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for the COVID-19 vaccine [See Page 16](#)

Monster traffic jams amid chaotic start to curfew

Health minister under fire • Opposition MPs livid after govt refers gathering to court



KUWAIT: Fahd Al-Salem St in Kuwait City is deserted yesterday as a nationwide curfew from 5 pm until 5 am is imposed for a month. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: As Kuwait entered the first day of a 5 pm to 5 am partial lockdown yesterday, the country was in total paralysis with unprecedented traffic jams that continued way after the deadline. Motorists posted hundreds of pictures showing thousands of vehicles motionless on most of Kuwait's main roads as people raced against time to beat the deadline.

"Nothing new...another government failure," commented MP Osama Al-Shaheen on Twitter. "I said before...the biggest crisis facing Kuwait today is the continuity of the prime minister at the helm. He has failed to manage the crisis," said MP Abdulkarim Al-Kandari.

The government last week decided to re-impose a partial nightly curfew

for 12 hours after a spike in the number of coronavirus cases. Kuwait yesterday reported 1,144 COVID-19 cases and seven deaths. Health Minister Sheikh Basel Al-Sabah, who recommended the new curfew, was strongly criticized by MPs, who accused him of failing to manage the pandemic.

Opposition MPs yesterday vowed to file two grilling against the health minister for his mismanagement of the coronavirus crisis. A large number of MPs immediately backed the grillings. Two lawsuits were filed yesterday against the government challenging the legality of the fresh curfew, saying closures have devastated the economy and the lives of people. The Municipality said yesterday that markets will remain open from 5 am and close at 4 pm daily, an hour before the curfew.

Continued on Page 2

Students complain after being called to school for exams

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Students from several Indian schools in Kuwait have contacted Kuwait Times to complain that they are being compelled by their schools to attend on-campus exams in the upcoming exam period. Some students claim that their teachers are telling them to come to campus "quietly", suggesting that they are holding exams on campus but without the necessary ministry approval.

All public and private schools (with a few exemptions for special needs schools) have been closed for on-campus learning since March 2020. To investigate, Kuwait Times spoke with an official from the ministry of education's private education department to learn if any schools - including Indian schools in Kuwait - have been granted the right to hold on-campus exams.

But according to the education ministry, all exams should be conducted online. "We haven't issued any approvals for on-campus exams till this moment. We are still waiting for approval from the ministry of health to allow schools that want to hold on-campus exams to do so. Schools should only hold exams online unless they receive approval from us," Assistant Undersecretary for Private Education Abdulmohsen Al-Huwaila told Kuwait Times yesterday.

Kuwait Times then contacted several well-known Indian schools in the country to see if they were holding or planning to hold on-campus examinations. Two of the schools contacted explained that they had requested approval from the education ministry to hold exams for grade 12 students at the campus, but so far had not received approval for this. Other schools said no exams would be conducted on campus, even for grade 12.

Kuwait entered another partial curfew yesterday due to rising numbers of COVID-19 positive cases, and this is one of the main factors the ministries of health and education point to in providing the rationale for the continued closure of on-campus learning. The ministry of education had already announced that online learning will continue through the second semester.

Saudi pounds Sanaa after Houthi strikes

RIYADH: A Saudi-led military coalition mounted air strikes on Yemen's Houthi-controlled capital Sanaa yesterday after it intercepted a string of drones launched by the Iran-backed rebels, state media reported. The developments mark a new escalation in Yemen's six-year conflict between the coalition-backed Yemeni government and the rebels, despite a renewed US push to end the conflict.

The strikes triggered huge explosions in Sanaa and sent plumes of smoke rising in the sky, according to

AFP correspondents at the scene. The rebels reported seven air strikes on the city. "The military operation targets Houthi military capabilities in Sanaa and a number of other provinces," the coalition was quoted as saying by the official Saudi Press Agency.

The raids come after the coalition said it intercepted a total of 12 drones launched by the rebels yesterday, in a sharp escalation in cross-border attacks on the kingdom. The coalition - fighting in Yemen alongside the internationally recognised government against the insurgents - said the drones were aimed at "civilian" targets in Saudi Arabia, SPA reported, without specifying the locations. Targeting civilians in the kingdom was a "red line", the coalition said after the retaliatory strikes on Sanaa.

Continued on Page 2

Pope visits Mosul, holds mass in Arbil

ARBIL, Iraq: Pope Francis vowed yesterday to keep Iraq in his heart, as he concluded the largest mass and final public event of a historic trip meant to encourage the country's dwindling Christian community and deepen interfaith dialogue. The pontiff celebrated among thousands of smiling worshippers in a sports stadium in the Kurdistan region's capital Arbil, after visiting Christian survivors of the

Islamic State group's reign of terror.

The 84-year-old was driven in his white, windowless "popemobile" into the stadium, where jubilant worshippers sat socially distanced on white chairs spread out on the greens. Others stood, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of Francis, in the stands ringing the Franso Hariri Stadium, named after an Iraqi Christian politician who was assassinated by extremists 20 years ago.

In concluding the mass, the Pope vowed to keep Iraq in his heart even when he returns to the Vatican today. "In my time among you, I have heard voices of sorrow and loss, but also voices of hope and consolation," he said.

Continued on Page 2

Swiss voters narrowly back 'niqab ban'

GENEVA: Swiss voters yesterday narrowly backed a ban on full face coverings in public places - a decision hailed by supporters as a move against radical Islam but branded sexist and racist by opponents. Official results showed that 51.21 percent of voters, and a majority of federal Switzerland's cantons, supported the proposal. Some 1,426,992 voters were in favor of the ban, while 1,359,621 were

against, on a 50.8 percent turnout.

The so-called anti-burqa vote comes after years of debate in Switzerland following similar bans in other European countries - and in some Muslim-majority states - despite women in Islamic full-face veils being an exceptionally rare sight in Swiss streets. Even though the proposal "Yes to a ban on full facial coverings" did not mention the burqa or the niqab - which leaves only the eyes uncovered - there was no doubt as to what the debate was about.

Campaign posters reading "Stop radical Islam!" and "Stop extremism!", featuring a woman in a black niqab, have been plastered around Swiss cities. Rival posters read: "No to an absurd, useless and Islamophobic 'anti-burqa' law". The ban would mean that nobody could cover their face completely

in public - whether in shops or the open countryside. But there would be exceptions, including for places of worship, or for health and safety reasons. The vote came at a time when face masks are mandatory in shops and on public transport due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Yes vote risks "trivializing the xenophobic and racist atmosphere" towards Muslim women, Meriam Mastour, of the Purple Headscarves feminist group, told broadcaster RTS. Very few women wear the full veil in Switzerland, she stressed, and those that do tend to be converts and tourists. A 2019 Federal Statistical Office survey found that 5.5 percent of the Swiss population were Muslims, mostly with roots in the former Yugoslavia.

Continued on Page 2



SANAA: Smoke billows following a reported airstrike by the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemeni capital yesterday. — AFP



MOSUL: Pope Francis releases a white dove at a square near the ruins of the Syriac Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception (Al-Tahira-I-Kubra) in the old city of Mosul yesterday. — AFP

Local

Deputy Amir receives state officials at Seif Palace



KUWAIT: His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem. — KUNA photos



His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.



His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah.



His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Nazaha Enhancement Affairs Abdullah Al-Roumi.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Seif Palace yesterday National

Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem. His Highness Sheikh Mishal also received His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-

Hamad Al-Sabah, and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah. Furthermore, His Highness the Deputy Amir

received Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Nazaha Enhancement Affairs Abdullah Al-Roumi. — KUNA

Pope visits Mosul, holds...

Continued from Page 1

"Now the time draws near for my return to Rome. Yet Iraq will always remain with me, in my heart."

The faithful wore hats featuring pictures of Francis, and facemasks to protect them from COVID, as a second wave has driven up cases to around 5,000 new infections per day in Iraq. The stadium seats around 20,000, but large swathes of the stands were empty after authorities had trimmed down the allowed attendance in recent days.

"It's a special trip, also because of the conditions," said Matteo Bruni, the Vatican's spokesman, who described the visit to Iraq as "a gesture of love for this land its people". Iraq's Christian population has shrunk to fewer than 400,000, from around 1.5 million before the US-led invasion of 2003. Arbil has been a place of refuge for many Christians who fled violence over the years, including IS jihadists' 2014 onslaught and ensuing reign of terror.

The heaviest security deployment yet is protecting Francis in northern Iraq on what is perhaps the riskiest day of his historic trip. The city was targeted just weeks ago by a deadly rocket attack, the latest in a series of strikes blamed on pro-Iranian forces. The visit to the north came the day after the leader of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics met Iraq's top Shiite Muslim cleric, the reclusive Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who agreed Iraq's Christians should be able to live in "peace".

It also embodies a cause close to the pope's heart: Reaching out to Iraq's traumatized Christian community. Watching from afar as IS swept across the northern province of Nineveh in 2014, Pope Francis said he was ready to come and meet the displaced and other victims of war in a show of solidarity. He fulfilled that promise yesterday, first visiting Mosul, the onetime bastion of the Islamic State group, still largely in ruins.

Standing in front of the partially collapsed walls of the centuries-old Al-Tahera (Immaculate Conception) Church, Francis pleaded for Christians in Iraq and the Middle East to stay in their homelands. He said the "tragic" exodus of Christians "does incalculable harm not just to the individuals and communities concerned, but also to the society they leave behind". The Al-Tahera Church, whose roof collapsed during fighting against IS in 2017, is one of the oldest of at least 14 churches in Nineveh province that were destroyed by the jihadists.

The pope was driven in a golf cart around the historic Old City, largely razed during the grinding fight to dislodge the jihadists. "Today was the most beautiful day for us, being visited by the pope!" said Hala Raad, a Christian woman who had fled when IS seized Mosul but returned to see the pope. "We hope to come back to Mosul in health and wellbeing. The most important thing is security - we want stability."

Before visiting Arbil yesterday, the pope held a prayer service in Qaraqosh, whose ancient church - named Al-Tahera, like the one in Mosul - was torched by the jihadists as they destroyed most of the town. Residents of Qaraqosh have since rebuilt their homes with little government help. Al-Tahera too has been refurbished, its marble floors and internal colonnades buffed to host its most important guest yet. — AFP

weak and those who are giving funding find it more difficult to give money," said Gressly. "So we need to find a way to go beyond humanitarian assistance to help the economy come back."

The Houthis have stepped up attacks on Saudi Arabia in recent weeks, while they escalate an offensive in Yemen to seize the government's last northern stronghold of Marib. The escalation comes after the United States last month delisted the Houthis as terrorists and stepped up efforts to de-escalate the six-year conflict. The terror designation, imposed late in the administration of former US president Donald Trump, had been widely criticized by aid organizations, who warned it would hamper their efforts to alleviate a humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

"The removal of the Houthis from the list of terrorist groups has been interpreted in a hostile way by the militia," SPA cited the coalition as saying. The coalition added that their "victories" in Marib had prompted the rebels to step up attacks on the kingdom. On Saturday, Yemeni government sources said fierce fighting between pro-government forces and the rebels in oil-rich Marib had left at least 90 combatants on the two sides dead over the span of 24 hours.

Years of bombing have failed to shake the rebels' hold on Sanaa, and they have steadily expanded their reach in the country's north. US President Joe Biden has halted support to Saudi offensive operations in Yemen's war, which he called a "catastrophe" that "has to end". But he has also reiterated US support for Saudi Arabia in defending its territory. — AFP

Swiss voters narrowly back...

Continued from Page 1

"It's a huge relief," said Mohamed Hamdaoui, a regional lawmaker in the Bern canton and the founder of the "A Face Discovered" campaign. He called the vote "the opportunity to say stop to Islamism" and not "to Muslims, who obviously have their place in this country". Within Europe, Switzerland's neighbours France and Austria have banned full face coverings, as have Belgium, Bulgaria and Denmark.

Several other European countries have bans for particular contexts, such as in schools and universities. The Swiss government and parliament opposed a nationwide ban. Their counter-proposal - which would have been automatically triggered if the initiative was rejected - would have required people to show their faces to the authorities if necessary

Monster traffic jams amid...

Continued from Page 1

Meanwhile, the government and the National Assembly are on the verge of yet another showdown after two leading members of the opposition yesterday said they will file to grill HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah after the government referred an opposition-sponsored gathering to court.

MPs Mohammad Al-Mutair and Bader Al-Dahoum said that the interior ministry had referred the attendees to court even after they agreed to a request by Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Al-Sabah to replace the gathering with a press conference.

Dahoum said the opposition had planned to

for identification, such as at borders.

Under Switzerland's system of direct democracy, any topic can be put to a national vote as long as it gathers 100,000 signatures in the wealthy country of 8.6 million people. Such votes take place every three months. A 2009 vote that banned the construction of minaret towers on mosques sparked anger abroad.

Two other votes were held yesterday. A free trade agreement struck between Switzerland and Indonesia, put to the vote after opponents criticized Bern's move to reduce import duties on palm oil, narrowly gained approval with 51.7 percent support. Tariffs will gradually be removed from almost all of Switzerland's biggest exports to the world's fourth most populous country, while the Swiss would abolish duties on Indonesian industrial products.

A government plan to introduce a federally-recognized electronic identity that could be used for ordering goods and services online was rejected with 64.36 percent of the vote. It was pushed to a popular vote by critics alarmed at the plan to rely on private firms for the e-IDs, giving them access to sensitive, private information. — AFP

organize a large gathering in which thousands would have attended, but agreed to replace it with a press conference after a meeting with the interior minister. Mutair said the interior minister was pleased with the change and had said he was a messenger of the prime minister, adding that this reflected a selective application of the law, claiming the government had closed its eyes on many gatherings organized by others.

The two lawmakers held the prime minister responsible for sending the opposition to court. Dahoum said under 300 people attended the press conference, and charged that half of them were state informers. A number of opposition lawmakers immediately announced their support of the grilling.

A number of other MPs had vowed to grill the prime minister over various charges. The prime minister and the Cabinet resigned in early January, less than a month after its formation, after three lawmakers filed to grill the premier, who later took two months to form the new Cabinet.



KUWAIT: People desperately wait for buses to take them home minutes before the curfew began at 5 pm yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Saudi pounds Sanaa after...

Continued from Page 1

Amid a new US push for a resolution to the grinding conflict, it added that the Houthis' actions "will not lead to an imposition of a political settlement". The rebels did not immediately claim responsibility for the drone attacks. The grinding conflict has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced millions, according to international organizations, sparking what the United Nations calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Yesterday, David Gressly, the UN's humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, was in the Red Sea port of Hodeida, a key entry point for both humanitarian aid and commercial goods. "I need to understand the situation of food, fuel, health, water, education and other needs of the people," he told reporters. "What we would want to see is the port to be open, not only for fuel but other commodities."

The UN had warned of a "death sentence" against Yemen after a donor conference last week yielded less than half the funds needed to prevent a devastating famine. It appealed for \$3.85 billion to pay for urgently needed aid, but just \$1.7 billion was offered at the virtual pledging conference. "After over a year of COVID throughout the world, the economies are

Local

Kuwait making progress in women empowerment: EU delegation chief

Challenges remain as world marks International Women's Day

KUWAIT: Kuwait has been making steps of progress in empowering women and protecting their rights, a senior European official said yesterday. "I welcome the 2020 adoption of the Law on the Protection against domestic violence," Head of Delegation of the European Union to the State of Kuwait Dr Cristian Tudor said in a statement marking the International Women's Day. "I also welcome the appointment of eight female judges for the first time in Kuwait's history."

"On 8 March, the world commemorates International Women's Day to mark social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women around the globe," Tudor said. "It is also a moment to reflect on the urgency of stepping up action to tackle inequality and injustice facing women and girls in order to meet the Sustainable Development Goals and in particular Goal 5 on gender equality."

Women empowerment remains a challenge for

all countries, the senior official said, adding that the Delegation of the European Union looks forward to continue working with Kuwait in pursuit of gender equality. "Last year, the EU awarded Chaillot Prize for the promotion of human rights in the GCC to the Kuwaiti initiative 'Grey Area' for promoting the rights of children of Kuwaiti mothers and non-Kuwaiti fathers," he said.

Gender equality

"In 2020, the European Union (EU) stepped up its efforts to support gender equality and women's rights," Tudor noted. "The EU renewed its internal and external policy framework through the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, and the EU's new Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2021-2025. These policies place promotion of gender equality at the top of the EU's priorities as well as aim to accelerate progress on the empowerment of women and girls, and safeguard gains made since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and its Platform for Action. Twenty five years after the Beijing Declaration, the Generation Equality Forum convened by UN Women and co-chaired by France and Mexico will take place in Paris in June 2021. This historic gathering will

develop an agenda to advance gender equality and women's rights by 2030."

COVID-19 pandemic

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, women in particular have been disproportionately affected, Tudor further pointed out. "Stepping up action for gender equality is more important than ever before and is vital in the COVID-19 recovery," he stressed. "In order to achieve a sustainable, inclusive and fair recovery, women must be part of the decision making processes in all sectors, at all levels."

Tudor also quoted a statement by the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, in which she said: "Stronger engagement on gender equality is key to a sustainable global recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and building fairer, more inclusive, more prosperous societies. Women and girls are in the frontline of the pandemic and must be put in the driving seat of the recovery. As a gender-sensitive and responsive geopolitical Commission, we want to work more closely with our Member States, as well as all partners, in building a truly gender-equal world."

