



6 Thousands defy virus curbs for Women's Day rallies



10 The long lines of Milan's 'new coronavirus poor'



13 Egyptian Billy Elliot sets new bar for Middle Eastern ballet



15 Messi to Paris: Barca nightmare, and PSG's unattainable dream?



Kuwait Times REGISTER TODAY for the COVID-19 vaccine [See Page 16](#)

Curfew fresh body blow for struggling businesses

Long-suffering restaurants, retailers witness sharp drop in sales



KUWAIT: Customers enjoy lunch in their car outside a restaurant in Kuwait City yesterday. As dine-in services are banned, some restaurants in Kuwait have come up with in-car dining. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat (More pics on Page 3)

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Many businesses already hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic have been further affected after the imposition of the latest 12-hour curfew in Kuwait. "We have already suffered losses due to the closure of dine-in services at the restaurant for over a month. Ninety percent of our orders are usually during the evening, but now we cannot even deliver, so our sales have dropped dramatically. The situation is really bad, and the government will not even compensate us," said Ali, who runs a Lebanese restaurant in Salmiya.

Kuwait imposed a daily curfew from 5 pm to 5 am from March 7 until April 8 aimed at curbing a sharp rise in coronavirus cases. Since Feb 7, the government cut opening hours for non-essential retail shops and banned non-citizens from entering the country.

The health ministry yesterday announced 1,157 additional COVID-19 cases over a 24-hour span, taking total number of infections to 203,055, while eight fatalities were recorded, raising the death toll to 1,141. Active cases amounted to 13,747 with 181 in intensive

care units, spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said. Health authorities conducted 7,760 swab tests, which means 14.9 percent of swab tests performed in 24 hours were positive, Sanad revealed.

"Our sales had already fallen by over 65 percent with the (earlier) 8 pm closure, as the peak of our sales is after 7 pm. Now with the curfew, we close at 3:30 pm. Our sales are almost dead, and I don't think we will be able to resist for long. We already closed one branch last year due to the pandemic. I hope we will survive," said a salesman at a major retail store.

"The situation of our business is very bad. Sales had already dropped during the pandemic, and negative news announced by the government is badly affecting our sales. When a minister announces there will be no salaries next month, people typically stop buying unnecessary stuff such as outfits and bags, which is what we sell," rued the owner of another retail store.

The huge drop in sales has made owners of retail stores hope the government announces a total closure.

Continued on Page 2

News in brief

Egypt arrests pedophile

CAIRO: Egyptian police arrested yesterday a man alleged to be a pedophile caught on a surveillance camera assaulting a young girl, the interior ministry said. The footage went viral on social media on Monday night, with many users calling for the perpetrator's prompt arrest. It showed a man abusing a minor near the staircase of a residential building in the upmarket suburb of Maadi. — AFP

Biden halts some drone strikes

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden has suspended drone strikes outside of war zones where US forces are operating, reversing the policy of his predecessor Donald Trump, who had given the military free rein in countries such as Somalia. Any drone strikes planned against jihadist groups outside of Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq will have to be approved by the White House, the Pentagon said. — AFP

Food drives third of emissions

PARIS: A third of all the world's man-made greenhouse gas emissions are linked to food, according to new global research that tracked produce from field to fork to landfill. Land clearing and deforestation, fertilizer use, livestock and waste all contribute to the emissions from the system to feed Earth's 7.7 billion people. — AFP

Malala signs Apple TV deal

ISLAMABAD: Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai, who won the Nobel Peace Prize as a teenager after surviving a Taliban assassination attempt, has signed a deal with Apple TV+ that will see her produce dramas and documentaries that focus on women and children. The multi-year partnership would "draw on her ability to inspire people around the world", the company said. — AFP

Kuwait Flour Mills adds vitamin D to wheat flour

KUWAIT: Kuwait Flour Mills and Bakeries Company, in cooperation with the Food and Nutrition Authority, announced the addition of vitamin D to wheat flour according to international standards and as applied in some Arab and international

countries. Chief Executive Officer Mullaq Al-Zayed said in a statement yesterday that fortifying flour with iron and folic acid is an effective way to maintain the level of vitamin D in the body, reduce its deficiency and prevent diseases associated with it.

The mills sector can play an important role for people suffering from vitamin D deficiency, as basic ingredients will be enriched with this vitamin, Zayed said, adding that mixtures containing vitamin D can eliminate the dangerous effects of this vitamin's deficiency. A small study will be made on flour with vitamin D to follow up and evaluate the flour enrichment program to prepare reports on the final product, he added.

China launches virus passport

BEIJING: China has launched a health certificate program for Chinese international travellers, leading the world in plans for so-called virus passports. The digital certificate, which shows a user's vaccination status and virus test results, is available for Chinese citizens via a program on Chinese social media platform WeChat that was launched on Monday.

The certificate is being rolled out "to help promote world economic recovery and facilitate cross-

border travel", a foreign ministry spokesman said. However, although the certificate is meant for travel in and out of China, it is currently only available for use by Chinese citizens and it is not yet mandatory. There is also no indication authorities in other countries will use it when Chinese travellers go abroad.

Nevertheless, the certificate, which is also available in paper form, is thought to be the world's first known "virus passport". The United States and Britain are among countries currently considering implementing similar permits. The European Union is also working on a vaccine "green pass" that would allow citizens to travel between member countries and abroad.

Continued on Page 2

Jordan aims for green with 10m tree campaign

KUFRANJAH, Jordan: On a bare hill in Jordan's verdant Ajloun region, dozens of people plant saplings as part of a reforestation effort that aims to reach 10 million trees in 10 years. "The trees in our region are beautiful," says 11-year-old Mohammed Al-Ananza, helping his father Mustafa plant a carob sapling. "It's a real shame that we have lost so many to fires... We should work together to protect them," he says as they work near the Kufranjah forest north of the capital Amman.

Forests make up only one percent of the desert kingdom's territory,

according to the agriculture ministry, though Jordan also has an estimated 23 million orchard trees, half of them olives. Forest fires strike almost every year in the Middle Eastern country due to high summer temperatures, in a trend scientists expect to intensify with climate change.

The blazes are often started by picnickers' barbecues or carelessly discarded cigarettes. There were 499 fires in wood and forest areas last year alone, according to the agriculture ministry. "We must make up for what has been lost in the fires," said

Continued on Page 2

In light of the current health conditions to confront the spread of COVID-19, the company saw the dire need to produce flour with vitamin D, which plays an important role in strengthening the immune system of the body, Zayed stressed. The company is moving forward rapidly to achieve food security according to an effective implementation mechanism and plans, as it has attached special importance to food security as a basic strategy in its vision, he said.

The Mills Company was established in 1961 and began industrial activity in 1965. In 1986 it merged with the Kuwait Bakeries Company to become the Kuwait Flour Mills and Bakeries Company. — KUNA



BEIJING: A woman holds a phone yesterday displaying a mock-up of China's new digital health certificate. — AFP



KUFRANJAH, Jordan: Jordanians take part in the planting of eucalyptus and carob saplings near the forest of Kufranjah north of Amman on Feb 11, 2021. — AFP

Local

Deputy Amir chairs KFAS meeting, new Director General named

Sheikh Mishal urges KFAS to back up scientific and technological sectors

KUWAIT: His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah chaired, at Seif Palace on Monday, a meeting grouping Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS) officials. During the meeting, Dr Khaled Ali Mohammad Al-Fadhel was chosen as KFAS Director General. The meeting was attended by the following board members: Justice Dhari Abdullah Al-Othman, Mustafa Al-Shimali, Dr Abdullah Youssef Al-Ghunaim, Sheikh Dr Mishal Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Dr Ibrahim Rashed Al-Reshdan and Dr Amani Sulaiman Bouqmaz. Their presence marked the new board lineup. His Highness Sheikh Mishal advised KFAS's new leaders to back up scientific and technological sectors for the sake of further progress. Moreover, he urged for encouraging research, knowledge seeking, innovation and creativity in the State of Kuwait with aim of creating a scientific entity based on most advanced research means for boosting citizens' capacities in various scientific realms. His Highness Sheikh Mishal also urged them to work as a team and cooperate for drawing up schemes and strategies designed to elevate the name of the State of Kuwait aloft at various regional and international quarters, wishing them best of luck. — KUNA



KUWAIT: His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah chairs a meeting grouping Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences officials. — KUNA

UK Ambassador bids farewell to Kuwait

By UK Ambassador Michael Davenport



Diplomats are supposed to be used to moving on, but I must admit that I never find it very easy. Kuwait is no exception. My wife Lavinia and I have been fortunate to spend six months longer here than we expected, giving us the opportunity to savor Kuwait's best kept secret - it's beautiful, mild winter. We have made wonderful friends in Kuwait and look forward to staying in touch.

Although I had visited Kuwait briefly two years after the First Gulf War, the experience of living and working here was completely new. Only living in Kuwait have I come to understand the depth and breadth of relations between Britain and Kuwait and the extent to which so many Kuwaitis have come to see Britain, and London in particular, as a second home.

I arrived here with the words of the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office ringing in my ears - 'Congratulations on the job Michael, but please do remember that relations with Kuwait are very good, so just don't mess it up!'

He was right of course. But I think His Highness the late Amir Sheikh Sabah hit the nail even more firmly on the head when he told me that relations between our two countries are not just very good, or very special, but "unique and distinguished." This is due in no small part to the very close friendship between Kuwait's Ruling Family and the British Royal Family.

It was therefore both a great pleasure and an enormous privilege to welcome His Royal Highness Prince William to Kuwait at the end of 2019 and more recently his father, His Royal Highness Prince Charles, when he came last October to express his condolences to His Highness the Amir on the death of Sheikh Sabah.

During 2019 Britain and Kuwait marked together the 120th anniversary of our Treaty of Friendship of 1899. His Highness the Prime Minister hosted an anniversary event and we watched with pride as the Kuwait Towers were lit up with our respective flags for the occasion. Later that year Sheikh Mohamed Abdullah Al Sabah attended celebrations hosted in London by the Lord Mayor and the late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al Sabah visited London for the signature of new accords to deepen our bilateral defense co-operation, which remains at the core of our relations.

Of course none of us in 2019 anticipated that 2020 would be the year of COVID-19 and the global battle against the pandemic. We are grateful above all for the unflagging hard work and personal sacrifice of Kuwait's healthcare workers to keep us safe over the last twelve months, and we mourn those who have given their lives in this struggle.

Many young Kuwaitis I have spoken to over the last few years are impressively energized by efforts both to tackle climate change and clean up our environment. So it is my hope that Kuwait will support an ambitious outcome at the Glasgow Summit this November, one which really will limit the rise in temperatures which is threatening life on our planet as we know it.

As I prepare to leave Kuwait, following a long line of more illustrious predecessors since 1904, I feel confident that close and friendly relations between our two countries will continue. Even during COVID-19 more Kuwaiti students than ever before are studying at British universities. Together we are tackling the cyber threat more effectively and we are deepening scientific collaboration to ensure a sustainable future for coming generations.

Over the last few years we have opened up new opportunities and together laid the foundations for an even closer and more enduring partnership. Long may it last!

KNG's Deputy Chief underlines continuation of rehabilitation plans

KUWAIT: Deputy Chief of Kuwait National Guard (KNG) Lieutenant General Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah toured Al-Samoud camp and inspected several units, underlining the continuation of rehabilitation plans and increasing combat readiness of KNG forces to always be ready to protect the country's capabilities. KNG said in a press statement Monday that Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf was received upon his arrival by the Commander of Protection and Reinforcement of KNG Brigadier General Hamad Salem Ahmad, who provided a briefing on the duties of the task force during the period of partial ban in protecting state facilities and supporting the Ministry of Interior in emergency situations.

KNG's Deputy Chief listened to a briefing in the Directorate of Combat Support, which included a visual presentation on the combat support units, the operations they carry out, human resources and advanced equipment that contribute to the implementation of security and military tasks to the fullest. Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf went to the Al-Samoud camp, where he listened to an explanation about the modern mechanisms and weapons of the Reinforcement Brigade and the Internal Security Brigade in KNG and their use in special operations. In the field of Al-Samoud, he was briefed on the weapons and equipment used in preventive inspection and the detection of explosives, on which human personnel are trained to master the operations during the performance of their duties in guarding vital sites.

In the Training Directorate, he inspected the National Guard Training Institute and listened to a briefing on the command and junior staff course, its curricula and stages, stressing the interest in rehabilitation and training processes and refining the experiences of National Guard personnel. He also toured the guests' sleep and the health club and



KUWAIT: Deputy Chief of KNG Lieutenant General Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is seen during his tour at Al-Samoud camp. — KUNA

looked at the available services, commending the organization of these important facilities and the services they provide that contribute to the comfort of the members and guests of the National Guard.

KNG's Deputy Chief concluded the tour with a visit to the music branch, where he listened to one of the training sections of KNG members, stressing the excellence of the National Guard's music in national forums. The leaders directed efforts to

sharpen the expertise and skills of its associates, underscoring that the National Guard, since the start of its march under the leadership of His Highness Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah, has made use of all capabilities necessary to advance the human element as it is the pillar of the desired development and to ensure success in achieving the great goal of maintaining the security of the homeland and protecting its capabilities. — KUNA

Jordan aims for green with 10m...

Continued from Page 1

Belal Qishat, head of the nature protection department at the environment ministry. "It's the only way to fight desertification and climate change and to protect biodiversity."

Mahmoud Al-Ananza watched on as his grandson and son got to work on the hill in Kufrajah. The family has volunteered but agriculture and environment ministry employees were also among the 150 people in charge of planting 30,000 trees in the area. "I was born here and I can tell you that if you plant cypress trees, eucalypts, olives, carob or oak, they will grow on their own," the man in his 70s said, wearing a traditional red-and-white keffiyeh scarf.

The program focuses on species that, after the initial phase of taking root, can survive without a lot

of additional water. Mohamed Daoudia, agriculture minister at the time of the project's launch last month, said fires were the biggest problem for Jordan's wooded areas. "Illegal tree felling only represents one percent of the damage to forests," he told AFP.

In October, 50 hectares of olive and forest trees burnt in the Ajloun region, while a year earlier in Jerash province, 80 hectares went up in flames. Qishat, of the environment ministry, said the reforestation project aimed to rehabilitate only "the regions fit for doing so". "We don't plan to cover the whole kingdom with trees because each part of the country has its own special features," he said.

