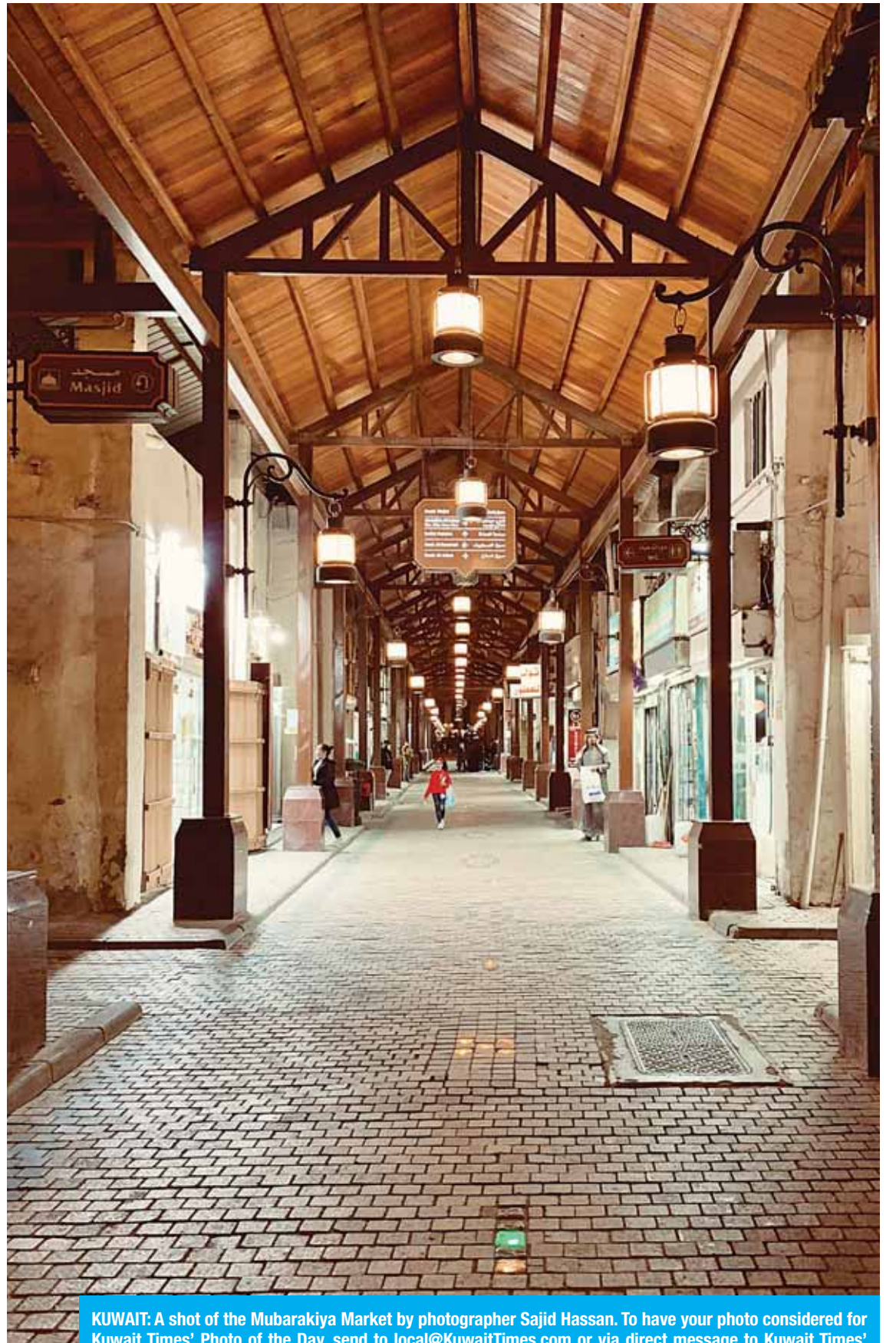
Fifteen deaths over the weekend; 168 patients in ICUs

KUWAIT: Kuwait's COVID-19 cases continued to soar as health authorities announced registering 2,931 new cases over the weekend, in addition to 15 deaths. The Ministry of Health announced yesterday that 1,318 people tested positive for the novel coronavirus over the previous 24 hours, raising total cases to 199,428, while seven deaths were registered during the same period, raising total fatalities to 1,120. Kuwait had reported 1,613 new cases and eight deaths on Friday. The number of COVID-19 patients receiving medical care stood yesterday at 13,077, including 168 in intensive care unit, up from 12,758 patients and 164 in ICUs the previous day. Health ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said yesterday that health workers conducted 7,966 swab tests over the previous 24 hours, compared to 10,927 announced Friday, as the total number of tests rose to 1,841,282. Meanwhile, total recoveries reached 185,231 after 992 fresh recoveries were announced yesterday and 918 on Friday. Dr Sanad went on to urge the public to abide by health precautions, mainly social distancing, in order to help

limit the spread of the virus.

Kuwait moves today into partial curfew imposed by the government to help curb the sharp increase in COVID-19 cases registered in recent weeks. The 12-hour nightly curfew starts from 5 pm to 5 am for one month. During the curfew hours, pharmacies, medical stores, cooperative societies and supermarkets to continue operation only through delivery services. Also during the curfew, people are allowed to go to Fajr, Maghreb and Isha prayers at mosques only by walking. During an extraordinary meeting on Thursday, the cabinet ordered all parks and public gardens closed in addition to shutting all public seating places. It allowed taxis to carry only two passengers. 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 statement said that the partial lockdown will be evaluated at the end of the one month period, hinting at a possible extension.

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A shot of the Mubarakiya Market by photographer Sajid Hassan. To have your photo considered for Kuwait Times' Photo of the Day, send to local@kuwaittimes.com or via direct message to Kuwait Times' Instagram account @kuwaittimes. Photos should be high resolution, with no processing or editing.

Bohra community organizes blood donation drive



KUWAIT: The people of the Bohra community residing in the State of Kuwait launched a blood donation campaign on the occasion of the National Day and Liberation Day at the Salwa Sabah Al-Ahmad Center in the Al-Sabah Health District, in the belief of the community members to participate and

provide assistance in society and in their second homeland, the State of Kuwait. The representative of the Sultan of Bohra in Kuwait, Sheikh Yahya Badri, encouraged and thanked the community for their participation in the donation and urged them to donate in the future as well.

Kuwait's envoy hosts luncheon for Brazil President

KUWAIT: The Ambassador of the State of Kuwait to Brazil Nasser Al-Mutairi, on behalf of the GCC Ambassadors to the South American country, held a luncheon in honor of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. Ernesto Araujo and senior officials of the Presidential Palace accompanied President Bolsonaro. Ambassador Mutairi conveyed greetings from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to the President of Brazil.

Ambassador Mutairi affirmed the strong relations linking Kuwait and Brazil, adding that the State of Kuwait was keen on boosting ties through the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED), Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), and the private sector. Meanwhile, President Bolsonaro commended the level of Brazilian and GCC relations, affirming that his country was keen on bolstering them on all possible levels. —KUNA

Kuwait oil price up by \$3.38

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by \$3.38 to \$67.07 per barrel Friday as opposed to \$63.69 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. At the global level, the price of Brent crude went up by \$2.62 to \$69.36 per barrel, the same case with the West Texas Intermediate, which went up by \$2.26 to \$66.09 pb. —KUNA

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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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China moves to eliminate Hong Kong opposition

After Floyd killing in US, no sweeping police reform but small, local steps Page 6

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DHARAMSALA, India: Exiled Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama gets inoculated with the COVID-19 vaccine by a health worker at a vaccination center yesterday. —AFP

WHO: Don't waste hope of vaccines

Tedros voices alarm about coronavirus situation in Brazil

GENEVA: Covax will distribute 14.4 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to 31 more countries next week, the WHO said Friday as it warned people not to waste, through complacency, the hope that vaccines bring. The Covax global vaccine-sharing facility shipped more than 20 million doses to 20 countries as the scheme aimed at ensuring poorer nations get access to jabs took off this week.

But the World Health Organization voiced fears that further waves of the coronavirus pandemic could be on the way if people think the roll-out of vaccines around the globe means the crisis is over. "The arrival of vaccine is a moment of great hope. But it potentially also is a moment where we lose concentration," WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan told a press conference.

"I really am very concerned that... we think we're through this. We're not. And countries are going to lurch back into third and fourth surges if we're not careful. We should not waste the hope that vaccines bring... by dropping our guard in other areas."

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus praised the first full week of the Covax roll-out, but said wealthy countries were nonetheless still leaving others behind in the vaccination rush. Within Africa, Angola, the DR Congo, The Gambia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sudan and Uganda have now received their first doses through Covax. Elsewhere, Cambodia, Colombia, India, Moldova, the Philippines and South Korea have also taken deliveries.

'Mass trauma'

"In the next week, Covax will deliver 14.4 million doses to a further 31 countries. That brings the total number of countries to 51," said Tedros. "This is encouraging progress, but the volume of doses being distributed through Covax is still relatively small." He said the first round of allocations, running until the end of May, only covered between two and three percent of the population in recipient states, "even as other countries make rapid progress towards vaccinating

their entire population within the next few months".

He called for vaccine production to be urgently ramped up, including through linking manufacturers with rival companies that have spare capacity. Tedros also said the planet would be feeling the mental scars from the pandemic for years to come and said the scale of its impact would be worse than during the recovery from World War II.

"The whole world is affected. Each and every individual. That means mass trauma which is beyond proportion. Even bigger than what the world experienced after the Second World War," he said. "And when there is mass trauma it affects communities for many years to come." "Countries have to see it as such and prepare for that. "Mass, mass trauma."

Brazil fears

Meanwhile, Tedros voiced alarm about the coronavirus situation in Brazil, where cases and deaths have shot up, bucking the global trend. He said that in the week beginning November 2, there were

114,000 new cases in Brazil - a figure that hit 374,000 in the week of Feb 22. Tedros said the number of deaths had also shot up from 2,500 to 8,000 over the same time period.

"The situation is very serious and we're very concerned, and the public health measures that Brazil takes should be aggressive while also rolling out vaccines," he said. "Brazil has to take this very, very seriously." He said that because Brazil bordered so many other countries, the situation there threatened the entire South American continent.

Ryan said the P1 variant - which has now been found in 29 countries - had become dominant in Brazil, adding to its woes. He said basic public health measures were still the "best bet" in trying to control case numbers. "Our risk, to an extent, is still in our hands," Ryan said. But he added that it was very hard in countries like Brazil with large urban populations to take measures like physical distancing and mask-wearing "where they don't have the resources to do that without the support of the state". —AFP

4 dead in Senegal after opposition leader held

DAKAR: The Senegal government on Friday vowed to use "all means necessary" to return order after police fired tear gas in clashes with supporters of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko as the interior minister said four people had died. The clashes followed a court ruling that Sonko be held in custody. And following two days of protests, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged all sides to avoid any further escalation of the violence.

"The protests must remain peaceful, and the security and police forces must at all times operate... in line with international human rights standards," his spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters in New York. "The government regrets the loss of four lives" in events "that are rooted in banditry and insurrection". Interior Minister Antoine Felix Abdoulaye Diome said on television on Friday, accusing Sonko of "issuing calls to violence".

In Dakar's working class district of Medina earlier, hundreds of young people fought running street battles with riot police and smoke rose from burning tires at makeshift barricades in the capital city. Protesters chanted "Free Sonko" on the main Blaise Diagne avenue, the ground strewn with stones, grenade cartridges and burning debris.

"The protests must remain peaceful, and the security

and police forces must at all times operate... in line with international human rights standards," his spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters in New York. In Mbao, in the city's outer suburbs, looters also ransacked a French chain Auchan supermarket, an AFP correspondent at the scene said. The chain says least 14 stores have been attacked during this week's unrest.

Tensions high

The arrest of Sonko, popular with young people and seen as a key challenger to President Macky Sall, has sparked the worst unrest in years in a West African state often heralded as a beacon of stability. His supporters had called for further protests to coincide with his hearing before a judge on Friday on charges of disturbing order. "Sonko has been returned to custody over the matter of disturbing public order," attorney Etienne Ndione told reporters after the hearing.

Tensions were high in the city with hefty police deployments in place around the law courts, presidential palace and National Assembly in the heart of the city. Clashes broke out on Wednesday between Sonko's supporters and police as he made his way to court for another case where he faced rape accusations - allegations that he denies.

Sonko was then arrested on charges of disturbing public order, a development that sparked angry protests in the capital and other cities. The custody order issued on Friday, which relates specifically to the public order case, expires today. He was not charged on Friday in the rape case and returns to court tomorrow for questioning over those accusations, his lawyers said.



DAKAR: Protesters fight against gendarmes near their barracks in the Colobane neighborhood in Dakar on Friday during clashes following the arrest of main opposition leader Ousmane Sonko. —AFP

Media targeted

One person died in the southern town of Bignona on Thursday, police said, during clashes there. It was not clear if that death was included in the four revealed by Abdoulaye Diome. Protesters attacked the offices of the government daily Le Soleil and RFM radio station, which belongs to a press group owned by singer and former minister Youssou Ndour. Both media outlets are deemed pro-government.

Sonko, a 46-year-old devout Muslim who is leader of the opposition Pastef party, is popular with many young Senegalese because of his sharp-tongued attacks on the elite, especially President Sall. He came in third to Sall in the 2019 elections. —AFP

Traces of life sought beyond solar system

WASHINGTON: Searching for traces of life on Mars, like NASA is doing, is one thing. But scientists are also looking further afield. Could it be found beyond our solar system? A study published on Thursday in the prestigious journal Science reveals the discovery of a new exoplanet that could be instrumental in the hunt. Researchers will try to determine whether there is an atmosphere on the "super-Earth" and traces of life around a star other than our Sun.

"The end of the road is finding biomarkers or biosignatures in the atmospheres of exoplanets, which is signs of life on habitable Earth-like planets," said Jose Caballero, an astronomer at Spain's Centro de Astrobiologia and one of the co-authors of the study. About 4,000 exoplanets have been discovered during the past 25 years and some have

been found to have an atmosphere.

But these are "gaseous planets or icy planets", Caballero told AFP, and planets the size of Earth have not been investigated yet. The latest discovery opens up the possibility for researchers to study an exoplanet that is "rocky in nature, like the Earth," he said. The name of the exoplanet is Gliese 486b and it is "only" 26 light years away.

It is about 30 percent larger than Earth but with a mass 2.8 times that of our planet and is located in what is called a habitable zone around a star. To identify it, researchers used two methods: "transit photometry" - slight variations in a star's brightness as a planet passes in front of it - and "Doppler radial velocity," which measures the "wobbling" of stars from the gravitational pull of orbiting planets. Since Gliese 486b is very near its star, Gliese 486, it takes only slightly less than 1.5 days to complete an orbit around it. "We surveyed about 350 small red-dwarf stars for signs of low-mass planets," said Trifonov, a researcher with the Max Planck Institute for Astronomy and the lead author of the study involving contributions from five continents.

Trifonov said Gliese 486b is not habitable with



An artistic impression of the surface of the newly discovered hot super-Earth Gliese 486b. —AFP

temperatures ranging around 430 degrees Celsius. "The proximity to the red dwarf Gliese 486 heats the planet significantly, making its landscape hot and dry, interspersed with volcanoes and glowing lava rivers," Trifonov said. At the same time, Caballero said "if our planet has an atmosphere, then any planet at wider separation (from its star), and with roughly the same planet characteristics... will also have an atmosphere." —AFP

Israel's dilemma: To work with ICC probe or not?

JERUSALEM: Israel faces a dilemma: Should it argue its case to International Criminal Court investigators looking into possible war crimes in the Palestinian territories, or refuse to cooperate? Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a vocal critic of the ICC, declared Israel was "under attack" after prosecutor Fatou Bensouda announced Wednesday she was opening a full-blown probe into the actions of all sides in the 2014 Gaza conflict.