Work remains

Tudor admitted that while gender equality is a priority for the EU, a lot of work remains. "No country in the world is on track to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030," he said. "Moreover, the health and socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis are disproportionately affecting women and girls. For example, because a higher proportion of women work informally and in vulnerable sectors, their job loss rate globally is 1.8 times greater than that of men. The poverty rate among women globally could go up by 9.1 percent."

"While we are marking International Women's Day, I pay tribute to the achievements of women all over the world. The EU is determined to be at the forefront of global efforts to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment and to continue working closely with all its partners," he concluded.



Dr Cristian Tudor

In my view

Stand up for her



By Bashayer Al-Majed

As we today celebrate International Women's Day, I'd like to say thank you for all the women out there who are working on the front-line during this global pandemic: all the teachers, doctors, pharmacists, nurses, police officers, all of those who care for others, whilst putting their and their family's lives at risk. I'd like to acknowledge all they are doing for the greater community at large.

I'd like to draw attention to another serious aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic and that is the increase in domestic violence, particularly domestic violence committed against women. Due to international lockdowns, more people are spending time at home. For some, home is not a safe place. For some, it means spending more time in a space with family members who may be violent or abusive. This has led to an increase in the number of deaths and injuries. Even before the pandemic the UN quoted that 1 in 3 women will suffer gender-based violence at home at some point in their lifetime.

In Kuwait, last September, the Anti-Domestic Violence Law was passed. This has been an excellent step; it not only sees the crimes of violence as domestic violence in itself, it allows the victim to leave the home, and to seek support in a women's shelter, where counseling and legal help can be found. But this is not the end. We need to change a culture which ignores violence against women, which sees it as a private matter within the home.

Accessibility to women's shelters is vital so that women and their children have a safe space to go; so they do not have to return to a place of fear and violence because they have nowhere else. It is vital they receive counseling. Women who suffer from domestic violence are more likely to suffer from mental health disorders, due to the abuse, whereby they may experience flash-backs, severe depression and severe panic attacks, which can affect their ability to leave the house, or go to work.

The changing of the law is a wonderful first step. It shows legal and state support for victims of domestic violence, and it gets people talking about the issue and, the more we talk about it, the less taboo the subject is and the less acceptable the violence becomes. Domestic violence isn't the victim's fault; the abused shouldn't feel ashamed because it happened.

But the laws need to change further. Article 153 in Kuwait's Criminal Code allows a man a reduction in sentence to a mere three years in prison and a fine of KD 14 for murdering a female family member if he observes her with a man outside of wedlock. We need to work together as a society to dis-enable violence against women. The acceptance of murder within the law is at odds with the Kuwait 2020 Anti Domestic Violence Laws, and at odds with the constitution (1962) which promises equality, it is also at odds with the UN Convention of Human Rights.

We still have work to do to eliminate domestic violence, but with more people talking about the problem, it becomes less acceptable and easier to find help. I am hopeful that we are moving towards a future where domestic violence is a thing of the past.

Domestic Violence is one of the problems, not the only problem. But like any problem, we need to work together to end it and we need to face it bravely. For those out there suffering, please reach out for help and do not suffer alone. Have a happy International Women's Day.

- Al-Majed is an Assistant Professor of Law at Kuwait University

DWC celebrates women on their int'l day



KUWAIT: Members of the Diplomatic Women's Committee (DWC), in presence of the Honorary President Sheikha Halah Badr Muhammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, held a symbolic stand marking International Women's Day, to honor and congratulate the women of the world for the great efforts made by women to achieve gender and workplace equality.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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PACI activates curfew permit website

KUWAIT: Director General of Public Authority for Civil Information Musaed Al-Asousi said yesterday that PACI reactivated the permits' link, which enables the public to leave houses during the curfew (from 5:00 pm to 5:00 am) for a period not exceeding two hours. He explained the permits would be granted for specific reasons like medical treatment, patient's aid, blood donation, COVID-19 swab and vaccine. Asousi explained that these permits, in coordination with Ministries of Health and Interior, can be obtained through: www.paci.gov.kw. He also added that the authority also reactivated curfew permits for employees in government and private sectors who would be working during curfew hours. Curfew permits' application can be used by security personnel to verify the validity of these permits, he added. — KUNA



Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti artists paint a mural of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on the wall of a bridge in Kuwait City. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



DOHA: An aerial view of the Sabah Al-Ahmad Corridor. — KUNA photos



The commemorative shield of the Sabah Al-Ahmad Corridor project.

Sabah Al-Ahmad Corridor reflects depth of Qatar-Kuwait historic ties

DOHA: A commemorative shield of Sabah Al-Ahmad Corridor project reflects the civilization of Qatar and the architectural renaissance it is wit-

nessing, as well as depth of historical relations between the two countries. The shield includes a picture of the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Kuwait and Qatar flags in addition to the cable-stayed bridge, which is part of that corridor as its first and longest cable stayed bridge in Qatar. His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received the shield a few days ago from Qatar. The shield was presented to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah during the project's inauguration ceremony in Doha. The Sabah

Al-Ahmad Corridor was opened on February 24, 2021. It was built in appreciation of Kuwait's late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The corridor links nearly 15 highways among vital economic, commercial, educational and health facilities in Doha including Hamad International Airport. It spans across the city from the south to the north to connect more than 25 neighborhoods with high population density. The landmark project includes the first suspended causeway in the State of Qatar, which is 1,200 meters long, and a 2.6 km-long overpass; the country's longest. — KUNA

FRONTLINE HEROES OF KUWAIT

Student Art Competition 2021



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

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

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News in brief

Auditors disapprove KD 281m transactions

KUWAIT: Kuwait's State Audit Bureau examined 2,647 financial transactions between April 2020 and February 2021 with a value of KD 2.8 billion (\$9.2 billion), and disapproved 113 of them valued KD 281 million (\$928 million), a SAB official said recently. Loulwa Al-Fozan, auditor at Pre-Audit for Social Affairs Department, said in a statement 92 percent of transactions, or KD 2.6 billion (\$8.5 billion), were related to government budgets, and the rest belonged to budgets of independent authorities. The auditing took place between April 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021. The pre-auditing process, she added, did not include transactions related to sale and purchase of oil and by-products, nor investment. Fozan said 73 percent of transactions, or KD 2 billion (\$6.6 billion), have been approved, of them 65 percent were conditional on completing financial and technical procedures. The pre-auditing department informed SAB's financial penalties department about violations committed by some departments which carried out transactions without obtaining SAB's approval, she said. Fozan said SAB recommended disapproval of 113 transactions with a value of KD 281 million (\$928 million) because they would inflict damage on public funds. Throughout the auditing process, she said, SAB also succeeded in preventing waste of KD 75 million (\$247 million) in public funds due to variation in prices and quantities. — KUNA

Kuwaiti driver in 2nd place

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti rally driver Mishari Al-Dhafiri and his Qatari assistant, Nasser Al-Kuwari, won second place in FIA T4 category and fourth place in the third round of the World Championship of the Eastern Baha Rally 2021. The rally was held in harsh weather conditions and poor visibility that led to the cancellation of Friday's rally and merging it with Saturday's stage, with a total distance of 645 km in Al-Aqi area, Dhafiri said in a statement. He added he won third place in general ranking of the world championship and keen to achieve the title of world champion for this year. Dhafiri thanked the Kuwaiti officials who helped facilitate his mission to achieve these results. — KUNA

In my view

It's time to cooperate with the government

By Azzah Al-Ghamdi

In this article, I would first like to congratulate the new ministers in the third Cabinet of HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah and wish them success and the ability to face the challenges of the 2020 National Assembly.

I also want to focus on the positivity of separating the ministries of education and higher education, because it is a good step to develop and follow the hard work in both these ministries.

We all know that the ministry of education needs many meetings and studies to follow developments in the education field around the world. This is a lot of hard work for one minister, especially since public and private education need someone full-time to take the right decisions and control them.

The decision to have a separate minister for higher education comes after the government issued licenses to many investors to establish new colleges with high numbers of students. This needs concentration from the minister, because higher education today is responsible not only for Kuwait University and the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, as there are many other colleges too.

Also, the minister of higher education is responsible to follow up on students who study outside Kuwait and authentic certificates inside and outside the state. This led the premier to put different ministers for each of them.

We notice that MPs have not attacked the new government until now. This means that maybe the PM can contain the crises we saw between the two authorities. It's time now for the parliament to cooperate with the government and work towards development. Continued crisis with the Cabinet will not affect society positively. We need to build our country and this needs full cooperation with all parties.

On the other hand, there is some convergence between judicial provisions and the government. This will have a bad effect on the independence of the three authorities because they are separate, and we can't accept accusations that the government interferes in court rulings.

I think it's time now to stop all the rumors which negatively affect our society and image of our country in front of the world. Democracy needs to first accept the other opinion without questioning intentions and not making accusations without evidence.

In the last few months, we noticed some MPs don't accept court rulings. This is not acceptable. We know that some MPs are not educated and are not specialists in important fields of science. They make accusations without giving any evidence and some play the role of experts that they are not.

We hope to move beyond this crisis and see stability in relations between the Cabinet and the National Assembly.

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



Myanmar protesters defy troops after raids on opposition figures

'Giant step' as Biden COVID rescue plan clears US Senate



TEHRAN: A handout picture provided by the Iranian presidency yesterday shows Iran's President Hassan Rouhani (right) receiving Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney in the capital Tehran. — AFP

Iran to Europe: Avoid 'threats or pressure'

Rouhani receives Ireland's FM amid efforts to revive nuke deal

TEHRAN: Iran's President Hassan Rouhani yesterday urged Europe to avoid "threats or pressure" in any negotiations with Tehran, as he received Ireland's foreign minister amid diplomatic efforts to revive a landmark nuclear deal. Ireland is currently "facilitator" for the United Nations Security Council resolution that enshrined the 2015 nuclear accord between Iran and six major powers, according to the Irish foreign ministry.

The deal, known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has been hanging by a thread since former US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from it in 2018 and reimposed punishing sanctions on Tehran. Following Joe Biden's US presidential election victory in November, the US, the European parties to the

deal-France, Germany and Britain-and Tehran have been trying to salvage the accord.

"The best way to solve problems with European partners at various bilateral, regional and international levels, is negotiations based on mutual respect and avoiding any threats or pressure," Rouhani told Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney at yesterday's meeting, according to a statement by the Iranian presidency. Ireland is not party to the nuclear deal, but currently sits on the UN Security Council.

As "facilitator" for resolution 2231 - the UNSC resolution enshrining the nuclear deal-Dublin is tasked with keeping other council members briefed with implementation of the deal.

The Iranian president criticized Europe's "inactivity on JCPOA commitments" and added that Iran is

committed to "preserving the JCPOA and is the only party that has paid a price for it."

"But this situation cannot continue as it is," Rouhani stressed. "Preserving and reviving" the deal requires all sides to act on their commitments, he said. The three European parties to the nuclear deal on Thursday scrapped a draft resolution at the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency that criticized Iran's suspension of some nuclear inspections, a move welcomed by Tehran. Biden has signalled his readiness to revive the deal, but insists Iran first return to all its nuclear commitments, most of which it suspended in response to the US sanctions.

Tehran meanwhile demands Washington take the first step by scrapping the sanctions. Iran on February 23 started to restrict some IAEA inspec-

tions. But a visit to Tehran by the UN nuclear watchdog chief Rafael Grossi just before the restriction came into force led to an interim technical deal for up to three months. The arrangement would allow the body to continue monitoring "all the key activities," Rossi said at the time. Rouhani noted that "Iran still remains committed to cooperation with the IAEA."

He added that Iran is ready to reverse the restrictions "after the lifting of America's illegal sanctions and it stopping the policy of threats and pressure." Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif is set to meet Coveney later in the day. Zarif said on Twitter on Friday that he will soon present Tehran's "constructive concrete plan of action-through proper diplomatic channels". — AFP

Call for protests in Senegal after deadly clashes

DAKAR: A Senegalese opposition collective called for fresh protests starting today, following days of clashes that have left at least four people dead. At a news conference in the capital Dakar, the Movement for the Defense of Democracy—which includes the leading opposition party Pastef—urged Senegalese people to "massively descend on the streets".

Police arrested Pastef leader Ousmane Sonko on Wednesday after scuffles with his supporters broke out while he was on his way to court to answer a rape charge that he says is politically motivated. The arrest sparked violent clashes between opposition supporters and police which continued through Friday, with protesters torching cars and shops in the worst unrest the West African country has seen in years. Tensions appeared to have eased by Saturday, although looters continued to pillage shops in Dakar.

As well as calling for renewed protests from today, the opposition movement demanded that the government release "political prisoners held illegally and arbitrarily". It also called on the government to respect the right to protest, and demanded it restore the licenses of two television channels that were temporarily suspended for broadcasting images of the unrest.

On Saturday, the 15-nation Economic Community of West African States, which includes Senegal, urged all parties in the country to exercise restraint and remain calm. ECOWAS also called on the government "to take the necessary measures to ease tensions and guarantee the freedom to demonstrate peacefully".

Sonko is due to appear before a judge in Dakar today to face questions about the rape charge. Popular with young Senegalese voters, 46-year-old Sonko has capitalized on frustrations over stubborn poverty and the government's handling of COVID-19. He ran against President Macky Sall in 2019, but finished third in a race that delivered the incumbent a second term. Sonko is seen as a potential challenger to Sall in 2024 — but his political future came into doubt in February after an employee at a beauty salon where he received massages filed rape charges against him. — AFP



YEREVAN: A wounded soldier is helped by members of staff at The Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Homeland's Defenders in Yerevan. — AFP

Armenian veterans look warily to the future

YEREVAN: Nver Gasparyan, who was injured during the fighting for control of the mountainous Caucasus region of Nagorno-Karabakh last year, is haunted by memories of the war that ended in national humiliation for Armenia.

The 20-year-old was one of thousands of people wounded during six weeks of a brutal conflict that erupted in September and saw swarms of Azerbaijan's drones pummel the ageing Soviet-era hardware of Armenia's military. "I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to remember," Gasparyan told AFP as he was undergoing physiotherapy to strengthen his injured legs.

"I want to forget everything as soon as possible, to erase the sounds and images of war from my memory." At a hospital for veterans being treated for physical and psychological wounds in the capital Yerevan, Gasparyan said he avoids ruminating about the future. "I don't think about tomorrow, whether or not I'm going to study. Right now I'm focused on getting better and restoring the mobility in my legs," he said.

'Not going to give up'

The latest flare-up in fighting between the ex-Soviet rivals left more than 6,000 people dead on both sides and sparked a political crisis in Armenia,

which has struggled to come to terms with the devastating loss. Thousands returning from the front are now also processing the war and what comes next.

Military doctor Roman Oghanyan was wounded by shrapnel near the frontline when artillery hit his ambulance, killing his colleague. He told AFP he lost consciousness and woke up later in a hospital. "God saved me... from an imminent death, and I'm not going to give up," the 25-year-old said. "I plan to go back and work in the ambulance service and continue helping people."

The health ministry in the tiny Caucasus nation has said that some 600 soldiers are disabled and around 150 require prosthetics. More than 300 veterans are undergoing treatment at the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Homeland's Defenders in Yerevan, one of several facilities designated for former soldiers. "We are helping the wounded understand how their bodies have been affected... and are trying to motivate them to go on to live," the hospital's chief physician Lusine Poghosyan said.

"These guys not only have to learn how to live without an arm, a leg, or an eye, but also to heal their moral trauma," she said. "The 18-20-year-olds have seen horrible things. Many have persistent nightmares or suffer from insomnia."

Thousands of people have been taking to the streets in Armenia near daily, calling for revenge and demanding the government's resignation, ever since Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signed a ceasefire agreement that handed over significant territory to Azerbaijan. But the embattled premier has said he had no choice but to agree to the humiliating ceasefire agreement, or see his country's forces suffer even bigger losses to a superior enemy. — AFP

Ethiopia gears up for vaccine drive as first doses arrive

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopia yesterday received its first 2.2 million doses of vaccine against the coronavirus, and officials in Africa's second most populous country said the first jabs would be administered in the coming days. The doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India, were allocated under the UN-led Covax initiative which is working to facilitate vaccine access for poorer countries.

"After a long wait of uncertainty, hope has become a reality," health minister Dr Lia Tadesse said at a ceremony yesterday morning at the airport in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa.

She hailed Covax as "an unprecedented global partnership," adding: "The more people get vaccinated, the faster we're going to beat this pandemic." Ethiopia has so far reported 165,029 cases of COVID-19, the fifth-highest total in Africa and the highest in East Africa. Over the past month, cases have risen by 12 percent on average each week, and deaths have risen by 37 percent on average each week, according to the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC).

"We have lost more than 2,400 of our brothers and sisters, and we know the real numbers could be much higher," Lia said yesterday. Yesterday's delivery "is part of the first wave of arrivals of the COVID-19 vaccines in Ethiopia that will continue in the coming weeks," the World Health Organization (WHO) said in a statement. Ethiopia's vaccination campaign will initially target health workers, health ministry senior adviser Dr Muluken Yohannes said.