The aim of the first stage is to create forests in Karak and Tafila provinces south of the capital, planting in each area 30,000 commonly found trees like eucalyptus, jujube and carob. The campaign began in Kufrajah, which Qishat described as "Jordan's lungs". The kingdom also plans to work on fire prevention by setting up monitoring posts and patrols, providing its civil defense with specialized vehicles and carrying out forest surveillance using drones. — AFP

China launches virus passport...

Continued from Page 1

China's program includes an encrypted QR code that allows each country to obtain a travellers' health

information, state media agency Xinhua reported Monday. "QR health codes" within WeChat and other Chinese smartphone apps are already required to gain entry to domestic transport and many public spaces in China. The apps track a user's location and produce a "green" code - synonymous with good health - if a user has not been in close contact with a confirmed case or has not travelled to a virus hotspot. But the system has sparked privacy concerns and fears it marks an expansion of government surveillance. — AFP

Curfew fresh body blow...

Continued from Page 1

"With these meager sales that hardly cover our expenses, we wish that a total closure is imposed, so at least we will be relieved from paying half the rent. The government won't compensate us anyway. I'm not sure if we will be able to survive for long if this situation persists," stressed a

salesman at a shoe store.

The drop in sales has led some businesses to cut the prices of their services. A maintenance company is offering a discounted rate for the annual contract for maintaining kitchen and sanitary appliances from KD 120 to only KD 50 per year.

Employees too are facing a tough time, as some workers were not able to reach home on the first day of the curfew due to heavy traffic. Three deliverymen of a restaurant in Kuwait City could only deliver half their orders, and by the time they returned to the restaurant to return the undelivered orders, it was 5 pm already. They had to spend the night sleeping on the floor of the restaurant.

UAE to host IAEA's most complex nuclear crisis drill

DUBAI: The UAE said yesterday it will this year host the International Atomic Energy Agency's most complex nuclear emergency exercise, a 36-hour drill that takes place every three to five years. The exercise, which will involve more than 170 countries, will be held at the UAE's Barakah nuclear power plant on the Gulf coast west of the capital Abu Dhabi, which lies some 340 km from Iranian shores.

The drill is designed to test international responses and capabilities in the event of a severe nuclear emergency. "In the last quarter of this year, UAE will be hosting an international emergency exercise by the IAEA, which is called ConvEx-3," the permanent representative of the UAE to the IAEA, Hamad Al Kaabi, told AFP. "It allows all the countries, more than 170 countries including countries from the region, to participate."

Known as the Level 3 Convention Exercise, it is the IAEA's highest level emergency exercise. The United Arab Emirates, the fourth largest crude producer in the OPEC cartel, was built on oil. Nevertheless, it is spending billions to develop enough renewable energy to cover half of its needs by 2050.

The Barakah plant, a first for the Arab world, started up in August when authorities pushed the button on the first of four reactors, with the second reactor receiving its operating license yesterday. When fully operational, the four reactors will generate 5,600 megawatts, around 25 percent of the UAE's electricity needs.

But the region is grappling with conflicts. A few hundred kilometers away to the east, Iran has been facing severe sanctions designed to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons. To the south, Yemeni rebels have been attacking Saudi Arabia and its oil facilities with drones and missiles. Yemen's Houthis, backed by Tehran, have threatened to hit targets in the UAE including the nuclear plant, over its involvement in the six-year Yemen war.

But Kaabi said that the Barakah site is well protected. Asked whether the plant is "immune" to outside threats, the Emirati official told AFP that "when we gave the license, we took into consideration all these elements including physical security, cyber security, and protection against sabotage and any potential threat". "It continues to be updated, based on any additional information," he said. — AFP

Local

Kuwait Cabinet discusses latest on health situation in weekly meeting

Appointment reservation system for co-ops during curfew hours



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

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Cabinet on Monday held its weekly meeting, chaired by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. On the occasion of the Isra and Mi'raj, which falls on Thursday, the Cabinet congratulated His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the Kuwaiti people. Moreover, the Cabinet was briefed by the Health Minister Dr Basel Al-Humoud Al-Sabah on the health situation in the country. The minister also pointed out that those who received the coronavirus vaccine in Kuwait has reached 322,000 so far. The Cabinet called on all citizens and residents to continue cooperation and commitment to

health requirements and precautionary measures. Kuwait on Sunday reported 1,326 new coronavirus cases and six deaths, raising the total number of contamination cases to 201,898 and deaths to 1,133. The number of patients in ICUs stood Monday at 180, while the total number of people still receiving medical care reached 13,643, the Ministry of Health's official spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said. Ministry personnel conducted 9,215 swabs within, raising the total number of such examination to 1,859,578, he said, adding that the infection percentage was 14.4 percent of the swabs.

The Cabinet has studied the recommendations of the Ministerial Committee for COVID-19 Emergencies, and then decided the following: First,

assigning the Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs to coordinate with the Ministry of Health to expedite the draft law amending some provisions of Law No 8 of 1969 regarding preventive health precautions from communicable diseases and consider it among the priorities. Second, to assign the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, in coordination with each of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Community Development and Kuwait Municipality to implement the appointment reservation system for the entry of consumer cooperative societies during the period of partial curfew in the country. Furthermore, the Cabinet discussed the latest regional and global political developments, where it condemned the recent Houthi attacks on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. — KUNA

EPA system to control transport of medical waste

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The Environmental Public Authority (EPA) had previously issued a decree establishing a digital system to control the transport of medical waste. This should be done by installing detectors on all vehicles transporting such waste.

According to the EPA, this will be implemented soon. "We are currently preparing a schedule for the transporters and their timings. We will soon announce the start of operating the new system. The vehicles will be connected to a central operations room and all the collected and delivered waste will be registered. This new sys-

tem was approved to ensure better control on delivering the waste properly and protecting the environment," Abdullah Al-Otaibi, head of the waste department at EPA, told Kuwait Times.

EPA is penalizing violators who pollute the environment. "We have ticketed tankers dumping sewage water into rain sewers. And we apply the same for medical waste vehicles if they dispose it in any place other than the incinerator. Medical waste is not dumped but burned," explained Otaibi. He said this system will connect various institutions related to waste collection to simplify operations and protect the environment.

The Municipality is not in charge of collecting medical waste, which is collected separately from other waste from both public and private hospitals. An administrator of a private hospital said the hospital has a contract for collecting medical waste daily. He however refused to provide information about the charges for collecting this waste. He also said the hospital is not in charge of controlling the vehicles transporting



the waste, noting that this is the responsibility of the cleaning company that operates these vehicles.

In my view

Stop manufacturing nuclear weapons

By Azzah Al-Ghamdi

In this article I want to focus on how to keep our environment safe from any disaster that might happen because of something that is dangerous to both human health and the environment. Today I will focus on nuclear weapons, the use of which is prohibited by the UN Security Council because any mistake will lead to a humanitarian and environmental disaster.

Nuclear weapons are highly dangerous, even if they are not used in any war, because any mistake will cause a huge disaster and no one can stop it. Wars also have a bad effect on the environment. I think it's time now to think how we can live peacefully and love and protect each other to make our world a stable place.

The Security Council should not allow nuclear weapons, as there are many other weapons countries can use in a situation without causing mass casualties. As we can see, the pandemic has caused death, destroyed the economy, changed lifestyles, deprived children from school and led to job losses.

This pandemic gave us a signal that we should work to protect our environment, because in this way we are protecting our entire life. So the Security Council should not allow these kinds of weapons which might cause another pandemic or have a dangerous effect on health.

The whole world should work hard to return to life as it was before COVID-19. This needs many meetings with environmental organizations around the world. The Security Council should set a plan on how we can protect our environment from violations, starting with the manufacture of weapons that might cause disaster in the future like COVID-19.

We will not accept any excuse or justification from any state. All should work and coordinate to protect humanity, first by keeping our environment clean and safe.

We all know about the disasters that happened after the first and second world wars and how many millions of people were victimized. After cooperating with the United Nations and applying international law, the world has become better than before. So we will not accept any reasons for having nuclear weapons because we want to live peacefully.

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



KUWAIT: Waiters serve food to customers inside their cars outside a restaurant in Kuwait City yesterday. Restaurants launched car-in services as a way to continue receiving customers after the government banned dine-in service due to the spread of COVID-19. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait curfew: What you need to know

KUWAIT: Kuwait imposed a one-month partial curfew from 5:00 pm to 5:00 am starting from March 7, 2021 to help curb the sharp increase in COVID-19 cases registered in recent weeks. During the curfew hours, pharmacies, medical stores, co-operative societies and supermarkets are allowed to continue operation only through delivery services. The government later allowed co-ops and supermarkets to serve shoppers from 5:00 pm to 10:00 pm every day. Also during the curfew, people are allowed to go to Fajr, Maghreb and Isha prayers at mosques only by walking, while taxis are allowed to carry only two passengers. The government meanwhile allowed salons and health clubs to reopen during the day after a one-month closure but kept restaurants and cafes closed except for drive-through and delivery services.

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry launched a booking service, allowing people to shop from 5:00 pm to 10:00 pm during the curfew hours. The service is valid for all co-ops and supermarkets around Kuwait. To book an appointment, a shopper should visit www.moci.shop, enter the required information (civil ID number and serial number, contact number and email address), the reason for appointment (food supply center) and the time and date of the appointment. The shopper would then receive a barcode to show once they reach the shopping center.

Where to obtain a curfew pass?

Citizens and residents that need a pass during the curfew hours to leave their homes can apply for a pass at <https://www.paci.gov.kw/>. The pass is available for those in need of emergency medical treatment, doctor's visits, blood donation, COVID-19 swaps and COVID-19 vaccinations.

Co-op delivery during curfew hours

During curfew hours, co-ops, grocery stores and other markets will be allowed to offer delivery services. Most co-ops will accept orders via delivery. Here is an incomplete list of co-op WhatsApp numbers. Each co-op will be responsible for deciding if and when they provide delivery services and not all may be providing.

Omariya Co-op
WhatsApp 6041-0067

Farwaniya Co-op
WhatsApp 6767-8211

Qairawan Co-op
WhatsApp 9000-3749

Jahra Co-op
WhatsApp 5160-2458

Abdulla Al-Mubarak Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-6338

Nuzha Co-op
WhatsApp 9784-5531

Khaitan Co-op
WhatsApp 6777-9745

Ardhiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6902-0779

Rabiya Co-op
WhatsApp 2438-8316

Wafra Farm Co-op
Tel: 9883-5245 / 5170-0085

Salmiya Co-op
Tel: 22253225

Jabriya Co-op
Tel: 1805-353
WhatsApp 6566-6084

Rawdha & Hawally
WhatsApp 9662-2883

Shaab Co-op
WhatsApp 9090-4455

Wafra Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-0539

Keifan Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-1719

Rehab Co-op
WhatsApp 9222-2358

Mishref Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-9900

Faiha Co-op
Tel: 1861-000
WhatsApp 9098-6000

Rumaithiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-0045

Bayan Co-op
WhatsApp 9004-2500

Fahaheel Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-9951

Adan & Qusour Co-op
Tel: 5034-3111 / 6593-3975

Salam Co-op
WhatsApp 9788-7832

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News in brief

Municipal efforts appreciated

KUWAIT: Minister of State for Municipal Affairs, Minister of State for Housing Affairs and Development Shaya Al-Shaya announced that he conveyed appreciation from His Highness the Amir for the municipal personnel for their role in the fight against the novel coronavirus. His Highness the Amir's message reflects his pride of the municipal personnel good efforts at this level, he said during a meeting of the municipality officials, including Director General Ahmad Al-Manfouhi. A statement issued after the meeting quoted Shaya as expressing his deep confidence in capacities of the national cadres for overhauling the work to speed up citizens' transactions and tackle any irregularities or defaults. Manfouhi noted that the workers earned His Highness the Amir's praise due to their noticeable efforts and hard work. Specialized staff are working round the clock to set up as many as possible of online services. — KUNA

Ease of services

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Commerce and Industry has launched a portal regarding combating money laundering and terrorism funding as part of its plan to digitize services. The ministry said in a statement on Monday that the gateway provides full services, calling upon companies to make their transactions through the digital service. The smart tool audits and analyzes financial data. — KUNA

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Kuwait suffered massive traffic jams and chaos this week as motorists rush to return home before the daily curfew kicks in.

— File photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

OAPEC, KISR sign scientific cooperation MoU

KUWAIT: The Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) and Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR) signed Monday a memorandum of understanding over scientific cooperation. OAPEC secretary general Ali bin Sabt, speaking to reporters after signing the MoU with KISR Director General Dr Samira Sayyed Omar, said the MoU reflected desire of both institutions to exchange expertise in energy industry. Cooperation between OAPEC and KISR has been ongoing for years, he said, and the MoU would further explore studies over production, refining and treatment of oil, gas and petro-



KUWAIT: OAPEC secretary general Ali bin Sabt (left) and KISR Director General Dr Samira Sayyed Omar sign the agreement. — KUNA

chemical products. The MoU also tackles management of water resources and environmental studies, he said. This cooperation, said bin Sabt, stipulated conducting of studies over consumption of renewable and conventional energies. Dr Omar

said the MoU was part of KISR's contributions to oil industries and natural resources. The MoU, she said, was within the two organizations' contributions to the global efforts to addressing challenges facing the energy and oil sectors. — KUNA

Kuwait takes part in UN 14th conference on Crime Prevention

KUWAIT: Kuwait, on Monday, participated in the United Nations 14th Conference on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. In a statement, the Kuwaiti Ministry of Justice said that this participation comes within the framework of strengthening Kuwait's pioneering role in international forums through its active and continuous presence in such technical conferences. The meetings discuss many issues related to the implementation of policies and strategies for crime prevention and criminal justice to achieve development and exchange the best national policies of countries in the field of combating crimes, it added. The ministry noted that the conference will also discuss the international application of UN instruments that promote the concept of transparency and the establishment of fair and effective institutions, in connection with the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Justice, representing the State of Kuwait, along with more than 120 countries, formulated the articles of this political declaration within intense and arduous discussions that lasted for more than four months and through virtual meetings. — 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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IOM provides psychosocial support to women in shelter

KUWAIT: The International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN Migration agency in Kuwait - in partnership with the telecommunication company, Ooredoo - has launched a series of psychosocial support workshops through the month of March for women residing in the government of Kuwait's shelter for female foreign workers.