"We will speak the truth in every forum, in every country, on every stage until this outrageous decision is reversed and becomes null and void," he said. The ICC is the world's only permanent war crimes tribunal and was set up in 2002 to try the planet's worst crimes where local courts are unwilling or unable to step in.

It does not try states, but top leaders or warlords alleged to have given the orders. Even presidents have been hauled before the court in The Hague. So in theory it might be possible that Netanyahu or even former defense minister in 2014 Benny Gantz could be targeted in the ICC investigation. Some countries have bridled at moves to investigate top national leaders or warlords allegedly behind war crimes or even genocide.

Under president Donald Trump, the United States imposed sanctions on Bensouda after she separately decided to investigate alleged US war crimes in Afghanistan. Netanyahu's office said Friday that in a call with US Vice President Kamala Harris she had "expressed the American administration's complete opposition to the decision of the prosecutor" to probe the Gaza war. Netanyahu has not made clear whether Israel would fight back through diplomacy and public opinion - or by engaging directly with the ICC, to which Israel is not a party.

There is also a middle path, said Phina Sharvit Baruch, former head of the international law unit of the Israeli Military Advocate General - to provide less than full cooperation, but not a total boycott. "What Israel can do and probably will do is provide the prosecutor with the relevant materials" for its defense, but without formal cooperation because the Jewish state "does not trust this court", she told AFP.

The ICC probe will focus on the 2014 conflict that saw Israel launch a major military operation in Gaza, said to be to stop rocket fire into the Jewish state by the strip's ruling Islamist Hamas movement. An estimated 2,250 Palestinians were killed, mostly civilians, and 74 Israelis, mostly soldiers. —AFP

International

After Floyd killing in US, no sweeping police reform but small, local steps

Blacks denounce police violence, whites retain lofty image of police officers

MINNEAPOLIS: George Floyd's death at the hands of a white police officer last year was a gut punch that sparked sometimes violent nationwide protests over brutality against people of color in America and a national reckoning over race relations. Nine months later, the US has not undertaken any radical overhaul of its police forces, but is instead taking incremental and localized steps to better tackle excess force and racism in the ranks of its law enforcement agencies.

Floyd's death by asphyxiation as a white police officer knelt on his neck for almost nine minutes last May in Minneapolis sent shock waves around the country. But what remains of this extraordinary mobilization, as the trial opens of Derek Chauvin, the former police officer accused of Floyd's murder?

A substantive debate

The main shift has been one of perception: while the black minority in America had for years denounced police violence, the majority of Americans, in particular white people, had retained a lofty image of police officers. "It's culturally accepted in America that police will commit violence. And the assumption is that they're committing violence, because they're faced with violence," said Kate Levine, a professor at the Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University in New York.

"I think some of that assumption is being upset by video, and protests and narratives about people who are killed by the police who are no way vio-

lent," she said. With Floyd's death, "people who historically have not had to think about it, have to think about it. They're uncomfortable with that," said Tracie Keese, a black ex-police officer who co-founded the Center For Policing Equity.

Hot takes

Since June last year, there have been nationwide calls for radical reforms, including the idea of "defunding the police." That means redirecting some funds from police departments to social services tasks like dealing with people who have mental health issues. In order to calm things down, Keese said certain measures had been quickly adopted: some cities banned police choke holds, and others made police disciplinary records accessible to the public or beefed-up police training.

The US House of Representatives adopted a bill tackling the sweeping immunity that police officers enjoy from prosecution. More broadly, the United States embarked on a re-examination of its own history, resulting in numerous statues of historical figures with links to slavery being taken down.

Stalled efforts

But in the middle of last year's electoral campaign, the debate inevitably took on a political hue. As crime rates soared in big cities due to the coronavirus pandemic, then-president Donald Trump sought to portray himself as guarantor of law and order and accused Democrats of weakness.

Set against that backdrop, radical reforms were



WASHINGTON: In this file photo taken people raise their fists as they protest at the makeshift memorial in honor of George Floyd, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. — AFP

shelved. In Minneapolis, where Floyd was killed, "there was a brief moment of them attempting something and they've done nothing," said Levine. In New York, billion-dollar cuts to the police budget that were decided upon in June have been significantly reduced and spread over time.

As for federal reform, that was buried by the Senate. And on the ground, the situation has not changed: around 1,000 people were killed by the

police in 2020. 28 percent of them African-Americans, who make up only 12 percent of the population. Grand juries and other local decision makers dropped prosecutions of officers blamed for the deaths of unarmed African-Americans such as Breonna Taylor, who was shot dead in her Kentucky apartment, or Daniel Prude, who suffocated in police custody while suffering from a mental health episode in New York state. — AFP

News in brief

Eritrean troops kill hundreds in Ethiopia

ADDIS ABABA: Eritrean forces shot dead hundreds of children and civilians in a November massacre in neighboring Ethiopia's war-hit Tigray region, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said Friday. It was the second major report on Eritrean abuses in the town of Axum, a UNESCO World Heritage site, in the past week. An Amnesty International investigation into the same events detailed how Eritrean troops "went on a rampage and systematically killed hundreds of civilians in cold blood." The findings from the rights watchdogs come as global concern mounts over atrocities by Eritrean troops in Tigray. — AFP

Italy extends regional lockdowns

ROME: Italy's health minister announced Friday that another region would be subject to lockdown measures due to worsening pandemic numbers fuelled by the spread of more contagious coronavirus variants. The new clampdown came after the ISS health institute said the R number—which measures the rate at which the virus is spreading—had risen above one, to 1.06, for the first time in seven weeks. As of Monday, the southern region of Campania, which includes Naples, will be classified as a "red" zone, joining the regions of Basilicata and Molise in the highest-risk level, announced Health Minister Roberto Speranza. — AFP

Russia population shrinks by 130K

MOSCOW: Russia's population shrank by over 113,000 in January, official data showed Friday, more than double its rate of decline over the same month last year, as the country is battered by the pandemic. The Rosstat statistics agency released figures showing that in January Russia saw 219,769 deaths and 106,603 births, meaning its population shrunk by 113,116. The decline was 2.5 times as much as the decrease of 45,255 people in January 2020. The new figures came as Rosstat on Friday also reported that Russia saw 28,680 virus-related deaths in January this year. — AFP

Saudi center to leave Vienna

VIENNA: A Saudi-funded center for interfaith dialogue announced Friday that was relocating its headquarters from the Austrian capital Vienna, following years of political controversy over its presence. The King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) was founded in 2012 and critics have long said it offered the government in Riyadh a way to gloss over Saudi Arabia's human rights record. In 2019 Austrian MPs voted to demand the centre be shut down, prompted by a case in which an 18-year-old was sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia for alleged crimes committed when he was a child. — AFP

Fighting in Yemen's Marib kills 90

DUBAI: Fierce fighting between Yemeni pro-government forces and Iran-backed Houthi rebels has killed at least 90 combatants on both sides in the past 24 hours, government military sources said yesterday. The Shiite rebels launched an offensive last month to seize Marib, the last stronghold in northern Yemen of pro-government forces who are backed by a Saudi-led military coalition. The clashes in the oil-rich province left 32 dead among government forces and loyalist tribes, while 58 Houthi rebels were killed in coalition air strikes, the sources told AFP. — AFP

Amid virus, a 'shadow' pandemic for domestic abuse sufferers

PATERSON, United States: In New Jersey, at a timber farm turned shelter for women who have suffered domestic violence, Gloria's struggles, like those of many abuse victims, have worsened with the coronavirus pandemic. From Argentina to Singapore, virus-induced confinement has caused an increase in violence cases and their severity and made it more difficult to report abuses and help victims, activists say. Gloria, a 56-year-old New Yorker who is too afraid to give her surname, arrived at the Strengthen Our Sisters shelter six months ago, several months into the pandemic.

Before joining the center, which houses about 80 women and children in seven houses, Gloria first had to quarantine for two weeks, completely alone. Sitting in her pink- and red-painted bedroom, which is decorated with teddy bears, hearts, a Christmas tree, and a picture of Jesus, Gloria describes her ex-partner as "a mon-

ster" who beat her and forced her to work for him in exchange for drugs. "He had me isolated with him, without my family. He spoke very badly to me, he abused me very badly, and yet I still loved him," says Gloria, tears streaming from her piercing blue eyes.

Gloria, who has grown children from another relationship and several grandchildren, said her abuser would remove the phone, rip her clothes, force her to eat food she didn't want and call her a prostitute. "He said that I owed him my life and my body," said Gloria, the daughter of Puerto Rican parents, in Spanish. She is a former cocaine paste addict, who for a time lived on the streets of Coney Island, in Brooklyn. "The pandemic has exacerbated the ability of abusers to utilize power and control tactics over their intimate partners," said Connie Neal, executive director of the New York Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Stay-at-home orders have caused



PATERSON, United States: Gloria gestures as she describes the abuse she suffered while speaking during an interview at the shelter "Strengthen Our Sisters" in Paterson, New Jersey. — AFP

household abuse to last longer and in many cases become more serious, said Cassie Mecklenburg executive director of Sheltering Wings, an organization that provides emergency housing to domestic violence survivors. The group is based in Danville, Indiana, a state where deaths caused by domestic violence surged 102 percent between the start of the pandemic in March and December. "People are

having a harder time seeking services, but when they do finally have the opportunity to reach out, they're more serious," she told AFP. A rise in unemployment and increased consumption of alcohol and drugs have also aggravated the situation, Mecklenburg notes. In April, the United Nations warned that violence against women during COVID-19 was a "shadow pandemic." — AFP

In Florida yard, a ribbon flutters for every COVID death

FLORIDA: When Cathy Tobias began tying a ribbon to a rope for each COVID-19 death in Florida, she had no idea her entire patio would end up being draped in color. The eye-catching tribute to those who have died in the Sunshine State during the pandemic crisscrosses her patio, weaves across stairs and onto a balcony at her home on Anna Maria Island, a small community on Florida's Gulf coast. There are now more than 30,000 ribbons, in all colors of the rainbow—from pale pink to crimson to neon green. Sitting on a porch with a neighbor who has helped her create the memorial, Tobias said she began to tie the ribbons because she wanted to visualize the death toll.

"Watching the numbers change as fast as we can tie really hits us very deeply and strongly—how many people have died and are dying," the 67-year-old retired occupational therapist said. "It's very sad." Tobias' home is at the end of the main road on Anna Maria Island, a tourist-friendly town on a narrow strip of land with visitors driving around in rented golf carts and plenty of stores stocked with beach gear. She says her tribute of course conjures up mixed emotions. "It is in some ways celebratory because we're celebrating life-of course, lives lost," said Tobias, who now works as a photographer.

Kyrgyz activists face Women's Day Violence from 'patriots'

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan: For activists preparing to mark International Women's Day in Kyrgyzstan, recalling the ambush that broke up last year's march is still traumatic. That day, a group of masked men charged the marchers, hitting them with sticks and trampling banners dedicated to equality. What followed shocked the activists even more. As the men strolled away, police who had stood by began detaining the victims—a move they later claimed was for the marchers' own safety. Gender equality in Central Asia's most politically turbulent country has



FLORIDA: Cathy Tobias, 67, poses in her courtyard which has turned into a memorial for Covid-19 victims, in Anna Maria Island, Florida. — AFP

"Each one of these people have family, loved ones, friends that are all deeply impacted and I didn't want them to get lost in this pandemic." She said she knows "what it feels like, unfortunately, to lose a loved one," because her first child died at less than a month old.

'Labor of love'

Tying ribbons might not seem too complicated, but as the pandemic swept the world and Florida along with it, Tobias and her neighbor Lucy Kancy, devised an organizational system to keep track of all the dead. For every 10 deaths, they tie a white ribbon. After that, for every 500, 1,000 and 10,000 deaths, they acknowledge the grim milestone using

taken a back seat to what conservatives call "traditional values."

Kidnapping for marriage and domestic violence are systemic and mostly go unpunished thanks to indifferent law enforcement and stigma surrounding whistleblowers. For Nadira Masyumova, one of the rally organizers, the police's behavior last year was further proof of state complicity in attacks on activists by self-styled patriot groups. The 25-year-old noted that the attempt "to frighten activists" was carried out by men sporting Kyrgyzstan's traditional square white hat.

"Many girls we spoke to are now frightened of the Ak-Kalpak," Masyumova said, referring to the garment embedded in Kyrgyz culture and whose national day falls on March 5, three days before International Women's Day. "Yes it is a symbol of purity and wisdom, but many women now perceive it as a symbol of aggression and terror". As they readied to march this

year under slogans promoting equal pay, healthcare and education free of sexism, Masyumova said marchers were prepared for any violence.

Successive regimes in Kyrgyzstan have ignored chronic domestic violence and the custom of coerced marriages that survived the Soviet period and forces thousands of women into wedlock every year. Activists complain authorities are empowering conservative groups that single out feminists, LGBT groups and anti-corruption protesters in smear campaigns. They are also questioning a clause in a draft constitution-expected to be passed via referendum this year—that could be used to quash dissent. The article in question allows for restrictions on events "contradicting traditional values" to protect "forthcoming generations". One party backing the proposal is the new Nur Party, which has attracted controversy for positioning itself as defending Islamic norms against the secular spirit of the constitution. — AFP

International

China moves to eliminate Hong Kong opposition

Vetting legislation final nail in coffin of HK democracy movement

BEIJING: China moved Friday to grant itself veto powers over selecting Hong Kong's lawmakers, part of a campaign to eliminate dissent and ensure a "patriotic" government in the city following huge democracy rallies in 2019. Legislation to allow China's communist rulers to vet all election candidates in Hong Kong was introduced at the opening of the nation's rubber-stamp parliament in Beijing. It came a day after dozens of democracy campaigners in the financial hub—including former lawmakers—were jailed under a security law that was passed during last year's parliamentary session.

The new legislation includes a "qualification vetting system" that will promote "orderly political participation", parliamentary spokesman Wang Chen told reporters. China had committed to giving Hong Kong a degree of autonomy when it reverted from British colonial rule in 1997. But it began moving quickly to dismantle the financial hub's democratic pillars in response to huge and sometimes violent democracy rallies that paralyzed the city throughout 2019.

Nail in coffin

The introduction of the vetting legislation—expected to be approved next week—was quickly interpreted as one of the final nails in the coffin of Hong Kong's democracy movement. "If the measures are passed, as I'm sure they will be, then the voice of the opposition will be effectively silenced," said Willie Lam, China analyst at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "This will effectively wipe out any remaining opposition."

The proposed rules drew swift international condemnation, with the United States and European Union saying that China was violating commitments it made before the 1997 handover. The move constitutes "a direct attack on Hong Kong's autonomy, Hong Kong's freedoms and the democratic processes," US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

"If implemented, these measures would drastically undermine Hong Kong democratic institutions" and run counter to promises to work towards universal suffrage, he said. The European Union warned it could take additional steps against China in response. "The EU calls on the authorities in Beijing to carefully consider the political and economic implications of any decision to reform the electoral system of Hong Kong that would undermine fundamental freedoms, political pluralism and democratic principles," an EU spokesperson said.

Economic power

The measure had been widely expected, with Beijing officials stating in the lead-up to the annual gathering of the National People's Congress that only "staunch patriots"—those loyal to the Communist Party—should be involved in governing Hong Kong. The Chinese congress session opened with an annual address by Premier Li Keqiang, who made no mention of Hong Kong besides Communist Party boilerplate about the city continuing to enjoy a "high degree of autonomy".

The annual week-long gathering of roughly 3,000 delegates, held in the cavernous Great Hall of the People in Beijing, is China's biggest political event of the year. The highly choreographed display is held to drive home the unquestioned domestic power of the Communist Party while updating China and the world on its economic, political, environment and foreign policy priorities. The event takes place with China outpacing other major economies after bringing the coronavirus pandemic, which first emerged on its soil, under control through draconian lockdowns and mass testing.