"This week administration will start," he said. The goal is to vaccinate 20 percent of the country's roughly 110 million people by the end of the year, he said. So far Ethiopia has not arranged for any separate vaccine shipments to supplement what Covax can provide, Muluken said. While it has received some offers for donations, none has been approved, he said. "If there are any successful donation programs, then we will make it transparent," he said. — AFP

International

'Giant step' as Biden COVID rescue plan clears US Senate

\$1.9tn package expected to revive pandemic-stricken American economy

WASHINGTON: The US Senate on Saturday voted to approve a \$1.9 trillion relief package in what President Joe Biden called a "giant step" towards reviving the pandemic-stricken American economy, capping frenzied negotiations and a marathon overnight voting session.

Passed by 50 votes to 49 in a strict party line vote, the sweeping legislation now heads back to the Democratic-majority House of Representatives, where it is expected to be adopted, barring a last-minute setback. "I promised the American people help was on the way," said Biden in an address from the White House, after the plan was approved along strict party lines.

"Today, I can say we've taken one more giant step forward in delivering on that promise," he said. "It obviously wasn't easy. It wasn't always pretty. But it was so desperately needed." Even without the progressive priority of a minimum wage increase to \$15 an hour, the stimulus bill marks a victory for Biden's Democrats as they put their stamp on the recovery from a pandemic that has killed more than 500,000 people in the United States and hobbled its economy.

Top Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer vowed that the bill "will deliver more help to more people than anything the

federal government has done in decades." The legislation would send out \$1,400 stimulus checks to most Americans and allocates \$350 billion to state and local governments and \$130 billion to schools.

It would also provide \$49 billion for expanded COVID testing, tracing and research, and \$14 billion for vaccine distribution. Steny Hoyer, the Democratic majority leader in the House, said the chamber would take up the amended bill on Tuesday, with a view to sending it to Biden for his signature early next week.

Vote-a-rama

The huge bill—the second largest rescue package in US history, after last year's \$2 trillion CARES Act—almost fell apart. Senate action was paralyzed for more than 10 hours Friday as Democrats scrambled to retain the support of their most conservative senator, Joe Manchin, who balked at the scale of jobless benefits. It took a call from Biden and a cut in supplemental weekly unemployment insurance from \$400 to \$300, among other tweaks, to prevent Manchin from defecting.

The drama served to highlight the growing political muscle of moderates in a deadlocked Senate, where a single

swing vote could make or break major legislation. Biden already had to compromise with Democrats urging more fiscal restraint, reportedly agreeing to a narrowing of the income limit for families receiving stimulus checks. But the president struck an upbeat note, insisting: "I don't think any of the compromises have in any way fundamentally altered the essence of what I put in the bill in the first place." "This plan is historic," Biden said. "This plan will get checks out the door starting this month to the American people who so desperately need the help," he said, "many of whom are lying in bed at night, staring at the ceiling, wondering, will I lose my job...? Will I lose my insurance? Will I lose my home?" The breakthrough on the bill came against a backdrop of strong US economic data signaling that the world's largest economy may finally be healing, including better-than-expected hiring in February as battered businesses began recruiting again.

Yet the economy was still short 9.5 million jobs compared with February 2020. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen welcomed the Senate vote, saying that without it, it might take two years for the economy to return to pre-COVID levels, creating "economic scars that last well



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden speaks about the American Rescue Plan from the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, DC. The US House passed the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, hailed by Democrats as a critical step in funneling new funding toward vaccinations, overburdened local governments, and millions of families devastated by the pandemic. — AFP

beyond the end of the pandemic."

Over a rapid-fire but lengthy series known as a "vote-a-rama", bleary-eyed senators acted on dozen of amendments, mostly Republican proposals that failed but which forced rival Democrats into

casting politically fraught votes. Republicans have been united in opposition to the bill, and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell issued a statement slamming a "colossal missed opportunity for our nation." —AFP

Ivory Coast votes in test of stability after turmoil

ABIDJAN: Ivory Coast held parliamentary elections on Saturday, with voters going to the polls in a key test of stability four months after a presidential vote was marked by deadly violence.

Abidjan Mayor Sylvestre Emmou, an opposition candidate, said that three people had been stabbed and injured in the economic capital on what was otherwise a calm day of voting. Election observers reported no other major incidents. The 22,000 polling stations closed at 6:00 pm (1800 GMT) and the independent electoral commission was set to announce the results as they came in.

Grappling with a deep political crisis, President Alassane Ouattara had offered an olive branch to his former rival Laurent Gbagbo, whose party lifted a decade-long boycott of elections.

A masked Ouattara voted in the plush Cocody neighborhood of Abidjan, Ivory Coast's main city and economic hub. "I hope that the unfortunate events of the presidential elections of 2010 and 2020 are past us," he said, referring to poll-linked violence that claimed thousands of lives.

'We're tired'

More than 1,500 candidates were vying for the votes of roughly seven million people in a contest for the 255-seat National Assembly in the world's top cocoa grower, formerly a haven of peace and prosperity in troubled West Africa. Former president Henri Konan Bedie, head of the opposition Democratic Party of Ivory Coast (PDCI), who cast his vote at the same polling station as Ouattara, called on the electoral commission "to ensure there is no cheating or trouble".

Prominent Ivory Coast opposition figure Pascal Affi N'Guessan, who was arrested after the presidential vote and released on parole, said he hoped the polls would be "a new start for our country on the path of democracy and political stability". Voter Micheline Irieliou, a 43-year-old who lives in Abidjan's central Plateau district where all government offices are located, called for change. "We're tired. We don't have much to eat. In my neighbourhood we don't have water and that's why I came to vote. So that it changes," she said.

New alliances

In the last legislative vote in December 2016, Ouattara's RHDP party teamed up with the center-right Ivory Coast Democratic Party (PDCI), winning an absolute majority with 167 seats. But last year's crisis shattered that deal.

In an unprecedented move, the PDCI forged an election alliance with the center-left coalition Together for Democracy and Solidarity (EDS), whose driving force is Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front (FPI). Their declared aim is to prevent Ouattara and his party from "consolidating absolute power".

As a result, some commentators believe it could be the most open election in years, with the prospect that independents could hold the balance of power. The October 31 presidential vote was marred by violence that claimed 87 lives and left hundreds more wounded. Clashes erupted over Ouattara's bid for a third term—a plan that critics said sidestepped constitutional limits. The 79-year-old was returned to power in a landslide thanks to the opposition boycott, but the country was mired in crisis. —AFP

Trial to begin for policeman charged with Floyd death

MINNEAPOLIS, US: Nine months after George Floyd's death laid bare the racial wounds in the United States, the white policeman charged with murdering the 46-year-old Black man is going on trial.

Jury selection begins in Minneapolis today in the case against Derek Chauvin, who was filmed with his knee on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes as the handcuffed man struggled to breathe.

The shocking footage of Floyd's May 25 death sparked a wave of "Black Lives Matter" protests against police brutality and racial injustice across the United States and in capitals around the world.

Chauvin's case promises to be extraordinary in many respects: it will

feature star attorneys, be held under tight security and broadcast live. The Minnesota Attorney General's Office brought in Neal Katyal, a former acting solicitor general who has argued cases before the Supreme Court, to help with the prosecution. Katyal described Chauvin's trial as a "landmark criminal case, one of the most important in our nation's history."

Ashley Heiberger, a former police officer who now works as an advisor on police practices, said "the fact that a police officer has been charged criminally for an abusive use of force, that in and of itself is an outlier." "It's even rarer for them to be convicted," Heiberger said. "There is a tendency for jurors to want to give the police officer the benefit of every doubt."

The circumstances surrounding 44-year-old Chauvin's case, however, are so troubling that "to the best of my knowledge, no police officers or police organizations came out and defended his action," he said.

Three other police officers involved in Floyd's arrest—Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao—face lesser charges and will be tried separately.

Floyd: 'Gentle giant' who became symbol of fight against racism

MINNEAPOLIS: His name is chanted by demonstrators around the globe. His face is displayed on murals all over the United States. Since his brutal death George Floyd has embodied, more than any other, the Black victims of police violence and racism in the United States.

"Daddy changed the world." The words of Floyd's six-year-old daughter Gianna summed up the paradox of his killing, in which the end of his life began a moral reckoning on race and white supremacy far beyond the borders of the United States. The 46-year-old died of asphyxiation beneath the knee of a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, on May 25, 2020 in the US city of Minneapolis.

Chauvin's trial opens today. The horrifying killing, which kicked off the biggest civil rights protests in the US since the 1960s, snuffed out a life marked by hardship but also generosity.

Standing at six foot four inches (1.93 meters), Floyd was known to friends and family as a "gentle giant,"

a rapper and athlete who suffered runs-in with the law and addiction but who wanted the best for his children. His mother, for whom he cried out when he was dying, moved to Houston shortly after he was born in 1973 in North Carolina.

He grew up in the Third Ward, a poor and predominantly African American neighborhood in central Houston. "We didn't have a whole lot, but we always had each other," his cousin Shareeduh Tate said during a memorial gathering last year in Minneapolis. At Jake Yates High School, he played the role of big brother to a lot of the local boys.

"He was teaching us how to be a man because he was in the world already before us," said his younger brother Philonise at the memorial.

Floyd stood out on the football field and excelled at basketball, playing the latter sport when he went to college. "He was a monster on the court," said Philonise. "But in life, in general, talking to people, a gentle giant."

He dropped out of college and

Black woman's arrest draws new scrutiny to police in a NY city

NEW YORK: Police in the New York city of Rochester are again under scrutiny after body-cam video shows them forcing a woman, holding her three-year-old daughter, to the ground and pepper-spraying her. Rochester police had come under fire in recent months over two earlier episodes that raised questions about their use of force.

Police video of the latest incident, which took place February 22 and was released Friday, shows an officer stopping a woman on the snow-covered shoulder of a road, telling her a nearby business had accused her of stealing. The woman, carrying her tiny

daughter in one arm, insists that she stole nothing and partially empties her purse to show the officer.

But when the officer refuses to let her leave, the woman suddenly turns and runs, her child still in her arms. Several officers give chase, catch up with her and force her to the ground. When the woman struggles back to her feet and grabs for her screaming daughter, police use pepper spray to subdue her and force her back to the ground. "Stop. Oh my God, what is wrong with her?" one officer is heard saying of the mother. The child was not pepper-sprayed directly, according to the Democrat & Chronicle newspaper, but officials who saw the footage said she could have been exposed.

The city's Police Accountability Board, made up entirely of civilians, said it was "disturbed" by the video, which it released. Board chair Shani Wilson told reporters that there were "troubling parallels" to an incident in late January in which a nine-year-old girl was handcuffed and pepper-sprayed.



In this file photo taken on October 14, 2020 Paris Stevens (left) and Angela Harrelson (right), George Floyd's cousin and aunt, hold their fists as people gather in celebration of George Floyd's 47th birthday in Minneapolis, Minnesota. — AFP

All four officers were fired by the Minneapolis Police Department. Floyd's arrest was prompted by accusations that he had tried to pass off a \$20 bill in a nearby store.

Chauvin, a 19-year veteran of the force, was released from prison on bail in the fall and is expected to

plead not guilty to murder and manslaughter charges. "Mr. Chauvin acted according to MPD policy, his training and within his duties as a licensed peace officer of the State of Minnesota," according to his lawyer, Eric Nelson. "He did exactly as he was trained to do." —AFP



In this file photo taken on May 30, 2020 Artist Celos paints a mural in Downtown Los Angeles in protest against the death of George Floyd, an unarmed black man who died while being arrested and pinned to the ground by the knee of a Minneapolis police officer. — AFP

came back to Houston to help out his family. In the 1990s, he threw himself into Houston's hip-hop circuit under the name of "Big Floyd," where he enjoyed some success. But he could not escape the violence of Houston's underground scene, and was arrested several times for thefts and drug dealing. Local media said he was jailed in

the early 2000s for armed burglary, serving four years. After prison, he turned to religion and fell in with the pastor of a church in the Third Ward, using his notoriety and his love of basketball star LeBron James to draw in young men to the ministry, where he taught them religion and coached them in basketball. —AFP

"Both involved Black people obviously in crisis, both involved officers using pepper spray on or around a Black child," Wilson said Friday. She said the Rochester Police Department "needs to fundamentally change its organizational culture." And City Council president Loretta Scott said that "the amount of force used, coupled with the emotional damage suffered by this child, was disproportionate to the alleged crime," according to the Democrat & Chronicle.

The woman was ultimately charged with trespassing and the arresting officer was placed on administrative leave pending an internal investigation, the newspaper said. In September, Rochester police came under attack after video showed the arrest of Daniel Prude, a 41-year-old Black man. Prude was walking naked, high on drugs, when police put a hood over his head to prevent him spitting, then held him face-down on the pavement until he stopped breathing. He died a week later. —AFP

International

Myanmar protesters defy troops after raids on opposition figures

Suu Kyi's party official beaten to death in overnight raids

YANGON: Thousands of Myanmar anti-coup demonstrators defied a continued military crackdown yesterday, following overnight raids in Yangon in which an official from Aung San Suu Kyi's party was beaten to death and several others were detained. Myanmar has been in chaos since a February 1 coup which ousted civilian leader Suu Kyi from power and triggered a mass uprising opposed to the new military junta. Wednesday was the deadliest day so far, with the United Nations saying at least 38 people were killed as security forces fired into crowds, shooting some protesters in the head. The UN rights office also said it has verified at least 54 deaths since the coup-though the actual number could be far higher-and more than 1,700 people have been detained.

National League for Democracy party official Soe Win confirmed some officials were arrested in overnight police operations but the exact number is not known. At least one community leader connected to the ousted NLD government, 58-year-old Khin Maung Latt, was killed during a raid at Pabedan township in Yangon, Tun Kyi, from the Former Political Prisoners Society, said. "He was beaten and taken in a raid since last night and it seems he underwent a harsh interrogation," he told AFP. "The dead body is being taken from Mingaladon military hospital and on the way Yay Way, cemetery." NLD MP Sithu Maung posted on Facebook that security forces last night were also searching for the party's information officer Maung Maung but couldn't find him.

"Maung Maung's brother was beaten by police and soldiers and his body was held in an upside-down position while he was tortured because there was no one to arrest," the MP said. State-run media on Sunday warned ousted lawmakers involved in a group called the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw-which is claiming to be the legitimate elected government-that

they are committing "high treason" and could be sentenced to death or 22 years jail. The junta has declared group members personae non-grata and says those who communicate with them could face seven years prison.

'Willing to die'

Rallies fanned out across the country with more than seven separate demonstrations in Yangon and at least five in other cities and regional towns, according to Facebook live feeds. The only reports of serious injuries were a 19-year-old man shot in the jaw and a woman, 56, hit by a rubber bullet in Bagan, the UNESCO World Heritage Site famed for its ancient Buddhist temples. "One woman was shot with a rubber bullet in her left leg," a rescue team member told AFP, requesting anonymity. Security forces opened fire near the ancient city at around 9 am local time.

"There was one (19-year-old) man who was shot through the jaw and neck in Bagan," Ko Ko, a member of the Bagan rescue team, said. Yangon-based activist Maung Saungka said coordinated protests across multiple cities and areas were part of a two-day general strike. "We are willing to die for our country," he told AFP. "This current situation is worse (than the past regime). So do we stay under this condition or do we fight? This time we must fight to win." A state-run newspaper Sunday warned people not to join the rallies.

"The public should be careful not to get involved in the protests to prevent the future of their children being ruined," the Global New Light of Myanmar said. The junta also warned civil servants that if they continued to boycott work, "they will be fired" with immediate effect from today.

In Yangon's North Okkalapa township, protesting took on a musical flavor Sunday with guitarists, drummers and vocalists wearing Suu Kyi t-shirts singing revolutionary songs at an impromptu concert. "It's important brothers and sisters, let



YANGON: Protesters gather behind shields during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon yesterday. —AFP

us unite," the crowd sang. There was also a large turnout in Mandalay-Myanmar's second biggest city-where security forces used tear gas as demonstrators chanted: "don't serve the military". Scores of monks in saffron robes also staged a sit down protest in the city, with signs saying "we don't want a military junta". That city lost another life Saturday, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which reported that 21-year-old man Naing Min Ko had died after being shot in the leg and beaten by security

forces the previous day.

The monitoring group also said a group connected to the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party was responsible for two deaths on Saturday morning in the Magway region-a 17-year-old and a NLD party official. In neighboring Thailand, thousands of Myanmar migrant workers rallied outside the United Nations Office in Bangkok on Sunday calling for intervention. Many waved their country's flag and held photos of Suu Kyi in the air. —AFP

Myanmar martyr's boyfriend vows resistance

NAYPYIDAW, Myanmar: Hein Yar Zar grimaced as a tattoo artist etched onto his chest the features of his first love, a young protester whose death has become a symbol of resistance against Myanmar's junta. Mya Thwate Khaing was shot in the head during a demonstration in the capital Naypyidaw, becoming one of the coup's first fatalities on February 19 after 10 days in hospital. Her image has since become synonymous with the bloody fight to wrest power from the military, which toppled Myanmar's civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and knocked the country off the path for democracy last month. For 21-year-old Hein Yar Zar, the abrupt end to his girlfriend's young life has filled him with resolve to keep protesting, even as he grieves.