IOM has been working in Kuwait to provide the needed support to female breadwinners, who have left their country of origin to provide financial support for their families back home and who have faced some challenges along the way.

"The workshops are primarily aimed to offer women the very much needed safe space to discuss and share their psychosocial challenges, concerns and experiences in a structured and non-stigmatizing manner." Mazen AbouHosn, IOM Kuwait Chief of Mission said. Xandra Spijker, a certified life coach and psychosocial support expert, said: "Through these workshops, we create

a sense of togetherness and support in times of stressful events. With this psychosocial support program, the women in the shelter acquire information on how to be more resilient and with higher self-esteem; all needed to enable women to be survivors rather than victims."

Sheikha Bibi Nasser Al-Sabah, IOM Goodwill Ambassador for Kuwait and the Gulf Countries, said "I am really pleased with my partnership with the International Organization for Migration as we share a common vision and goal, which it to advocate for, and protect the rights of migrant workers and to highlight their important role in our society."

In addition to the series of psychosocial workshops and in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, IOM also provided 200 personal hygiene and protective kits to around 100 women residing in the shelter as a preventive measure against the virus.



IOM Kuwait Chief of Mission Mazen AbouHosn



HE Madam Nabeela Abdulla Al Mulla
State of Kuwait



HE Madam Ayse Hilal Sayan Koytak
Ambassador of Turkey to the State of Kuwait



HE Madam Elena Romanowski Ambassador
of United States to the state of Kuwait



HE Madam Anne Claire Legendre Ambassado
of France to the State of Kuwait

IWG marks Int'l Women's Day

KUWAIT: Under the patronage of Sheikha Hanouf Bader Al-Muhamad Al-Sabah, spouse of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Honorary President of the International Women's Group - Kuwait, IWG celebrated International Women's Day with the participation of four inspiring and distinguished women leaders. The members and

executive board of the IWG were honored to have as key speakers, Nabeela Abdulla Al-Mulla, retired Ambassador from the State of Kuwait; Ayse Hilal Sayan Koytak, Ambassador of Turkey to the State of Kuwait; Alina Romanowski, Ambassador of United States to Kuwait; Anne Claire Legendre, Ambassador of France to the State of Kuwait. As a sign of solidarity with women around the world, the members then enjoyed a song recorded especially for International Women's Day in 2013 by 25 singers and musicians from over 20 different countries.



US tests push for sweeping change in Afghanistan as pullout nears

Syria's Assad set for election win 10 years after start of war

Page 6

Page 7



MEKELE: Eyerusalem (left), 40, is held by an assistant at a safe house for survivors of sexual assault, in Mekele. She was raped in a village outside of Adigrat by Eritrean soldiers. — AFP

Survivors allege rape by soldiers in Tigray

'I don't feel safe', rape victim narrates her harrowing tale in a tearful interview

MEKELE, Ethiopia: It was "like they were fetching water," 40-year-old Tirhas recalls. Once a day, she says, Ethiopian soldiers would line up outside her cell in a military camp, sometimes as many as 10 men waiting their turn to rape her.

According to Tirhas, the group assaults lasted for two weeks—from the afternoon soldiers picked her up off a street in Mekele, the capital of Ethiopia's conflict-hit Tigray region, until the day they drove her home. But her nightmare was not over.

Two nights later, a soldier barged in during the evening curfew and raped her as her three children—ages 11, 7 and 3 — covered in terror in an adjacent room, she said. "I don't feel safe in Tigray anymore. Even the sight of the military uniform frightens me very much," Tirhas, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, told AFP during a tearful interview at the safe house where she is now recovering.

"Even now I'm shocked, and I'm wondering: What did the women of Tigray do to deserve this?"

Four months into the Tigray war, stories of rape—many involving multiple soldiers—have become all-too-

common, according to doctors and nurses in Ethiopia's northernmost region. At the largest hospital in Mekele, around two dozen women have sought treatment for gang rapes by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers since fighting began, the medical personnel said.

Medical workers fear this figure only hints at the scale of the scourge, noting that ongoing fighting has hampered Tigrayans' ability to access functional health facilities, and that stigma silences rape survivors even in peacetime. Despite the absence of solid numbers, there is little doubt sexual violence has become a sinister feature of the conflict, said Saba Gebremedhin, a Tigrayan women's rights activist, adding she believes this is no accident. "It's being used as a weapon to humiliate and dehumanise not only the women but the Tigrayan people," she said. Ethiopia's military did not respond to requests for comment. The Ethiopian and Eritrean governments deny Eritrean soldiers are present in Tigray.

'Horrific'

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, winner of

the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, sent troops into Tigray in early November to disarm and detain leaders of the regional ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). He said the move came in response to TPLF attacks on federal army camps.

After federal troops entered Mekele in late November, Abiy declared military operations "completed", but the TPLF has vowed to fight on and hostilities continue. A communications blackout combined with tight access restrictions for humanitarian workers and the media meant accounts of rape were somewhat slow to surface.

But now multiple officials have acknowledged it's happening, though they've avoided addressing who is responsible. In a Twitter post last month, Ethiopia's women's minister Filsan Abdullahi Ahmed said a task force set up to investigate sexual violence in Tigray "unfortunately established rape has taken place conclusively and without a doubt."

A more moving statement on wartime rape came a week later from the first woman to hold Ethiopia's mostly ceremonial role of president,

Sahle-Work Zewde, who visited the same safe house in Mekele where Tirhas and other survivors are receiving medical care. "I spoke with those who were brave enough to speak and I read a lot in the eyes of those who could not," Sahle-Work said afterwards. "In short, what they experienced is horrific."

'We cried, we screamed'

That statement, though, told only part of the story of the president's visit, which witnesses describe as openly confrontational. When soldiers providing security for Sahle-Work came to inspect the facility before her arrival, rape survivors gathered in the television room cried out in horror, fearing they would be assaulted again, staffers said.

Most refused to meet with Sahle-Work. "When she came we cried, we screamed, we didn't want to talk to her," recalled Abrehet, who told AFP that Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers raped her for eight days in a military camp after pulling her off a bus near the Tigray town of Wukro. —AFP

Tunisia's gender violence law struggles to get beyond paper

TUNIS: When Nadia told police about her husband's violence during a coronavirus lockdown in Tunisia, she nearly lost custody of her daughter, illustrating a chasm between a gender law and its enforcement. Adopted in 2017, the celebrated law greatly expanded the scope of punishable violence against women and in theory provides wide-ranging support to victims, making the country a pathfinder among regional peers.

But getting justice remains a battle without any guarantee of success, due to waning political will and scant funding. For several years, Nadia, in her forties, weathered threats and mistreatment at the hands of her husband. With no income of her own, she did not feel she could complain. "He would do it when drunk, then apologize," Nadia said. "He left for several months every year to work abroad, so I preferred to do nothing" about the abuse, she added. But things became

intolerable during a three-month lockdown to forestall the spread of the coronavirus a year ago.

"He was stuck in the house, stressed. He drank a lot," Nadia said. "One day my daughter told me of inappropriate advances" of a sexual nature. Nadia immediately called the police, who summoned her a few days later. She was one among many Tunisian women who suffered a surge in violence during the March to June lockdown, as reported cases spiked five-fold, according to authorities. And cases remain high.

'Nearly lost everything'

But Nadia says she was completely blindsided by what happened next. While her initial interaction with the police was positive, things quickly turned sour. Her husband was able to afford a lawyer, while she is destitute and fears he may have bribed the police or magistrates. The police



TUNIS: Tunisian women demonstrate in Tunisia against violence against women. In Tunisia, the Personal Status Code or CSP consists of a series of progressive Tunisian laws, promulgated on August 13, 1956 by a Beylical decree and then entered into force on January 1, 1957, aimed at establishing equality between men and women. — AFP

requested she put together an evidence file herself. After several weeks without any progress and by now desperate and terrified of losing custody of her daughter, Nadia turned to a women's group for help. The

Association of Women Democrats (ATFD), which provides everything from shelter to legal help, linked her up with a lawyer who found that the police station had not even sent her evidence to court. —AFP

Bike-riding Dutch PM pedals towards new term

THE HAGUE, Netherlands: Regularly seen riding his bike to work, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte is hoping voters add to his 10 years in the saddle next week. The liberal leader, 54, has sought to project an image of normality, stability and frugality during his time in office, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic. Critics however dub him "Teflon" Mark for his ability to dodge scandals, while in Europe he's known as "Mr No" for his opposition to spending.

Opinion polls suggest that Rutte and his liberal VVD (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) are on course to head another coalition government. "He rides on a bicycle. This is a portrait of a normal guy... a leader of a 'People's Party'," political

analyst Andre Krouwel of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam told AFP. "He's not coming in a big limousine or an expensive car with a driver opening doors. He doesn't need it. "In the Netherlands you don't need to show power through all these kinds of symbols of wealth. People like this kind of humility."

'Teflon prime minister'

A former human resources manager with Anglo-Dutch consumer giant Unilever, Rutte went into politics with the liberal, pro-business VVD and rose to become party leader in 2006. Rutte became prime minister in 2010 and has used his killer political instincts and affable personality to build three coalition governments, having also come first in elections in 2012 and 2017. But opponents have accused him of a lack of vision and of poaching their most popular policies. "We call him the 'Teflon' prime minister," Jesse Klaver, leader of the GroenLinks (Green-Left) party, told AFP. "He doesn't have an idea of his own, he can go with the flow."

"I think he's a great political talent, but he uses his talent to stay in power himself instead of doing



Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte arrives with the bicycle at the Catshuis, the official residence of the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, in The Hague.

the best for the country and the European Union." Within the EU, Rutte is a divisive figure, especially among southern European countries. —AFP

Iraq pegs hopes on Pope's visit, but experts skeptical

BAGHDAD, Iraq: Pope Francis' historic trip to war-scarred Iraq went off without a hitch—an image boost Baghdad hopes will help revive international engagement, foreign investment and even tourism. But while the government hailed the pontiff's successful visit as a "turning point", country experts cautioned that the threats of violence and political turmoil have not vanished overnight. The 84-year-old pontiff's four-day visit was a bold trip by any measure: Iraq has long been a byword for conflict. Recent years have seen major battles to oust the Islamic State group, rockets attacks against the US-led coalition, and deadly street clashes between protesters and security forces. The pope's visit stood in welcome contrast as Francis criss-crossed the country and spread his message of peace to jubilant crowds.

Baghdad believes it marked a turning point that will change Iraq's image as a dangerous destination, foreign ministry spokesman Ahmad Al-Sahhaf told AFP, as the pope's plane left for Rome. "If Iraq was not stable and secure, would someone of the stature of the pope have been able to travel all around?" he said. "The whole world was following the success of this trip." A senior security official told AFP that intelligence agencies had worked day and night as Francis toured sites including the northern city of Mosul, a former IS bastion still largely in ruins, and nearby plains where paramilitaries remain powerful. "The fact that there was no security issue, not even a tiny one," the official said, "proves Iraq is done with terrorism and can protect foreign delegations who will come more easily in the future." US President Joe Biden said that to see Francis visit ancient religious sites, meet Muslim leaders "and offer prayers in Mosul—a city that only a few years ago endured the depravity and intolerance of a group like ISIS—is a symbol of hope for the entire world". —AFP

International

Syria's Assad set for election win 10 years after start of war

A decade of war ravages the country, but Assad clings to power

BEIRUT: A decade of war may have ravaged the country, but Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad has clung to power and looks determined to cement his position in presidential elections this year. When the Arab revolts started toppling autocrats like dominoes in early 2011, Assad's days looked numbered.

But 10 years on, he has defied the odds, surviving international isolation and the temporary loss of two thirds of Syria's territory to claw his way back into relevance. When protests first broke out in Syria in March 2011, there were doubts whether his ruling Alawite minority would be able to withstand the tide of Arab Spring uprisings dramatically reshaping the region.

The leadership mettle of the London-trained ophthalmologist, a reluctant heir when his iron-fisted father Hafez died in 2000, was also in question. But his patience and cool-coupled with his grip on the security apparatus, the West's disengagement, and the support of Russia and Iran among other factors—saved him from defeat, analysts say. “Years after the whole world demanded he leave and thought he would be toppled, today it wants to reconcile with him,” veteran Lebanese politician Karim Pakradouni said.

'Long game'

“Assad knew how to play the long game,” said the politician, who has often acted as a mediator between the Damascus regime and various Lebanese parties. In 2011, Assad chose to repress peaceful protests with force, sparking an increasingly complex war involving rebels, jihadists and world powers in which any fighter not on his side was dubbed a “terrorist”.

The conflict has since killed more than 387,000 people, displaced more than half the country's pre-war population, and seen tens of thousands thrown behind bars. Ordinary Syrians have seen food prices soar and the Syrian pound plummet in an economic crisis the government has blamed on Western sanctions.

But Assad is still in power and, after a string of Russia-backed victories, his forces are back in control of more than 60 percent of the country. The Syrian president always insisted he would come out on top.

“He has never faltered. He has stood firm on all



DAMASCUS: In this file picture, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad (left) visiting the historic Umayyad Mosque with Russian President Vladimir Putin (right) in old Damascus. A decade of war may have ravaged his country, but Assad has clung to power and looks determined to cement his position in presidential elections this year. —AFP

his stances without concession, and has managed to take back most of Syria with military might,” Pakradouni said.

Loyal army

Despite tens of thousands of defections, Syria's army also played a major role in his survival, he said. “This is what made Assad an exception in the so-called Arab Spring.” In Tunisia, the army abandoned dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali when street pressure mounted, Egypt's military also let go of long-time leader Hosni Mubarak, and in Libya, top brass had already turned against Moamer Kadhafi before his demise. Analyst Thomas Pierret said: “Army leadership remained loyal because for decades it had been stacked with relatives of Assad and fellow Alawites.”