Li said the government was aiming for 2021 growth in the world's second-biggest economy of "above 6 percent". "In setting this target, we have taken into account the recovery of economic activity," Li told delegates in China's equivalent of a "state of the nation" address. China's economy



BEIJING: Wang Chen (center), vice chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC), delivers a speech during the opening ceremony of the National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. —AFP

expanded just 2.3 percent in coronavirus-stunted 2020, but Li noted the country was still "the world's only major economy to achieve growth" last year. Analysts believe China's economy could grow eight to nine percent this year.

China's finance ministry, meanwhile, revealed that the nation's military budget—the world's second largest after the United States—would increase 6.8 percent in 2021 to 1.36 trillion yuan (\$210 billion). But China's official budget number is widely believed to be lower than true spending. Li made

no direct mention of brittle ties with the United States, China's trading partner and geopolitical rival, with all eyes now on how the relationship may evolve under new US leader Joe Biden. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi holds a press conference on diplomatic affairs today on the sidelines of the NPC session. The gathering may consider a proposed revision to wildlife protection laws that would permanently ban eating most wildlife, amid the belief that the pandemic came from an animal host. —AFP

The towering sea wall legacy of Japan's 2011 tsunami

TARO, Japan: The Japanese town of Taro had sea walls that were supposed to be able to survive almost anything the ocean could offer up, but the 2011 tsunami still brought utter destruction. A decade after the deadly waves unleashed by one of the most powerful earthquakes in recorded history, the lesson learned in many coastal towns was: build higher. That has left a legacy cast in concrete along hundreds of kilometers of Japan's northeastern coast—with a few notable exceptions where communities have rejected the imposing barriers. Before 2011, people in Taro assumed their walls would withstand just about everything. "Taro had built a perfect town to prevent disaster," 63-year-old local tour guide Kumiko Motoda told AFP.

The town adopted sea walls as early as 1934, after being engulfed by huge tsunamis in 1896 and 1933. Its 10-metre high barriers, running 2.4 kilometers (1.5 miles) in total, were known collectively as "The Great Wall" and came with 44 tsunami evacuation routes, equipped with solar panels to keep the lights on.

Roads were designed with clear views for evacuees, and residents were supposed to be able to get to safety in less than 10 minutes, Motoda explained.

But the 16-metre wave that arrived on March 11 made quick work of those best-laid plans, streaming over the walls and partially destroying them as it carried away homes and cars. Across Taro, 140 residents were killed and 41 remain missing. After the disaster, Japan's government asked coastal regions in the area to consider constructing or rebuilding protective walls, eventually setting aside 1.3 trillion yen (\$12 billion) in funds. In all, 430 kilometers of non-contiguous barriers will be built, with construction around 80 percent complete.

'Disaster-prone archipelago'

The structures have reshaped the coastal landscape, screening long sections of the sea from view. In Taro, the walls are now up to 14.7 meters high and run for over two kilometers. At their base, residents must crane their necks to even see the top. For a glimpse of the ocean, they must climb more than 30 steps up a staircase that looks like it leads directly to the sky. Experts say the barriers are worth it, offering two key protections: bouncing back the power of the waves, which reduces damage, and buying time for evacuation.

Even a few minutes can count for everything, said Tomoya Shibayama, a professor of civil and

the biggest challenges Modi has faced since coming to power in 2014. Singh, 32-year-old 'Major' in the 'army' of the Khalsa-followers of Sikhism who have undergone a sacred ceremony—oversees safety and security at the Singhu protest site. "This fight is for a just cause and anyone trying to harm the protesters will have to deal with us first," Singh, flanked by two spear-wielding men, told AFP. "We are here to defend our brothers and ready to die or kill. This fight is for peace, justice and dignity and we never compromise on these principles."

Following a tractor rally-turned-rampage in Delhi on January 26, authorities built a wall with huge blocks of cement, steel and barbed wire on the border of the Singhu protest site. On one side of this wall, are thousands of armed police and paramilitary forces, and on the other, dozens of barefoot Nihangs, armed to the teeth. At the protest camp, Nihangs tend to horses they rode from their Punjab homes hundreds of miles away, practice the Sikh martial art of "Gatka" and make a cannabis-laced sacramental drink. Most Sikhs carry daggers as religious symbols and wear turbans, but Nihangs stand out with their robes and weaponry, including knives, swords and spears.

and was a central figure in Bangladesh's war for independence from Pakistan that ended 50 years ago. He became the country's first leader but was assassinated during a military coup in 1975.

Last year, the prime minister unveiled plans for mass celebrations to mark the centenary birthday of Sheikh Mujib and 50 years since the founding of Bangladesh. Since then, hundreds of sculptures and murals of Sheikh Mujib have been appearing across the country. "People come from all over the country. Since the portrait became visible last month, every day we have got hundreds of visitors," Mohammad Asaduzzaman, a manager of National AgriCare, the company behind the giant portrait, told AFP.

The firm imported Chinese purple seeds to add to the local green variety and recruited fine arts students, hundreds of volunteers and rural workers to make the portrait. "He is our father of the nation. We got independence thanks to him," Shrimoti Mayrani Robidas, one of the workers, told AFP. —AFP



MIYAKO, Japan: In this picture a woman walks along an old sea wall as construction workers (behind) build a newer and higher one in the Taro district of Miyako, Iwate Prefecture. —AFP

environmental engineering at Waseda University. "There were many moments (in 2011) where these few minutes of time decided whether people were able to evacuate or were caught up by the tsunami," he told AFP. Newer designs incorporate wider bases and reinforced inner walls to stop the barriers being toppled and better absorb the force of multiple waves. Heights have been adjusted based on new predictions of the highest waves that could occur in once-in-a-century tsunamis. —AFP

Piety and bravery

Nihangs have been revered by Sikhs for their piety and bravery since their order was founded in the 17th century by the last Sikh Guru to defend the religion, which began around 1500. They played an important role in Punjab for over a century, including defeating Mughals and Afghan kings. British colonialists dissolved the Sikh empire in the mid-19th century and the Nihangs were reduced to ceremonial roles. In recent weeks, they have been in the spotlight, after pictures and videos emerged of them brandishing swords and spears at policemen at Delhi's historic Red Fort during the January confrontation. In surreal scenes around the fort, Nihangs on horseback joined farmers on tractors and hoisted Sikh religious flags atop the rampart.

Days later, AFP witnessed a policeman wounded in a scuffle after he grabbed a Nihang's sword, as hundreds of people with alleged links to the government attacked farmers at the Singhu protest site. Nihangs were criticized for openly brandishing and using their weapons, which they are allowed to carry under the constitution as part of religious tradition. The warriors say they are simply fulfilling their obligations. —AFP



BOGRA: This aerial photograph shows a representation of the portrait of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman made with paddies in a field of Sherpur upazila in Bogra. —AFP

News in brief

Lanka allows COVID burials

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka on Friday buried two Muslims who died of COVID-19, formally ending its policy of forced cremations that had sparked international outrage over the violation of Islamic funeral rites. Community leader Ali Zahir Moulana said a 55-year-old man and a 66-year-old woman were the first to be buried in coastal Oddamavadi, 300 kilometers east of Colombo. "Thank God," Moulana told AFP. "Finally, we have got burial rights." —AFP

Xi calls for 'popularizing' Mandarin

BEIJING: Authorities in Inner Mongolia must "solve ethnic problems" and push the use of the Mandarin language, Chinese President Xi Jinping has said, months after the region was rocked by protests over a new rule that would reduce the use of the local language. Tens of thousands took part in demonstrations and school boycotts last year after an edict mandated Mandarin replace Mongolian as the language of instruction, part of a nationwide drive to assimilate China's ethnic minorities into the majority Han culture. —AFP

Nepal signs peace deal with rebels

KATHMANDU: An outlawed Maoist group accused of staging several attacks signed a peace deal with Nepal's communist government on Friday, bringing an end to the country's only active insurgency. Jubilate Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli hailed the deal as "historic" at a gathering with the group's leader Netra Bikram Chand, who came out of hiding for the signing. Nepal has enjoyed relative peace since 2006, when a decade-long civil war ended and most rebels joined mainstream politics. But some hard-line guerrillas formed a new Communist Party of Nepal, accusing their former leaders of betraying their revolutionary cause. —AFP

Pakistan PM survives vote

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan survived a vote of confidence by the country's parliament yesterday, days after his party lost a key Senate seat to an opposition candidate. Ruling party and opposition activists clashed briefly outside the parliament ahead of the vote, with local TV channels showing a shoe being thrown at former interior minister Ahsan Iqbal. Khan secured 178 votes in the 340-seat National Assembly through an open ballot, boycotted by the main opposition parties, the Pakistan Muslim League and Pakistan Peoples Party. —AFP

Taliban met US envoy in Doha

DOHA: Washington's special envoy to Afghanistan met with the Taliban in Qatar, the insurgents said yesterday, as efforts intensify to revive a peace process faced with mounting violence and a US troop withdrawal deadline. The envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, held talks earlier this week with Afghan leaders in Kabul, including President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, chair of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation which oversees the government's talks with the insurgents in Qatar. —AFP

Giant portrait of Bangladesh's founder heightens anniversary fervor

BOGRA, Bangladesh: A giant portrait of Bangladesh's founding leader made from rice paddies has drawn hundreds of visitors as the country gears up to celebrate its 50th anniversary of independence this month. The 400 meter-long portrait of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—the father of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina—was created from planting purple and green rice over the 13 hectares (33 acres) of land. Sheikh Mujib, as he is known, was born a century ago,

Business

SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 2021

Biden plan grinds toward Senate approval

Democrats reach compromise with Manchin over COVID-19 relief package

WASHINGTON: US Democrats were on track yesterday for a final vote on President Joe Biden's massive COVID-19 relief package after agreeing to scale back unemployment benefits, with passage increasingly likely in the evenly divided Senate. With the sun rising in Washington, bleary-eyed senators continued their all-night session voting on nearly two dozen amendments and counting as they hammered out the \$1.9 trillion stimulus bill, which Biden insists will revive the pandemic-hit US economy.

Negotiations in the Senate had frozen the chamber's action for more than 10 hours Friday, before the Democrats reached a compromise with moderate Senator Joe Manchin, who had balked at the scale of the benefits. "This agreement allows us to move forward on the urgently needed American Rescue Plan," White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

Republicans have stood uniformly opposed to the giant package, but Democrats - who cannot afford to lose a single vote - united to beat back repeated efforts to derail the legislation. The action came against a backdrop of strong US economic data signaling that the world's largest economy may finally be healing. Yet the economy was still short 9.5 million jobs compared with February 2020, before the pandemic began.

Biden's economic advisers said the current pace of job gains meant it would take two years to recover to pre-virus levels. "We can't go one step forward and two steps backward," Biden said Friday at the White House. "The rescue plan is absolutely essential to turning this around." But the whole bill came under threat by an impasse over the amount and duration of supplemental unemployment insurance benefits for people left jobless during the pandemic.

Democrats had struggled to keep Manchin's support for expanded unemployment aid in the measure. Ultimately he agreed to a compromise that reduced jobless benefits from \$400 to \$300 and extended them to Sept 6, rather than through October as many Democrats had wanted. "We have reached a compromise that enables the economy to rebound quickly while also protecting those receiving unemployment benefits" from being hit with unexpected tax bills, Manchin said in a statement. The amendment passed 50-49 along party lines.

'Vote-a-rama'

An effort to include a national minimum wage hike to \$15 an hour - a Biden priority - failed, however. Biden's proposal would be the third major stimulus package to help the economy weather the coronavirus crisis. Republican opponents have argued the latest plan is excessive, since the economy has already started to recover.

But with the Manchin hurdle overcome, Democratic unity could see the measure across the finish line. It first needed to advance beyond the endurance test known as a "vote-a-rama", in which several amendments and motions were being voted on in rapid-fire succession in the Senate. Republicans moved to adjourn but Democrats, perhaps eager to wear down their opponents, hung together and voted down the motion so they could plow ahead.

"Make no mistake: We are going to continue working until we get the job done," Democratic majority leader Chuck Schumer said. The Senate is deadlocked 50-50. In the event of a tie Vice President Kamala Harris would cast the deciding vote. But Harris' tie-breaker has not been needed, as



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden holds a roundtable meeting on Friday with Americans who will benefit from the COVID-19 pandemic relief checks that are a part of the American Rescue Plan. —AFP

a Republican senator went home Friday on a family emergency and could not vote.

A limp bipartisan cheer rose up yesterday when an amendment addressing veterans' protections earned unanimous approval. But otherwise the posture was adversarial, with Republicans offering multiple amendments which forced rival Democrats into casting politically fraught votes. Republican minority leader Mitch McConnell decried the bill as "a parade of left-wing projects" and said "our country's already set for a roaring recovery".

With debate raging over the stimulus plan,

February saw better-than-expected hiring as pandemic-battered businesses began recruiting again. Payrolls jumped by 379,000 last month, almost double expectations, and pushed the unemployment rate down slightly to 6.2 percent, the Labor Department reported. Most of the gains were in the leisure and hospitality sector, which was devastated in the pandemic's early months. US unemployment was at a record low before the pandemic began but spiked to 14.7 percent last April after COVID restrictions were imposed. Joblessness has since declined, but at an increasingly slow pace. — AFP

Lebanese dread end to subsidies

BEIRUT: To feed her family, Lebanese mother Sandra Al-Tawil sold her fridge and washing machine. Now she fears the cash-strapped state will scrap food subsidies, plunging them deeper into poverty. Lebanon is locked in its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war, with no end in sight. The value of the Lebanese pound has plunged, driving up the price of crucial imports like food and fuel and triggering small but angry protests.

More than half of Lebanon's population is poverty stricken and relies on subsidies, but a central bank demand for "an immediate plan to ration subsidies" is looming. "We're already tightening our belts. What will we eat if we can no longer buy rice or lentils?" 40-year-old Tawil said. Tawil and her husband lived a comfortable life in Dubai before returning to their homeland to open a high-end hair salon in 2019.

But that dream turned to nightmare after the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic hit. "I had to sell my washing machine and fridge... just to get the minimum of daily bread and

pay rent," said the mother of two young children. Her husband found a job at the start of the year, and the Beit El Baraka charity is helping them out with food and school fees. But Tawil is still worried, and furious with the political class she blames for the malaise. "If I see people heading out to protest, I'll be the first to join them," she said.

Money running out

In a country that imports 80 percent of its food, much of the six million population depends on subsidies to get by. Even without them being lifted, many are already struggling, said Beit El Baraka founder Maya Ibrahimchah. "There have been many more demands for help over the past four months," she said. "Those we are helping today are all from the middle class."

The state has poured up to \$437 million into subsidies a month, the World Bank estimates, to keep prices in check for bread, medicine, fuel and electricity, as well as around 300 other items since mid-2020. To counter the pound's drastic devaluation, importers get access to dollars at a preferential rate to ensure they can afford to continue bringing in supplies.

For flour, fuel and medicine, for example, they offer dollars at the official exchange rate of 1,507 pounds to cover most of their cost. But traders must resort to the black market to



BEIRUT: Maya Ibrahimchah, the founder and president of the Lebanese NGO Beit al-Braka (house of blessings) organizes the stock of food to be distributed to the needy at the organization's headquarters on Feb 23, 2021. — AFP

cover the difference, where Tuesday the rate hit a record low of 10,000 pounds to the dollar. As a result, in less than a year the price of a large bag of subsidized bread has risen from 1,500 to 2,500 pounds.