"We had so many plans for this year. She died when

her birthday was so near," he told AFP. "I got a tattoo of her portrait as I'm missing her-it's a memory for us." Two days after she was shot, Mya Thwate Khaing turned 20 while unconscious in a hospital bed-an image shared by anti-coup demonstrators as they rallied on the streets. Days later, a 15-metre-long banner illustrating the moment she was hit was hung off a bridge in commercial hub Yangon, with some protesters describing her as a "martyr". Her death brought scathing global condemnation of the junta, with multiple countries imposing targeted sanctions on the generals. Today, more than 50 people have died during protests as the security forces enforce an increasingly brutal crackdown on demonstrators. "There was nobody like her," said Hein Yar Zar. He showed off an inking he had done years ago on his arm-"Together forever"-a poignant reminder of their youthful optimism.

'I will keep fighting'

On February 9, the couple were both on the front lines of a massive Naypyidaw demonstration, although separated by the crowd of protesters. "I sent her a message, 'Please call me back', because I had no credit on



NAYPYIDAW, Myanmar: Photo shows 21-year-old Hein Yar Zar getting a tattoo of his late girlfriend Mya Thwate Khaing on his chest. —AFP

my phone, but she never did," said Hein Yar Zar, who heard the news of her shooting from her sister. "I stayed beside her at the hospital and I prayed every day that she would get better." —AFP

Lanka's top Catholic demands action on Easter bombings probe

COLOMBO: The leader of Sri Lanka's Catholics demanded that the government find the perpetrators of deadly Easter attacks two years ago, as black-clad worshippers held silent protests outside the capital's churches yesterday. No one has been prosecuted over the bombings at three hotels and three churches in Colombo that killed 279 people on April 21, 2019, although a local investigation found that followers of a jihadist group were behind them. An inquiry set up by former president Maithripala Sirisena said in a report published last month that he and his intelligence chiefs should be charged for failing to prevent the attacks.

"Our effort is to establish who was actually behind the attacks," Catholic leader Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith said in a statement yesterday.

"This is not an issue only for Catholics. All Sri Lankans suffered after this attack." Several Buddhist monks joined Ranjith and other protesters outside St Anthony's church, one of the sites attacked, carrying banners calling for justice. Some banners asked "Who ran the operation behind the curtain?", and "Will the law be enforced against those who were found to be negligent?" Ranjith told a press conference last week that he was unhappy with the lack of progress in the inquiry, and laid out an ultimatum. "If the authorities fail to come up with answers as to who was behind the attacks by the second anniversary of the bombings, we will call for a nationwide black-flag campaign," he said.

The campaign would involve Sri Lankans flying a black flag above their homes as a sign of protest, the cardinal added. The US Justice Department in January charged three Sri Lankans with supporting terrorism for their alleged participation in the attacks, which were claimed by the Islamic State group. All three are in custody in Sri Lanka but have not been charged locally. The Justice



COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's top Catholic priest Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith (front second right) with other Catholics and Buddhist monks take part in a 'Black Sunday' demonstration outside the Saint Anthony's church in Colombo yesterday. —AFP

Department said it would support their prosecution in the country. At least 45 foreigners, including five Americans, were among those killed. —AFP

Chinese urgency on COVID goes missing in jabs drive

BEIJING: Shirley Shi has received three offers to be vaccinated against COVID-19 — through her hometown, her Beijing residential area and her office area-but the human resources manager is in no rush. "I'd like to keep an eye out for any adverse effects first," said Shi, who like many Chinese seems happy to take a wait-and-see approach. Through aggressive lockdowns and mass testing of millions, China has had success controlling the virus that first surfaced on its soil in late 2019. But vaccinating the world's most populous country is a different story.

China is still working to ramp up production of its four domestically-produced vaccines and has yet to approve any foreign-made shots in a global race for bragging rights. For Shi, the problem is not accessibility, but a lack of urgency. "With China's control of the epidemic domestically and my lack of plans to go abroad in the near-term, there is no need for now," she said. Chinese experts have sig-

naled the vaccination rate could soon quicken. Zhong Nanshan, a respected pulmonologist and key national figure in the fight against COVID-19, said recently that China plans to immunize 40 percent of its 1.4 billion people by June.

That would require massively increasing the number of jabs given in China, where currently only around 3.5 percent of the population is inoculated. That's far behind the UK's 32.99 jabs per 100 people and the US's 25.42, according to Our World in Data, a collaboration between Oxford University and a charity. "The sense of urgency that exists in the West, where vaccination is no less than an expected game-changer, is not present in China," said Mathieu Duchetel, director of the Asia Program at Institut Montaigne, a Paris-based think tank.

Health risks

The slower pace could pose risks for China by delaying herd immunity. There is no globally-accepted standard for the percentage of a population that needs to be jabbed-or to develop the necessary antibodies through infection-for herd immunity against COVID-19 to kick in. A November paper in medical journal Lancet estimated that percentage at 60-72 for a 100-percent effective vaccine, while Gao Fu, the head of the Chinese disease-



NANTONG, China: A medical worker (left) administers a dose of Covid-19 coronavirus vaccine to a man at a community health center in Nantong, in eastern China's Jiangsu province. —AFP

control agency, put it at 70-80 percent for China in comments this week. China would need to administer 10 million doses every day for seven months to reach such thresholds, Chinese infectious-disease specialist Zhang Wenhong told a recent forum. Only around 52.5 million doses had been administered as of end-February, according to Zhong. —AFP

News in brief

Paraguay reshuffles cabinet

ASUNCION, Paraguay: Paraguay's President Mario Abdo Benitez announced a cabinet reshuffle Saturday after violent street protests over the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. He announced new people would be appointed to the ministries of health, education, women's issues, and civil affairs. "I am sure that the men and women named will do their utmost to confront this moment of crisis that the country is enduring," the president said. Thousands of protestors clashed with police late Friday, ransacking shops and setting cars on fire. A total of 21 people were injured, hospital officials said. —AFP

SK, US to stage military drills

SEOUL: South Korea and the United States will conduct their annual military training this week but the drills will be smaller because of COVID-19, Seoul said yesterday. The nine-day exercise that begins Monday is still likely to infuriate the North, which has long considered them rehearsals for invasion. "The upcoming annual training is a computer-simulated command post exercise that is strictly defensive in nature," the Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement, adding they went ahead with plans after considering the pandemic. The drills come in the early months of a new US administration under President Joe Biden, with nuclear talks between Pyongyang and Washington deadlocked.

Crew of Chinese boat freed

PORT HARCOURT, Nigeria: The Nigerian army freed 14 crew members of a Chinese fishing boat from their pirate kidnappers on Saturday after a month in captivity, following a ransom payment, the military said. The crew of six Chinese, three Indonesians, a Gabon national and four Nigerians were kidnapped in early February when the tuna fishing boat was attacked. "A ransom of \$300,000 was paid before we arrived to rescue them," and bring them safely to Nigeria, Lieutenant Colonel Mohammed Yahaya said AFP. Kidnap attacks on ships for ransom have become common occurrences in the Gulf of Guinea which runs from Senegal to Angola, taking in the southwest coast of Nigeria. The perpetrators are usually Nigerian pirates.

Slovak patients arrive in Poland

WARSAW: Patients from Slovakia, the country with the highest death rate from the coronavirus, began arriving in neighboring Poland Saturday, with others due in Germany, said officials from those countries. "There are three patients in Poland at the moment," Poland's deputy health minister Waldemar Kraska told the Polsat News television channel. "We know that others are yet to come." Poland was also waiting to hear from the Czech authorities about the arrival of a first patient from that country, Kraska added. The transfers were all of people in a serious condition from COVID-19 who needed to be on respirators, he said. —AFP

Business

MONDAY, MARCH 8, 2021

China exports spike to highest in decades after COVID-19 hit

Imports also surging in a sharp bounceback

BEIJING: China's export growth jumped to the highest in over two decades, official data showed yesterday, with imports also surging in a sharp bounceback from the coronavirus outbreak that had brought activity to a near halt.

Electronics and textile exports such as masks contributed to the spike in outbound shipments, as demand for work-from-home supplies and protective gear against the virus outbreak soared during the pandemic. Exports spiked 60.6 percent on-year in the January-February period, well above analysts' expectations, while imports rose 22.2 percent, official data showed yesterday.

The latest figures stand in stark contrast to last year's fall of around 17 percent in exports and 4 percent drop in imports. The country struggled to contain the spread of COVID-19 early on, with consumers staying home and businesses seeing a slow return to operations. The customs administration said comparison to last year is also likely to have bolstered the latest figures, saying in a statement that the "low base is one of the reasons for the larger increase this year."

Yesterday, official data showed that electronics exports rose 54.1 percent, while textiles including masks rose 50.2 percent. China's overall trade surplus came in at \$103.3 billion, its customs administration said. Meanwhile, the country's trade surplus with the US—a key point of contention during the trade war pursued by former president Donald Trump—doubled from the same period last year to \$51.3 billion.

Chinese authorities started combining January and February trade data last year, while it battled the coronavirus outbreak. This is in line with how some other indicators are released, to smooth over distortions from the Lunar New Year holiday, which can fall in either month.

Off-season

China's foreign trade data remained strong despite the "off-season", the customs authority said yesterday. Trade was also high due to a recovery in production and consumption in major economies such as Europe and the United States amid the coronavirus pandemic, as well as improvements in domestic consumption.

Although business activity usually falls during the Lunar New Year period when workers return to their hometowns, official appeals to avoid travelling this year to keep the COVID-19 outbreak in check supported production, the customs administration added. "Many enterprises in major foreign trade provinces such as Guangdong and Zhejiang maintained production during the Lunar New Year," it said. "Market demand is expected to rebound further."

Some companies have also been stocking up on goods such as integrated circuits, iron ore and crude oil imports. "Global electronics demand has risen strongly due to the global shift to remote working and online shopping," said Rajiv Biswas, Asia-Pacific chief economist for IHS Markit.

This had driven demand for electronics products such as laptops, mobile phones and wearables, he



This aerial photo shows shipping containers for export stacked at a port in Lianyungang, in China's eastern Jiangsu province, as the country's export growth jumped to the highest in over two decades according to official data shown yesterday. — AFP

said. Meanwhile, the strong import growth also reflected a "normalization of consumer spending" in China, he told AFP, after a severe slump due to lockdowns. Analysts have warned the demand boom for protective equipment supporting Chinese exports could fade as pandemic controls improve globally, although this may not happen too soon.

"The pandemic might have already changed people's behavior... I think this kind of demand will still be in place for some time," said ANZ Research senior China economist Betty Wang. But Chinese authorities cautioned yesterday that, given global uncertainties, there is "a long way to go towards steady growth in foreign trade". — AFP

Space-starved Singapore builds floating solar farms

SINGAPORE: Thousands of panels glinting in the sun stretch into the sea off Singapore, part of the land-scarce city-state's push to build floating solar farms to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

It may be one of the world's smallest countries, but the prosperous financial hub is among the biggest per capita carbon dioxide emitters in Asia. And while authorities have been pushing to change that, renewable energy is a challenge in a country with no rivers for hydro-electricity and where the wind is not strong enough to power turbines.

So the tropical country turned to solar power—however, with little land space in a place half the size of Los Angeles, it has resorted to setting up energy plants off its coasts and on reservoirs.

"After exhausting the rooftops and the available land, which is very scarce, the next big potential is actually our water area," said Jen Tan, senior vice president and head of solar in Southeast Asia at conglomerate Sembcorp Industries, which is building a project. An island-state threatened by rising sea levels because of climate change, Singapore is aware of the urgency of cutting emissions, although critics say authorities' environmental commitments have thus far fallen short.

The government last month unveiled a wide-ranging "green plan" that included steps such as planting more trees, reducing the amount of waste

sent to landfills and building more charging points to encourage the use of electric cars. Among the measures is increasing solar energy use four-fold to around two percent of the nation's power needs by 2025, and to three percent by 2030 — enough for 350,000 households per year.

As well as on water, solar power plants have already been built on rooftops and on the ground.

'New frontier'

One newly built solar farm spreads out from the coast into the Johor Strait, which separates Singapore from Malaysia. The 13,000 panels are anchored to the seabed and can produce five megawatts of electricity, enough to power 1,400 flats for an entire year.

"The sea is a new frontier for solar to be installed," said Shawn Tan, vice president for engineering at Singaporean firm Sunseap Group, which completed the project in January.

"We hope that this will set a precedent to have more floating projects in the sea in Singapore and neighboring countries." Under development at Tengeh Reservoir is a far bigger project—once completed later this year, the 122,000-panel solar farm will be one of the biggest in Southeast Asia covering an area the size of 45 football pitches.

The project, developed by Sembcorp and the national water agency Public Utilities Board, will generate enough power to meet the energy needs of Singapore's water treatment plants, said the agency's senior planner Sharon Zheng. This will lead to a reduction in carbon emissions equivalent to removing 7,000 cars from the roads.

The solar panels are imported from China, the world's largest manufacturer of the technology, and anchored to the floor of the reservoir with blocks of concrete.

A United Nations report last month called for urgent international regulations to ensure fair conditions for workers paid via platforms, noting that the rising competition was in some cases forcing people to accept less money per job than before. The Uber ride-hailing platform lost a legal battle in Britain in February that should see its freelance drivers receive contracts.

'Exploitation of people'

Giraud knows well what not having a work contract means. After he skidded and fell a few months ago, cracking a rib, as a freelancer he wasn't entitled to any paid sick leave during the week he couldn't ride.

His dream of buying a home would have also likely remained a dream as French banks don't like to lend to borrowers without a work contract. But Giraud and former programmer Xavier Caron decided to form a cooperative — A2ROO—that provides riders with a proper work contract and decent working conditions. "We want to offer riders the security that a work contract brings with unemployment insurance and coverage in case of an accident," said Caron, who heads up the association that pays its riders the minimum wage and provides them with a work bicycle.

"A work contract, that changes things a lot," said Cyril Jeanpierre, a rider in Dijon.

Jeanpierre was earning the equivalent of the minimum wage when he started riding for other platforms, taking home 1,500 euros per month



SINGAPORE: A worker pulling a cable along a floating solar power farm at sea, off Singapore's northern coast just across the Malaysian state of Johor. — AFP

But the maritime hub could even face some space constraints when it comes to floating solar, said Subhod Mhaisalkar, executive director of the Energy Research Institute at the city-state's Nanyang Technological University.

"Do you use the ocean waters for deploying solar, or do you use it for shipping?" he told AFP. And despite the push for green power, the city-state will struggle to wean itself off a reliance on climate-damaging natural gas, and to cut emissions without impacting its refining and petrochemical sectors. —AFP



French associations are trying to prove it's possible to pay delivery riders a minimum wage.

before taxes. But with the proliferation of riders, it fell by a third. A2ROO's social model is also good for clients and restaurants, said chef Zuddas at the Dijon restaurant DZ'envies. He said other platforms demand restaurants pay a commission of 25 to 30 percent of the value of an order, whereas it is just 10 percent for A2ROO. "It's out of the question that I take part in the exploitation of people by others," said Zuddas, who also participated in the creation of A2ROO. —AFP

As Texas ends mask rule, restaurants stuck in tough spot

HOUSTON: Sipping coffee at a sidewalk cafe in upscale Houston Heights, Evelyn Marcks shakes her head at the Texas governor's decision to scrap a mask-wearing mandate before the Covid-19 pandemic is under control.

"I don't know who he is trying to please," she said, sitting at a table at the Central City Co-Op, "but it's certainly not people like us from the big cities." "He probably wants to please the right-wing people who live in places where, to be honest, there's no need for a mask," she added, referring to the roughly four million Texans who live in rural areas.

But some restaurant owners and clients in the state's largest city, Houston, were perplexed by or even against Governor Greg Abbott's recent decision to drop the mask mandate "and open Texas 100%" beginning Wednesday. "We will continue to ask our customers to mask up," said Jessica Navas, an owner of the Central City Co-Op, which also sells fresh vegetables from area farms.

A fervent defender of eating locally and responsibly, Navas added that the Co-Op's mask requirement "will continue so long as CDC guidelines recommend it." The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website currently recommends that "people wear masks in public settings, at events and gatherings, and anywhere they will be around other people." Not far from the Co-Op, at the Taco Stand and Burger Joint on Shepherd Drive, Houston Heights' central avenue, owner Matthew Pak has taken a similar stance.

"We are not going to change anything that we are doing," he said. "We are going to require all our staff and customers to wear masks, continue sanitizing, keeping everything extra, extra clean, social distancing as much as we can enforce." Those precautions will probably not end soon, he said.

"There's only a low percentage that have the vaccine" so far, Pak noted. "I mean, none of my staff has vaccine." So far, some 4.1 million Texans — 14.2 percent of the population—have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. —AFP



HOUSTON: In this file photo taken on May 01, 2020, shoppers walk around The Galleria shopping center amid the coronavirus pandemic in Houston, Texas. — AFP

Delivery co-op seeks to serve decent work conditions for riders

DIJON, France: It may have taken a cracked rib, but Bruno Giraud is now joining a growing number of French riders trying to challenge the business model of meal delivery platforms.

Giraud, 40, initially found it cool that he could cycle for his job by delivering meals for Uber Eats and Deliveroo in the central French city of Dijon. But he was soon disenchanted with working conditions that are "not far from slavery" with no guaranteed minimum number of work hours or minimum wage.

"Before, one could make 70 euros a night but they recruit more and more deliverers and there aren't enough orders, so the price of a delivery drops. It has become really abusive," Giraud said.

Delivery platforms have seen a boom in business thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic, as demand has soared in countries where restaurants have closed. The revenue of Anglo-Dutch Just Eat jumped more than 50 percent last year, while UK-based Deliveroo on Thursday unveiled plans to enter the stock market with a valuation that could exceed \$7 billion. But the platforms have come under increasing criticism for not offering work contracts and benefits.