“The latter probably made up more than 80 percent of the officer corps by 2011 and held virtually every single influential position within it,” said the researcher at the Institute of Research and Study on the Arab and Muslim Worlds. A Syrian researcher based in Damascus who asked to remain anonymous said Assad's “determination and rigor” were also key. “He was able to con-

centrate all decisions in his hands and ensure the army was entirely on his side,” the researcher said, adding the regime's structure ensured nobody could garner enough influence to challenge him.

Instead, Assad gambled on Syria's complex social structure—ethnic divisions between Arabs and Kurds, as well as religious differences between Sunni Muslims, his Alawite clan, and other minorities.

He benefitted from “people's fear of chaos”, and from his own Alawite group's fear they would not survive if he was toppled, the Syrian researcher said.

US failure to use force

The rebels needed air power to help them, but the West wanted to avoid a Syrian repeat of the NATO fiasco in Libya. As years went by, Assad grew increasingly confident that no US warplanes would come anywhere near Damascus.

In 2013, after an alleged regime chemical attack on two rebel-held areas near Damascus that killed more than 1,400 people, then US president Barack Obama balked at carrying out air strikes to punish the crossing of his own “red line”. “The Obama administration was

not interested in the Syrian conflict,” Pierret said. “It had been elected on the promise that it would withdraw from Iraq, hence was reluctant to return to the Middle East.”

A US-led coalition did launch strikes in Syria the following year, but that was to back Kurdish-led fighters battling the Islamic State group whose newly-proclaimed “caliphate” had become the focus of global attention. Russia stepped in the year after in support of Assad and launched its first air raids in 2015, turning the tide of the conflict. It “seized a historical opportunity to retrieve its lost superpower status by filling a strategic void left by Obama's partial disengagement from the region,” Pierret said.

“Impossible equation”

At 55, Assad is already in his third decade in power, and a fourth mandate looks guaranteed after presidential elections this summer. Once clamoring for Assad to leave, Western powers are now eager for a political solution to stem the conflict before the polls.

UN-led efforts in recent years have focused on a committee—equally representing the regime, the opposition and civil society—to re-write the country's constitution. But they have made next to no progress. “We can't continue like this,” UN envoy to Syria Geir Pedersen said frustrated, after the committee's last meeting in January.

A Western diplomatic source said Assad would likely delay any progress until after presidential elections are held under the current constitution, then present the international community with a fait accompli. “The Syrian regime and his godfathers just want to explain to the world: ‘Well elections took place, the game is over, could you please open your checkbooks and finance all infrastructure we have been bombing in the last 10 years?’” the source said.

But Damascus denies any link between the talks and the vote. “Today the Syrian regime cannot be accepted back into the international system, but also cannot remain outside it,” the Damascus-based researcher said. “This impossible equation will leave us in a quandary for years to come, without solution or stability.” —AFP

for those already here, who will now be eligible for the 18-month stay. This is “due to the extraordinary temporary conditions in Venezuela” and because “it is not safe for Venezuelans to return,” the senior administration official said. TPS allows people fleeing unrest or natural disaster to remain and work for a limited time.

Andres Gonzalez, who arrived in Miami from Venezuela four years ago, was relieved when he heard about the TPS decision. Gonzalez, 24, applied for asylum, but is not sure it will be granted and is still waiting for his interview appointment.

“The TPS is great because all the people like me who are seeking asylum or who are arriving and have not applied for asylum, or anything like that, do not have to worry that they will be thrown out, that they will be deported, that they will be told no, because they have 18 months to be able to resolve it,” Gonzalez, who works at a Venezuelan restaurant in downtown Miami, told AFP. Those applying will undergo background checks and get 180 days to put in their applications. They must provide proof they were here on or before Monday and pay a \$50 application fee and \$85 biometrics fee. A further \$410 fee is required for work permits.

In Caracas, opposition leader Juan Guaido said that “Venezuelans who have been forced to flee to the United States for fear of losing their lives can now sleep more peacefully.” Venezuela is in the midst of a crippling economic and humanitarian crisis. The country has the world's highest inflation levels, it's been in recession for seven years and has regular shortages of basic necessities such as food and medicine.

According to the UN, 34 percent of the 5.4 million Venezuelans who have fled the country since 2015 are in Colombia, which has no diplomatic relations with its neighbor. The Colombian government announced Monday that it was giving protected status to almost one million undocumented migrants from the neighboring country. President Ivan Duque welcomed the US decision on TPS. “Together, the United States and Colombia will work for a fraternal and humanitarian immigration policy, in addition to continuing efforts for the return of democracy to Venezuela,” he tweeted. —AFP



WASHINGTON: In this file photo taken on January 25, 2021 First dogs Champ and Major of Biden are seen on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

Biden's pooches sent home after 'biting incident'

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden has sent his two dogs back to his family home in Wilmington, Delaware, after the younger of the two German Shepherds was involved in a “biting incident” with a White House security agent, US media said Monday. Three-year-old Major, whom Biden and his wife Jill adopted in November 2018 from an animal shelter, had been displaying aggressive behavior including jumping, barking and charging at White House staff and security, CNN reported, citing two anonymous sources.

The sources described a “biting incident” involving a member of the security services but did not specify if the person was injured. The episode was, however, seen as serious enough for both dogs, including 13-year-old Champ, to be returned to the Bidens' home in Wilmington last week. —AFP



BERLIN: Syrian human rights lawyer Anwar Al-Bunni in his office in Berlin. Anwar Al-Bunni is among the Syrian exiles who have turned to European courts to ensure that state-sponsored crimes in Syria do not go unpunished. — AFP

For Syrians, the road to justice begins in Europe

KOBLENZ, Germany: Wassim Mukdad has carried a deep darkness inside of him since his native Syria slipped into an abyss of conflict and terror.

But on a summer's day in western Germany in an ancient city 3,000 kilometers (1,900 miles) away from Damascus, he finally glimpsed a “ray of light”. On that day, August 19, 2020, the refugee took the witness stand in a Koblenz courtroom to recount the ordeal he suffered in a Syrian detention center.

At that time, buoyed by the Arab Spring uprisings sweeping the Middle East, a sea of fists in the air rallied protesters calling for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to go. They were struck down however by a wave of brutal repression. Mukdad, now 36, who was looking for a protest to join when he was picked up by police, was among those dragged to Al-Khatib prison in the Syrian capital on September 30, 2011.

Almost 10 years on, standing before the German court he described being blindfolded and interrogated three times in the prison as if it had all happened yesterday. Not only were questions flung at him. Lashes also flew, lacerating the soles of his feet—targeted in particular for the excruciating pain every time he later tried to stand up or walk.

It was only on that August day that he finally threw off his shackles, he said. “I finally had the feeling that my story counted, that the sufferings were not for nothing,” said the musician, who plays the oud, a lute-like instrument.

1,000 suspects in Europe

Mukdad is among the Syrian exiles who have turned to European courts to ensure that state-sponsored crimes in Syria do not go unpunished. Many arrived in Europe in the huge influx of asylum seekers fleeing war in Syria and Iraq in 2015, with Germany having taken in more than one million people since then. Cases have been filed in Germany, Austria, Sweden and Norway against officials in Assad's regime by around 100 refugees, backed by Berlin NGO, the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR). Across Europe, activists are joining forces with police and UN investigators in collecting testimonies, sifting through tens of thousands of photos, videos and files of one of the best documented conflicts in history. Using social media, they are forming networks to track down regime officers, who they say shed their uniforms to blend in among the tide of refugees arriving in Europe. —AFP

US offers refuge to thousands of Venezuelans

WASHINGTON: The United States will allow potentially tens of thousands of Venezuelans to seek refuge, in a significant policy shift from the former Trump era, officials said Monday. Temporary Protected Status, or TPS, is being offered to people who fled political repression and economic chaos in the once wealthy South American country. A senior official in President Joe Biden's administration, who asked not to be named, told reporters that “over 300,000 individuals are estimated to be eligible.”

The Venezuelans being considered are all already in the United States but will now be able to escape possible deportation, with stays granted through September 2022. “The living conditions in Venezuela reveal a country in turmoil, unable to protect its own citizens,” Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said.

“It is in times of extraordinary and temporary circumstances like these that the United States steps forward to support eligible Venezuelan nationals already present here, while their home country seeks to right itself out of the current crises.” Donald Trump—despite backing a push to topple far-left Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro—denied Venezuelans the protected status as part of his headline crackdown on immigration and refugee rules. On taking office in January, Biden immediately set about reversing what he says were Trump's inhumane border policies.

'Not safe' in Venezuela

The Democrat has come under pressure from Republicans for what they say is a lax attitude that will lead to uncontrollable numbers of illegal immigrants. But the administration is pushing back, underlining that the doors are not being opened to new arrivals—merely

Thousands defy virus curbs for Women's Day rallies

MEXICO CITY: Tens of thousands on Monday defied coronavirus restrictions, gathering worldwide on International Women's Day to denounce gender violence and inequalities.

Women took to the streets in peaceful democracies and in countries gripped by conflict, though in far smaller numbers than last year, when the full force of the COVID-19 pandemic had yet to hit the world.

Thousands marched in Mexico City, bringing with them photos with the names of alleged rapists, murderers and harassers of women. “Together we are the fire, burn everything,” said one banner in the crowd, some of whom angrily kicked at a wooden fence around the Monument to the Revolution.

“My daughter was raped. I am grateful that she is alive,” 45-year-old Leticia Resendiz told AFP. Thousands of women also marched in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which has seen a wave of femicide that has claimed on average one life per day so far this year. “We want to be free, alive and without fear,” said posters carried by the demonstrators. Clashes broke out in Chile, as police used water cannon and tear gas to disperse thousands of protesters who painted the slogan “They are killing us” on the esplanade next to



MEXICO CITY: Women clash with the police, behind a fence in front of the National Palace, as they protest during a demonstration to commemorate the International Women's Day in Mexico City, on Monday. — AFP

Plaza Italia, in central Santiago. More than 100 activists wearing purple to symbolize women's struggle gathered outside the prosecutor's office in Honduras to demand justice for nurse Keyla Martinez, 26, who died in police custody last month. “Here, the life of the woman is worth nothing,” said Maria Julia Avila, 49. Honduras' human rights watchdog says 4,769 women were murdered in the country between 2010 and 2020.

'We won't be silent'

In France, where one woman is killed every three days by their partner or ex-partner, according to 2019 government figures, tens of thousands marched in

major cities to call for stronger police action against femicide. In Turkey, several hundred Muslim Uighur women protested near China's walled-off consulate in Istanbul, calling for the closure of mass-incarceration camps in the Xinjiang region. “Rape is a crime against humanity,” read one poster, referring to a BBC report alleging systemic rape and forced sterilization in the camps—charges China denies.

Thousands marched elsewhere in Istanbul and Ankara, many of them angered by a recent viral video purporting to show an attack on a woman by her ex-husband in front of their five-year-old child in the country's north. “We're not scared, we won't be silent and we won't bow down,” some posters read. —AFP

International

US tests push for sweeping change in Afghanistan as pullout nears

High-risk strategy mulls involving Taliban in potential government

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden is testing whether he can bring sweeping changes in Afghanistan, including a potential government involving the Taliban, in a high-risk strategy as he weighs whether to honor a May deadline to end America's longest war. In a letter leaked to Afghan media over the weekend, Secretary of State Antony Blinken encouraged Afghan leaders to consider a "new, inclusive government" and proposed that talks take place within weeks in Turkey to seal a peace deal with the Taliban.

The behind-the-scenes but dramatic diplomacy comes as Biden completes a review on one of his first major foreign policy questions—whether to abide by an agreement with the Islamist insurgents negotiated by former president Donald Trump to pull the final US troops out by May. "I think the objective here seems to be, let's see if there's some other option that we have other than simply leaving on May 1 or overstaying. Is there some short-cut to a peace process?" said Laurel Miller, the former US envoy on Afghanistan and Pakistan. "I see this as just trying stuff and looking to see if something sticks," said Miller, Asia director at the International Crisis Group. In the letter to President Ashraf Ghani reprinted by Afghanistan's TOLONews, Blinken said with uncharacteristic bluntness that the United States feared the "security situation will worsen and the Taliban could make rapid territorial gains" if the United States ends its two-decade military involvement. While saying the United States did not want to dictate terms, Blinken encouraged Ghani to "move urgently" on ideas from Zalmay Khalilzad, the veteran US negotiator kept on from the Trump administration.

Blinken proposed a 90-day reduction in violence that would avoid the Taliban's bloody annual spring offensive. In addition to the meeting in Turkey, Blinken said the United States was asking the United Nations to convene a meeting of foreign ministers from Afghanistan's neighbors on ensuring future stability that would notably include Iran—in what could turn out to be a first diplomatic encounter with the Biden administration.

No promise on 'dignity'

Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh denounced the ideas in the letter, saying that the Taliban could enter elections but that the country's fate would not be decided by "20 people in a room." "We thank the US for their support. They have the right to decide on their



JALALABAD: Women attend an event to celebrate International Women's Day in Jalalabad on Monday. — AFP

2,500 troops," he told an event in Kabul. "We also have the right to decide on the fate of our 35 million people."

"We will never compromise our dignity. Our dependency on the outside world does not mean we obey illegitimate demands," Saleh said. The State Department did not confirm or deny the letter, saying it would not discuss Blinken's correspondence. But State Department spokesman Ned Price said the administration is pursuing diplomacy aimed at permanently ending the fighting and bringing a political solution. "We have continued to encourage all sides to take part constructively, and with a degree of alacrity, knowing that this is a moment in time where progress is possible," Price told reporters. Biden as vice president was an early proponent of limiting involvement in Afghanistan, seeing little further scope for progress—a rare point of agreement with Trump who vowed to end "forever wars."

But Biden has since spoken of keeping a limited force to strike extremists—an idea likely to draw opposition from the Taliban, who have held fire against US-led coalition troops but have kept up their violence against the government. First Lady Jill Biden also promised Monday that the president will factor in women, who faced extreme restrictions under Taliban

rule, telling an event: "The United States will stand with you."

'Making every effort'

Scott Warden, director of the Afghanistan and Central Asia programs at the US Institute of Peace, said it was unrealistic to come up with an entirely new governing framework by May—but that Blinken's letter could make clear what is possible. "The bottom line is, if this letter can get people's attention and actually moves to discussion of the key terms," he said, "then you can consider it progress."