Authorities have remained vague about how the subsidies will be reduced, though meetings are ongoing. In early December, central bank governor Riad Salameh said it could only fund subsidies for another two months. Later that month, he said two billion dollars were available for them. At the end of February, the central

bank's website showed it had \$17.9 billion in foreign currency reserves, yet \$17.5 billion of that is the bank's required reserves. The bank did not respond to AFP's repeated requests for comment. The UN food agency has warned any subsidy reduction would have "major inflationary repercussions" and "put an unbearable strain on households". The price of bread could increase by up to three times and fuel by 4.5 times, the World Food Program said, adding it was critical to immediately scale up assistance to the poorest. — AFP

US, EU hail 'fresh start' with truce in planemaker feud

WASHINGTON: Washington and Brussels hailed an opportunity to restore frayed ties as US President Joe Biden and EU leader Ursula von der Leyen on Friday suspended tit-for-tat trade tariffs in a longstanding aircraft dispute. The truce in the 16-year-old transatlantic dispute over subsidies for rival planemakers Boeing and Airbus represents a significant ratcheting back of the aggressive trade policies pursued by former US president Donald Trump.

Following a phone call on Friday, Biden and von der Leyen's announced a four-month suspension of billions of dollars in punitive import tariffs, in what the White House said was an opportunity "to repair and revitalize the US-EU partnership". "I was glad to speak to President Biden this afternoon - the first of many exchanges and the start of a good personal partnership," von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, said in a statement. "President Biden and I agreed to suspend all our tariffs imposed in the context of the

Airbus-Boeing disputes, both on aircraft and non-aircraft products, for an initial period of four months."

The call was the European Union chief's first with Biden since he came to office, although the pair spoke in November after he won the US presidential election. Each side has won WTO rulings in the dispute which authorized the governments to impose punitive tariffs, including US duties on a record \$7.5 billion in EU goods.

Washington has imposed tariffs on European products like wine, cheese and olive oil, and 15 percent tariffs on Airbus. And the EU levied additional duties on \$4 billion worth of American products including Boeing planes and farm produce such as wheat and tobacco, plus alcoholic spirits and chocolate.

'Fresh start'

Biden initially maintained the duties imposed by his predecessor but also pledged to rebuild relations with American allies and trading partners that frayed over the past four years. On Thursday the United States and Britain - which hosts an Airbus plant and was part of the EU when the dispute started - also agreed to suspend retaliatory tariffs for four months.

Von der Leyen said in her statement that she hoped the suspension signaled a



"fresh start". She said her call with Biden touched on many other aspects of transatlantic relations. "We both committed to focus on resolving our aircraft disputes, based on the work our respective trade representatives," she said. "This is excellent news for businesses and industries on both sides of the Atlantic, and a very positive signal for our economic cooperation in the years to come."

A joint statement issued by both parties stressed their committed to finally resolving the dispute, which would lead to closer cooperation in other areas, and reinforce the allies as they review ties with a rising China. "This will allow the EU and the US to ease the burden on their industries and workers and focus efforts towards resolving these long running disputes at the WTO," it said. — AFP

Honda launches advanced self driving cars

TOKYO: Honda launched the world's most advanced self-driving car licensed for the road on Friday, releasing an initial batch of 100 models in Japan. The Legend is capable of adaptive driving in lanes, as well as passing and switching lanes under certain circumstances. The car also features an emergency stop function in case a driver is unresponsive to handover warnings, and Honda touts extensive safety testing.

"Approximately 10 million patterns of possible real-world situations were simulated during system development, and real-world demonstration tests were conducted on expressways for a total of approximately 1.3 million kilometers," it said in a statement. Experts said the limited rollout would help determine whether there is sufficient demand for more autonomous vehicles.

Vehicle autonomy is classified along a 0-5 scale, with 5 indicating

essentially total autonomy. The Legend is Level 3. Several automakers have already manufactured vehicles capable of Level 3 autonomy, but few countries have legal frameworks permitting their sale and use. Honda's Legend release comes after the carmaker won approval for sales in Japan last November.

The government had already amended the law to allow for such vehicles, believing self-driving cars will be key in a country with a rapidly ageing population in need of safe transportation solutions. Automakers and tech firms are locked in a fierce battle for the lead in self-driving technology, with electric carmaker Tesla among the challengers.

For now, analysts say automakers are still a long way from a true Level 4 system, in which a car is considered to no longer have a driver, just passengers. Level 5 vehicles would theoretically have no steering wheel or other driver controls and would be capable of handling all terrain types and weather without driver assistance. Honda's limited release of the Legend will be available only for lease sales. The partially self-driving sedan is priced at 11 million yen (\$102,000). — AFP

Twitter working on way to 'undo' fresh tweets

SAN FRANCISCO: Twitter on Friday confirmed that it is working on a button that would give people a chance to take back freshly fired-off tweets before they are posted. While the feature would not be an edit option long clamored for by Twitter users, it would provide a brief window of opportunity of several seconds to "undo" a tweet after sending. "We can confirm we are testing this feature," a Twitter spokeswoman said in reply to an AFP inquiry.

The feature would be in addition to the delete function but would prevent a tweet from appearing on a user's timeline. Google's free Gmail service provides a similar chance to reconsider emails being sent. Twitter put out word this week that it would be testing products throughout the year, and "hopefully" some would be rolled out.

Plans shared by Twitter recently include a possible subscription service in which users would pay for special content from high-profile accounts, part of an economic model to diversify its revenue. The social media platform is working on a new Super Follows service as it searches for new revenue streams beyond targeted advertising, it said at an annual meeting of investors. — AFP

Business

Amid pandemic, Americans are saving more, especially the wealthy

Americans have accumulated \$1.8tn in excess savings in 11 months

WASHINGTON: The coronavirus pandemic has wiped out millions of jobs in the United States, but it's had the unexpected effect of increasing savings rates among Americans, especially wealthy people stuck at home and forced to give up travel and entertainment. Along with the dramatic reduction in leisure spending, things like government stimulus checks, unemployment benefits and the suspension of monthly loan repayments for more modest earners have swelled the bank accounts of Americans who are usually known to be crumbling under debt.

Americans have accumulated \$1.8 trillion in excess savings in the 11 months since the start of the pandemic, according to figures released this week by Barclays and Oxford Economics. "And, we estimate that this number could rise to \$2.5 trillion by this summer," Gregory Daco, chief US economist at Oxford Economics, told AFP.

The savings rate of Americans, which averaged seven to eight percent before the crisis, spiked to a record 33 percent in April 2020, thanks to a massive \$2.2 trillion COVID relief package for households and businesses, according to Bureau of Economic Analysis data. The savings rate was holding at 13.7 percent

at the end of December, though decreasing as various forms of aid expired.

It jumped in January to 20.5 percent after \$600 stimulus checks were included in a \$900 billion plan adopted by Congress at the end of December. And, it could rise again this spring, as lawmakers consider the Biden administration's \$1.9 trillion relief package. Overall, the savings trend has highlighted the disparities between rich and poor in the United States, with wealthy households saving much more than families of modest means who have been hardest-hit by job losses and have used stimulus money mostly to pay bills.

The richest Americans were generally able to maintain their jobs through teleworking - their income has remained constant while spending has plunged, resulting in excess savings. "About four-in-ten Americans (42 percent) say they have been spending less money than usual since the pandemic began, and that is especially the case among upper-income adults," according to a survey of 10,334 Americans by the Pew Research Center, released Friday.

Some 53 percent of higher-income Americans reported spending less, compared with 43 percent of middle-income and 34 percent of low-income people.

While financially secure people were unable to spend on leisure and travel, low-income Americans reported spending less because they were worried about personal finances.

Euphoric consumption?

"Many Americans were already struggling to save money before the coronavirus outbreak hit," Pew said, with 47 percent of low-income adults unable to save, compared to 25 percent for those who are middle-income. Only eight percent of upper-income Americans had the problem. Saving rates were even more unequal when broken down by race, with 38 percent of black adults saying they are usually not able to save, compared with 31 percent of Hispanics, 27 percent of white respondents and 19 percent of Asians, the Pew data showed.

The fundamental question remains: Whether the record savings rate will boost consumption in the United States, where consumer spending is historically the driver of the economy. Before the pandemic, it represented two-thirds of the GDP. "Our outlook assumes a fairly rapid acceleration in household spending in the coming year and we make the explicit assumption that households will draw down on accumulated saving in the



NEW YORK: US currency is seen in a back pocket on March 4, 2021. — AFP

process," Barclays economists said.

They noted the potential "for a substantial rebound in consumption post-pandemic if households experience higher benefits - akin to 'euphoria' - from consuming after a period of deprivation". Daco is not so sure. While he anticipates a rebound in consumer activity, he noted that spending on things like

travel probably won't skyrocket to a rate that would make up for a year's shortfall.

"Are we going to take all the trips that we would have liked to take last year, in addition to those planned once the pandemic is over? Are we going to travel in business or first class on the pretext that we have more money tucked away?" he asked. "Not necessarily." — AFP

Kamco Invest reports KD 15m fee income, KD 2.7m losses in 2020

KUWAIT: Kamco Invest, a regional non-banking financial powerhouse with one of the largest AUMs in the region, announced its financial results for FY 2020 ended Dec 31, 2020. The Company reported a net loss of KD 2.7m (EPS: -7.85 fils) compared to a net profit of KD 3m in 2019 (EPS: 12.47 fils). The results were impacted by unrealized losses and the coronavirus pandemic which disrupted government entities, the private sector, and economies since March 2020.

The slow of business since March 2020 had a negative impact on the fee & commission income which dropped by 21.4 percent compared to 2019 to reach KD 15m in 2020. Despite the unprecedented challenges, negative sentiments and the slow of business, the company continued to provide its clients with interruption-free services and distributed cash dividends to its shareholders for the fiscal year 2019 amounting to KD 1.7m in June 2020.

As at the end of Dec 2020, total assets under management stood at KD 3.9bn (USD 12.9bn). Equity funds and managed portfolios continued to outperform their respective benchmarks and three funds were recognized by the 2020 Refinitiv Lipper Fund awards for their consistent risk-adjusted performance relative to peers.

Kamco Invest successfully raised over USD 623m for several products and transactions, distributed around USD 49m to clients (capital and income distributions) and acquired properties in the US and UK, raising the managed real estate value to over USD 1.1bn. Simultaneously, the Company exited from two managed US properties generating

above targeted returns to its clients. The Special Situations Asset Management team continued exit negotiations with several parties on behalf of clients.

Throughout the year, Investment Banking successfully played the role of joint lead manager for six debt capital market transactions, two regional and four local offerings, for a total amount equivalent to USD 2.6bn. The team also acted as exclusive sell-side advisor to a healthcare group in Egypt and launched a strategic initiative to support companies in battling the ongoing crisis. Kamco Invest was awarded the 'Best M&A Bank in the Middle East - 2020' award from the highly accredited and internationally renowned Global Finance.

First Securities Brokerage Company, Kamco Invest's brokerage arm, continued to provide its services to clients without interruption while increasing market share and attracting new clients through the online trading platform. Furthermore, Kamco Invest managed to rationalize its cost base where general and administrative expenses dropped by 26.5 percent in 2020 to reach KWD 14.3mn, thanks to the measures taken by the Company to cope with the market conditions and the Company's strategy post-merger completion.

The Company reduced its total liabilities by KD 3.8m, a reduction of 5.5 percent, to reach KD 64.8m at the end of Dec 2020. The Company enjoys a strong financial position with KD 50m in shareholders' equity as of Dec 31, 2020 and a "BBB" long-term credit rating and "A3" short-term rating with stable outlook by Capital Intelligence in their latest

breathless pace, the pandemic acted as an accelerant," said Alaeddine Karim, Country Manager, Microsoft Kuwait. "In both the private and government sectors we saw extraordinary progress in a short span of time. When making such moves, the IT environment undergoes dramatic changes, and maintaining compliance can be quite difficult, especially if you don't have the resources to build a dedicated oversight team. Microsoft Compliance Manager demystifies and simplifies compliance processes, putting the organization in the driver's seat, while allowing it to automate at scale - thereby accelerating innovation."

Microsoft Compliance Manager - now part of Microsoft 365 - takes the complexity out of regulatory alignment, allowing organisations of all sizes and industries to examine their obligations quickly and map out their actions in a way that makes sense to their operational models. It supports the prioritisation of tasks and allows the formulation of risk-informed policies.

"Kuwait's regulatory framework is in place to protect citizens, residents and businesses from the loss or compromise of their private data. It is an essential component of Vision 2035, and Microsoft is committed to showing businesses how they can comply with these important guidelines while continuing to innovate and thrive in the new normal," added Karim.



Faisal M Sarkhou



review in June 2020.

Faisal Mansour Sarkhou, Chief Executive Officer, said, "The results were impacted by unrealized losses and we are well positioned to benefit from positive market performance as well as cope with the unforeseen circumstances should returning to normal take more time than expected. Despite the extremely difficult economic and operating conditions, we managed to strengthen our financial position by enhancing our liquid assets and reducing our total liabilities. We also rationalized our cost base and most importantly remained focused on the recurring fee-based income."

He added, "We were able to sign new mandates, close deals, attract new clients and raise funds for new and existing products and mandates. We have also expedited our digitization drive while ensuring our existing systems and processes handled the situation of remote working and serving of our clients. We will continue to monitor new trends and behavioral changes that will inevitably lead to the formulation of new standards and investment opportunities after overcoming the current crisis."

Maersk pleads for military backup against pirates

COPENHAGEN: Fed up with pirate attacks on its fleet off the west African coast, global shipping giant Maersk is clamoring for a major naval mission to police the vital but treacherous maritime route. The call for action comes after two of the Danish company's ships were boarded by bandits in the Gulf of Guinea within the space of one month at the turn of the year.

The area is a major shipping route stretching from Senegal to Angola, but it has been plagued by piracy in recent years. Armed kidnappings of seafarers reached record levels in 2020, according to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB). "In 2021 we should not have seafarers who are afraid of sailing anywhere because of piracy, this is not the age of piracy," Aslak Ross, head of maritime standards at the Danish giant, told AFP. Maersk wants an international mission similar to the naval operation that the European Union has deployed in the Gulf of Aden, off East Africa, since 2008 and which has been credited with a sharp drop in piracy there. "A solution is to have the international community support a mission in the short term," Ross said.

At the same time, governments should back longer-term efforts to strengthen the anti-piracy capabilities of coastal countries, he said. Every day some 1,500 ships travel the maritime route off Africa's two largest oil producers, Nigeria and Angola, and Maersk said 50 of its vessels regularly sail in the area.

Maersk is the world's largest container shipping company, operating in 130 countries and employing some 80,000 people worldwide. It moves 12 million containers every year. The waters are the world's number one spot for cargo-ship crew kidnappings, which tend to be seen as more lucrative for pirates than the traditional attacks on oil tankers. Of the 135 attacks on seafarers recorded worldwide last year, 130 took place in the Gulf of Guinea, the IMB reported. — AFP

Microsoft compliance manager now available in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Microsoft announced that cloud customers in Kuwait will gain access to Microsoft Compliance Manager, empowering organisations to adhere to legal obligations while innovating with more freedom in an economic climate where business agility is critical.

The announcement comes at a time when more and more Kuwaiti businesses are choosing remote working and hybrid workplaces to keep employees safe while delivering operational continuity. According to a GCC survey in March, 35 percent of regional organisations were either in the process of implementing remote-working models or had already done so. And another research in June showed that remote working was likely to remain beyond the pandemic, with 90 percent of MENA employees expecting its usage to increase between now and 2030.

"In a region that was already innovating at a



Business

NBK approves distribution of 20% cash dividends and 5% bonus shares



KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) held yesterday its 2020 Annual General Meeting (AGM) and Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM), at which there was a quorum of 78.4 percent. The AGM and EGM approved the Board of Directors' recommendation to distribute 20 percent cash dividends to shareholders (equivalent to 20 fils per share) and the distribution of 5 percent bonus shares (5 shares for every 100 shares owned).