Business

Tunisia's debt-laden public companies edge toward ruin

Pandemic, political instability could push firms to bankruptcy

TUNIS: Tunisia's state-owned firms are in dire straits, facing a perfect storm of debt, mismanagement, the coronavirus pandemic and a decade of political instability that could push some to bankruptcy, experts say. Ten years since a revolution that overthrew the nepotistic regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the sweeping reforms economists say are needed to clean up state finances have yet to materialize. The situation has pushed many of the cash-strapped North African country's 110 state-owned firms towards the edge.

"Today we're talking not about reforms but about rescue packages," Transport Minister Moez Chakchouk told journalists last week.

Economist Hakim Ben Hammouda has urged the government to "declare an economic state of emergency". Among the public firms edging towards life support are national carrier Tunisair and a phosphate giant that is one of Tunisia's top employers.

Overstaffing has left both with eye-watering wage bills.

Tunisair today runs a fleet of 26 aircraft, of which just seven are operational-but employs some 7,600 people. On top of that, the coronavirus pandemic slashed annual passenger numbers by more than two thirds last year, with turnover down by 70 percent compared to 2019.

The firm is now 955 million dinars (\$348 million) in debt and struggling to pay creditors. Last month, a Tunisian court temporarily froze its bank accounts over outstanding payments owed to a Franco-Turkish operator. The airline has for years considered laying off staff to reduce its wage bill.

But that proposal has met stiff opposition from Tunisia's powerful UGTT trade union, which has vowed to prevent any move to privatize the airline.

In February, CEO Olfa Hamdi was sacked after

just two months in the job, after she leaked documents related to the UGTT. In a Facebook post on Monday, the young engineer accused the union of blocking essential reforms.

Phosphate flop

The airline is not the only public firm struggling with a bloated wage bill. The Gafsa Phosphate Company, set up during the colonial era to exploit one of Tunisia's few natural resources, has seen production repeatedly grind to a halt as protesters in the marginalised Gafsa region demand jobs and local investment. Tunisia in 2010 ranked as the world's fifth-biggest producer of the mineral, an ingredient in artificial fertilizers and once a key source of state revenues. Today it comes in at number 12.

Last year, production of phosphate hit one of its lowest annual figures in a decade at just over three million tons, according to former trade minister Mohsen Hassen.

Tunisia was even forced to import phosphate from neighbouring Algeria.

Since the Ben Ali regime's fall, successive governments have created thousands of menial public sector jobs. Hassen said doing so at the Gafsa Phosphate Company had had a "snowball effect".

Yet even before the revolution, "the government tried to buy social peace by hiring people at these companies, which exacerbated their problems," according to Ben Hammouda.

'New social pact' needed

In a decade of democracy, Tunisia has seen repeated political crises and nine governments, leaving it bereft of any long-term economic strategy. As a result, the overall debt of publicly owned companies has reached some 40 percent of GDP,



This file photo shows the state-owned Tunisian Chemical Group (GCT)'s phosphate processing plant close to the Chott Essaïem beach and in front of a rare coastal oasis in Gabes. Tunisia's state-owned firms are in dire straits, pushed to the edge of ruin by a perfect storm of debt, mismanagement, the coronavirus-led downturn and a decade of political instability. —AFP

according to the International Monetary Fund.

That has undermined state finances as a whole: Moody's last week downgraded Tunisia's sovereign debt, citing-among other issues-"outstanding guarantees to state owned enterprises at over 15 percent of GDP in 2020". On Tuesday, IMF official Chris Geiregat demanded stricter controls on transfers to "poorly run state-owned enterprises".

In a virtual press conference, he called for "a

reform strategy that evaluates the role of public enterprises in the economy, centralizes their oversight, strengthens their corporate governance, and improves the transparency of their finances". Former trade minister Hassen had another prescription for ending the crisis: "A new social pact that defines the strategic and economic orientation of the state and its role in preserving these institutions." —AFP

Ooredoo Kuwait supports culture of health, well-being

KUWAIT: Out of its eagerness to achieve a balance between the company's goals and those of society, Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, constantly supports sporting initiatives and activities that promote healthy and wellbeing for the members of the community. Thus, as part of its social responsibility program, Ooredoo Kuwait sponsored the Third 10,000 Steps Walking Challenge Campaign organized by Lofat, a leading organization that specializes in providing healthy dietary solutions to people of all ages in Kuwait.

The 10,000 Steps Walking Challenge Campaign

comes in its third edition to motivate and inspire individuals to live a better and healthier life, which is formerly driven by Ooredoo and Lofat's belief in the importance of sport in supporting physical health and preventing disease. Hence, everyone can participate in the race and enter the raffle draw with a chance to win valuable gifts provided by Ooredoo Kuwait. The campaign started in February and continues until the end of March 2021.

Commenting on sponsoring the campaign, Mijbil Al-Ayoub, Senior Director, Corporate Communications, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "At Ooredoo, we understand that social responsibility is directly associated with a number of human values and standards such as solidarity and responsibility towards not only community members, but also shareholders, and employees. These values are to build strength, healthy society and raise health awareness and sports participation. In fact, sport often ignites people to work towards a goal or purpose which adds a meaningful value to their daily life."

"Health and wellbeing are essential to being able to perform one's best within different life aspects. The campaign is intended to help people conquer small goals each day through the 10,000 steps which eventually can help them to see measurable progress for the work they put in and enhance their health and welfare," Al-Ayoub added. All participants must take a picture or screenshot of their smartwatch showing the completion of the 10,000 steps walk and send it in a direct message on Lofat's Instagram account @lofatgroup, for the opportunity to enter the raffle draw and win many valuable prizes.



Mijbil Al-Ayoub

Al-Tijari announces winners of Al-Najma draws

KUWAIT: Commercial Bank of Kuwait conducted the weekly draws on Al-Najma Account and Salary Transfer Campaign yesterday. The draws were conducted in the presence of Ministry of Commerce and Industry representative Ahmad Al-Basman.

The results of the draws were as follows:

- 1- Al-Najma weekly account - the prize of KD 5,000 went to the winner Mitham Mohammad Al-Qattan
- 2- Salary account campaign - the prize of up to KD 1,000 went to the winner Qannour Oraim Al-Azmi

The bank stated that the salary campaign is aimed at customers who transfer their salaries of KD 500 or more to the bank, especially Kuwaiti employees and residents working in the government, oil sectors and companies listed with the Bank as well as retirees, and take advantage of the benefits of this campaign and get an instant cash gift from KD 250 to KD 500 or an interest-free loan of five times the salary and a maximum of KD 10,000, Kuwaiti pensioner, along with expatriate customers who transfer their debt amounting to KD 10,000 or above to the Bank will receive an instant cash gift of 1 percent from their transferred debt.

The Bank stated that Al Najma Account prizes are distinguished by the highest cash prize and diversity of prizes throughout the year clarifying that the account offers weekly prize of KD 5,000, monthly prize of KD 20,000 and a semi-annual prize of KD 500,000 in addition to the largest prize - linked bank account payout of KD 1,500,000.

Al-Najma Account can be opened by depositing KD 100, and customer should maintain a minimum amount of KD 500 to be eligible to enter all draws on Al-Najma Account prizes. As for the chances of winning, the more balance a customer maintains in Al-Najma Account, the more chances the account holder will get to win, the account also offers additional benefits like the ATM card, a credit card against customer's account and all CBK banking services that customer can enjoy. The bank revealed that Al-Najma account is available to everyone, and anyone can open Al-Najma account through CBK mobile application in simple steps from anywhere and at any time.

Burgan Bank announces winners of Yawmi account draw

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank announced yesterday the names of the daily draw winners of its Yawmi account draw, each taking home a cash-prize of KD 5,000.

The lucky winners are:

1. Khattar Shebli Haddadin
2. Abdulsalam Ali Alnaqi
3. Terrylin Osigan Layno
4. Abdullah Jawad Dashti

In addition to the daily draw, Burgan Bank also offers a quarterly draw with more chances to win higher rewards, offering the chance to one lucky customer to win KD 125,000 every three months. The Yawmi Account offers daily and quarterly draws, wherein the quarterly draw requires customers to maintain a minimum amount of KD 500 in their account for two months prior to the draw date. Additionally, every KD 10 in the account will entitle customers to one chance of winning. If the account balance is KD 500 and above, the account holder will be qualified for both the quarterly and daily draws.

Burgan Bank encourages everyone to open a Yawmi account and/or increase their deposit to maximize their chances of becoming a winner. The higher the level of the deposit, the higher the likelihood to win.

HK police arrest 12 over 'ramp and dump' stock scam

HONG KONG: Hong Kong police on Friday said they have arrested 12 people for allegedly running a "ramp and dump" stock scam in a series of raids targeting homes in swanky neighborhoods.

The joint investigation with the city's Securities and Futures Commission (SFC) led to the freezing of HK\$900 million (\$116 million) in assets. At a press briefing on Friday, authorities said seven men and five women were being held on market manipulation, money laundering and fraud charges.

They are accused of using popular messaging apps including WeChat to run a so-called "ramp

and dump" scam, where certain stocks are hyped up and touted for sale via social media before being suddenly sold, leaving other investors to shoulder losses. Some of those arrested allegedly posed as investment gurus offering tips and insider information to victims in both Hong Kong and mainland China.

Officials called for victims of the scam to come forward. "Our estimate is there is a large number of victims but many of those victims might not want to come forward because they might feel embarrassed about being duped in this way," SFC chief executive Ashley Alder told reporters.

The role of social media in hyping stock prices has gained renewed attention recently in the wake of the GameStop share frenzy. An army of amateur investors, many exchanging advice and opinions on a popular forum at the Reddit website, began buying up GameStop in defiance of hedge funds that had bet shares in the company would tank because



The joint investigation with the city's Securities and Futures Commission led to the freezing of HK\$900 million in assets. —AFP

the video game disk-selling company is out of synch with the internet age. —AFP

eBay to halt resale of pulled Dr Seuss books

WASHINGTON: US e-commerce giant eBay will halt the resale of six Dr Seuss books on its platform after they were pulled by their publisher over imagery considered racist, the Wall Street Journal reported. Dr Seuss Enterprises—the publisher of the bestselling chil-

dren's books—announced Tuesday it was taking the titles, which include "If I Ran the Zoo" and "The Cat's Quizzer," out of print.

The announcement sparked a bidding frenzy for the scrapped books on eBay. The leading bid for a first edition of "On Beyond Zebra!" soared from \$14.99 on Monday to \$810 on Tuesday.

"eBay is currently sweeping our marketplace to remove these items," a spokeswoman for the company told the Journal. She added it would take "some time" for the company to review the listings of all its sellers. The move comes as criticism grows in the United States over the way minority communities have been

portrayed in many of the author's books.

Seuss, born Theodor Seuss Geisel in Massachusetts in 1904, published more than 60 books during his lifetime, including some of the most popular children's books of all time.

His most famous works include "The Cat in the Hat," "Green Eggs and Ham" and "How the Grinch Stole Christmas." He died in 1991. In 2017, a school librarian in Cambridge Massachusetts said she would not accept a gift of ten Dr. Seuss books from then-first lady Melania Trump because many of his books were "steeped in racist propaganda, caricatures, and harmful stereotypes." —AFP

Zimbabwe evictions to grow animal feed 'will harm thousands'

JOHANNESBURG: Rights groups have denounced Zimbabwean government plans to evict thousands of villagers from their communal land and convert it to industrial animal feed farming. More than 13,000 Shangani people, an indigenous minority group, were last month ordered to immediately vacate over 12,900 hectares of land in southeastern Zimbabwe. The legal notice, issued by Local Government Minister July Moyo on February 26, said the land would be set aside for lucerne grass production unless the villagers acquired fresh occupation rights.

Lawyers representing the community on Friday filed two urgent High Court motions to have the

eviction notice declared unconstitutional. A provincial magistrates' court has since granted an interim relief barring the expulsion without first securing a court order.

"The Zimbabwean government should stop these evictions that... would leave thousands of people destitute and vulnerable," Human Rights Watch (HRW) southern Africa director Dewa Mavhinga said in a statement on Saturday. Forcing thousands of people to move "without reasonable notice", compensation or alternative land in the midst of a pandemic would be a "wanton disregard of the country's legal obligations", he added.

A South Africa-based land rights group has meanwhile called for a moratorium on all rural evictions in Zimbabwe. "The government is partly basing its decision on a narrow belief that private big estates are the only vehicle for economic transformation," Phyllan Zamchiya, researcher for the Institute for Poverty Land and Agrarian Studies, wrote in an op-ed this week.

The planned eviction will affect 678 villages on



communal land near the small town of Chiredzi, more than 355 kilometers (221 miles) south of the capital Harare. The residents were moved to the area by the British colonial government during the 1960s, when their ancestral Shangani land was forcibly turned into a national park. —AFP

Business

Israeli 5-minute battery charge aims to fire up electric cars

Ultra-fast recharge specialists develop a first-generation lithium-ion

HERZLIYA, Israel: From flat battery to full charge in just five minutes—an Israeli start-up has developed technology it says could eliminate the “range anxiety” associated with electric cars.

Ultra-fast recharge specialists StoreDot have developed a first-generation lithium-ion battery that can rival the filling time of a standard car at the pump. “We are changing the entire experience of the driver, the problem of ‘range anxiety’... that you might get stuck on the highway without energy,” StoreDot founder Doron Myersdorf said. The innovation could eliminate the hours required to recharge an electric car, he said.

Hundreds of prototypes are being tested by manufacturers. His company, based in Herzliya, near Tel Aviv, is backed by four key investors: German automobile manufacturer Daimler, the UK’s British Petroleum and the electronic giants Samsung and TDK. Myersdorf, who set up the company in 2012, has tested the battery on phones, drones and scooters, before tackling the big prize of electric vehicles.

‘Revolution’

But Eric Esperance, an analyst at Roland Berger consulting firm, cautioned that while ultra-fast charging would be a

“revolution”, many stages remain. “We are still far off from the industrial automotive market,” he said. In 2019, the Nobel Chemistry Prize was awarded to John Goodenough of the US, Britain’s Stanley Whittingham and Japan’s Akira Yoshino for the invention of lithium-ion batteries.

“This lightweight, rechargeable and powerful battery is now used in everything from mobile phones to laptops and electric vehicles,” the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences said on awarding the prize. Myersdorf said charging “speed was not part” of the original design that won the Nobel, so he worked on what was “considered impossible”: a lithium-ion battery good to go in minutes.

“We wanted to demonstrate that you can take a lithium-ion battery, replace some of its materials and then charge it in five minutes,” he said. The engineer switched the original graphite in the battery’s negative anode with silicon. “We are taking that amazing innovation of the lithium-ion battery and upgrading it to extreme fast charging capability,” he said.

Batteries are assembled in a laboratory equipped with large glass boxes, sealed to keep oxygen out. StoreDot chemists clad in goggles and white coats build 100 batteries a week, sent to com-

panies for possible use in their products.

‘Fossil fuel-free society’

The team is already working on a second generation of batteries to cut costs. While the design cycle of a vehicle is “typically four to five years”, they are looking to speed up the process.

“We are working on taking this solution to the market in parallel, by designing the manufacturing facilities that would be able to mass produce this battery,” Myersdorf said. The Nobel jury praised the lithium-ion battery for being able to “store significant amounts of energy from solar and wind power, making possible a fossil fuel-free society”. As public opinion shifts towards prioritizing the climate change crisis, manufacturers are gearing production towards less polluting vehicles.

But the road is long. On the ground, charging stations would have to be adapted for the new generation batteries, costing between \$1,500 and \$10,000 depending on capacity.

Electric cars are also still expensive, and in 2019 they represented only 2.6 percent of global sales, according to the International Energy Agency.

For Myersdorf, the sooner the world switches to electric vehicles the better,



A display promoting fast-charging batteries is pictured at the entrance of the Israeli startup StoreDot's headquarters in the Israeli coastal city of Herzliya. Israeli ultra-fast charge specialists StoreDot have developed a first generation lithium-ion battery that can rival the filling time of a standard car at the pump. — AFP

pointing to the “huge impact on the planet”. But recycling lithium-ion batteries remains a problem, with Esperance noting that each has a lifespan of between 3,000 and 3,500 charges.

“We must set up a recycling system,

as there is for lead-acid batteries,” he said. “Today, this network is just being set up.” Both the extraction and recycling of lithium pose ecological, political and economic challenges for technology to overcome. — AFP

N Korea's petroleum imports breached sanctions cap: UN

SEOUL: North Korea illicitly imported far more refined petroleum products last year than allowed under an annual threshold set by United Nations sanctions, a report seen by AFP revealed. Pyongyang can import up to 500,000 barrels per year, but from January through September last year the isolated regime received petroleum products that exceeded that cap “by several times”, according to a Panel of Experts report submitted to the UN Security Council.

Citing “images, data and calculations”, the new report claimed at least 121 shipments of refined petroleum products—such as gasoline and diesel—were delivered to North Korea by an unnamed member state’s tankers and others.

The shipments mark Pyongyang’s latest circumvention of international embargoes meant to stem its weapons development by choking off revenue needed to keep its economy running.

Despite multiple sets of sanctions—including limits on Pyongyang’s oil imports and a ban on its exports of coal, fish and textiles—the country has continued to develop its nuclear and ballistic missile arsenal, analysts say.