Biden officials "really don't want to let the May 1 deadline drift or expire without making every effort that they can to get a constructive peace process going."

Miller, the former envoy, saw risks in the approach if the Biden administration is indeed set on leaving Afghanistan. "Don't dismantle the Afghan government on your way out the door. You're not going to get a quickie peace settlement that's going to solve it all and bring the Taliban in over the next seven weeks," she said. "So if you're intent on leaving, at least leave something that can have some modest potential to stand on its own." — AFP

Afghans recall destruction of Buddha statues

BAMIYAN, Afghanistan: Afghanistan's giant Buddhas stood watch over the picturesque Bamiyan valley for centuries, surviving Mongol invasions and the harsh environment until the Taliban arrived with an apocalyptic worldview that did not care about one of the great wonders of antiquity.

After years of scorched-earth offensives across Afghanistan, the militants—who saw any representation of the human form as an affront to Islam—turned their attention to the two Buddhas in Bamiyan, peppering the carvings with tank shells and rocket fire before ultimately dynamiting them in March 2001. To finish the job, the Taliban conscripted locals as porters to lug stacks of explosives to the base of the Buddhas, carved out of the cliff face in the 5th century.

Bamiyan resident Ghulam Sakhi said he is still haunted by the role he was forced to play in the destruction. "It is not like a memory you could ever forget," he told AFP, saying he was snatched from a market along with dozens of others to help rig the two giant Buddhist statues.

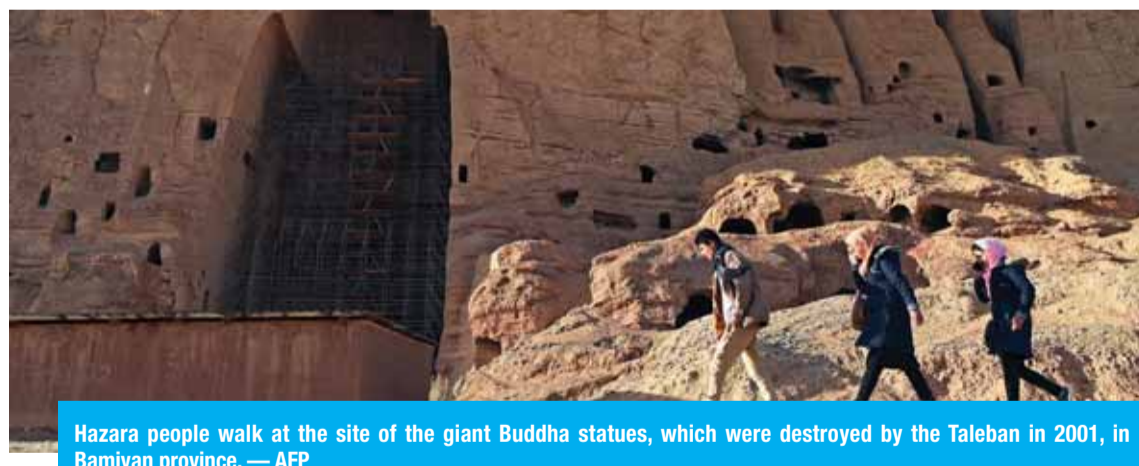
"I was only thinking how to stay alive that day," he

said. The destruction of the Buddhas has been considered one of the greatest archaeological crimes on record and put the Taliban's uncompromising beliefs on the world's radar just months before the September 11 attacks that triggered a US-led invasion of the country that ousted the jihadists. First mentioned in the writings of a Chinese pilgrim in 400 AD, the statues served as a testament to what was once a great Buddhist civilization in the heart of the Hindu Kush that straddled the famed Silk Road.

The statues—one 55-metres (155-feet) high, the other 38 meters—were believed to have been carved painstakingly by hand over lifetimes into the caramel-colored sandstone cliffs in Bamiyan, alongside a network of ancient caves, monasteries and shrines, some of them still showing remnants of colorful frescos.

For generations Sakhi and his family took great pride in the archaeological treasures that briefly made the area a magnet for tourists flocking to Afghanistan along the famed "Hippy Trail" in the 1960s and 70s. "Foreign tourists would come in big numbers to visit the statues and many, including my father, would provide them with food and other items in exchange for money," said Sakhi.

"Work was good. Everyone—shopkeepers, drivers, landowners and others—would benefit from them." But the arrival of the Taliban in the valley, with their heavy weapons and hardline views, forever shattered the landscape of Bamiyan. "They were a beautiful view, a source of hope for people," said Hamza Yosufi, a resident who witnessed the destruction.—AFP



Hazara people walk at the site of the giant Buddha statues, which were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, in Bamiyan province. — AFP

Fukushima reverend prays for revival of radiation-hit church

OKUMA, Japan: Reverend Akira Sato dreams of hearing hymns echo once again through the church he was forced to leave behind after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster a decade ago. Ten years after a tsunami overwhelmed the cooling systems at the nearby plant, sending it into meltdown, the Fukushima First Bible Baptist Church is a shell haunted by memories.

"In the past when I've come back here and looked around, I couldn't stop my tears from falling," Sato said on a visit to the church in Okuma town, five kilometers (3 miles) from the crippled plant.

It lies in the approximately two percent of Fukushima prefecture that is still a no-go area because of radiation. Visitors need permission to enter, and

must wear plastic suits covering their body and bags over their shoes and hair before they go in.

At the church, which once hosted a congregation dozens strong, time has stood still. A notice for a Sunday mass that was never held is still posted on a billboard at the steel entry gate. Above sit a damaged cross and a rusty bell. Inside, a ray of sunshine illuminates empty pews.

The silence is shattered only by the alarm from a Geiger counter indicating radiation "hotspots" in the house of worship. The steep-roofed church is surrounded by vast vacant lots belonging to neighbors forced to destroy homes that were rendered uninhabitable by the earthquake or radiation.

Inside the chapel, several bibles and hymn books sit on a podium next to an organ that has not been played since the disaster. The 63-year-old reverend was outside Fukushima when the earthquake struck, and it fell to pastor Masashi Sato to shepherd dozens of the church's faithful away from the Okuma church. "I evacuated carrying just a few bottles of water and the Bible," said the pastor, who is not related to the reverend.

News in brief

US daily virus toll below 1,000

WASHINGTON: For the first time in nearly three and a half months, the United States recorded fewer than 1,000 deaths in a day from COVID-19 on Monday, according to Johns Hopkins University. In 24 hours, 749 people died from the coronavirus, far below the peak of 4,473 deaths recorded on January 12. The daily US death toll has not been below the thousand mark since November 29, when 822 people died in a 24-hour period. That indicates that the slowdown in the epidemic is continuing in the United States, where infection rates and deaths have fallen to similar levels as before Halloween, Thanksgiving and other end-of-year holidays that were marked by travel and larger gatherings that boosted the spread of the virus. — AFP

700,000 COVID deaths in LatAm

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay: More than 700,000 lives have been lost to COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean since the pandemic began, according to an AFP tally on Monday evening from official sources. The region, which encompasses 34 countries and territories in South and Central America and the Caribbean plus Mexico, recorded 700,022 deaths—the second-highest number of virus fatalities after Europe. Brazil and Mexico account for two-thirds of the region's coronavirus deaths, which hit the grim figure of over 500,000 by the end of December and have steadily increased since, reaching 600,000 on February 2. — AFP

Brazil judge clears ex-leader Lula

BRASILIA: A Brazilian Supreme Court judge on Monday overturned the graft convictions against former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, clearing the way for the left-wing leader to run in the 2022 presidential election. Justice Edson Fachin overturned all convictions against the popular-but-tarnished ex-president (2003-2010), stemming from a probe into a massive corruption scheme centered on Brazilian state oil company Petrobras. Fachin ruled the court in the southeastern city of Curitiba that convicted Lula "lacked jurisdiction," and sent a total of four related cases against him to a federal court in the capital, Brasilia. — AFP

US cracks down on Israeli billionaire

WASHINGTON: The United States reimposed curbs Monday on an Israeli billionaire accused of corruption in the Democratic Republic of Congo, reversing a move by Donald Trump during his last days in office. Rights groups had urged Joe Biden's new administration to halt the recent easing of sanctions on mining tycoon Dan Gertler, whom Washington claims deprived the DRC of \$1.4 billion in tax revenues over the past decade. US State Department spokesman Ned Price said the license granted to Gertler five days before Trump left the White House had been revoked, as it was "inconsistent with America's strong foreign policy interests in combatting corruption around the world." — AFP

Biden names two women generals

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden on Monday announced the nomination of two women to lead US military commands, who will be only the second and third women to hold such senior military positions in the United States. US Air Force General Jacqueline Van Ovost, the only woman to have reached the rank of four-star general, the military's highest, was nominated to head Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM). Three-star army general Laura Richardson was nominated to lead Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), which covers Central and Latin America. She will also receive her fourth star. — AFP

'Why did this happen?'

Departing the region, he felt he was living "a tribulation sent by God." "I was asking God: 'Why did this happen? What does this mean? What will happen to us?'" the 44-year-old told AFP. After the disaster, most of the flock decided to stick together.

Reverend Sato joined them and they embarked on a year-long exodus—moving from Aizu in western Fukushima to the Yamagata region, down to Tokyo and then eventually settling in the Izumi district of Iwaki city. Their final destination was just 50 kilometers from the church they had left behind, but they travelled over 700 kilometers before settling there.

One parishioner was killed in the tsunami and several died after the evacuation. Others suffered discrimination over rumors that people from Fukushima could "infect" people with radiation.

Harumi Mottate, an 83-year-old church member, recalls the time as "a test." "It was a turbulent year," Mottate, who was evacuated on a military truck, told AFP. "I was deprived of my daily life in Okuma all of a sudden. If I had not had faith, I would have resented what happened to me." — AFP



YANGON: A nun pleading with police not to harm protesters in Myitkyina in Myanmar's Kachin state, amid a crackdown on demonstrations against the military coup. — AFP

Security forces search Myanmar protest district room by room

YANGON: People barricaded in a Yangon neighborhood overnight said yesterday that security forces searched their homes room by room for anti-coup protesters, targeting apartments flying the flag of Aung San Suu Kyi's party. Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military ousted and detained Suu Kyi last month, triggering daily protests around the country to demand the junta restore democracy.

The police and army have responded with an increasingly brutal crackdown and parts of Yangon have emerged as flashpoints for violence as protesters continue to defy authorities and take to the streets.

Crowds once again flocked to central San Chaung township in the commercial hub to call for Suu Kyi's release from custody in a Monday protest coinciding with International Women's Day. By nightfall, security forces had sealed off a block of streets with around 200 protesters still inside, according to the UN rights office, prompting alarm from diplomatic missions and calls for their safe release. Sharp loud bangs were heard coming from the area, although it was not clear if the sounds were caused by gunfire or stun grenades.

Security forces started searching apartments after a nightly internet shutdown blanketed the country at 1:00 am local time (1830 GMT), residents told AFP, particularly those flying the red and gold flag of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party on their balconies. One resident said her home—which did not have any protesters hiding inside—was searched. "They searched every building on Kyun Taw road—they destroyed the locks of apartment buildings if they were locked downstairs," said the resident, adding that she heard dozens were arrested. By dawn, security forces appeared to have retreated, allowing some protesters to escape from the area. "There will be a crackdown again" San Chaung—a bustling township known for its cafes, bars and restaurants—has transformed since the protests began, with makeshift barricades of bamboo, sandbags, tables and barbed wire set up by protesters in an effort to slow security forces. Yesterday morning saw brisk sales from food vendors on the streets. "We need to finish selling our goods before 9am—there will be a crackdown again on the streets," said one. Since the coup, more than 60 people have been killed as security forces have broken up anti-coup demonstrations, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group. — AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10, 2021

From checks to child poverty, US economy awaits Biden stimulus

US Congress votes on \$1.9 trillion stimulus package

WASHINGTON: A flood of money for COVID-19 vaccines, stimulus checks and unemployment benefits is set to flow into the US economy this week, with Congress's expected approval of President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion stimulus package.

The bill—approved by the Senate on Saturday and set for a vote in the House—will pay for programs credited with helping the world's largest economy survive the mass layoffs and business disruptions sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a departure from previous relief measures, the package also specifically targets poverty by expanding tax credits meant to help low-income families, which economists say could lead to child poverty being cut almost in half.

"It's a sea change for American social policy," Samuel Hammond, director of poverty and welfare policy at the Niskanen Center, said of the reforms included in the bill known as the American Rescue Plan.

Congress is only narrowly controlled by Biden's Democrats, and analysts believed the president's initial proposal would be whittled down significantly. But the bill survived largely intact, and firms believe the US economy will expand even faster this year, with Oxford Economics forecasting a seven percent expansion in GDP. "That was the calculus on the part of the Democrats—we're going to get one more bite at the apple, and we're going to make it big enough that we don't have to worry about not doing enough," economist Joel Naroff said of the Democrats' surprisingly expansive package.

Continued aid

The United States began spending big as its Covid-19 outbreak morphed into the world's largest, and unemployment skyrocketed after businesses shut down



WASHINGTON, DC: A homeless man sleeps on the National Mall near the US Capitol in Washington, DC on Monday. The American Rescue Plan, the bill, which was approved by the Senate last week and is set for a vote in the House today. —AFP

or curtailed operations. The \$2.2 trillion CARES Act passed nearly a year ago increased weekly unemployment payments, expanded eligibility, offered aid to small businesses and funded stimulus checks to consumers. An additional \$900 billion in relief was passed in December.

After taking office in January, Biden proposed a third measure that would, among other things, keep the expanded unemployment aid going until September 6,

despite arguments from Republicans that the bill is wasteful, and some economists' concerns that it could spark inflation. It would also apportion money to speed up the US vaccination campaign against COVID-19, without which Naroff warned the crisis—and the need for massive government spending—will not end.

"Once you've got the pandemic down to the level where you probably wouldn't call it a pandemic anymore, you can start the process of moving from a gov-

ernment-run economy to a private sector-run economy," he said. Wells Fargo Securities economist Michael Pugliese said businesses would step up rehiring in the coming months as virus cases ebb, but wasn't sure if the economy would return to the historically low unemployment seen before the pandemic, as Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen predicts. "Even if we're not all the way back to full employment by 2022, we should be in a much, much better place than we are at the moment on jobs," he told AFP. As he campaigned for Democratic control of the Senate, Biden promised stimulus checks of as much as \$1,400 to adults, but the impact of that money is unclear.