Maintaining Course

Nasser Al-Sayer, NBK Group Chairman delivered his speech at the 2020 AGM and EGM affirming that the COVID-19 pandemic's fallout affected all global economies and companies, and Kuwait and the Middle East were no exceptions. For the GCC, the impact was especially severe in light of a record-low oil price environment, at the beginning of the crisis, followed by fluctuations, at the same time they are fighting to contain the spread of the pandemic.

Sayer said: "Despite the challenging operational environment that we faced during the past year, we managed to achieve decent profits amounting KD 246.3 million, whereas operating profits stood at KD 530.9 million. These financial results for 2020 reaffirmed our resilient business model and a strong financial position, and showed continued payback of our diversification and digital transformation strategies."

Sayer pointed out that NBK's tremendous and well-thought-out investments in developing employees and digital infrastructure over the past years have proven to be prudent. Additionally, Boubyan Bank, the Islamic arm of the Group, along with the bank's international operations, continued to play an instrumental role in mitigating risks and diversifying sources of income.

Sayer noted that NBK faced the crisis in a solid position, as the size and liquidity of the group's balance sheet, along with healthy profitability, enabled it to continue to support customers and society. Moreover, during the year, all necessary measures were taken to enhance the strength of the bank's financial position amidst the unstable economic conditions caused by the pandemic.

"Our ability to sustain dividend policy while maintaining our solid capital base during this uniquely challenging year is a testament to the solidity of our strategic foundations, and a reflection of the trust placed in us by our customers and shareholders," he added.

Sayer explained that the Board of Directors has performed its duties in the best way, providing guidance and advice to the Executive Management to move the Group's operations forward. Sayer praised the bank's executive management and leadership team, and all employees who made tireless efforts during working remotely to help customers weather the challenges imposed by the pandemic. He also extended his thanks to the Central Bank of Kuwait for its efforts aimed to enhance the operational environment.

On NBK's performance of its social responsibility, Sayer said: "We are proud to continue our unshakable approach laid down by the founders for nearly seven decades with regard to our social responsibilities. In this context, we made a contribution to the fund set up to support government efforts in facing coronavirus outbreak, in addition to supporting the efforts of the Kuwaiti Red Crescent by providing ventilators and mobile clinics to help their efforts to contain the pandemic."

Concluding his speech, Sayer said: "Despite the difficulty of forecasting how the year 2021 will unfold, I am sure that the NBK has the strength, stability and operational resilience enabling it to face all possible scenarios and be up to the expectations of its shareholders and customers, as well as to carry on its historical role in supporting the Kuwaiti economy to recover from the impacts of this pandemic."

Proactive Strategy

On his part, Isam J Al-Sager, NBK Group CEO, said in his speech: "The year 2020 was exceptional, due to the challenging operating environment resulting from the pandemic, which demonstrated the bank's resilient business model, solid financial position, and the prudence of NBK's proactive strategy for diversification of income sources and digital transformation."

Sager stated: "This year was exceptionally challenging, not only due to the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, but also the concurrent sharp decline in oil prices and historically low interest rates. These factors combined led to a decline in the volume of banking transactions across many sectors in all the markets in which we operate. The pace of project awarding and implementation in Kuwait also saw a significant slowdown due to the challenges imposed by the pandemic, in addition to the government's cutting of investment spending due to the decline in its revenues."

Sager indicated that these circumstances impacted the bank's operating results, as interest income was affected after re-pricing loans according to the new interest rates after the Central Bank of Kuwait cut the discount rate twice in last March to reach its lowest historical level. Additionally, fees and commission income was also affected by shutdown of economic activities as part of the precautionary measures to combat the spread of the pandemic, especially in the second and third quarters of the year. These circumstances, Sager noted, made it necessary for NBK to maintain a conservative risk management approach, by providing for prevailing uncertainty, especially that the crisis is still unfolding.

Exceptional policies

Sager indicated that it was normal that the financial results were affected by these repercussions. However, he emphasized that the exceptional policies adopted by the executive management minimized this impact and resulted in posting financial results allowing the Board of Directors to recommend distribution of dividends to shareholders. Total assets also grew by 1.5 percent to reach KD 29.7 billion, whereas loan portfolio grew by 5.7 percent to reach KD 17.5 billion, and customer deposits increased by 7.4 percent, to reach KD 17.1 billion.

Sager continued: "Our profitability, solid financial position and sustained growth of our balance sheets, despite the unprecedented challenges, demonstrate the success of the ini-

tiatives and policies we were quick to adopt in order to minimize the impact of the crisis, which focused on enabling our customers to make all their banking transactions without being affected by the lockdown measures, depending on our various digital channels and advanced payment solutions."

Sager said, "We followed a cost control strategy aimed to strike a balance between implementing stringent cost-cutting measures and continuing to inject the necessary investments to achieve our strategic goals."

"We were keen on completing our investments and implementing the digital transformation roadmap, and all our digital initiatives that proved to be very successful in light of our customers' reliance on our digital channels for 85 percent of their transactions during the year. Our tremendous digital capabilities were instrumental to ensure smooth flow of our operations, which enabled us to continue making progress in most of our strategic goals," he added.

Well-positioned for recovery

Sager mentioned that, in line with its policy aimed at diversifying the financing base, enhancing capital adequacy ratios, and benefiting from low interest rates, NBK issued subordinated Tier 2 bonds: one KD-denominated worth KD150 million, and another USD-denominated worth USD 300 million, and succeeded in obtaining one of the lowest pricing compared to peer GCC issuances. These issuances saw a remarkable demand from fixed-income investors, reflecting the bank's creditworthiness and internationally leading position.

Sager noted that throughout the year, the executive management placed the safety of customers and employees at the top of its priorities. To this end, it strived to enable customers to make all their transactions remotely, and to apply all precautionary measures at the branches, as well as maintaining a safe working environment to protect employees' health and safety.

Regarding the outlook for 2021, Sager said: "We believe that our diversification and digital transformation strategies, along with our solid financial position and leading franchise, and the policies and initiatives accomplished over the past year, make us better positioned for a gradual recovery in light of the accelerated vaccination drive and improving oil prices, and that we will be the biggest beneficiaries from the emerging opportunities as we proceed towards recovery in all the markets in which we operate."

Sager concluded his speech by thanking the members of the Board of Directors for their prudent advice and guidance. He also thanked the Group's employees for their dedication in performing their job duties during these exceptional circumstances, regardless of their positions, as well as the bank's customers inside and outside Kuwait, stressing that the bank always aspires to provide top-notch banking products and services in a way that meets all their expectations.

Solid foundations

On the sidelines of the AGM, Shaikha Al-Bahar, NBK Group Deputy CEO, said: "The year 2020 was one of the most challenging years for global economies since long generations, as the rapid spread of the pandemic forced countries to shut down major parts of their economies to protect their citizens, which led to the worst economic downturn in decades."

Bahar added: "While we could not predict the nature or extent of this crisis, we were fully prepared and well-positioned to provide the support needed by our customers and employees, thanks to our solid foundations in the operational and financial sides, and our continuous efforts over the years to build a solid capital base and focusing on our asset quality, minimizing risks, and enhancing the operational resilience needed to withstand potential economic shocks."

Bahar indicated that the record low interest rate environment had an impact on net interest income. However, this was offset by the decent growth in the loan portfolio and prudent cost control, and despite the increased provisioning and the pressure on the bank's revenues from some sectors, NBK outperformed other regional banks in terms of key financial indicators, and at the same time, maintained strong capitalization levels, with a capital adequacy ratio of 18.4 percent, and healthy asset quality levels, as non-performing loans ratio stabilized at 1.72 percent and loan loss coverage ratio stood at 220 percent.

Digital investments

Bahar continued: "Our geographical footprint and access to markets with great growth potentials are unique factors that give us an edge over our competitors, as our international operations continue to play a vital role in mitigating risks and increasing the diversification of income sources, whereas the growth in Islamic banking through Boubyan Bank, the group's Islamic arm, remains a key element of our diversification strategy, as the operating income from NBK's international operations reached KD 206.1 million, which is robust in view of the prevailing circumstances, contributing to 24 percent of the group's total operating income."

On the digital transformation front, Bahar said: "Despite the impacts of the pandemic, it offered us opportunities to accelerate the implementation of our digital transformation roadmap, which will help us take decisive steps to move forward with our comprehensive and sustainable digital transformation agenda. Throughout its long history, NBK does not hesitate to seize opportunities to consolidate its leading position and meet its aspirations that transcend geographical barriers."

Bahar emphasized that NBK's digital investments paid off during the crisis, as the bank's digital channels played a key role in customer service, since digital transactions increased to record levels, a trend that continues even after returning to normal levels of economic activities, especially as we continue to introduce continuous enhancements to NBK Mobile Banking App and develop branches to integrate with digital channels with the aim of enriching customer experience.

Bahar explained that over the past year, and in recognition of NBK's efforts in supporting customers and employees, the bank was one of the few banks around the world to be recognized by receiving a number of prestigious awards in the areas

of innovation in digital banking services from Global Finance magazine, noting that the bank also scored a high rating in customer satisfaction index.

International expansion

Speaking about the outlook, Bahar said: "As we navigate into 2021, we will continue to focus efforts on leveraging the size and strength of our balance sheet to support our customers. In addition, having a combination of professional human cadres and advanced digital technology will remain a key factor for our success, as this will support the creation of distinguished propositions and solutions that attract new customers, and strengthen the relationships with existing customers."

Bahar continued, saying: "We will continue to give priority to a disciplined focus on managing cost to remain financially and strategically flexible, and we will align our business with our endeavors to create added value for our customers by empowering them and enriching their banking experience. We will continue to simplify and digitize their interactions with us to save time, provide convenience and added value. We will also provide AI-based solutions and enhance the analysis of data and core digital systems to identify and meet their needs and provide them with new and outstanding solutions."

On the international markets level, Bahar mentioned that the bank will continue its efforts to expand in the retail and wholesale sectors in the Egyptian market by investing in digital banking services and focusing on increasing new customers acquisition and simplifying their transactions. On the other hand, the bank will seek to expand its regional wealth management footprint, by enhancing its wealth management proposition (Watani Wealth Management Company) and linking it to the group's global wealth management platform, as well as increasing commercial banking offers in the Saudi market to gradually boost its presence in the Kingdom and increase this market's contribution to the group's bottom line.

Positive signs

Bahar stated: "Over the past few months, we have witnessed positive signs and indicators that give us optimism, and we are confident that our strategy will continue to achieve better returns for our shareholders across all of our key markets in the future. We stress that the executive management has a clear mission and an unwavering focus on preserving the bank's leadership, and this mission is supported by key principles represented in putting customers first, investing in our people and digital infrastructure, and benefiting from our broad geographical footprint, and we are confident that the implementation of this mission will help us sustain stable returns for our shareholders on the long term."

Bahar concluded: "We are proud of the role we played since the very beginning of the crisis in supporting our country and government's efforts to curb the spread of this pandemic, and we will certainly be there to support the recovery of our national economy from this crisis."

Operational resilience

Meanwhile, Salah Al-Fulaij, CEO of NBK-Kuwait, announced after the meeting: "The operating environment was exceptionally challenging, as Kuwait was one of the first and most keen countries to impose lockdown measures. This coincided with the slow pace of project implementation, low interest rates and the failure to approve the public debt law and guarantee financing for SMEs, which affected the business sector, as the IMF expected the economy to contract by 8.1 percent in 2020."

Fulaij pointed out that these challenges demonstrated the bank's resilient business model, which as reflected in the asset growth trends mainly driven by the growth of loan portfolio by 5.7 percent year-on-year, with the continued support of the Kuwaiti demographics for strong growth trends in consumer lending, in addition to the bank's leading position in financing government, oil and private sectors' institutions. Fulaij said: "Our crisis management focused on key pivots that aimed to continue focusing on digital initiatives and developing our digital channels to ensure uninterrupted services, consolidate our digital excellence, and provide the required support to our retail and corporate customers during the crisis, in addition to maintaining the safety of our customers and employees."

Speaking on digital initiatives, Fulaij said: "We launched advanced payment solutions for the first time in Kuwait at the beginning of the year, and we were the first to launch Samsung Pay in the third quarter. We also continued to invest in enhancing our digital channels, basically NBK Mobile Banking App, to which we added 22 updates. This was reflected in a 38 percent increase in the number of users and 51 percent in the number of transactions made using the app. At the end of the year, we opened our new branch at The Avenues Mall, unfolding NBK's futuristic approach to branches, as part of our digital transformation strategy."

The bank's digital excellence was recognized by naming it Best Consumer Digital Bank in Kuwait and the Middle East from Global Finance magazine.

Local dominance

Fulaij continued: "We defended our market share and maintained our leadership as the largest financier of government projects and the house bank for Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) and its subsidiaries. We succeeded in leading the banking sector to conclude a financing facility agreement worth KD 1 billion in favor of KPC. We also preserved our dominant share in financing foreign companies operating in Kuwait and cemented our relationships with most of these companies. Additionally, we signed a memorandum of understanding with Italian Export Credit Agency (SACE) to support and finance Italian companies operating in Kuwait. We were also keen to continue investing in developing innovative banking and treasury solutions and foreign exchange services to live up to international standards."

These efforts were recognized by winning the awards of Best Private Bank in Kuwait, Best Foreign Exchange Provider in the Middle East, and Best Trade Finance Bank in Kuwait from Global Finance magazine. Al-Fulaij pointed out.

Customer support

Regarding the bank's role in supporting customers, Fulaij indicated that NBK and the banking sector launched exceptional initiatives to mitigate the impact of the crisis including a deferral program for the installments of all consumer loans and credit card for six months, without any resulting interest or fees, as well as deferring the installments of SMEs loans and stopping collection of fees on POS terminals and digital channels for three months. The bank also provided soft loans to its corporate and SMEs customers.

Fulaij affirmed that NBK was committed to enable customers make all their transactions, saying: "We launched the mobile branch initiative, and reached our customers in quarantined areas during the full lockdown by providing mobile ATMs. And as part of our endeavors to serve all our customer segments, we opened our new branch at the headquarters of Kuwait Boursa, and were closer to our customers through our digital channels and social media platforms, which reached 1.7 million followers."

These customer support efforts were recognized as NBK was named Best Retail Bank in Customer Service in Kuwait, according to Service Hero Index.

Fulaij highlighted that the bank's employees received full support during these exceptional circumstances, and a series of questionnaires were conducted about employees' awareness and confidence in the measures taken by the bank during these times. This helped create new programs and resources to support them, with a strong focus on their health and safety.

Furthermore, in order to protect our people, Fulaij indicated that the bank has taken all necessary actions to keep them safe, and has not stopped to provide them with training by re-designing all training courses according to virtual reality technology, as the bank organized 71 training programs and workshops that were attended by 1137 participants, and 2,625 employees received mandatory training courses, which are unprecedented levels NBK succeeded to achieve, despite the exceptional circumstances.

NBK's leadership

Fulaij pointed out that while the bank strives to weather the continuing crisis, it is looking forward to the future and focusing on preserving NBK's leadership and its dominant market share in Kuwait by continuing to implement its digital transformation roadmap that supports the achievement of all the bank's strategic objectives, basically acquisition of more customers from the youth segment.

"We aim to maintain our leadership in financing development projects, support and finance expansion of the oil and private sector projects. We also seek to continue our strategy aiming to penetrate the medium-sized companies market to increase and diversify our corporate customer base. We are also looking forward to complete the strategy of creating integration between branches and digital services, as opening the Avenues branch was just the beginning of unveiling this strategy," he added.

Thanks and appreciation.

At the end of his speech, Nasser Al-Sayer, on behalf of all Board members and the Executive Management team, extended thanks to HH Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, the Amir of Kuwait, and HH Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, the Crown Prince, for their continued support for the stability and growth of the Kuwaiti economy. He also thanked the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Capital Markets Authority for their efforts to make Kuwait a more attractive investment destination.