Nuclear negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington have been at a standstill since a summit between Kim Jong Un and then-US president Donald Trump broke down over sanctions relief and what North Korea would be willing to give up in return. — AFP

China military budget to grow 6.8% in 2021

BEIJING: China’s military budget—the second largest in the world after the US—is set to increase by 6.8 percent in 2021, the finance ministry announced.

Military tensions have dramatically increased over the past year between China and rival powers including the United States and India, with flashpoints like the Himalayan border, Taiwan and the South China Sea. Beijing plans to spend 1.36 trillion yuan (\$210 billion) on defense, which is still less than a third of Washington’s military budget.

The growth rate, up from 2020’s 6.6 percent, was revealed by the ministry at the opening of the government’s annual legislative meetings. In recent years, China has poured trillions of yuan into the modernization of its military, which it aims to transform into a world-class force rivaling that of the US and other Western powers.

Beijing has over the past year repeatedly used its military might to threaten the self-ruled island of Taiwan, which it claims-flying fighter jets into its airspace and staging invasion drills. This sabre-rattling has been met with frequent US warship patrols in the nearby South China Sea. “China’s defense budget has increased rapidly in absolute terms over the last two decades,” said Adam Ni, analyst at the China Policy Centre in Canberra, Australia.

“This reflects China’s rising economic power and determination to underpin its strategic ambitions with hard power.” The official figure does not show the whole picture, since it “probably does not capture all defense-related spending”, he added. — AFP

NBK money markets report

US dollar jumps, economy adds 379,000 jobs

KUWAIT: The US dollar rebounded last week reaching fresh four-month highs after Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell did not express concern about the recent sell-off in bonds. Speaking at a virtual event, Powell maintained his dovish rhetoric and said the sell-off in Treasuries was not “disorderly” or likely to push long-term rates so high that the Fed might have to intervene more forcefully. He also reiterated a commitment to maintain ultra-easy monetary policy until the economy is “very far along the road to recovery.” The comments reignited Treasury selling, pushing yields higher.

The rise in yields has been picking up pace since the start of the year with Treasury trading being particularly volatile in the past two weeks as the US 10-year yield briefly surpassed 1.6% last Thursday. The move to sell treasuries boils down to inflation. The impending US fiscal stimulus package is adding fuel to expectations of higher inflation as the accelerating roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines boosts confidence in an economic recovery. Powell’s dovish tone sent messages to markets that the Fed will tolerate inflation for a longer time before hiking rates. And because higher inflation makes bonds less attractive by eroding the value of their income payments, bond selling has been on the rise. Higher US bond yields also make the US dollar more attractive in carry-trades where traders try to take advantage of interest rate spreads between financial instruments. In the case last week, most major currencies were sold in favor of the US dollar supporting the rebound.

Biden's stimulus package

President Biden’s stimulus package dubbed the American Rescue Plan, passed through the House of Representatives in February and had just passed the Senate debate Saturday. The democrats faced heavy opposition from Republicans who called the bill “partisan and excessive.” Indeed, all republicans in the House voted against it and the bill narrowly passed through the initial stages of the Senate where members vote whether to debate new legislation. Vice President Kamala Harris had to break the tie of 50-50 and voted with the democrats to allow the bill to be deliberated. The vote on the final passage came back 50-49 in favor of the Democrats. The bill will now need to return to the House a second time to approve

UK green strategy under fire before COP26 climate meet

LONDON: Britain, host of this year’s COP26 climate summit, drew harsh criticism from experts after its annual budget put energy transition on the back burner while a new coal mine was greenlit. The UK, which has committed to reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050, will lead the next UN climate gathering in Glasgow in November.

Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson has vowed to deliver a “green revolution” that would ban high-polluting new diesel and petrol cars by 2030, boost cutting-edge electric technology, and make Britain a global leader in wind power. However, Johnson has not delivered on his pledge, according to Lancaster University professor Rebecca Willis, who specializes in the environment.

‘Kickstart economy after COVID’

“Boris Johnson has repeatedly confirmed his commitment to ambitious climate action, and to the UK’s net zero greenhouse gas emissions target,”

some amendments before heading to the President for ratification.

Non-farm payrolls

US employers added a robust 379,000 jobs last month, the most since October and showed that the economy is strengthening as confirmed viral cases drop, consumers spend more and states ease business restrictions. The February gain marked a sharp pickup from the 166,000 jobs that were added in January and the loss of 306,000 in December. Yet it represents just a fraction of the roughly 9.6 million jobs that the economy needs to regain to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Still, the report showed that the nation’s job growth is being driven by a steady recovery of bars, restaurants and other leisure and hospitality establishments. Bars and restaurants, in particular, snapped back last month, adding 286,000 jobs as business restrictions eased in California and other states. That trend will likely continue as Texas recently joined other states in announcing that it would fully reopen its economy with no restrictions.

UK budget

In the UK, Finance minister Rishi Sunak said in the annual budget speech that the economy would return to its pre-pandemic size by mid-2022, six months earlier than previously forecast, helped by Europe’s fastest coronavirus vaccination program. The budget will bring some relief to the country in terms of pandemic support remaining in place for many months to come and job protection for affected workers. The chancellor will spend GBP 65 billion in the next two years supporting jobs, investment and the recovery as the country tries to come back from the COVID-19 crisis.

To cater for the increased spending, Sunak also announced the first corporate tax hike in the UK since 1974. Britain will raise its tax on big companies to 25 percent from 19 percent starting 2023 but will temper the burden with a two-year “super deduction” for investment to spur a fast recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. “The government is providing businesses with over GBP 100 billion of support to get through this pandemic so it is fair and necessary to ask them to contribute to our recovery,” Sunak told parliament.

Rising bond yields

In contrast to the Fed, the European Central Bank has expressed more concern over rising European yields. ECB President Lagarde and Chief Economist Lane have signaled that they will watch long-term yields closely and could use the flexibility of the PEPP to dampen upward pressure on yields. It was reported last week that the ECB PEPP purchases slowed to EUR 12 billion in the latest weekly data from EUR 17 billion in the previous period. However, the latest ECB figures cover only the period up to and including last Wednesday, and not the sharp bond market sell-off on

Willis said. “But we have not yet seen whether he is delivering on his promise.

“The government has a huge opportunity now to kickstart the economy after COVID by providing incentives for green jobs, and investment in zero carbon infrastructure.”

Johnson’s partner, environmentalist Carrie Symonds, stated recently that politicians have a “gigantic responsibility to make the right decisions” over the climate crisis. His father Stanley in February meanwhile called for his son to “practice what he preaches” by funding his environmental pledges. Britain’s budget, delivered Wednesday by finance minister Rishi Sunak against the backdrop of soaring coronavirus-fueled debt and slumping economic growth, sought to harness the green energy transition to help spark recovery.

Sunak confirmed the launch of an Infrastructure Bank with £12 billion (\$17 billion) in capital, which will finance projects in the green economy like carbon capture and renewable energy. However, campaigners argue that the measures fell short of tackling what they describe as a climate emergency.

“For all the talk of a green recovery, this budget suggests the chancellor has failed to clock the urgency of the climate emergency,” said Greenpeace spokeswoman Rebecca Newsom.

Thursday or following days. The next report will provide clearer evidence of whether the ECB has since stepped up PEPP purchases. The price action seen on Thursday suggests that it could be the case. The developments are offering more support for the US dollar in the near-term.

China targets 6% growth

China is targeting at least 6 percent growth this year, reflecting the government’s confidence in the wake of its successful containment of the coronavirus pandemic in the world’s second-largest economy. Premier Li Keqiang unveiled the goal at the National People’s Congress in Beijing last week. Delegates at this year’s week-long session will also formally pass a new five-year economic plan focused on “self-reliance” in critical technologies. The five-year plan aims to increase R&D spending by at least 7 percent each year through 2025, to reduce China’s reliance on US companies for semiconductors and other technologies. Li also added that the government wanted to create a further 11 million jobs, noting the 11.9 million urban jobs created last year. Most economists believe that Beijing will comfortably exceed its growth target, given last year’s low base of 2.3 percent growth in 2020.

Australia GDP expands

The Reserve Bank of Australia said their economy remains on a steady path in terms of recovery, as forecasts continue to improve due to faster vaccine roll-outs. A strong labor market, rising wages, and rising private capital expenditure data painted a rosy picture for the economy moving forward this year. GDP expanded 3.1 percent in the 4th quarter of 2020 bringing the annual growth rate to a better than expected -1.1 percent. The bounce in private capital expenditures also reflects growing local optimism, and as a result, the trend has provided upward pressure to the Australian dollar.

Oil prices jump

The move higher in long-term US rates and inflation expectations has been supported as well by the further jump in the price of oil last week. It rose to a new high of \$69.69 per barrel after climbing by around 8.7 percent following Thursday’s OPEC+ meeting. Oil producers surprisingly agreed to hold output steady in April, while Saudi Arabia said it will maintain its 1 million barrel-a-day voluntary production cut. No additional supply from OPEC+ in April means lower oil inventories throughout 2021 while demand is expected to increase as the global economy recovers.

Kuwait
Kuwaiti dinar
USD/KWD closed last week at 0.30195.



PARIS: Members of Greenpeace protest calling for the reduction of air traffic in the face of climate challenges, paint an Air France passenger aircraft parked on the tarmac ‘green’ as others climb up to unfurl banners at the Roissy-Charles de Gaulle International airport (CDG), north of Paris. — AFP

“A National Infrastructure Bank and green bonds could be steps forward, but without a guarantee they will provide sustained investment to decarbonise buildings, transport and industry, they are unlikely to do much to advance climate action.” She lamented that Britain now had “weakened authority on the world stage” ahead of COP26. — AFP

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Reel excitement: New Yorkers return to movie theaters



The AMC Empire 25 off Times Square is open as New York City's cinemas reopen for the first time in a year following the coronavirus shutdown. —AFP photos



A mask requirement post welcomes patrons at AMC Empire 25 off Times Square as New York City's cinemas reopen for the first time in a year following the coronavirus shutdown.

Movie enthusiast Cindy B was among the first in the door at the AMC Empire 25 off Times Square Friday as New York City's cinemas reopened a year after they were abruptly closed by coronavirus. "Oh my God, I'm so excited to be back. I'm not working so I gotta have something to do!" the woman in her sixties told AFP, before buying a ticket for "Raya and the Last Dragon." The Big Apple's movie theaters resumed operations for the first time since March 17 last year, when officials ordered them shut as Covid-19 began ravaging America's commercial capital.

Governor Andrew Cuomo announced last month that cinemas would be allowed to operate at 25 percent capacity—or with no more than 50 people per screen—from March 5. Cindy arrived at 10 a.m., 30 minutes before the doors opened and a full hour before her film started to ensure she didn't miss out. "I'm a movie fanatic. I go once a week, so I went crazy over the last year," she said, declining to give her full name. The film buff needn't have worried though, with only a few cinemagoers slowly trickling into the popular theater that during normal times would be



A moviegoer enters the AMC Empire 25 off Times Square.

teeming with tourists. "I thought there would be a long line. But I guess a lot of people have started working already," she mused.

Mask-wearing and social distancing is mandatory inside the cinemas. AMC has installed special air filters and is disinfecting each auditorium between screenings. Cindy said she wasn't worried about virus transmission. "I've got two masks on. I've got wipes, I've got hand sanitizer.



An employee wearing protective gloves pours a drink for a moviegoer at AMC Empire 25 off Times Square.

I've got everything!" she said. Roy Evans was another who waited in the cold for the AMC Empire 25's doors to open, itching for his fix of the big-screen experience. "I've become a couch potato over the past year, staying at home, social distancing and watching TV," the 68-year-old told AFP. "It's nice to get off that chair and actually go to a theater," added Evans, who planned to see "Judah and the Black Messiah."

Liam Neeson

Thomas Levesque, 28, agreed. "Netflix is cool and all but it doesn't beat the movie atmosphere and my TV is not what you would call a huge flat screen TV," he said. The partial reopening of one of America's biggest movie-going markets, at a time when Los Angeles cinemas remain closed, will provide some relief to a battered industry. Actor Liam Neeson was due to thank cinemagoers at a Manhattan multiplex later, telling the Hollywood Reporter the reopening was "one for the diary." AMC, which needed nearly \$1 billion of emergency funding to fend off bankruptcy, is reopening all of its 13 New York City locations.

However, owners of smaller, independent cinemas say it doesn't make economic sense to rush to reopen. "At 25 percent (capacity), it's a challenge," said Andrew Elgart, who plans to stagger the opening of his three cinemas in Brooklyn and Queens later this month. The reopening comes as officials gradually ease restrictions in New York City, where the virus has killed more than 29,000 people. Madison Square Garden welcomed back NBA and NHL fans last week while Broadway theaters and music halls are expected to reopen at limited capacity on April 2. "This is definitely a step towards getting back to normality," said Cindy, before taking her seat. —AFP



A general view shows the Mausoleum of Augustus, (center) a large tomb built by the Roman Emperor Augustus in 28 BC on the Campus Martius near the river Tiber, as it reopens on March in Rome. —AFP photos



People visit the Mausoleum of Augustus a large tomb built by the Roman Emperor Augustus in 28 BC on the Campus Martius near the river Tiber, as it reopens.

Forgotten mausoleum of Roman emperor Augustus reborn

A newly renovated colossal mausoleum for the founder of the Roman empire Augustus has reopened to the public in the Italian capital after centuries of neglect. "Until now we have always known it as a ruin, but it is one of the most important monuments of antiquity," explained Alessia, a masked guide taking a small group of visitors on the labyrinthine route through five concentric enclosures. "It was so majestic, they had never seen anything like this in Rome." The mausoleum was built on the banks of the River Tiber between 28 and 23 BC. It is a vast, towering monument to Augustus, the great-nephew of Julius Caesar who built the Roman empire during his 40-year rule. The cylindrical base has a diameter of 90 meters, on top of which was planted a mound of cypress trees. On the summit, a bronze statue of the emperor stood guard, taking the total height to 45 meters.

At the center of the mausoleum, originally clad in white marble and travertine, was a burial chamber reserved for Augustus and his wife Livia, while around them were further rooms reserved for mem-

bers of their dynasty. But it had fallen into such a state of disrepair, in ruins and overgrown with weeds, that modern-day Romans described it as a "rotten tooth". Mayor Virginia Raggi rejoiced at seeing "a masterpiece of Roman antiquity, a priceless treasure, restored to its full splendour".

Buffalo arena

After the fall of the Roman empire, the mausoleum lost its relevance as a burial site and like other Roman monuments was put to a variety of uses by the generations that followed. It was a fortress in the Middle Ages, then a Renaissance garden, an arena for bulls and buffalo fighting, and in the early 1900s a concert hall was built over it. The mausoleum was brought back into public display in the 1930s by fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, who sought to present his regime as the heir of the ancient Roman empire. As a result of all these conversions, only 30 percent of the original monument remains, and the spoils of Augustus and his family have long disappeared.

But the restoration of the square in front of the

building, which currently lies seven meters below ground level, has made it more visible—ensuring it finally gets the attention it deserves. The mausoleum was closed in 2007 and the restoration works are not yet complete, as evidenced by the crane overhanging the site and the swarms of contractors bustling around like ants. Such is the scale of the building that experts believe Augustus was probably inspired by the tomb of Alexander the Great in Alexandria in Egypt, or the mausoleum of Halicarnassus, now in Turkey, which was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Gianluca Carli, a 38-year-old Roman, was overwhelmed after his first visit.

"It's a lot of emotion, as a Roman in love with his city, the idea of regaining possession of a part of my heritage," he told AFP. "I feel a bit like the guardian of this city. So to be able to set foot again in such a mausoleum, so beautiful." Rome is deserted of tourists thanks to coronavirus restrictions, but tickets for the mausoleum—only accessible online—are already booked up until the end of June. —AFP

a curfew: all birds in captivity must be kept under a roof," aquarium director Aslak Sverdrup told AFP on Thursday. But the end is in sight, with the arrival of bird flu vaccine doses. The oldest and most fragile had their first shot on Wednesday, followed by the younger penguins on Thursday, the aquarium said. Among the freshly immunized is "Erna", named for Prime Minister Erna Solberg who once had a summer job at the aquarium, a tourist attraction in the western city where she was born.

Once the second vaccine dose has been administered in a month's time, the birds will be able to see the sky again. "The fact that penguins are being vaccinated now is pure coincidence, totally independent of the coronavirus, but it shows that vaccines are important, even more so today," Sverdrup said. In the wild, gentoo penguins live on the other side of the Earth, in Antarctica. None at the Bergen Aquarium caught the flu, and while the disease can be devastating for birds, transmission to humans is rare. —AFP



This Handout photo made available by Bergen Aquarium shows penguins receiving a vaccine against bird flu from staff in Bergen, Norway. —AFP

Norway penguins get vaccinated, isolation nearly over

They have been living under strict confinement measures for months, but soon the second shot of a life-saving vaccine will let them go outside and get back to their normal lives. While it sounds like a familiar story, in this case their normal lives involve sliding about on their bellies, frolicking in icy water and catching fish in their mouths. Twenty-nine gentoo penguins at Norway's Bergen Aquarium have had a tarp stretched over their pen since early December after cases of a highly infectious bird flu strain, H5N8, were detected in the country.