"I would expect a jump there in consumption... starting in April and May as that money really starts to flow, but at an individual level, it will vary, I think, quite a bit what Americans are using it for," Pugliese said.

'Landmark legislation'

Even as millions of people lost their jobs last year, the CARES Act's initial burst of spending helped push the US poverty rate down, but data from the University of Chicago and University of Notre Dame shows it has since rebounded to 11.3 percent in January 2021. Biden's plan expands tax credits intended to aid the poor, most notably by raising the amount refundable to taxpayers under the Child Tax Credit to \$3,600 for children under the age of six, and to \$3,000 for children between the ages of six and 17. Those provisions will cut the child poverty rate—which Pew Research Center said was on a downward trajectory at 14 percent in 2019 — by a little under half, Hammond said, while for the poorest children, the decline will be more than 50 percent. "It's landmark legislation, but it's going to be enormous for low-income families across the country," he said. —AFP



YANGON: Demonstrators hang women's longyi, a traditional garment worn in Myanmar, as a form of determent to security forces in Yangon, on Monday. — AFP

Myanmar garment workers stand for 'women martyrs'

YANGON: For the past month, garment worker Khine Mar Nwe has demonstrated alongside her female co-workers at violent protests in Myanmar, risking her life to demand a return to democracy.

The 26-year-old mother used to spend her days hunched over a sewing machine in the commercial city of Yangon, making clothes for western fashion brands. But that all changed when the putsch on February 1 ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and triggered mass protests against the new military junta. Security forces have responded with an increasingly brutal crackdown on demonstrators, with more than 50 people killed and nearly 1,800 arrested. Despite the dangers, Khine Mar Nwe is determined to fight.

"We have equal responsibilities with men and we are here to protest shoulder to shoulder with men in the revolution," she told AFP on International Women's Day. "We don't have any fears," she said, her long ponytail billowing out from a baseball cap, as she

raised three fingers in the air—a symbol of resistance—at a rally in Yangon. Khine Mar Nwe, chairwoman of a popular garment factory workers association, says the oppressive conditions she worked under have taught her the importance of standing up for herself. Her dogmatic leadership style has at times rankled her bosses who have threatened to lay her off. Before the coup, Myanmar's garment industry was booming thanks to an influx of investments from international fashion brands. Labels such as GAP, H&M, Primark and Adidas had shifted production to Myanmar factories, and locally-manufactured clothing, footwear and handbags were worth three percent to the country's gross domestic product.

But with the military back in power, the fate of the industry's 700,000 workers is in doubt amid fears fashion labels could exit the country. The unintended impact could be "malnutrition and sex-trafficking" for the mostly female workers, an industry insider told AFP. Despite the uncertainty in her industry and the personal safety risks for demonstrators, Khine Mar Nwe says she's not worried and maintains women must be a part of Myanmar's democratic restoration.

The deaths by gunfire of two young women—Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing, 20, and Kyal Sin, 19 — in recent weeks has deepened her commitment to the cause. "I'm very proud of our women martyrs," she said. "We promise to fight (on) relentlessly on their behalf, as long as I'm alive." — AFP

Vodafone towers unit set for 14.7-bn euro valuation

LONDON: British mobile phone giant Vodafone yesterday announced the price range for the upcoming German stock market flotation of its towers business, valuing the unit at up to 14.7 billion euros (\$17.4 billion). The float of up to one-quarter of Vantage Towers comes amid increasing demand for mobile telecommunications connectivity across Europe, driven by data growth, 5G roll-out and regulatory coverage obligations.

Mobile phone giants are also floating or selling off their tower businesses in order to slash debt.

German-headquartered Vantage Tower will have its first day of trading on the Frankfurt stock market on or around March 18, with a price-per-share range of between 22.5 euros and 29 euros, Vodafone said in a statement. The initial public offering (IPO) "implies a total market capitalization for Vantage Towers of 11.4 billion euros to 14.7 billion euros", it added. Digital Colony, a digital infrastructure investor and operator based in the US, has agreed to be a cornerstone investor in the IPO, alongside RRI, a global equity fund based in Singapore, with commitments of 500 million euros and 450 million euros, respectively.

"The Vantage Towers IPO is moving ahead at pace," Vantage chief executive Vivek Badrinath said in the statement. "Today's price range announcement is accompanied by the news that two leading global investors have committed to cornerstone our IPO with the purchase of 950 million euros of shares at the offer price." Vantage Towers' portfolio includes 82,000 macro sites—towers, masts and rooftops—across 10

UK finance firm Greensill collapses into insolvency

LONDON: Troubled UK finance firm Greensill has collapsed into administration after encountering serious financial difficulties, administrators Grant Thornton said Monday, sparking fears for the future of thousands of jobs worldwide. Greensill specializes in short-term supply chain financing for businesses, but itself faces funding problems and mounting questions over opaque and complex accounting methods.

Administration caps a crisis-hit month for Greensill, whose collapse risks more than 50,000 jobs—including over 7,000 in Australia—across the group and its customers. "Chris Laverty, Trevor O'Sullivan and Will Stagg of Grant Thornton UK LLP were appointed as joint administrators of Greensill Capital (UK) Limited and Greensill Capital Management Company Limited," Grant Thornton said in a statement on Monday. "The joint administrators are in continued discussion with an interested party in relation to the purchase of certain Greensill Capital assets."

"As these discussions remain ongoing, it would be inappropriate to comment further at this time."

Sources close to the matter confirmed a Financial Times report that US private equity firm Apollo was seeking to buy parts of the group. The paper cautioned however that any Apollo rescue would not include loans made to the GFG Alliance Group headed by Indian-British steel billionaire Sanjeev Gupta.

Greensill lawyers appeared before a UK court on Monday, stating in court documents that it has "fallen into severe financial distress" and can no longer pay debts, the FT said. Both Greensill and Apollo have declined to comment on the matter.

Swiss and German problems

Greensill was thrown into crisis one week ago when lender Credit Suisse suspended \$10 billion in funds after discovering that \$4.6 billion of insurance underpinning Greensill contracts had expired.

Greensill lawyers said Monday that Credit Suisse had demanded repayment of a \$140-million loan—but had admitted that the firm has "no conceivable way" of repaying the sum. The financier also has \$5.0 billion of exposure to GFG Alliance Group, which is also facing

European countries. "Demand for data and connectivity across Europe is powering growth in the towers sector," Badrinath said. "Our superior grid and leading market positions mean we are well placed to benefit from this growth and our recent financial results highlighted the good commercial and operational momentum across the business," he added.

Vodafone said it was targeting proceeds of up to 2.8 billion euros from the IPO, helping to reduce its debt pile. Earlier this year, heavily-indebted Telefonica agreed to sell its telephone masts in Europe and Latin America to US-based telecom infrastructure firm American Towers for 7.7 billion euros.

The Spanish group said it would use the proceeds to cut debt by 4.6 billion euros. Vodafone meanwhile rebounded into profit during the first half of its financial year, or six months to September. During the same period a year earlier, the group had suffered a hefty loss after India's Supreme Court ordered telecoms companies to pay long-standing licensing fees. — AFP



financial difficulty according to Greensill lawyers. A GFG Alliance spokesman said Monday the firm is functioning normally.

"Our operations are running as normal and our core businesses continue to benefit from strong market conditions generating robust sales and cash flows," the spokesman told AFP. The group was "making progress in our discussions with financial institutions that can help diversify our funding" and would provide updates following developments, he said.

Greensill also suffered a heavy blow last Wednesday when Germany's financial watchdog froze the operations of its German banking subsidiary, citing an "imminent risk" of over-indebtedness.

The public prosecutor's office in Bremen told AFP that it has opened a preliminary probe. German media reported that regulator Bafin has filed a criminal complaint against Greensill Bank over allegations it falsified balance sheets. Bafin on Wednesday froze payments in and out of Greensill Bank, essentially closing it down.

It also expressed concern about accounting irregularities, including dealings with the GFG Alliance Group. There are worries in Britain about GFG Alliance facing difficulties as Gupta owns Liberty Steel, which employs 5,000 workers in Britain.

There is such concern in the British government that a minister held an urgent meeting with Liberty Steel's chief on Sunday, the BBC reported.

London-headquartered Greensill was founded in 2011 by Australian Lex Greensill. Its activities span Australia and the United States. Administration refers to the process whereby a troubled company calls in outside expertise to try to minimize job losses. — AFP



Business

Germany's exports tick up on robust trade with China

French economy to rebound with 5% growth: CB



BERLIN: German Chancellor Angela Merkel attends a video-conferenced meeting with representatives of the German Association of Local Utilities of municipally determined infrastructure undertakings and economic enterprises (Verband kommunaler Unternehmen, VKU) in Berlin yesterday. — AFP

FRANKFURT: Germany's exports ticked up in January on robust trade with China but imports sank as coronavirus shutdowns sapped consumer demand in Europe's top economy, official data showed yesterday. Exports rose 1.4 percent month-on-month in seasonally adjusted figures, federal statistics office Destatis said.

Imports slumped 4.7 percent, widening Germany's closely-watched trade surplus to 22.2 billion euros (\$26.3 billion). Compared with a year ago, before the pandemic ravaged the global economy, exports fell 8.0 percent in January and imports almost 10 percent.

"Consumer demand fell sharply in January due to a lack of opportunities" as the government kept non-essential shops, leisure and cultural centers closed to rein in the coronavirus, said LBBW bank economist Jens-Oliver Niklasch. But demand for "made in Germany" goods was powered by vital trade partner

China, which has recovered faster from the virus shock.

Exports to European Union countries plunged six percent year-on-year, while demand for EU goods within Germany was down by almost the same. The Brexit fallout continued to hurt commerce with the United Kingdom, with Destatis recording a 29 percent plunge in German exports across the Channel.

Demand for UK goods in Germany collapsed by more than 56 percent. Cross-Channel exporters have had to adapt to new customs requirements from January 1, following Britain's 2016 decision to leave the European Union. Firms on both sides have since complained of increased bureaucracy and shipment delays as they grapple with the new rules.

"Foreign trade with Britain has collapsed," said Niklasch. Combined with Germany's struggles to bring down COVID-19 infections despite months of shut-

downs, "the January reading is not an indication of renewed German export strength, but rather an alarm bell for the first quarter."

The French economy will rebound strongly this year from a deep recession sparked by Covid-19, the country's central bank chief said yesterday. Growth will reach at least five percent in 2021, Bank of France governor Francois Villeroy de Galhau told France Info radio, a forecast that "comforted" a prediction the bank made in December.

"The recession is behind us," he said. French GDP slumped 8.3 percent in 2020, national statistics bureau Insee estimated in late January, saying that downturn had turned out to be less brutal than originally forecast. A massive drop in consumer spending was behind much of the 2020 decline, while investment and foreign trade held up well, it said. — AFP

Burgan Bank redeems KD 100m subordinated tier 2 bonds issued in 2016

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank K.P.S.C. successfully redeemed its KD 100 million Subordinated Tier 2 bonds due 9 March 2026 (bonds), in accordance with the terms and conditions of their issuance. The terms and conditions of the bonds' issuance stipulate that Burgan Bank may exercise a call option to redeem the bonds five years from the date of their issuance or on any interest payment date thereafter.

The fixed and floating-rate tranches of the redeemed bonds carried coupon rates of 6.00% and 3.95% plus CBK Discount Rate, respectively. The redemption came after a \$500 million Subordinated Tier 2 Capital Securities issuance in the international debt capital markets in December 2020. The new bonds were priced at a fixed-rate of 2.75 percent and have an eleven-year tenor with a call option for redemption after six years from the

date of their issuance (11NC6) or on any interest payment date thereafter. The new bonds also have an A- rating by Fitch. The new bonds comply with the Basel III regulatory framework, as adopted by the Central Bank of Kuwait.

The prior written approval of the Central Bank of Kuwait for Burgan Bank to exercise the call option was issued on 28 October 2020. Kamco Investment Company K.S.C.P. (Kamco Invest) was mandated as the Fiscal and Principal Paying Agent for the bonds, and has advised on and managed the bonds' redemption process. Burgan is rated A+ by Fitch, A3 by Moody's and BBB+ by S&P, and is a regular issuer in the international debt capital markets. All of the Bank's previous bond issuances have been successfully settled in accordance with the terms and conditions of their offering.



BEIRUT: A Maronite Christian priest pleads to anti-government protesters to let him pass with his vehicle as he stands next to burning tires at a make-shift roadblock in Zouk Mosbeh north of Lebanon's capital Beirut on Monday. — AFP

Lebanon protesters block roads over worsening poverty

BEIRUT: Lebanese protesters set up new road blocks yesterday to vent anger over political inaction in the face of deepening poverty, but security forces managed to re-open some to traffic.

The country has been mired in economic crisis, which has brought surging unemployment and spiralling prices while the currency has plunged to a new low to the dollar on the black market. Yet the government—which formally resigned after the massive Beirut port explosion last August that killed more than 200 people—has failed to agree on a new cabinet since. Road blocks have become a near daily occurrence in the small Mediterranean country and lasted all day Monday, including in and out of Beirut.

Demonstrators yesterday again cut off some roads in the northern city of Tripoli and the eastern region

of the Bekaa, the National News Agency said. Highways leading to Beirut were also briefly closed, but then re-opened to flowing traffic. Some protesters have called for a revival of the nationwide street movement of late 2019 that demanded the removal of Lebanon's entire political class, widely seen as incompetent and corrupt.

More than half of the population is living below the poverty line, and prices have soared as the Lebanese pound has lost more than 80 percent of its value.

With foreign currency reserves dwindling fast, the authorities have warned they will soon have to lift subsidies on fuel and mostly imported food. President Michel Aoun has accused demonstrators blocking roads of "sabotage", but also called for authorities to prevent "the manipulation of food prices". Despite growing anger on the streets, there have been no serious clashes between security forces and demonstrators in recent days, in contrast to previous rallies.