In addition, Sayer thanked the shareholders for their trust in National Bank of Kuwait, and also expressed his special gratitude to the bank's customers in Kuwait and throughout the region and the whole world for their loyalty and continuous support. Sayer also thanked the Group's Board of Directors for their prudent advice and leadership. He also expressed his appreciation for the relentless efforts of the Executive Management of the National Bank of Kuwait and their constant endeavors to sustain the bank's progress, and accentuated the instrumental role of the bank's employees to gain the confidence placed by customers and shareholders in the bank.

Dividend distribution date

Cash dividends and bonus shares will be distributed as of Tuesday dated 30.03.2021, for the shareholders registered in the bank's shareholders' records as at the end of the due date set to Thursday dated 25.03.2021.

Eid and Saidi elected as independent board members

The General Assembly elected Robert Maroun Eid and Nasser Amin Saidi as independent members for the remainder of the membership term for the current session of the board, in compliance with corporate governance regulations issued by the regulatory authorities.

Eid, who holds a PhD in banking and finance from the Sorbonne University in Paris, held many executive positions in many leading financial institutions including Saudi Home Loans Company (SHL), Arab National Investment Company (ANB Invest), MetLife and Arab National Bank Cooperative Insurance Company (AIG ANB). He also worked as Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer at Arab National Bank - KSA from 2005 to 2020, and as Managing Director and CEO of National Bank of Kuwait (International) PLC (NBKI) from 1998 to 2005.

Saidi, who holds a PhD from the University of Rochester in USA, also held several positions. He served as the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry in Lebanon from 1998 to 2000 and the Vice Governor of Banque du Liban (Central Bank of Lebanon) from 1993 to 2003. He also was a Member of UN Committee for Development Policy (UNCDP) from 2005 to 2006, and the Chief Advisor to the Minister of Finance - UAE from 2005 to 2006 and the Chief Economist (previously) for Dubai International Financial Center (DIFC) from 2006 to 2012 and also served as the Executive Director of Hawkamah Institute for Corporate Governance from 2006 to 2012.

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Lifestyle | Features



Photos show Iraqi Christian Karjiya Baqtar embroiders a precious prayer shawl using golden thread, to gift to Pope Francis during his upcoming visit to her Iraqi hometown Qaraqosh. — AFP photos



Gift for Francis, handmade shawl tells story of Iraq's Christians

Pulling golden thread with her frail fingers, elderly Christian Karjiya Baqtar has embroidered a precious prayer shawl to gift the most cherished visitor to her Iraqi hometown-Pope Francis. Francis will visit the northern town of Qaraqosh, ravaged in 2014 by the Islamic State jihadist group, on the third day of his history-making trip to Iraq. Baqtar, a petite woman with veiny hands and wisps of hair gently brushed back from her face, has worked with other Christians in Qaraqosh for two months on the stole vestment.

The two-meter (6.5-foot) stole is entirely locally produced-from the checkered red and black fabric to the Syriac prayers hand-stitched along its edges in glimmering gold. It was designed by Ammar Yaqo, the priest at the Al-Tahera Church in Qaraqosh. "Khaya Baqtar wove the fabric, while Karjiya and Miss Adhrra Daaboul embroidered it," Yaqo told AFP proudly. The "Our Father" and "Hail Mary" prayers are carefully stitched on either side in Syriac, a dialect of the language spoken by Jesus Christ and still used in Qaraqosh. "This is the first time this kind of stole has been produced in Qaraqosh, and it represents the heritage of this town,"



said Yaqo. Also known as Bakhda and Hamdaniya, Qaraqosh has a long pre-Christian history and is also one of Iraq's oldest Christian towns. It was largely destroyed in 2014 when the Islamic State group swept through the surrounding province of Nineveh, but its residents have trickled back since 2017 and slowly worked at rebuilding their hometown. The security situation remains tense, with state-sponsored armed groups deployed in large numbers in nearby plains.

'Everything is local'

The prayer stole features Christian emblems, including grapes used for wine-which for Catholics represents the blood of Jesus-and wheat for bread, or his body. There are Iraqi emblems, including date fronds, for which the country is well-known, and even symbols of Qaraqosh. "It features three crosses, which were designed to look like the crosses atop the Al-Tahera Church in the town, which was smashed by IS," Yaqo said. Christians in

Qaraqosh have rehabilitated the church but opted to leave the cross as it is, as a memento of the jihadist onslaught they survived. "The fabric, the embroidery, everything about this stole is local," Yaqo added. "It was made specifically for the Pope and will be presented to him during the mass."

It's not the only handmade garment the Pope will be gifted on this trip. Kurdish Muslim designer Shanaz Jamal has stitched an ornate cross, inlaid with semi-precious turquoise and emerald stones, onto a burgundy fabric. In 2019, Jamal sewed interfaith symbols onto a white ecclesiastical cloak using 3,000 beads, including the same bright stones. The 40-year-old artist told AFP at the time that she hoped her artwork would be offered to Pope Francis as a "symbol of peace and harmony in the world". Just a few months later, President Barham Saleh formally invited the pontiff to visit Iraq, saying it could help heal the country's scars after years of "strife." — AFP



Four of the 14 pieces of "The Way of Suffering", sculpted plaques representing the stations of the cross by late Iraqi artist Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, are displayed at the Chaldean Catholic Church of the Ascension in the Mashtal district of the capital Baghdad.

Francis will take a piece of Iraq with him

Capping his first day in Iraq, Pope Francis was gifted a miniature of an extraordinary work of art depicting a stage on the path to Christ's crucifixion, designed by a Muslim artist. It was a touching welcome gift from President Barham Saleh, who invited Pope Francis to visit Iraq in 2019 — hoping it could help the country "heal" after years of strife. The bronze plaque received by Francis is a potent symbol of the struggles of Iraq's ancient Christian community, as well as the country's exceptional interfaith links.

It is a small replica of the sixth "Station of the Cross", where a woman named Veronica wipes Jesus's brow as he makes the torturous 14-stage journey up the hill to be crucified. Fourteen stone plaques of the journey were designed by Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, one of Iraq's most celebrated sculptors who passed away in 2011. Work on the replica crafted in the Lebanese capital Beirut was personally overseen by his son Yasser, who kept its existence a secret until it was presented to Francis. "It's very symbolic of Iraq, because my father was an Arab Muslim sculptor who recounted through his works the passion of Christ," Hikmat told AFP. "It represents all of Iraq in that there's no difference between any of the sects," he said.

'Unlike any other'

The original stone works-imposing at two meters (yards) tall by a meter wide-indeed tell the story of Iraq. In 1993, as Iraqis faced crippling global sanctions targeting then-dictator Saddam Hussein, an elegant church was being painstakingly built on the outskirts of Baghdad. The original Chaldean Church of the Ascension had been expropriated by the state under Saddam, so the parish decided to build another branch in an agricultural district known as "Mashtal." The 5,600 Catholic families living in the area pooled together donations for several years to build the church, designed with traditional Iraqi mud bricks.

For the Stations of the Cross, the parish chose Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, who had designed most of the major statues at the heart of the capital's many roundabouts. He was already lauded at the time as the "sheikh of Iraqi sculptors," and having a top Muslim artist design such a central piece for a church was exceptional. "It's unlike those in any other Chaldean Church in the rest of the world," said Fadi Nadheer, the young bespectacled priest who has headed the Church of the Ascension since he was ordained in 2017. To make them, Hikmat locked himself away in his studio and entered what he would later describe as a "mystic trance".

'We must stand by Iraq'

Hikmat sourced the stone from the northern plains of Nineveh province, the heartland of Iraq's minorities and where some Christian villages still speak a modern dialect of the language used by Jesus two millennia ago. Little did he know that nearly three decades later, the head of the world's Catholics would travel to those very villages to encourage their dwindling residents. But the sculptor did carve little symbols of Iraq into the corners of each



Iraqi artist Yasser Hikmat (right), son of sculptor Mohammed Ghani Hikmat credited for some of Baghdad's most famous landmarks, works on a piece at a workshop in Lebanon's capital Beirut.

stale: a woman and child, representing the people suffering under the international embargo at the time.

The exceptional pieces are rarely seen. The church's imposing architecture and brightly-lit crosses along its external walls are hidden behind concrete blast walls, installed in 2007 during sectarian infighting in Iraq. Of the thousands of worshippers who attended the church three decades ago, just 400 families remain, most of whom dream of exile. But after living in the shadows for so long, Nadheer is thrilled that the work of Iraq's artists-and

the plight of its Christians-would finally be brought to light.

"I didn't know how to express my joy... that copies of the works present in our church would be given to his Holiness the Pope as a gift from the Iraqi state," he told AFP. "Pope Francis is telling the word: 'This country that is called Iraq, we must take care of it. We must stand in solidarity with it. We must turn our attention and our thoughts towards it.'" — AFP



A sculpted plaque by late Iraqi artist Mohammed Ghani Hikmat is displayed alongside 13 others as part of his work "The Way of Suffering", at the Chaldean Catholic Church of the Ascension.



Iraqi artist Yasser Hikmat, son of sculptor Mohammed Ghani Hikmat credited for some of Baghdad's most famous landmarks, displays a finished piece at a workshop in Lebanon's capital Beirut.-AFP photos

'Nomadland' China release in doubt after nationalist backlash

A nationalist backlash to Golden Globe-winning American road movie "Nomadland" has cast doubt over the film's China release after social media users and state media questioned its director Chloe Zhao's loyalty to her birth country. Zhao became the first Asian woman in history to win the best director Golden Globe and the first woman to win best drama with the semi-fictional film, which stars Oscar winner Frances McDormand alongside a rag-tag bunch of non-actors living on the open road in the American West.



In this file photo US-Chinese, director Chloe Zhao poses during a photocall to present the movie "Songs My Brothers Taught Me" in the French northwestern sea resort of Deauville, during the 41th Deauville US Film Festival. — AFP

Zhao's win last week was initially celebrated in China, with state media calling the Beijing-born filmmaker a "Chinese female director" and "the pride of China." Chinese film authorities approved the film for a domestic release on April 23 through the government-backed National Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas, the organization announced on Monday. But major online box office apps removed the release date from their platforms after a controversy erupted over years-old comments by Zhao, leaving the film's release in Chinese cinemas uncertain, entertainment magazine Variety reported Friday.

The NAAC did not immediately respond to AFP's request for clarification. Social media users had dug up old media interviews with Zhao soon after her historic win in which she appeared to criticize China. A screenshot of Zhao's 2013 interview with Filmmaker magazine, in which she reportedly called China "a place where there are lies everywhere," as well as another interview with Australian media in which she allegedly said "the US is now my country," circulated on Twitter-like Weibo last week.

The comments prompted online users to call her a "traitor" and social media in China was awash with posts questioning her nationality. Neither quote remained on the online versions of the two interviews. The Weibo hashtag for "Nomadland" was no longer searchable on Saturday, although discussion of the film and Zhao did not appear to be censored in any other way. The state-owned tabloid Global Times covered the backlash, saying Zhao had made "controversial comments" a day after lauding her as "the pride of China." But others online defended Zhao.

"She's a director, not a politician, and has never been involved in political activities, and her work has nothing to do with China," one Weibo user wrote on Saturday in defense of Zhao. "Isn't this too harsh, regardless of whether she has Chinese nationality?" Another user agreed that China's entertainment circle was "a party venue for hypocrisy." China's cinemas have almost returned to normal after the country successfully contained domestic Covid-19 infections, a stark contrast with theatres across the US that remain mostly shuttered as the virus continues to ravage the country. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features

SEX TAPE SATIRE WINS BERLINALE

The 71st Berlin film festival awarded its Golden Bear top prize Friday to "Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn" by Romania's Radu Jude, a satire skewering pandemic-era social hypocrisy with the story of a teacher whose sex tape winds up on the internet. This year's Berlinale was held entirely online for critics and industry buyers but judged by a jury made up of previous winners, who watched the 15 contenders in a specially

Maren Eggert for her performance in the sci-fi comedy "I'm Your Man". In the film by "Unorthodox" director Maria Schrader, Eggert plays an antiquities researcher who signs up to test a humanoid robot, played by British actor Dan Stevens from "Downton Abbey" using his fluent German, as a romantic partner. The runner-up best film gong went to Japanese director Ryusuke Hamaguchi whose "Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy" is made

Prolific South Korean film-maker Hong Sang-soo, who won the Berlinale's best director prize last year, was awarded best screenplay for couples drama "Introduction", set partly in Berlin. Mexican director Alonso Ruizpalacios's Netflix feature "A Cop Movie", which mixes documentary and narrative techniques to look at the struggles of police work in the country's capital, won a Silver Bear for artistic contribution. Last year's winner, dissident

List of winners at 71st Berlin film festival

Here are the winners of the main prizes announced on Friday at the 71st Berlin film festival, the first major European cinema showcase of the year.

- Golden Bear for Best Film: Babardeala cu bucluc sau porno balamuc ("Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn"), Radu Jude, Romania/Luxembourg/Croatia/Czech Republic
- Silver Bear Grand Jury Prize: Guzen to sozo ("Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy"), Ryusuke Hamaguchi, Japan
- Silver Bear Jury Prize: Herr Bachmann und seine Klasse ("Mr Bachmann and His Class"), Maria Speth, Germany
- Silver Bear for Best Director: Denes Nagy for Termeszetes feny ("Natural Light"), Hungary/Latvia/France/Germany
- Silver Bear for Best Leading Performance: Maren Eggert in Ich bin dein Mensch ("I'm Your Man") by Maria Schrader, Germany
- Silver Bear for Best Supporting Performance: Lilla Kizlinger in Rengeteg-mindenhol la?tlak ("Forest-I See You Everywhere") by Bence Fliegauf, Hungary
- Silver Bear for Best Screenplay: Hong Sang-soo for Inteuodeoksyeon ("Introduction"), South Korea
- Silver Bear for Outstanding Artistic Contribution: Yibrán Asuad for the editing of Una película de policías ("A Cop Movie") by Alonso Ruizpalacios, Mexico. — AFP



This file photo shows Romanian director and screenwriter Radu Jude speaking after accepting the Silver Bear for Best Director for his film "Aferim" during the closing ceremony of the 65th International Film Festival Berlinale in Berlin. — AFP photos



This file photo shows Japanese director Ryusuke Hamaguchi posing during a photocall for the film "Asako I & II (Netemo Sametemo)" at the 71st edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France.



This file photo shows German actress Maren Eggert posing on the red carpet before the awards ceremony of the 69th Berlinale film festival on February in Berlin.

reserved cinema. Israeli director Nadav Lapid announced the award for Jude, one of Eastern Europe's most acclaimed filmmakers, saying his movie succeeded in "provoking the spirit of our time... by slapping it, by challenging it to a duel". Jude later told reporters that as pleased as he was about the award, "I'm more happy that nobody got sick" while filming during the coronavirus outbreak. "We proved that we could do it respecting the people and putting their health above art." The festival awarded its first "gender neutral" best acting prize, to Germany's

up of three stories of women looking for connection in modern-day Tokyo.

Summer gala ceremony?

Maria Speth's German documentary "Mr Bachmann and His Class", about an empathetic teacher on the cusp of retirement who takes pupils from a range of immigrant backgrounds under his wing, claimed the third-place jury prize. Hungary's Denes Nagy clinched best director for "Natural Light", a harrowing drama about an atrocity committed by Hungarian soldiers in the Soviet Union during World War II.

Iranian director Mohammad Rasoulof, took part in the current jury, watching the films from Tehran under house arrest. The festival's organizers hope to hold a gala awards ceremony in June if pandemic conditions permit.

'Vintage John Waters'

"Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn", part of Romanian cinema's vaunted new wave, makes the case that corruption, pettiness and discrimination are more obscene than graphic sex. Opening with an extremely real-looking hardcore porn video, it was perhaps the most daring of this year's films in competition. The clip is

taken from a home movie the teacher, Emi, shot with her husband that makes its way from PornHub to the mobile phones of her colleagues, students and their parents.