"Because of this, the Food Health Authority introduced

Great apes at San Diego zoo receive first COVID vaccines

Nine great apes at San Diego Zoo have become the first non-human primates given COVID-19 vaccinations, officials at the California zoo said Friday. Four orangutans and five bonobos were given two doses each of an experimental vaccine created specifically for animals by a veterinary pharmaceutical company. The inoculations were carried out after eight gorillas at the same world-famous zoo contracted the virus from human staff in January. "After a troop of eight western lowland gorillas got sick in January, San Diego Zoo staff received experimental COVID-19 vaccines to give to great apes in their care," tweeted Zoetis, the pharmaceutical company.

San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance on Friday called it a "win for science." Nadine Lamberski, a conservation and wildlife health officer at San Diego Zoo Global, told National Geographic that the use of an experimental vaccine on the zoo's animals at this stage "isn't the norm." "In my career, I haven't had access to an experimental vaccine this early in the process and haven't had such an overwhelming desire to want to use one," she said. One of the orangutans vaccinated, named Karen, has already made medical history in 1994 as the first in the world to undergo open-heart surgery. The gorillas were not vaccinated as it is assumed they have developed antibodies following their infection earlier in the year.

It was the first known case of natural transmission of the virus to great apes, and was suspected to have occurred because of contact with an asymptomatic staff member, despite the use of personal protective gear. One elderly gorilla, Winston, recovered from a serious case of COVID-19 after he was treated with cutting-edge synthetic antibodies. Like the vaccines, Winston's treatment came from a supply not permitted for human use. Veterinarians routinely vaccinate wildlife against a range of diseases, both in captivity and in their natural environment. The vaccine had previously been tested on cats and dogs. —AFP



Lifestyle | Features

NEW YORKERS REDISCOVER CITY'S PANDEMIC-DESERTED TOURIST SPOTS



People visit the Statue of Liberty in New York City. —AFP photos



General view of the World Trade Center memorial in New York City.

New Yorkers are taking advantage of the absence of tourists during the pandemic to visit iconic sites in the Big Apple that they would normally avoid. At 10:00 am on a recent Friday, barely ten people were on Liberty Island's roughly 200-metre (650-ft) promenade, starting up at the Statue of Liberty. In normal times, even although it is not peak season, hundreds of tourists would be posing for selfies in front of the copper icon of freedom. Alexander Lumbres, a student at City University of New York, has been to the island 20 times before, but never been able to enjoy a crowd-free view of the statue.

"It was really hard for me to take pictures. Usually, we would go around the backside, just to get like a proper picture with the family and everything," he said. Roughly 67 million tourists visited New York City in 2019. In 2020, visitor numbers were a third of that, and most came before the pandemic began ravaging the city in the spring. Today, 90 percent of visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art come from the local area, according to a spokesperson. Ordinarily, locals make up fewer than half. NYC & Company, which markets the Big Apple around the world and which cut its workforce by almost a half because of coronavirus, launched the "All in NYC" campaign to encourage New Yorkers to visit their own city.

Getting New York back on its feet is "going to start with New Yorkers" said executive vice president Christopher Heywood. "When you live here, you take it for granted," said Darlene Vann, who's in the military and stationed in New York for a year. She was visiting the Statue of Liberty for the first time. Jerry Willis, of the National Park Service, the government agency that manages national parks and sites, said "New Yorkers are famous" for not visiting renowned



People stop for a slice of pizza as they visit the Vessel at the Hudson Yards in New York City.

sites on their doorstep.

Darlene's husband, Jay Vann, prefers outdoor venues over closed spaces because officials are "limiting capacity" at indoor venues, which also come with the threat of some patrons not complying with strict health protocols. In the fourth quarter of 2020, the Empire State Building observation deck recorded a 94 percent drop in visitors compared to the same period the year before, despite being open for the full three months. At the 9/11 Memorial, only a few dozen people tend to walk amid the former home of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers.

Broadway the catalyst

Many New Yorkers avoided the memorial during its first few years, either out of trauma or because it was too crowded, to the point that organizers launched a



People visit the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City.

specific marketing campaign in 2016 entitled "Our City, Our Story". Janice Ryan lost a friend in the Al-Qaeda attacks on September 11, 2001. She recently visited to find her friend's name on the engraved list of victims that surround the large pools of water installed where the north and south tower used to stand. Today, she came to find her name in the list engraved along the two large pools installed where the 1 and 2 World Trade Center were located.

"It was easier for me to come today because usually it's so crowded," she said. "It's super emotional for me. I don't know anybody that could come down here and not feel as it is the day that it happened. I've stayed away because it's really hard," Ryan added. Mark Robinson, a theater director, often visits "Ground Zero" for some peaceful reflection. "(Normally) I wouldn't be coming down here on a Friday. But the streets down



A woman from Michigan jumps as she poses in front of Statue of Liberty in New York City.

here in the Wall Street area downtown are pretty deserted. So it just seemed like the right thing to do on such a beautiful day," he told AFP.

Despite enjoying New York's new-found quietness, locals are beginning to crave the manic old days. "It's about time we get back to the normal hustle and bustle of the city. We enjoyed that when we were living here when we were younger," said Jay Vann. With the partial reopening of cinemas and large arenas such as Madison Square Garden, NYC & Company's Heywood sees positive moves in the right direction. "It's been gradual, but we are starting to make our way toward a recovery," he said. But he says the real turning point will be when Broadway reopens, which may not be until September. "Broadway will be that catalyst that we need to be able to signal to the world that New York City is absolutely open for business," he said. —AFP

CAMBODIA'S ROYAL TURTLE LAYS EGGS IN CAPTIVITY FOR FIRST TIME



This handout photo shows a conservationist measuring a royal turtle egg at the Koh Kong Reptile Conservation Center (KKRCC) in Koh Kong province.



This handout photo shows royal turtle eggs on the sand at the Koh Kong Reptile Conservation Center (KKRCC) in Koh Kong province. —AFP

An endangered turtle bred in captivity laid eggs for the first time in Cambodia, conservationists said this week, in a massive win for animal protection in the kingdom. The animal was among five Royal Turtles—once feared extinct in the country—that laid more than 70 eggs. Cambodia is home to several populations of endangered turtles, whose numbers have dwindled due to demand for them in Vietnam and China as delicacies and for use in traditional medicine. Royal Turtles, formally classified as Southern River Terrapins, were pushed to the brink of extinction by hunting and sand mining, which destroys the banks where they lay their eggs.

The damage was so severe that in 2000 they were feared wiped out in Cambodia, before nests were found and a careful conservation effort began. On Tuesday the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) announced that four Royal Turtles bred in captivity—and one that was handed to its conservation center in Cambodia's southwestern Koh Kong province—successfully laid 71 eggs. "It's the first time that the captive female Royal Turtles have ever laid eggs since they were head-started at the center in 2006," said Som Sitha, a conservation project manager with the WCS. "The team will make artificial nests for incubation purposes or leave them as they are." Given the rarity of the species in the wild, the successful egg laying is considered a massive win for Cambodia.

"We anticipate soon being able to produce large numbers of Royal Turtles in captivity and releasing them back into the wild," said the WCS's Steven Platt. Since conservation efforts started, scores of Royal Turtles have been released back into the wild. These come from eggs laid in the wild and taken into captivity, to protect them from the dangers which threaten the species' numbers. Koh Kong Reptile Conservation Centre—the kingdom's only dedicated turtle conservation facility—currently holds 192 Royal Turtles, and plans to release 50 of them this year. —AFP



In this file photo Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman speaks during the inauguration of US President Joe Biden on the West Front of the US Capitol in Washington, DC. —AFP

US poet Amanda Gorman says followed by guard, called 'suspicious'

African-American poet Amanda Gorman, who became a star after her reading at the inaugural, a poem inspired by the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. The 22-year-old Harvard University graduate was invited to perform in Washington after First Lady Jill Biden saw one of her readings. She was the youngest poet ever to recite at a presidential inauguration, a role first given to Robert Frost by John F. Kennedy in 1961. Gorman subsequently became the first-ever poet to perform at the National Football League championship Super Bowl, America's most-watched broadcast of the year. In another tweet on Friday, Gorman wrote: "In a sense, he was right. I AM A THREAT: a threat to injustice, to inequality, to ignorance. Anyone who speaks the truth and walks with hope is an obvious and fatal danger to the powers that be." —AFP

Gorman became an international sensation after reciting her original work "The Hill We Climb" at the inaugural, a poem inspired by the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. The 22-year-old Harvard University graduate was invited to perform in Washington after First Lady Jill Biden saw one of her readings. She was the youngest poet ever to recite at a presidential inauguration, a role first given to Robert Frost by John F. Kennedy in 1961. Gorman subsequently became the first-ever poet to perform at the National Football League championship Super Bowl, America's most-watched broadcast of the year. In another tweet on Friday, Gorman wrote: "In a sense, he was right. I AM A THREAT: a threat to injustice, to inequality, to ignorance. Anyone who speaks the truth and walks with hope is an obvious and fatal danger to the powers that be." —AFP

Sports

No COVID vaccine mandate for NBA players: Commissioner

No plans to change 'iconic' NBA logo: Silver

LOS ANGELES: NBA commissioner Adam Silver says the league won't require players to be vaccinated against COVID-19, but if progress continues against the virus the league can play a normal schedule in "relatively full" arenas next season.

"Roughly half of our teams have fans in their arenas right now and if vaccines continue on the pace they are, and they continue to be as effective as they have been against the virus and its variants, we're hopeful that we'll have relatively full arenas next season as well," Silver said Saturday in a virtual press conference on the eve of the All-Star Game in Atlanta, Georgia.

Silver said there are no plans for any overseas exhibition or regular-season games in the upcoming campaign, but he remains confident teams will be able to play a full 82-game schedule starting next October and ending in June. "I'm fairly optimistic, at this point, that we will be able to start on time," Silver said.

Personal decision

The commissioner said he believed it was a "personal decision" whether to be vaccinated "that players need to make just like everyone in our communities needs to make." He said the league and players association were working together to provide players with information on vaccines "and also encouraging them to seek out information on their own" from personal physicians or other advisers.

Silver said that, to his knowledge, no NBA players had yet been vaccinated, although some coaches and other staff who qualified to be inoculated because of age or other reasons had been. Even so, Silver said, the league's coronavirus protocols including mask-wearing, social distancing and rigorous contact tracing and quarantining, had allowed the season to proceed with

only "a relatively small percentage of games" having to be postponed.

The coronavirus pandemic shut down the NBA in March of 2020, the league eventually cancelling 171 games before resuming in a quarantine bubble in Orlando, Florida. After the Los Angeles Lakers captured the title in September, the new season tipped off on December 22 with each team scheduled to play 72 games.

Silver said the financial hit had been and continues to be "significant" and was being borne by both owners and players. "Last season and this season has required a significant investment on the part of the team owners," Silver said. "They accept that. Players will end up taking a reduction in salary this season because they are partners with the league and teams on revenue."

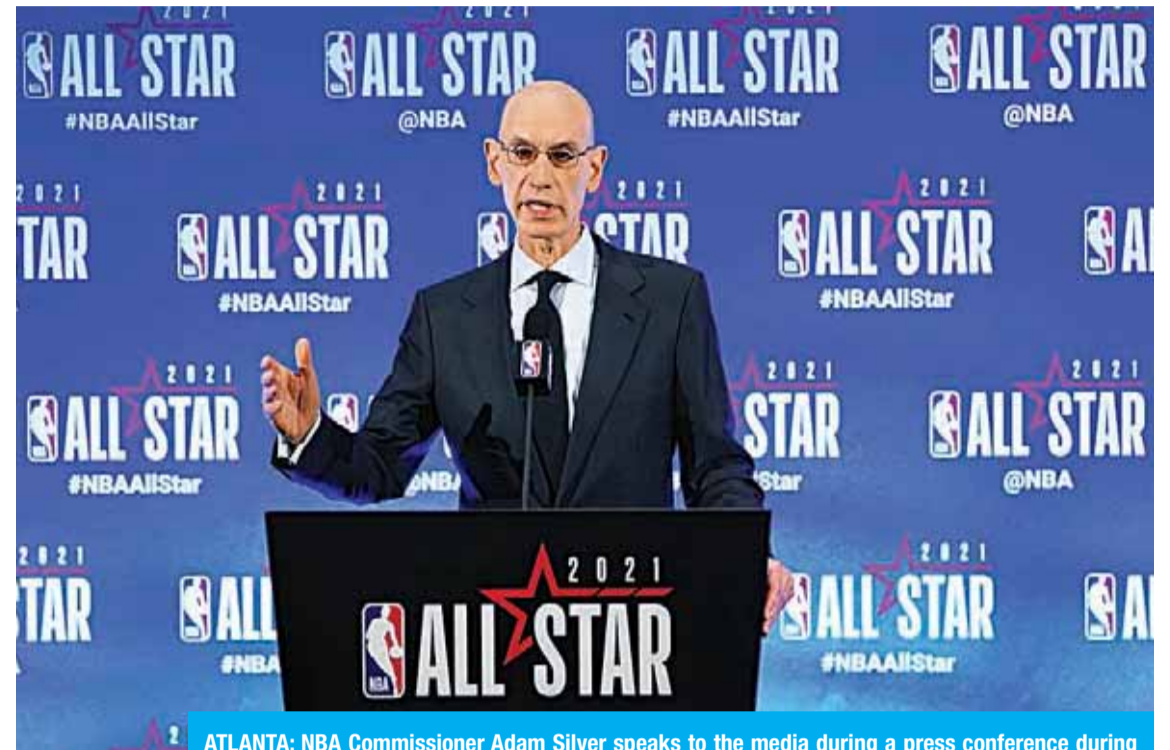
"League executives, team executives have all taken haircuts on their salary," he said. "But I think when we all step back, we all feel very fortunate to be working under these circumstances and my sense is the players feel the same way."

And despite his optimism, Silver sounded a cautionary note when discussing progress made in containing coronavirus. "One thing we've all come to understand over the last year is that the virus is firmly in charge," Silver said.

NBA logo

Meanwhile, Silver said the NBA has no plans to change its "iconic" logo, despite recent calls — including from Brooklyn Nets star Kyrie Irving — to make the late Kobe Bryant the image of the league. "The logo is iconic," Silver said in the virtual press conference, adding that it "doesn't feel like it's the appropriate moment to change it."

A change.org petition urging the league to "immortalize (Bryant) forever as the new NBA logo" has garnered more than 3 million signa-



ATLANTA: NBA Commissioner Adam Silver speaks to the media during a press conference during the NBA All-Star 2021 on Saturday at State Farm Arena in Atlanta, Georgia. —AFP

tures since Bryant died in a helicopter crash in January of 2020. Irving has come out strongly in favor of the idea in recent weeks.

"He was the standard for our generation," Irving said. "We want to set a standard and precedent, like this is excellence, Kobe Bryant. Logo. Yes. Needs to happen. I don't care what anyone says. Black kings built the league. That's exactly where I stand."

The current NBA logo is widely accepted to

be based on the silhouette of former Lakers star Jerry West, who has said before he would be happy to see it change. But Silver said there had been no discussions on the topic in the league office.

Noting that the league had named the All-Star Game's Most Valuable Player award after Bryant, Silver said the league could eventually revisit the idea of updating the logo design. "I appreciate the sentiments, but it feels like the logo is appropriate right now," he said. —AFP

Blachowicz stuns previously-unbeaten Adesanya at UFC 259

LOS ANGELES: Jan Blachowicz upset the odds with a grinding unanimous points decision over the previously unbeaten Israel Adesanya to retain his world light heavyweight title at UFC 259 in Las Vegas yesterday.

"If I had knocked him out it would have been better, but anyway I love this win because he is one of the best in the world," said the 38-year-old Polish fighter after the judges scored it 49-46, 49-45 and 49-45 in his favor. It was the first defeat inflicted on the 31-year-old Adesanya, who was stepping up in weight, in his 21-fight career. The New Zealander, the middleweight title holder, was looking to become only the fifth double-weight world champion in UFC history.

The Nigeria-born fighter found the bigger size of Blachowicz difficult to handle, especially when the Pole drew his opponent into clinches and down on to the mat late in the bout. Blachowicz only really became a contender after passing the age of 35 and had also been the underdog when he won the vacant title last year against American Dominick Reyes.

"I thought that he would be a little bit faster but he hit harder than I thought," said Blachowicz, who has spent his career being underestimated, after a successful first defense of the title. "He was slower and harder which is something I didn't expect. I knew that if I took him down, I'm bigger, stronger a little bit, so I would be better on the ground. I just had to wait for a good moment. I should have used my left hand more, put more pressure on him, but game plan is one (thing), fighting is a different thing."

Blachowicz, whose win-loss record improved to 27-9, initially looked for a one-shot punch to finish the fight early but Adesanya opted to score points by picking at Blachowicz from range. Blachowicz began to take control in the fourth. A big left hand and a takedown saw him keep Adesanya under wraps on the ground. He had Adesanya down again in the fifth for a sustained period of pressure that put the decision beyond doubt. "Back to the drawing board," Adesanya said.

There were three world title fights on the card but no fans in attendance as the United States still battles with the coronavirus pandemic. The opening championship fight made history when Russian Petr Yan was disqualified for an illegal knee to the head against American challenger Aljamain Sterling, who was deemed the winner — the first time a UFC title had changed hands in that fashion.