Lebanon's economic crisis has been aggravated by several lockdowns to stem the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. On Monday, the country entered a new phase of alleviating the latest stay-at-home order imposed after hospitals became overwhelmed following the winter holidays. — AFP

Asia markets rise as rate hike fears temper recovery hope

HONG KONG: Markets mostly rose in Asia yesterday but traders struggled to reconcile growing optimism about the global recovery with worries that the expected economic surge will fan inflation and force interest rates hikes sooner than expected.

A rally in equities across the world over the past year has started to run out of steam in recent weeks, despite the prospect of a sharp rebound in growth as coronavirus vaccines are rolled out, infections slow, lockdowns are eased and the United States prepares to pass another massive stimulus.

European indexes enjoyed a much-needed blast upwards-led by a record close in Frankfurt—after EU leaders pledged to double vaccine deliveries to 300 million doses between April and June, having been too slow out of the blocks with its immunization program.

Wall Street was a mixed bag, however, with the Dow also hitting a new all-time high but the S&P 500 in the red and Nasdaq shedding more than two percent as tech firms such as Apple continue to suffer, having rocketed last year as they benefited from people being stuck at home. The divergence in the Dow and Nasdaq came down to traders shifting into cyclical stocks that benefit more in times of economic booms such as airlines and construction firms, while financials were also rising along with interest rate expectations. Bets on higher US rates pushed the dollar past 109 yen for the first time since June.

"Stock markets heavy with the winners of 2020 are suffering, while previously unloved markets heavy with boring banks, consumer staples, resource and property companies are catching more of the global recovery trade winds," said OANDA's Jeffrey Halley.

After Monday's losses, most Asia markets battled to eke out gains. Tokyo rose one percent along with Singapore, while Sydney, Wellington, Taipei, Manila, Mumbai and Bangkok were in positive territory.

But Shanghai dropped 1.8 percent. Seoul, Wellington and Jakarta also fell. London and Frankfurt fell at the open, while Paris was flat.



Activists in race to save digital trace of Syria war

BEIRUT: From videos of deadly air strikes to jihadist takeovers, Al-Mutez Billah's YouTube page served as a digital archive of the Syrian war until automated take-down software in 2017 erased it permanently.

The page exhibiting footage that violated YouTube's community standards could not be restored because Al-Mutez Billah, a citizen-journalist, had been executed by the Islamic State group three years earlier over his documentation efforts. "It's not just videos that have been deleted, it's an entire archive of our life," said Sarmad Jilane, a Syrian activist and close friend of Al-Mutez Billah, who was killed at the age of 21. "Effectively, it feels like a part of our visual memory has been erased."

The Google-owned YouTube platform has deleted hundreds of thousands of videos uploaded by Syrian activists since it introduced automated software in 2017 to detect and delete objectionable content, including violent or graphic videos. It is not the only social media giant relying on artificial intelligence takedowns, but the platform is home to the majority of Syria war footage, making it an even bigger blow.

The videos showing regime bombardments, executions by jihadists and chemical attacks had served as a vital window into a conflict which has remained largely off limits to journalists and investigators and was captured mostly by the people living it. With the war entering its 11th year, there is growing concern that digital evidence of history's most documented conflict is being siphoned away by the internet's indiscriminate trash can. "The videos are part of an entire population's memory," Jilane said.

"Every clip helps us remember things like what shells were fired that day, the date of the event, or even how we were feeling at the time," the activist told AFP over the phone from Germany. Jilane is one of the founders of Raqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, a renowned activist-run page that documented abuses by jihadists from the so-called Islamic State group.

Four years ago, YouTube deleted the page's account but it has since been restored with the help of the Syrian Archive—a group working to preserve the conflict's digital footprint.

'Bleeding-out'

The Syrian Archive has helped restore more than 650,000 YouTube videos removed since 2017, but that is only a fraction of deleted content. "There is a

real feel among people who do open-source investigation that Syrian history is being erased by machine-learning technology," said Dia Kayyali of the parent company Mnemonic.

"It is a steady and ongoing bleeding-out of this body of evidence." To get a sense of how much content is being removed, the Syrian Archive compares videos available online against those collected on its servers. Almost a quarter of its collection is no longer available on YouTube, Kayyali said.

The situation is set to worsen as global powers ramp up pressure on social media giants to curb terror content online. In December, EU lawmakers reached a provisional agreement on tougher regulations, including an obligation that platforms take down offending material within an hour. If enforced, this would make preservation all the more difficult. "As soon as we find things, we archive them," Kayyali said. "But we can't keep up with the technology, it's specifically designed to be much faster than human beings," she added. "Right now, it's really a race against time."

YouTube usually relies on a mix of automated software and human reviewers to flag and delete problematic videos. But the coronavirus pandemic has forced it to lean more on artificial intelligence as it reduces "in-office staffing", according to its latest transparency report. This "means we are removing more content that may not be violative of our policies," it said.

But "when it's brought to our attention that a video or channel has been removed mistakenly, we act quickly to reinstate it," a YouTube spokesperson said.

'Destroying evidence'

Despite the erasures, countless hours of Syria content survive. "We have more footage of the Syrian war than the length of the conflict itself," said Nick Waters of the open-source investigation website Bellingcat.

Bellingcat has gained prominence as a pillar of open-source intelligence since it started using videos and images to probe the use of weapons in Syria's war, which has claimed more than 380,000 lives.

Rights groups have also used open-source information to investigate chemical weapon use in Syria.

"User-generated content is very good at establishing certain things: what happened, where and when," Waters said. "It's less good in terms of the why and sometimes the whom." Experts believe social media evidence could potentially play a future role in Syria prosecutions. Its use in court is still being developed, Waters said, but its added value should not be overlooked. "Each one of these videos or images potentially shows a piece of history," the open-source analyst told AFP. "By deleting these videos, especially from accounts of people who may have been killed... these social media giants are effectively destroying evidence." —AFP

surge. "A key question for the March... meeting is how participants will revise their economic and interest rate projections to reflect further fiscal stimulus," said Axi strategist Stephen Innes. "With so much riding on the Fed at the moment, you can't help but think the market has started to zero in on next week's (meeting), which comes at a fragile time for risk sentiment and inflation forecasting."

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has said that while she did not see inflation being a major problem, if there was a worrying spike then "there are tools to deal with that". But National Australia Bank's Rodrigo Catrill pointed out that "the tool to 'deal with that' is higher interest rates—precisely the sentiment the market has been adopting this year".

The auctions of US Treasuries this week will be closely followed with observers warning any sign of weak demand, which would push yields up to make them more attractive, could spark another sell-off in equities. Oil prices extended Monday's losses, weighed by the stronger dollar, while US officials are expected to announce another rise in stockpiles. The drop comes after Brent rallied past \$71 for the first time since January last year. — AFP

Business

The long lines of Milan's 'new COVID poor' amid growing food shortages

Around 3,500 people turn up at two distribution points in Milan for food

MILAN: Eyes on the ground, they queue in silence for a food parcel outside Milan's Pane Quotidiano charity. Since coronavirus swept across Italy a year ago, the line has grown and grown. "I'm ashamed to be here. But otherwise I would have nothing to eat," said Giovanni Altieri, 60, who has been coming every day since the nightclub where he worked was shut under virus regulations. He misses work—the sense of purpose and camaraderie.

"I like the contact with people, I had a good salary, but I'm at rock bottom here. I have no income and live off my savings," he said. Every day, 3,500 people turn up at the two distribution points run in Milan by the charity, which hands out surplus food it receives from a range of organizations, as well as through individual donations. Milan is the center of Italy's industrial north and one of the richest cities in Europe. But as the pandemic has battered the country, poverty rates have soared, even here.

Hidden faces

Some of those standing in line hide their faces with a scarf or even a plastic bag, fearful of being recognized. Many leave with several packages—one for each member of their family. Inside, there is milk, yoghurt, cheese, biscuits, sugar, tuna, a kiwi, a tiramisu and some bread.

Such sights were rare on the streets of Milan, but across the wealthy north of Italy, more than 720,000 people have fallen below the poverty line in the last year. Throughout Italy, the number of people in poverty jumped by one million in 2020 to 5.6 million, a 15-year high, according to national statistics agency Istat. The percentage of poor is

higher in the south, which has always struggled more, but at 11.1 percent, compared to 9.4 percent in the north, the gap is narrowing.

"The queues have increased with COVID, there are more young people and more undeclared workers who have no right to social benefits," said Claudio Falavigna, a 68-year-old volunteer at Pane Quotidiano, which has been running for 123 years.

"And there are also members of the middle classes, from the world of entertainment and events," he said. He recognizes them "as they still dress well, they are elegant—it's a question of dignity".

Pre-pandemic, the region of Lombardy, which includes Milan, accounted for 22 percent of Italy's GDP. In 2019, the region had a per capita income of 39,700 euros (\$47,000) a year—well above the European average. But it was also the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak last year that knocked Italy off its feet, and has so far left more than 100,000 people dead.

Pandemic shock So what happened?

"The shock of the pandemic reduced to zero the revenues of many categories of workers, notably the self-employed, who number many in the towns of the north," David Benassi, professor of sociology at the Bicocca University in Milan, said. And although a new citizenship income for the lowest paid came into effect in 2019 and is widespread in the south of Italy, many in the north often fall through the cracks of state support. "Many families who fell into poverty in 2020 don't fulfil the income and asset requirements," said Benassi.

The worst hit are women and young people, who



MILAN: Every day, 3,500 people turn up at the two distribution points run in Milan by the charity, which hands out surplus food it receives from a range of organizations, as well as through individual donations.

often have precarious jobs, noted Mario Calderini, professor of social innovation at Milan Polytechnic.

"Women have paid a heavy price in this crisis, as have families with underage children," he said.

Amina Amale, 52, was a cleaning lady before coronavirus but now stands in line for the food packages. "With coronavirus, everything is closed, there's no work," she said. — AFP

UK banks face climate conflicts of interest: Study

LONDON: British banks face potential conflicts of interest over climate change because almost 80 percent of board members have links with high-polluting sectors, a study showed yesterday.

DeSmog, an investigative climate campaign group, revealed the main finding of its research into UK banks' management. A majority of 50 out of the top 64 directors at the five biggest UK banks—Barclays, HSBC, Lloyds, NatWest and Standard Chartered—have past or present links to major polluters, DeSmog said in a statement.

And one quarter of directors have, or have had, direct links with the carbon-intensive fossil fuel sector, it added. "The analysis ... shows many of the banks' directors have close ties to polluting industries and their financial backers, either as current directors, advisors or previous employees," DeSmog concluded. "This could affect their ability to be impartial judges of shareholder resolutions trying to push the banks to actually end financing of fossil fuels."

Standard Chartered declined to comment. Barclays, HSBC, Lloyds and NatWest did not immediately respond to requests for comment. The corporate world meanwhile faces mounting demands to respond to climate change. NatWest chief executive



Alison Rose has put the climate high on her agenda by pledging to end loans for coal projects by 2030.

HSBC aims to achieve net-zero carbon emissions across its investments by 2050.

Both Barclays and HSBC meanwhile face shareholder motions to curb or phase out exposure to fossil fuels. "Banks have a significant role to play in addressing the climate crisis by cleaning up their portfolios, and removing support for environmentally damaging industries," said Rachel Sherrington, DeSmog's lead researcher for the study.

"Public support for scientifically-led action on the climate crisis is high, and the directors of the UK's banks have the chance to put themselves on the right side of history." Oil giants BP and Royal Dutch Shell have both vowed to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 — but both faced criticism from green campaigners over a lack of detail. The British government, which has committed to reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050, will host UN climate gathering COP26 in Glasgow in November. —AFP



Mijbil Al-Ayoub

Ooredoo first to launch its clubhouse Channel in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, acknowledges the importance of one-on-one communication with all segments of society and customers, keeping up with the latest digital developments of various social media platforms, and thus having a strong social media presence. Therefore, Ooredoo Kuwait announced the launch of its channel on the new voice-chat based social media app, Clubhouse.

This step comes in line with the company's strategy and vision of enriching people's digital lives. Ooredoo Kuwait has always been proactive in participating in all activities that accelerate digital transformation while taking advantage of the allure of social media through creating more intimate relationship with its customers and the public. Subsequently, it is keen to join various electronic channels to interact with customers and listen to all their opinions and suggestions which further strengthens the relationship between them.

The nature of the newcomer, Clubhouse, which is built around "drop-in audio chat", as the conversations are between people discussing various topics such as; technology, the latest local news and many others, which made it achieve huge widespread worldwide and in the country. Any user can start a "room" that others can join, as each "room" contains mediators, speakers and listeners. Moderators control who gets the privileges to speak, although listeners can "raise their hands" to ask to speak.

Mijbil Al-Ayoub, Senior Director, Corporate Communications, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "Clubhouse gives us the opportunity to better communicate and interact with our customers and the public, build a strong relationship with them, and gain their trust, especially the youth category who are always looking forward to experiencing everything new and digital."

Al-Ayoub added: "Today, and by joining the Clubhouse, we are closer and more interactive with our customers, followers, and the public. We, had our first conversation, and it was quite interactive and informative, the next conversation will be full of surprises and information related to all our products and services, our strategic partnerships and more."



COVID economies to recover quicker than in previous crises, says BoE

LONDON: The economic crisis caused by COVID-19 will leave fewer longer term scars than previous recessions, Bank of England (BoE) governor Andrew Bailey said Monday.

"If I had to summarize the diagnosis, it's positive but with large doses of cautionary realism," he said.

Britain, the European country hit hardest by the pandemic, has also suffered the worst recession among developed countries. But with a rapid vaccination campaign, the country hopes to return to normal sooner than initially expected. Despite a year of three lockdowns, the government's Office for Budget

Responsibility (OBR) projects that the economy will return to its pre-crisis level by mid-2022, six months earlier than originally forecast.

"Some of the effects on supply directly related to restrictions on activity and voluntary social distancing are likely to be temporary, and should start to reverse as the health outlook improves," Bailey said in Monday's speech. Ahead of next week's BoE meeting, Bailey said the economy faced pressure from "both sides", with fears that a worsening health situation could put a strain on the economy, and that a boom in activity on a rapidly improving health outlook could trigger inflation.