With disputes over social distancing and mask wearing already jacking up tensions and exposing social divisions, Emi fights to save her job and her reputation. The showdown reaches a farcical climax. The Hollywood Reporter called "worthy of vintage John Waters". "Many of the things that Emi's accused of are things that I was accused of in online comments regarding my previous films," Jude told AFP during the festival. He revamped the premise to incorporate coronavirus, which he said had created more "aggressiveness" in Romanian society.

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 novelty coronavirus masks like "costumes". "I wanted it to feel contemporary and if there's this pandemic going now why not include it in the film," he said. Asked about its explicit scenes, producer Ada Solomon told reporters that Jude was working on creating a "censored version" that "stays consistent with the vision of the film". Beyond the competition, the Berlinale also saw the premiere of a two-hour documentary about Tina Turner, with the music legend telling in her own words her story of triumph over poverty and abuse. — AFP

California relaxes COVID reopening rules for Disneyland, stadiums from April

California on Friday paved the way for Disneyland, other theme parks and outdoor stadiums to welcome guests back sooner than expected as it relaxed reopening criteria following a sharp decline in Covid-19 cases and pressure from operators. The move announced by the state health department will permit ballparks, stadiums and mega-attractions including Disneyland, Magic Mountain and Universal Studios to admit visitors from April 1, according to conditions in their county, and at reduced capacities. With these improvements, "California can begin gradually and safely bringing back more activities, especially those that occur outdoors and where consistent masking is possible," state health secretary Mark Ghaly said in a statement. Only outdoor activities are affected by the changes, which come as California's

governor Gavin Newsom faces mounting pressure and a bid to recall him from office over his handling of the pandemic. Theme parks will only be allowed to reopen if their county drops below the state's most-restrictive coronavirus "tier," and then initially at 15 percent capacity and for California residents only. Orange County—where Disneyland is located—currently remains in the strictest purple tier, as does neighboring Los Angeles county, where several other major tourist attractions are based.

But criteria for the tiers—including infection and positivity rates—have themselves been relaxed in recent days as the Golden State's brutal winter COVID spike rapidly recedes, and as vaccinations ramp up. Outdoor sports and live performances with fans will be allowed across the state from April 1, though capacity will again be determined by conditions in the state. Capacity will be limited to 100 California residents in the worst-hit areas. Theme parks in particular had bristled at restrictions they considered too strict, which would have seen them placed among the last to reopen. While other Disney resorts around the world and in Florida reopened last summer, the California site—the world's second-most-visited theme park—never did. —AFP



In this file photo three men pose during the Mullet haircut festival in Boussu.—AFP photos



In this file photo a man poses during the Mullet haircut festival in Boussu.

The unstoppable revenge of the mullet

"Business in front, party in the back": a hairstyle considered so obnoxious that for years it verged on being an arrestable offence, the mullet has made the unlikely comeback of the century. From pop stars like Rihanna and Miley Cyrus to a surprisingly high proportion of the England rugby team, the short-front-long-back style has reinvaded the world's TV screens and high streets. "My idols have always been David Bowie and Princess Diana, so the initial idea was to look like their lovechild," said Sharon Daniels, 26, an Australian living in Brighton, England. "Shaz" was well ahead of the game, and when she first arrived in Brighton two years ago, only one other person around town was sporting her do. She knew because people kept sending her pictures of him. Now, the mullet is everywhere. "I don't necessarily appreciate that, since now it looks like I'm trying to fit in," Daniels laughed. "I don't mind. I know how long I've been rocking it."

Totally own it

Fashion cycles are as inevitable as the turning of the planets, but this is one style that many thought buried for good. "It's back from the dead," said Tony Copeland of the British Master Barbers Alliance, theorizing that a few months of lockdown growth helped propel the resurrection. "We're going to see more and more this year. Guys are just fed up with all the skin fades." That could mean fierce competition at the next Festival de la Coupe Mulet, Europe's biggest mullet festival, last held in Belgium in 2019. Current titleholder Gauthier Istin, a farmer from Brittany in northern France, isn't worried about defending his crown. For him, the mullet is a passport to good times, and he intends to travel by foot to the next festival in central France in June, like a sort of slower, hairier Forrest Gump. "I hope people will walk with me along the way, ideally with a mullet but no problem if not," he



A man poses during the Mullet haircut festival in Boussu. "He takes a philosophical view of his flowing locks: 'It's about having enough confidence in yourself to not take yourself too seriously, and to totally own your look.'"



A man poses during the Mullet haircut festival in Boussu.

He takes a philosophical view of his flowing locks: "It's about having enough confidence in yourself to not take yourself too seriously, and to totally own your look."

Skullet, anyone?

Istin also points out that the mullet dates back much further than the shoulder pads and rolled-up jacket sleeves of the 1980s. "If you look at ancient frescoes, Roman mosaics, you'll see people with them because they're much simpler than other styles," he said. Indeed, the History Channel says mullets made their first appearance in literature in Homer's The Iliad, in which a group of spearmen are described as having "their forelocks cropped, hair grown long at the backs".

It also credits Benjamin Franklin's "skullet" (bald on top, long at the back) with helping to charm the French into supporting the nascent United States of America when he was ambassador in the 18th century. His daring, wigless hairstyle was part of a successful PR effort depicting him as a man of "simplicity and innocence". Amazingly, however, the mullet went for millennia without its own name. It was not christened until 1994, and by an unlikely source. "You're coming off like you're Van Damme, you've got Kenny G in your Trans Am," the Beastie Boys rapped on their 1994 single "Mullethead"—the first recorded use of the word according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

Offensive

By that point, the mullet was well on its way to disrepute, moving out of magazine pages and into the truck stops of deep south America, often to be seen near an



In this file photo a man has his hair cut during the Mullet haircut festival in Boussu.



Members of the public pause to take photographs of an artwork bearing the hallmarks of street artist Banksy on the side of Reading Prison in Reading, west of London. — AFP

Banksy takes credit for work at Oscar Wilde jail

Street artist Banksy on Thursday claimed responsibility for a painting on the wall of a former British prison that once held playwright Oscar Wilde. The artwork shows a prisoner escaping on a rope made of bedsheets tied to a typewriter. The elusive artist confirmed he was responsible in a video posted on his Instagram account. The footage shows the artist carrying out the painting, and

parodies the cult instructional videos of late US artist Bob Ross. It opens with a clip of Ross saying: "Hello, I'm Bob Ross. I'd like to welcome you to The Joy Of Painting."

"Got all your materials out, ready to do a fantastic painting with me? Good." The action then switches to Banksy as he executes his work, while a soundtrack of friendly advice from Ross plays over the top. Reading Prison closed to prisoners in 2013 and is best known for housing Wilde during his two-year sentence of hard labor for "gross indecency". His final work "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" made the case for prison reform. The Ministry of Justice, the listed building's owner, is set to decide this month whether to turn into an arts venue. — AFP

Photo of the Day



Janja Gambret climbs in Osp, Slovenia. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Pochettino wants 'fair' quarantine solution as Guardiola vows to ground international stars

Quarantine complicates situation ahead of World Cup qualifiers

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain coach Mauricio Pochettino on Friday called for a "fair and just" solution for players facing quarantine upon their return from international duty, an issue which prompted Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola to threaten to ground his jet-setting stars. French champions PSG risk losing Neymar, Marquinhos and Angel Di Maria for a game against Ligue 1 leaders Lille if they are required to self-isolate after featuring in World Cup qualifiers in South America later this month.

Guardiola said he would join Liverpool counterpart Jurgen Klopp, and several other Premier League managers, in preventing his players travelling worldwide if they would be required to self-isolate on returning. "It's a complicated matter, which involves the federations, the government and FIFA at the same time, in the search for a fair and just agreement for everyone," said Pochettino. "We have to find the best solution so the competitions remain as fair as possible, and so the players receive equal treatment regardless of the country where they play," the Argentine continued. "During this pandemic period, it's a decisive element that is going to have an impact on results. It's also an important international window, with key qualifying matches for the 2022 World Cup."

Neymar, who is working his way back from injury, and Marquinhos are expected to join up with Brazil for their game away to Colombia on March 26. They are due to host Argentina four days later. French government regulations stipulate that anyone entering the country from outside Europe must self-isolate for seven days on arrival and present a negative COVID-19 test at the end of that period.

Even if Brazil's players are given the all clear to play in the qualifiers, Colombia's Health Minister Fernando Ruiz threw a spanner in the works on Friday, pointing out that air travel between Colombia and Brazil is still suspended due to the latest wave of coronavirus infections. "Right now, I think it's difficult to authorize any flight leaving from Brazil and I don't have any justification to authorize such a flight," Ruiz told Blu Radio.

Spinners lead Sri Lanka to win over Windies

ST JOHN'S, ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA: Sri Lanka's spinners bamboozled world champions West Indies to claim a 43-run win in the second Twenty20 International at Coolidge Cricket Ground on Friday. Having lost by four wickets in the opening game on Wednesday, in a game where West Indies skipper Kieron Pollard launched six sixes in an over, the tourists successfully defended 160 on Friday to level the three-match series. West Indies were all out for 117 in the 19th over as Sri Lanka ended an eight-game losing streak in T20. The final match is at the same venue today.

Leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga finished with 3-17, off-break bowler Akila Dananjaya, who was the victim of Pollard's midweek assault but also claimed a hat-trick, had 1-13. Wrist spinner Lakshan Sandakan took 3-10, including Pollard who made just 13. "The wicket was a bit slow. I tried not to give away any boundaries. That's why I was able to bowl well," man-of-the-match Hasaranga told the post-match presentation. West Indies were 45-1 before five wickets fell for just 21 runs.

Chris Gayle, who was out for a first ball duck on Wednesday in his first appearance in two years, made a patchy 16 when he fell to a catch by Ashen Bandara off Hasaranga. Opener Lendl Simmons (21) was next out, lbw failing to pick a Hasaranga googly. Nicholas Pooran, Jason Holder and Dwayne Bravo all followed quickly for single figure scores. Dananjaya had earlier dismissed



BORDEAUX: Mauricio Pochettino gestures during the French L1 football match between Bordeaux (FCGB) and Paris-Saint-Germain (PSG) at the Matmut Atlantique Stadium on March 3, 2021. — AFP

Under current coronavirus guidelines in Britain, players arriving from "red-list" countries, including Brazil and Argentina, are subject to 10 days' hotel confinement. FIFA has given clubs dispensation to prevent players who may be affected by the regulations from joining up with their countries during the upcoming international window.

That angered South America's football governing body CONMEBOL, which said following a virtual meeting on Friday that "FIFA has committed to keep looking for a solution." CONMEBOL is due to hold another meeting on Saturday with FIFA president Gianni Infantino.

opener Evin Lewis for six. His impressive figures of 1-13 were in stark contrast to his 3-62 on Wednesday. Hasaranga, just 23, added Fabian Allan to his list of victims with the West Indies then struggling on 89-7 in the 16th over. With more than 22 an over required, Sandakan then got the big prize of Pollard, caught in the deep for just 13 having surprisingly opted to bat at number seven. Sandakan then halted Obed McCoy's late cameo of 23 from seven deliveries with the tail-ender proving to be his team's top scorer.

Earlier, veteran all-rounder Bravo slammed the brakes on Sri Lanka with two wickets and a run-out. Sri Lanka got off to a flying start after winning the toss and deciding to bat. Openers Danusha Gunathilaka and Pathum

'Makes no sense'

Guardiola said he never wanted to stop players from representing their country, but would make an exception as his side closed in on the Premier League title. "I think it makes no sense if the players go to the national team and then have to isolate for 10 days when they come back," he said. "We've worked incredibly tough for seven, eight or nine months and after the international break comes the real part of the season, and (if) important players, maybe six, seven, eight, nine players cannot play for 10 days, it makes no sense. They are not going to fly. That's for sure. If they can fly, play with the national team and come straight back to training, they'll fly." Some nations have moved fixtures to try to avoid travel restrictions. Portugal have announced they will play their "home" World Cup qualifier against Azerbaijan in Turin, while Norway will face Turkey in Malaga. Without an exemption from the French government, PSG's South American contingent would be unavailable for the visit of Lille, who lead the league from Pochettino's team by two points. "We need a decision so that neither the federations nor the clubs suffer any loss from a problem that cannot be resolved," said Pochettino.

"I'm saying that between the government, at global level, and FIFA, who can intervene, we need to take a measure that is fair for all clubs," he added. "We're in a situation where we need the protection and help from an organization like FIFA who can get people together and have the means to guarantee a fair set-up."

Infantino said it was right to go ahead with international matches if protocols were respected. "Many of the players from around the world play in clubs in Europe, but their countries are suffering as well from the pandemic," Infantino said at Friday's IFAB annual general meeting. "So if it is possible... then these players, taking all the necessary precautions and protocols, should be allowed to travel safely, as safely as possible, respecting all the protocols, because it is important that the same as for club football, national team football remains alive." — AFP

Nissanka put on a blistering 94 off the first 10 overs. But then 37-year-old Bravo was called into action and he responded by running out Nissanka for 37. Gunathilaka followed just four balls later in the 11th over, caught by Kevin Sinclair off Bravo at mid-off.

The Sri Lankan opener went for a top score of 56 which featured four boundaries and two sixes. Bravo also claimed the third wicket to fall when Simmons caught the experienced Dinesh Chandimal for just three. The runs then dried up for Sri Lanka. Having hit eight fours and three sixes in the first 10 overs, they managed just three more fours and one six in the second half of the innings. That included an eight-over stretch where the ball never crossed the boundary ropes. — AFP



ST JOHN'S, ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA: Kevin Sinclair (left) of West Indies congratulate Angelo Mathews (2nd L) as Dinesh Chandimal (second right) and Lakshan Sandakan (right) of Sri Lanka celebrate winning the 2nd T20i match between Sri Lanka and West Indies at Coolidge Cricket Ground on Friday in Osborn, Antigua and Barbuda. — AFP

Federer ready for return after 'long, hard road'

PARIS: Roger Federer said Friday it had "been a long hard road" but he was "pumped up" to return to tennis next week, having been sidelined for over a year to recover from two knee surgeries. The 39-year-old hasn't played a match since a semi-final defeat to Novak Djokovic at the Australian Open in January 2020. However, the 20-time Grand Slam title winner will be back in action at the Qatar Open in Doha next week. "I'd like to thank all the people involved who made this possible," the Swiss star said in a video message as he prepared to fly to the Gulf. "It's been a long and hard road, I'm not at the finish line yet but I feel I am in a good place. I've been practicing very well and feel just really pumped up. I am in a good place and progressing really well." Federer, who will slip out of the top five next week, will have an extra motivation on his return. Tomorrow will see Djokovic surpass Federer's record of 310 weeks in the world number one ranking. After Doha, Federer could play again in neighboring Dubai but he will not travel to the United States for the Miami Masters. Federer has also said he intends to play the European clay court swing this year ahead of Roland Garros which he won in 2009. — AFP



Roger Federer

Jazz's Conley finally an NBA all-star

LOS ANGELES: Mike Conley became one of the oldest first-time all stars in NBA history on Friday, the 33-year-old Utah Jazz player replacing Devin Booker in tonight's annual showcase event. For the past several years, the Jazz guard has been considered one of the NBA's best players to have never been chosen to play in an all-star game. He was added to Team LeBron as an replacement for Phoenix Suns Booker, who has an injured left knee.

Conley joins teammates Donovan Mitchell and Rudy Gobert as the Jazz's third player in the game. Conley will also take Booker's spot in tonight's three-point shooting contest. The Brooklyn Nets also have three all-stars — James Harden, Kyrie Irving and Kevin Durant. But Durant is injured and won't play. Like Conley, Booker was a replacement. He was to fill in for Los Angeles Lakers center Anthony Davis. Conley is in his second year with the Jazz after 12 seasons with the Memphis Grizzlies. He is averaging 16.1 points, 5.7 assists, while shooting over 42 percent from three-point range.