Brazil's Amanda "The Lion" Nunes strengthened her claim to be the greatest female fighter of all time when she forced a first-round submission from Australian Megan Anderson. The 32-year-old featherweight world champion Nunes — who also holds the UFC bantamweight belt — is unbeaten in her past 12 fights, and recently became a mum for the first time. "You know they say a lion is always dangerous but when she has a baby you can't stop her, ever," Nunes said. —AFP

South American 2022 World Cup qualifiers postponed

ASUNCION: South American football's governing body on Saturday postponed two rounds of 2022 World Cup qualifiers scheduled later this month because of COVID-19 quarantine rules affecting European-based players and the threat of clubs refusing to release their international stars.

The decision to call off the double matchday, which was set to take place on March 25-26 and 30, was "due to the inability to have all the South American players in a timely manner," CONMEBOL said in a tweet. The confederation said it would study the options available in order to reprogram the matches postponed. FIFA has given clubs dispensation to prevent players who may be affected by coronavirus regulations from joining up with their countries during the upcoming international window.

Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola on Friday joined Liverpool counterpart Jurgen Klopp in vowing to stop his players from flying overseas for internationals if they would be required to quarantine on their return. Under current coronavirus guidelines, players arriving in Britain from "red-list" countries, including Brazil and Argentina, are subject to

10 days' hotel confinement.

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. "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."

Brazil-Argentina showdown rearranged

Brazil had been due to play Argentina in Recife on March 30, in a meeting of the top two countries in South American qualifying for next year's World Cup in Qatar. The five-time world champions were also set to play Colombia in Barranquilla four days earlier.

Even if Brazil's players received the all clear, Colombia's Health Minister Fernando Ruiz pointed 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.

Paris Saint-Germain risked losing Neymar, Marquinhos and Angel Di Maria for a game against Ligue 1 leaders Lille had they joined up with their respective national teams. French government regulations stipulate that anyone entering the country from outside Europe must self-



MONTEVIDEO: In this file photo taken on November 17, 2020 Brazil's Renan Lodi (left) and Uruguay's Edinson Cavani vie for the ball during their closed-door 2022 FIFA World Cup South American qualifier football match at the Centenario Stadium in Montevideo. —AFP

isolate for seven days on arrival and present a negative COVID-19 test at the end of that period. PSG coach Mauricio Pochettino conceded it was "a complicated matter" but called for a "fair and just agreement for everyone."

"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 said. Some European nations have moved fixtures in order 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. —AFP

NBK launch UEFA Champions League Mastercard Cards

KUWAIT: As part of its efforts to reward customers and provide them with advanced and innovative card products and services, Mastercard and National Bank of Kuwait (NBK), are announcing the launch of the UEFA Champions League Mastercard Cards, which have been tailor-made for customers who have passions for football, sports and a healthy lifestyle.

The UEFA Champions League World Mastercard Credit Card and UEFA Champions League Platinum Mastercard Prepaid Card both come with a host of exceptional benefits. These include unique rewards programs, such as the NBK Goal Points, which can be redeemed at selected outlets and websites, as well as a range of other exclusive prizes and draws. In addition, cardholders can also take part in monthly draws to win exciting packages and gifts.

In another exciting twist, cardholders will now be able to join the live action by simply wagering on their favorite football team and earning thousands of points if their chosen team wins a major game or trophy in the tournament. This is the first time that customers are able to have their passions and dedication for football rewarded with tangible benefits.

Additionally, the UEFA Champions

League World Mastercard Credit Card issued by NBK comes complete with many complimentary services, including free access to multiple international airport lounges, free travel insurance, local concierge services, free valet parking, NBK Secure Shopping, as well as many other offers and discounts.

Speaking on this occasion, Mohammed Al-Othman, NBK's Group Consumer Banking GM at National Bank of Kuwait, said: "At NBK, we focus our efforts on developing our innovative banking products and services that are tailored to customers' needs and various lifestyles, in addition to offering the best benefits and exclusive promotions all year round, including discounts and special campaigns to attend international tournaments."

"The new cards are specially designed for customers with passion for football, sports and healthy lifestyle representing a step in our endeavors to provide integrated banking solutions that suit all our customers' segments. To this end, we rely on our continuous communication with them and our keenness to build strategic partnerships with leading global institutions, in a way that contributes to maintaining our leading position and enriching the banking experience of our customers," he added.

Othman affirmed that Mastercard Credit Cards issued by NBK, entitle customers to participate in the campaigns launched by the bank all year round, and also numerous benefits and features that



match their unique lifestyle.

Khalid Elgibali, Division President, MENA, Mastercard said, "We're delighted to collaborate with NBK, one of our longest-standing partners in Kuwait. At Mastercard, we continuously strive to offer our cardholders a host of truly priceless experiences, and this thrilling partnership is yet another testament to connect cardholders across the country to their innermost passions. The new card will not only drive loyalty for football fans but will also demonstrate the benefits of digital payments to a discerning Kuwaiti audience, thanks to our sponsorship of the UEFA Champions League that we have been proud to support for more than 25 years"

Customers can earn NBK Goal

Points on their purchases using the eligible cards: For every KD 1 spent locally, customer will earn 3 NBK Goal Points for World Card and 1 NBK Goal Point for Platinum, whereas for every KD 1 spent internationally, customer will earn 5 NBK Goal Points for World Card and 3 NBK Goal Points for Platinum.

In addition, and as part of its keenness to provide exceptional rewards to its customers and meet all their various needs, Mastercard Credit Cards issued by NBK provides to the cardholders the opportunity to get cashback up to 25 percent on their purchases across the world when using eligible Mastercard Credit Cards issued by NBK, at selected leading international brands.

Sports

Lewandowski hat-trick tops Haaland double as Bayern beat Dortmund

Bayern moves two points clear of RB Leipzig at the top

BERLIN: Robert Lewandowski scored a hat-trick to leave him on 31 Bundesliga goals this season and seal Bayern Munich's 4-2 comeback home win over Borussia Dortmund on Saturday in Germany's 'Klassiker'. Dortmund raced into a 2-0 lead as Erling Braut Haaland netted twice in the first nine minutes behind closed doors at the Allianz Arena.

However Lewandowski then struck twice, the second from the penalty spot, to haul Bayern level before the break. Leon Goretzka put Bayern ahead for the first time with two minutes left before Lewandowski completed his hat-trick on 90 minutes.

"The quality is certainly there, that's our DNA," said Thomas Mueller of Bayern's fightback. The win leaves Bayern two points clear of RB Leipzig at the top of the table. "We shook ourselves up at 2-0 down and deserved to win because we were the dominant team for (the last) 60 minutes," said Bayern coach Hansi Flick. Bayern have won the last five meetings between the clubs.

'Not good enough'

"We weren't good enough. We started well, but didn't play good enough football. We should have been more brave," said Dortmund midfielder Emre Can. The match delivered on its billing as the battle of the Bundesliga's star strikers. Haaland scored with just two minutes gone when his shot clipped the heel of Jerome Boateng.

Bayern were reeling after nine minutes when Thorgan Hazard flicked the ball back inside for Haaland to again smash the ball home. Dortmund

could have been 3-0 up on 25 minutes but Thomas Meunier squandered the chance to shoot.

A minute later, Bayern pulled a goal back when Leroy Sane squared the ball for Lewandowski to score. Bayern went into the break level when Mahmoud Dahoud brought down Kingsley Coman in the area and Lewandowski converted the penalty.

After a frantic first-half, the tempo dropped in the second as both teams suffered key injuries. "We started great and ended very badly," admitted Dortmund coach Edin Terzic. Haaland came off after an hour gone with a cut on the back of his ankle.

With ten minutes left, Boateng had to be helped off in clear discomfort after twisting his knee. Dortmund were left fuming for what captain Marco Reus claimed was a clear foul on Can late on. "It was a clear foul - if that had been against Bayern, it would have been given," fumed Marco Reus.

Bayern settled the matter when Goretzka pinged his shot in off the post before Lewandowski completed his hat-trick with an outstanding low drive. With ten games left, Lewandowski threatens to break Gerd Mueller's all-time record of 40 Bundesliga goals in the 1971/72 season.

Leipzig romp

Earlier RB Leipzig briefly climbed top of the table with a 3-0 romp at Freiburg thanks to goals by Christopher Nkunku, Alexander Sorloth and Emil Forsberg. Leipzig impressed in their final tune-up before facing Liverpool in Budapest next Wednesday in the last 16 of the Champions League having lost



MUNICH: Bayern Munich's Polish forward Robert Lewandowski (left) scores his team's fourth goal during the German first division Bundesliga football match between FC Bayern Munich and BVB Borussia Dortmund in Munich, southern Germany, on Saturday. — AFP

the first leg 2-0.

Leipzig coach Julian Nagelsmann said goal-scoring left-back Angelino will "probably" miss the Liverpool game with a leg injury. Third-placed

Wolfsburg are now ten points adrift of Bayern having stumbled to a 2-1 defeat at mid-table Hoffenheim whose striker Andrej Kramaric scored the winning goal just before half-time. — AFP

Morata spearheads Juve fightback against Lazio to close gap at top

MILAN: Alvaro Morata scored twice and set up another as Juventus warmed up for this week's Champions League game against Porto with a 3-1 comeback win over Lazio on Saturday to close the gap on the Milan teams in Serie A.

Cristiano Ronaldo started on the bench before next week's key last 16, second leg game against the Portuguese in Turin with Juventus trailing 2-1. Champions Juventus fell behind to an early Joaquin Correa goal following a Dejan Kulusevski passing error midfield.

But Morata set up Adrien Rabiot to pull the hosts level before the break with the Spaniard scoring twice in a three-minute spell before the hour mark. "Today we started the game 20 minutes late but it was normal because many were out of position and many returned (from injury)," said Pirlo. "But there was a great reaction, we didn't get down and

despite the many absences we played an excellent match. For us it was a final, an important match for the standings and we're happy."

Paulo Dybala remains out injured along with defender Giorgio Chiellini and midfielder Matthijs de Ligt, while Rodrigo Bentancur positive for coronavirus. But Juan Cuadrado started after missing three league games with Arthur and Leonardo Bonucci also returning off the bench in the second half.

Morata started up front alongside Kulusevski, with Ciro Immobile leading the Lazio attack alongside Correa. And the Argentine pounced after quarter of an hour after Kulusevski gave the ball away, shaking off Merih Demiral to beat Wojciech Szczesny in the Juventus goal. Szczesny denied Luis Alberto a second eight minutes later. Rabiot pulled a goal back six minutes before the break, picking up a Morata through ball to fire in a powerful left-footed angled drive over Pepe Reina.

Both sides had chances after the break with Reina denying Federico Chiesa, Szczesny clearing from Correa and a Sergej Milinkovic-Savic header rattling the bar. Chiesa set up Morata for the second after 57 minutes with the Spaniard completing a brace from the penalty spot three minutes later after Milinkovic-Savic brought down Aaron Ramsey in the box. — AFP



TURIN: Juventus' Spanish forward Alvaro Morata (right) scores his team's second goal during the Italian Serie A football match between Juventus and Lazio at The Juventus Stadium in Turin, northern Italy on Saturday. — AFP

Barcelona edge closer to top after Osasuna win

MADRID: Barcelona beat Osasuna 2-0 on Saturday night to edge two points behind first place Atletico Madrid in La Liga before the league's leaders squared off against city rival Real Madrid yesterday. Lionel Messi set up both goals in Pamplona as Jordi Alba hammered home in the first half before the 18-year-old Ilaix Moriba came off the bench to curl in an impressive shot late in the second.

"Thankfully Leo gave me the pass and I don't know how I cut in and shot with my left foot, I'm just glad it went in," Ilaix said. "I will never forget it, I will take that goal to my grave." Ilaix's strike was his first goal in La Liga and another breakthrough moment for a Barca youngster, 24 hours before the club hopes a brighter future can begin under a new president.

A few weeks ago, Ronald Koeman's side looked too far adrift in the title race but 10 victories out of 11 have shot them back into contention, even if Atletico remain in the driving seat. "Any result is good for us," said Koeman. After coming from two goals down to beat Sevilla after extra-time in the semi-final of the Copa del Rey on Wednesday, Barcelona now have one trophy, and perhaps even a domestic double, in their sights.

Their success in recent months has owed much to a talented crop of youngsters, with Ilaix — a dynamic but technically gifted midfielder — the latest to emerge. "Every time he comes into the team he gives the team something extra," said Koeman. "Because of his personality, his energy, most of all he's good with the ball, and physically he's a strong boy. He's gaining ground and showing he can be more with the first team."

Barca faced some nervy moments early on as Jonathan Calleri tried an ambitious lob from distance before Ruben Garcia's curler from the edge of the area required an athletic save from Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

Messi shot wide and then set up the opener, drifting in from the right and spotting the scuttling Alba racing in behind on the opposite side. Messi clipped a pass through three Osasuna defenders for Alba to collect and he lashed it high and in from the angle.

Garcia deserved an equalizer soon after for his first touch alone, a sumptuous cushioning of a long ball forward, but Ter Stegen was again there to deny the finish. There was more control about the second half but Barcelona needed a second to make it comfortable and substitute Ilaix seized his moment, shaping to shoot with his right before coolly rolling onto his left and whipping his shot into the corner.

While Barcelona sustained momentum from their midweek victory in the cup, Sevilla failed to bounce back, instead sinking to another loss away at Elche earlier on Saturday. Raul Guti and Guido Carrillo sealed a crucial 2-1 win for Elche, with Luuk de Jong adding a late consolation for Sevilla, who have now lost three consecutive matches in eight days. They sit six points ahead of Real Sociedad in fifth. Elche climb to 17th, two points above the bottom three. — AFP



PAMPLONA: Barcelona's Spanish midfielder Ilaix Moriba (right) celebrates with Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi, Barcelona's French forward Ousmane Dembele and Barcelona's Danish forward Martin Braithwaite after scoring during the Spanish League football match between CA Osasuna and FC Barcelona at El Sadar stadium in Pamplona on Saturday. — 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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e-mail: info@kuwaittimes.net

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

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United shatter City winning run

Liverpool crisis mounts • Fulham plunder Anfield win

LONDON: Manchester United shattered Manchester City's record winning streak with an impressive 2-0 victory against the Premier League leaders, while Liverpool hit a new low as relegation-threatened Fulham won at Anfield yesterday. Pep Guardiola's side were on an English top-flight record run of 21 successive wins in all competitions heading into the Manchester derby. But United ruined City's 28-game unbeaten run in all competitions thanks to an early penalty from Bruno Fernandes and Luke Shaw's second-half strike at the Etihad Stadium.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's team, unbeaten in their last 22 away league games, moved above Leicester into second place, but they are still 11 points behind City with 10 games left. Despite surrendering their 15-match winning league run in their first defeat since losing at Tottenham in November, City remain firm favourites to lift the title for the third time in four seasons. "We will be the news because we lost. But the news is 21 victories in a row. We played much better than the game against West Ham which we won," Guardiola said. "We will try to win as many games as possible to be champions."

Barring a dramatic collapse from City in the closing weeks, United's third win in the last four league meetings with their bitter rivals is likely to be remembered for cementing a top-four place rather than rekindling their title hopes. United will be left to rue the recent slump that allowed City to pull so far ahead in the title race, but at least they slowed their neighbours' march towards the trophy. "When you come away with a 2-0 win and another clean sheet and a performance like this then you are delighted," Solskjaer said. "But City are too far ahead to think we can catch them."

With just 34 seconds gone, Anthony Martial made a dangerous raid into the City area and Gabriel Jesus responded with a needless, clumsy challenge that sent the French striker sprawling. Fernandes stepped up to take the penalty and squeezed his shot past Ederson, who got a hand on the ball but couldn't keep it out. It

was United's first goal in four games, putting City were behind for the first time in 20 league games.

Guardiola's men gradually wrestled control and had a strong penalty appeal rejected by referee Anthony Taylor when Raheem Sterling was blocked by Fred. Riyad Mahrez shot inches wide and Rodri's drive hit the bar, but City were caught with a 50th-minute sucker punch. United left-back Shaw broke from deep inside his own half, played a one-two with Marcus Rashford and fired a fine finish past Ederson from just inside the area.

Liverpool crash again

Likely to be replaced by City as champions, Liverpool have now lost six consecutive home league games and gone eight without a win at Anfield after a 1-0 loss to Fulham. That run is all the more remarkable as Jurgen Klopp's men had gone nearly four years without a league defeat at home in 68 games between April 2017 and January this year. Liverpool's best chance of qualifying for next season's Champions League may now be in winning the European Cup for a seventh time as they sit seventh, four points adrift of the top four, having played at least one game more than all their rivals.

Despite their lowly position in the table, Fulham had lost just one of their previous six games and were well worthy of a half-time lead. Mohamed Salah's surprise substitution in midweek provoked fresh speculation over the Egyptian's future and he was at fault for the only goal in first-half stoppage time. Mario Lemina outmuscled Salah to win the ball inside the Liverpool box before firing low across Alisson Becker into the far corner. "We don't have the mentality we are used to but the boys want to win games and I saw that today. We still made mistakes and that's the problem," Klopp said. Fulham remain in the bottom three but only on goal difference behind Brighton. Newcastle, one point above in the relegation zone, remain in deep trouble after a 0-0 draw at second bottom West Bromwich Albion. — AFP



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's Belgian midfielder Kevin De Bruyne (up) is tackled by Manchester United's Swedish defender Victor Lindelof during an English Premier League football match at the Etihad Stadium yesterday. - AFP



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