Gobert, Mitchell fined

Meanwhile, Gobert and Mitchell, who have helped their club to the NBA's best record, were each fined Friday by the league for criticism of officiating. Frenchman Gobert was fined \$20,000 for his comments after Utah's 131-123 overtime loss at Philadelphia on Wednesday in a matchup of conference leaders. Mitchell was fined \$25,000 for his comments as well as conduct leaving the court after being ejected for two technical fouls with 30.8 seconds remaining, knocking over a water cooler as he departed.

The fine came hours after Mitchell and Gobert were the last players taken by LeBron James and Kevin Durant in filling out their rosters for tonight's NBA All-Star Game in Atlanta. Mitchell will be a reserve on Durant's squad with Gobert on the James bench by default as the last man available. "No slander to the Utah Jazz," James said of the NBA's winningest club at 27-9. Utah coach Quin Snyder will be coaching the James team.

Mitchell was fined Friday after appearing to accuse officials of treating Utah unfairly, slamming the "ridiculous" officiating in games involving the Jazz. "It's tough to go out there and see how we fight and compete and to have a game like that taken away from us," he said. "I'm sick of it, man. We all are. It's really getting out of hand... and the league needs to do something about it."

The 76ers went 27-of-35 at the free throw line while the Jazz were for 14-for-19, showing a disparity that upset Gobert. "Our guys are not able to get calls everybody else in the ... league gets," Gobert said. "We know we are the Utah Jazz and maybe some people don't want to see us go as far as we can go, but it's disappointing. Three times in a row, Mike Conley is going to the rim and they are grabbing him right in front of the officials and there are no calls. And on the other end there are calls that are invisible that are being made."

Gobert called it "disrespectful" to the sport and the Jazz and said he hoped officials felt "ashamed" when they watched the game on video. The Frenchman said Utah being a small market club was a reason the team was treated, in his eyes, unfairly. "I don't want to say it, but I really believe it," Gobert said. "It's very disappointing to be disrespected like that." — AFP

Sports

Man City face Man Utd test on march towards history

Victory could put City on brink of Premier League title win



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's Spanish manager Pep Guardiola reacts during the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Wolverhampton Wanderers at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on March 2, 2021. — AFP

LONDON: Manchester City have history in their sights as the runaway leaders bid to take a huge step towards the Premier League title in tonight's showdown with fading challengers Manchester United. City are 14 points clear of United with 11 games left and victory in the derby would effectively end their second placed rivals' faint hopes of catching them.

Pep Guardiola's side have been so dominant since the end of last year that it is the landmarks they can shatter on the way to a third title in four seasons that now hold the greatest interest. They are unbeaten in 28 games and will set a new club record if they avoid defeat tonight. That could be the first of many milestones to fall for City, who are on an English top-flight record run of 21 successive wins in all competitions.

The only teams from the top five European leagues ever to record longer winning streaks in all competitions are Bayern Munich (23) and Real Madrid (22). City can edge closer to Bayern's tally if they clinch a 16th successive Premier League victory this weekend, which would also take them to the brink of their own record of 18 consecutive Premier League wins, a mark shared with Liverpool. Guardiola's team are six wins short of equaling the world record for consecutive vic-

tories in all competitions by a top-flight side — set by Welsh team The New Saints in 2016.

City's incredible run is all the more remarkable given their troubled start to the season. When they were held to a 0-0 draw at United in December, they were a point behind their rivals in ninth place and the death knell was ringing for their title hopes. But, aided by some clever tactical tweaks from Guardiola, including the use of full-backs Joao Cancelo and Kyle Walker as auxiliary attackers, they have been perfect since then.

City have not trailed in a league fixture for 19 games despite being without the injured Sergio Aguero and Kevin De Bruyne for long periods. While United's inconsistencies and the collapse of champions Liverpool have contributed to City's surge to the top, the leaders' supremacy has not been restricted to the league.

'Something special'

An unprecedented quadruple is within City's reach, but Guardiola is determined to keep his players from getting complacent. "To do what we have done in these four years, still winning, these guys have something special like my time at Barcelona and Bayern

Munich," he said. "We are in a really good position. I did not expect to be in this position two or three months ago but we needed to be calm."

United have stumbled recently, drawing four of their past five league games, and their title ambitions faded into the south London fog during Wednesday's goalless stalemate at Crystal Palace. Even so, United are unbeaten in their past 21 away league games and Guardiola is well aware of the threat they could pose.

United are the only side in any of the top five European leagues yet to lose an away league match this season, while Ole Gunnar Solskjaer has won on both of his visits to the Etihad since taking charge in 2019. "I know how difficult United are," said Guardiola. "More than one year not losing away and they have good results at the Etihad."

Realistically United, who are five points clear of fifth-placed Everton, have to focus on qualifying for the Champions League, either via a top-four finish or winning the Europa League. "Our focus is just on this one game and not where we're going to end up," Solskjaer said. "They're ahead of us by a fair distance at the moment, so Sunday is a chance to test ourselves against a very good team." — AFP

Liverpool's 'power' will ensure Euro berth: Klopp

LONDON: Jurgen Klopp insists the solid foundations he has laid at Liverpool will ensure his troubled club are never faced with a long absence from the Champions League. Klopp is fighting to salvage a dismal season by lifting Liverpool into the Premier League's top four to guarantee qualification for next season's Champions League.

They are currently four points behind fourth placed Chelsea after five successive home defeats. If Liverpool cannot finish in the top four, the soon-to-be dethroned English champions will have to qualify for Europe's elite club competition by winning the Champions League this term. They hold a 2-0 first leg lead against Leipzig in the last 16. But regardless of Liverpool's fate this season, Klopp is convinced the six-time Champions League winners won't go back to the wilderness years when they spent six campaigns from 2010-11 either in the Europa League or out of Europe completely.

"This club will not be a regular out of the Champions League - this year is difficult we know that, but the potential and the power of the club is a completely different one," Klopp said. "I do not know the team 10 years ago but we are ready for a battle in this era, and with the team we have together. Seasons have momentum and we never really got it this year, that is true, but this club is in a really good position. In a difficult time obviously, but in a better position than other clubs I would say. I obviously did not think about what happened in the past but what I can say nobody has to worry about the future of the club because it is in good hands and has a really good team together, and so that is obviously the basis for a good future."

The loss of Champions League football would mean Liverpool take a significant financial hit on top of the ongoing effects of the coronavirus pandemic. It could also affect the composition of the squad in the summer transfer window. But Klopp struck a hard line when asked if players for whom the Champions League was a priority might consider leaving.

"I know we have loyalty from the players. It is not a situation where a player in the squad says, 'We are not in the Champions League so I have to leave'. That will not happen. I know them well enough to know that," he said. "The club is in a different situation and it will not be an issue with new players I can say that. We said it years back if a player does not want to come to us because we don't play Champions League next season then I don't want him. And if a player wants to leave because we don't play Champions League then I don't want him. It is not a personal thing, but it is always like this." — AFP

Live Matches on TV (Local Timings)	
ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE	
West Bromwich Albion v Newcastle Utd	15:00 beIN Sports
Liverpool v Fulham	17:00 bein sports
Manchester City v Manchester United	19:30 beIN Sports
Tottenham Hotspur v Crystal Palace	22:15 bein sports
SPANISH LEAGUE	
Huesca v Celta de Vigo	16:00 beIN Sports
Atletico de Madrid v Real Madrid CF	18:15 beIN Sports HD 1
Real Sociedad v Levante	20:30 beIN Sports
Athletic de Bilbao v Granada CF	23:00 beIN Sports
ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE	
AS Roma v Genoa CFC	14:30 beIN Sports HD 3
Hellas Verona FC v AC Milan	17:00 beIN Sports HD 3
ACF Fiorentina v Parma Calcio 1913	17:00 beIN Sports HD 2
Crotone v Torino FC	17:00 beIN Sports
UC Sampdoria v Cagliari Calcio	20:00 beIN Sports HD 3
SSC Napoli v Bologna FC	22:45 beIN Sports HD 3
GERMAN BUNDESLIGA	
FC Koln v SV Werder Bremen	17:30 beIN Sports
DSC Arminia Bielefeld v FC Union Berlin	20:00 beIN Sports



Zlatan Ibrahimovic

Arsenal frustrated by Xhaka blunder

BURNLEY: Arsenal midfielder Granit Xhaka compromised his side's faint hopes of a top four finish in the Premier League as the Swiss midfielder's embarrassing mistake gifted Burnley a 1-1 draw yesterday. Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang put Arsenal ahead early on at Turf Moor, but Xhaka's farcical howler allowed Chris Wood to equalize before half-time. Xhaka foolishly tried to pass the ball out of his own six-yard box instead of clearing it and his miscued effort bounced off Wood into the Arsenal net. Mikel Arteta's team couldn't make amends for Xhaka's blunder and 10th placed Arsenal are now nine points behind fourth placed Chelsea.

Arteta had warned Arsenal's players this week that their league position was unacceptable for a club with such a rich history. But, with their hopes of qualifying for the Champions League via a top four finish in tatters, Arsenal will have to prioritise their trip to Greece to play Olympiakos in the Europa League last 16 first leg on Thursday. Aubameyang's own goal had given Burnley their first win at Arsenal since 1974 when they last met in

Ibra poised for Sweden comeback?

STOCKHOLM: Zlatan Ibrahimovic will return to international football at the age of 39, Swedish media reported yesterday. Sweden, coached by Janne Andersson, have qualified for the Euros and kick off their campaign against Spain in Bilbao on June 14.

The return has been under discussion for several months, according to reports, but has not been confirmed by the Swedish football federation (SvFF). "It is certain that the Milan star is making a comeback in Janne Andersson's squad for the World Cup qualifiers," said the site FotbollDirekt, in a report that was picked up by the Swedish national press.

The striker, who has 116 caps and 62 goals, has not worn the Swedish jersey since Euro 2016, where he was captain but failed to score as Sweden finished bottom of their group. Last autumn, he said he "missed" wearing the yellow jersey. The SvFF said that the player then had a "good and fruitful" meeting with Andersson.

"The dialogue with Zlatan continues," SvFF spokesman, Jakob Kakebo Andersson, told AFP on Saturday, adding that the players selected for the next matches, a pair of World Cup qualifiers against Georgia and Kosovo and a friendly against Estonia, will be announced on March 16. Ibrahimovic has scored 14 goals in 14 Serie A matches for AC Milan this season.

Ibrahimovic expressed an interest in playing in the 2018 World Cup, but Andersson opted not to recall the star. Sweden reached the quarter-finals. The team then qualified without him for the Euro-2020, postponed to June and July 2021 because of COVID-19. They will face Spain, Poland and Slovakia in their group in the first round. — AFP

December. But this time the Gabon forward made his presence at the right end to open the scoring in the sixth minute. Picked out by Willian's pass after a strong break from the Brazilian, Aubameyang cut in from the left flank and used a nimble step-over to ease past Matt Lowton into the Burnley area.

With six Burnley players too slow to respond to the danger, Aubameyang had space to drill a low drive from 12 yards that beat Nick Pope's weak attempted save at his near post. It was Aubameyang's 14th goal of the season in all competitions and his eighth against Burnley in his Arsenal career. Arsenal were well on top but Xhaka handed Burnley their comical equalizer in the 39th minute. Pablo Mari passed back to Bernd Leno and the Arsenal keeper opted to find Xhaka inside his own area rather than boot it clear. Xhaka had to get rid of the ball quickly as Matej Vydra pressed, but the midfielder's woeful pass hit Wood on the hip and cannoned into the net. It was the latest Burnley nightmare for Xhaka, who was sent off for grabbing Claret's midfielder Ashley Westwood by the throat in the December.

Since the start of 2016-17, Xhaka has made more errors leading to Premier League goals (8) than any other outfield player. He returned for the second half with a torn shirt, sparking mischievous social media suggestions of a dressing room row with team-mates.—AFP

Classifieds

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

CHANGE OF NAME

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. 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, Banshi Lal S/o Natha Ji holder of Indian Passport No. S4699977 issued at Kuwait on 11/06/2018 & Civil ID No. 276031204249 has changed my name from Banshi Lal to Banshi Lal Patel in all my dealings and documents, I will be known by name of Banshi Lal (Given Name)

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www.kuwaittimes.net
e-mail: info@kuwaittimes.net

and Patel (Sur Name). (C 0224) 3-3-2021

I, Shaikh Irfanahamad Mohammadyusuf, Passport no. J6971528, has changed my name to Bhura Irfanahamad Mohammadyusuf. (C 0223) 2-3-2021

Automated enquiry
about the Civil ID card is
1889988

India crush England in fourth Test

Kohli hails India comeback as rout seals England series

AHMEDABAD: Spinners Ravichandran Ashwin and Axar Patel took all 10 wickets yesterday as India crushed England inside three days to win the fourth Test and seal the series 3-1. After the latest emphatic innings and 25-run victory, India captain Virat Kohli hailed the way his side came back from a game down to dominate the series and book their place in the World Test Championship final against New Zealand.

India completed three victories in only nine of the 15 days available. "The comeback in Chennai (the 2nd Test) pleased me the most. The first game was an aberration and England outplayed us," Kohli said. "We bowled and fielded with more intensity and so the comeback was very heartening. Our bench strength is extremely strong and that's a good sign for Indian cricket."

England captain Joe Root admitted his side, who suffered a two-day humiliation in the third Test, had been "outplayed" again. "There are a few key areas of the games where India managed to grab them and we didn't," he said.

Ashwin bowled Dan Lawrence for 50 and ended England's second innings on 135 to seal the match, in the world's biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad. Ashwin, who was named player of the series, led the bowling chart with 32 wickets followed by Patel, who played one game fewer, on 27. England spinner Jack Leach was third with 18 scalps.

Kohli praised Rohit Sharma for his 161 which proved decisive in the second Test in Chennai and Ashwin, who he

described as India's "most bankable player over the years." This win was set up by wicketkeeper-batsman Rishabh Pant, who made 101 on day two, and Washington Sundar, who hit an unbeaten 96 as India made a commanding 365. Pant scored his third Test ton in a 113-run stand with Sundar to lift India from a precarious 146-6 in response to England's first innings of 205.

'Magnificent' Pant

India coach Ravi Shastri singled out Pant's performance with the bat and behind the wickets as "magnificent." "He was told in no uncertain terms that he has got to respect the game a little more. He's got to lose a bit of weight and work hard on his keeping," said Shastri. "Yesterday's innings was the best counter-attacking innings I have seen in India. He built a partnership with Rohit playing against his nature - to do that is not easy."

Sundar kept up the attack as the final three wickets fell yesterday morning but ran out of partners and remained four shy of his century. England lost early and regular wickets to go down lamely in 54.5 overs. Ashwin struck twice on successive balls to send back Zak Crawley for five and Jonny Bairstow for nought. It was Bairstow's third duck in four innings.

Patel got opener Dom Sibley for three and then Ben Stokes for two after the left-hand batsman miscued a sweep and was caught at leg gully by Kohli. Ashwin took the prized scalp of skipper Joe Root for 30 to virtually end England's hopes.



AHMEDABAD: Indian players and team officials pose with the trophy after winning the test series against England at the end of their fourth Test cricket match at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Motera yesterday. — AFP

The visitors have scored more than 200 just once in their last six innings.

England fast bowler James Anderson made an impression with his three wickets and 14 maidens in 25 overs. Root

topped the batting chart with 368 runs, including 218 in the opening Test that England won convincingly.

"It is very important that we become a better side from this experience and

this series and we keep looking to evolve and move forward," said Root. The two teams now head into five Twenty20 internationals starting March 12 at the same Ahmedabad venue. — AFP



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