Fears of rising inflation have led investors to abandon bonds, pushing up rates. The BoE is examining the possibility of adopting negative rates in an attempt to boost investment, a measure never before used in the UK and for which the bank has advised the government to prepare for. It is also considering "tightening monetary policy if necessary" in combatting inflation, added Bailey. — AFP

ABK extends privileges to spouses with new 'Elite Family Banking'

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK), under its 'Elite Banking' umbrella, launches Elite Family Banking, enabling existing ABK Elite banking clients to extend an invitation to their spouses to join and enjoy ABK's Elite privileges.

To avail the membership, spouses are required to meet the eligibility criteria of a minimum deposit balance of KD 50,000 or a minimum salary of KD 1,500, whereas the main member has to have a maintained balance of KD 100,000, or a minimum salary of KD 2,000.

ABK's Elite program extends members the opportunity to plan and manage their finances via a dedicated relationship manager at ABK's Head Office, Shaab, University, Shuwaikh, Adan and Salmiya branches and enjoy access to investment opportunities managed by a team of wealth management specialists through Ahli Capital Investment Company. Additionally, Elite banking customers receive an ABK Visa Debit Card (Signature) which offers numerous benefits, services and discounts including access to over 1000+ airport lounges in more than 300 cities. Through ABK's Elite program, members can avail local concierge services, entrance to luxury hotels worldwide, exclusive fine dining discounts at restaurants across Kuwait and the UAE, AVIS car rental offers, multi-trip travel insurance, medical and travel assistance, and global customer assistance service 24 hours a day through multilingual service representatives. Members also experience shorter waiting periods in branches or when using Ahlan Ahli Call Center, through the priority service.

Customers can further benefit from the co-branded Emirates Skywards credit card, that offers skyward miles based on spend, the opportunity to enjoy cashback, upgrades, and a number of special offers when spending online and at retail outlets in Kuwait and abroad.

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Lifestyle | Features



The Fakhri Al-Din II's citadel overlooks the ancient Roman-era city of Palmyra with a view of the Great Colonnade in Syria's central province of Homs.



A picture shows a broken statue at the museum in Syria's Roman-era ancient city of Palmyra in the country's central province of Homs.



A picture shows the ruins of Syria's Roman-era ancient city of Palmyra, in the country's central province of Homs. — AFP photos

Syrian heritage suffered 'cultural apocalypse'

A decade of war has not only destroyed Syria's present and poisoned its future, it has damaged beyond repair some of its fabled past. Syria was an archaeologist's paradise, a world heritage home to some of the oldest and best-preserved jewels of ancient civilizations. The conflict that erupted in 2011 is arguably the worst of the 21st century so far on a humanitarian level, but the wanton destruction of heritage was possibly the worst in generations. In a few years, archaeological sites were damaged, museums were looted and old city centers were leveled.

Standing in front of a restored artefact in the Palmyra museum, he ran for 20 years, Khalil al-Hariri remembers the trauma of having to flee the desert city and its treasures as they fell into the hands of the so-called Islamic State group. "I have lived many difficult days. We were besieged several times in the museum," he said, recounting how he and his team stayed behind as late as possible to ferry artefacts to safety. "But the most difficult day of my life was the day I returned to Palmyra and saw the broken antiquities and the museum in shambles," said Hariri, now 60 years old. "They broke and smashed all the faces of statues that remained in the museum and which we could not save.

Some of them can be restored, but others have completely crumbled."

'Venice of the Sands'

Palmyra is a majestic ancient city whose influence peaked towards the end of the Roman empire and was famously ruled by Queen Zenobia in the 3rd century. Its imposing kilometer-long colonnade is unique and one of Syria's most recognizable landmarks. When IS jihadists hurtled into Palmyra in May 2015 to expand the "caliphate" they had proclaimed over parts of Syria and Iraq a year earlier, the outcry was global. The contrast offered by the splendor and prowess of Palmyrene architecture as a backdrop to the barbarity of disheveled gun-toting jihadists captured the world's imagination.

The site became a stage for public executions and other gruesome crimes, some of which were pictured and distributed in IS propaganda. The headless body of chief archaeologist Khaled Al-Asaad was also displayed there by IS henchmen who had tortured him to get him to reveal where the site's artefacts had been transferred.

Bent on their enterprise of cultural genocide, the nihilistic jihadists rigged Palmyra's famed shrine of Baal Shamin and blew it up. They also destroyed the Temple of Bel, blew up the Arch of

Triumph, looted what they could from the museum and defaced the statues and sarcophagi that were too large to remove. The sacking of the ancient city dubbed "The Venice of the Sands" drew comparisons with the destruction by Afghanistan's Taliban of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001. By the time government forces retook control of Palmyra in 2017, it had been irreversibly damaged.

'Complete, utter destruction'

Palmyra was just one of the irretrievable losses inflicted on Syria's heritage during a war that did not spare a single of the country's regions. "In two words, it's a cultural apocalypse," said Justin Marozzi, an author and historian who has written extensively on the region and its heritage. The patrimonial destruction unleashed on Syria in the previous decade harks back to another age, when the Mongol empire founded by Genghis Khan wreaked carnage far and wide. "When it comes to Syria and the Middle East in particular, I can't help thinking immediately of Timur, or Tamerlane, who unleashed hell here in 1400," said Marozzi, author of "Islamic Empires: Fifteen Cities that Define a Civilization."

The reference to the Mongol conqueror is inevitable when pondering the fate of Aleppo, Syria's economic hub before the war and once home to one of

the world's best-preserved old cities. Tamerlane put the city to the sword six centuries ago, but the devastation wrought on Aleppo in the past decade was not the work of a foreign invader. Maamoun Abdel Karim was Syria's antiquities chief when the worst of the destruction occurred, from 2012 to 2016. "Over the past two millennia of Syrian history, nothing worse has happened than what did during the war," he told AFP in Damascus. "Complete and utter destruction. We're not talking just about an earthquake in some place or a fire in another or even war in one city-but destruction across the whole of Syria," he said.

Looting

Before the war, the northern city of Aleppo-considered to be one of the world's longest continuously inhabited-boasted markets, mosques, caravanserais, and public baths. But the brutal siege imposed on rebels left it disfigured. The government, which from 2015 benefitted from Russia's military might, relied heavily on air power to claw back the territory. "I can't forget the day the minaret of the Umayyad mosque in Aleppo fell, or the day the fire ripped through the city's ancient markets," Abdel Karim said. Other buildings which, like the 11th century minaret, had survived Tamerlane to stand for centuries were

lost for ever. "Around 10 percent of Syria's antiquities were damaged, and that's high for a country with so many relics and historical sites," the former antiquities chief said.

A report published last year by the Gerda Henkel Foundation and the Paris-based Syrian Society for the Protection of Antiquities said more than 40,000 artefacts had been looted from museums and archaeological sites since the start of the war. The trafficking of "conflict antiquities" has generated millions of dollars for Islamic State, smaller rebel groups, state forces as well as more loosely-organized smuggling networks and individuals.

IS had a special department regulating excavations of archaeological sites on its territory, suggesting the profit to be made was significant, although it was never accurately quantified. The chaos that engulfed Syria at the peak of the war allowed the more moveable pieces-such as coins, statuettes and mosaic fragments-to be scattered worldwide through the antiquities black market. While some efforts have been undertaken to stem the illicit trade, and even in some cases to start repatriating stolen artefacts to Syria and Iraq, the damage done is huge.—AFP



A photo shows front page headlines reporting on the story of the interview given by Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, wife of Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, to Oprah Winfrey, which aired on US broadcaster CBS. —AFP Photos



In this file photo (from left) Britain's Prince William, Duke of Cambridge holding Prince Louis, Prince George, Princess Charlotte, Britain's Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, Britain's Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, Vice Admiral Timothy Laurence, Britain's Prince Charles, Prince of Wales, Britain's Princess Beatrice of York, Britain's Princess Anne, Princess Royal, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, Britain's Princess Eugenie of York, Britain's Lady Louise Windsor, Britain's Prince Andrew, Duke of York, Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, Britain's Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, James, Viscount Severn and Isla Phillips stand with other members of the Royal Family on the balcony of Buckingham Palace to watch a fly-past of aircraft by the Royal Air Force, in London.

Harry and Meghan: unanswered questions

Prince Harry and his wife Meghan's revelations about life in the British royal family-and why they left-have triggered a series of unanswered questions that will dominate coverage for weeks to come.

How will the royal family respond?

Buckingham Palace did not comment directly on the explosive pre-broadcast excerpts released before Sunday's interview. Weekend reports said they were unlikely to do so afterwards, unless individual members of the royal family were criticized. Yet they still face tough questions about Meghan's claims she had suicidal thoughts and felt isolated while pregnant, and failed to get any support.

Racism accusations against an unnamed royal are particularly sensitive, with Meghan having been the first senior member to be of mixed race. Black Lives Matter protests last year sparked calls for an urgent revision of the legacy of the British Empire. Harry's older brother, William, and his wife Kate, will be watched closely for any response, given their involvement in advocating for better mental health.

Who made the racist comment?

Harry vowed never to reveal which member of the royal family asked him about how dark their young son Archie's skin would be. Winfrey said Harry had told her the conversations did not concern his grandmother Queen Elizabeth II, or her husband Prince Philip. But it has sparked a guessing game that will do little to enhance attempts to portray the royal family as in touch with modern life and attitudes-and could force the monarchy to respond.

Who did Meghan go to for help?

Winefrey said she approached "one of the most senior people" in the royal household for help after admitting to having suicidal thoughts. But she claimed "nothing was ever done". Questions will be asked about who she contacted, and also why she was not given more help to adapt to the demands of royal life. Comparisons will inevitably be drawn to Harry's mother, Diana, who detailed a similar situation as she struggled with life in the limelight, including self-harm and bulimia.

How much have family ties been damaged?

The couple's claims will have done little to improve relations with senior

royals that were already frayed by their shock decision to leave. It could even burn bridges for good. Harry revealed a rift with his father, Prince Charles, after their departure last year. Charles even stopped taking his calls. Can that damage be repaired? And will Harry and Meghan ever be accepted back to Britain, including for royal events such as the unveiling of a statue of Diana planned for July?

What about Harry's brother William? Harry said there was "space" between the siblings. Will Diana's sons ever be as close again? Will Meghan face consequences for having singled out William's wife Kate for an incident in which Kate allegedly made her cry?

Who was jealous of Meghan?

Harry suggested that members of the royal family were jealous of Meghan's popularity during a 2018 tour of Australia and New Zealand. Who was it, why and can it explain the troubles that then developed? The revelation drew comparisons to Diana eclipsing Charles during their own tour of Australia in 1983, the subject of an episode in the latest season of Netflix drama "The Crown".

What about the bullying allegations?

The couple's interview was filmed before revelations last week that the palace had launched a probe into claims that Meghan bullied staff. She vehemently denies the allegations, and has accused the palace of peddling lies against the couple. What exactly happened?

What about Meghan's father?

Winefrey said she approached "one of the most senior people" in the royal household for help after admitting to having suicidal thoughts. But she claimed "nothing was ever done". Questions will be asked about who she contacted, and also why she was not given more help to adapt to the demands of royal life. Comparisons will inevitably be drawn to Harry's mother, Diana, who detailed a similar situation as she struggled with life in the limelight, including self-harm and bulimia.

What will they call their daughter?

Harry and Meghan revealed their second child will be a girl. Expect a flurry of speculation-and bets-about what she will be called.

BUCKINGHAM PALACE IN CRISIS AFTER HARRY AND MEGHAN UNLOAD ON ROYAL FAMILY

Britain's Queen Elizabeth was in crisis talks yesterday after Prince Harry and his wife Meghan lifted the lid on life inside Buckingham Palace with an explosive interview that reverberated around the world, local media reported. With revelations of suicidal thoughts, a racist relative and an heir-to-the throne trapped by tradition, the sit-down with Oprah Winfrey by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex was the most startling since Harry's late mother Princess Diana's own bombshell revelations in 1995. Harry described feeling "really let down" by his father Prince Charles, who had stopped taking his phone calls for a time.

Both Charles-the queen's heir-and Harry's elder brother William were "trapped" by the conventions of the monarchy, he said. "They don't get to leave. And I have huge compassion for that," Harry said in the interview broadcast on CBS Sunday night, explaining the couple's dramatic exit from royal life last year. Meghan, a mixed-race former actress, described herself as "naively" unprepared for life in the royal family. She said she was denied help for a mental health crisis and said there was even official concern about the skin colour of her unborn son. "I... just didn't want to be alive anymore," she told Winfrey.

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Racism row

The revelations have triggered a storm of reaction on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly the explosive claims about racism. Harry himself has faced accusations of using a racist slur against a former military colleague and was once pictured wearing a Nazi soldier's uniform at a fancy dress party. He has said Meghan had made him confront the issue. Anti-monarchy group Republic said the revelations showed the institution was facing "its worst crisis since the abdication in 1936", referring to Edward VIII's decision to step down to marry an American divorcee.

Amid political calls for a full investigation, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson-whose own views during his time as a newspaper columnist have been seen as racist-declined to comment. Yesterday's newspapers in Britain reported turmoil in the Royal Family as they reeled from the explosive revelations, and Buckingham Palace has yet to issue a formal response to the interview.

'Toxic' allegations

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pair, who have secured lucrative deals with Netflix and Spotify, had to find a way to make money as "my family literally cut me off financially". In one rare light-hearted moment, the couple disclosed that their second baby, due later this year, will be a girl. Following the interview, the couple released a photograph-labeled a "blissful portrait" by British tabloid Metro-of the pregnant Duchess with Harry and Archie.

'Character assassination'

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Lifestyle | Features



Young Egyptian dancer Luca Abdel-Nour performs during a lesson at Switzerland's Tanz Akademie Zurich.— AFP photos



EGYPTIAN BILLY ELLIOT SETS NEW BAR FOR MIDDLE EASTERN BALLET

Surrounded by little girls and mocked at school when he first tried ballet, it took serious determination for Luca Abdel-Nour to become the first Egyptian prizewinner at the prestigious Prix de Lausanne. The international competition in Switzerland has been one of the leading showcases for young ballet talent since it began in 1973. Abdel-Nour, 17, took three prizes, including second overall and the audience award, at the latest instalment in February, and hopes his success can inspire more boys from the Middle East to overcome their prejudices about dance. Born to a French mother but growing up in Cairo, he performed in dance and theatre shows with his school as a young boy.

But he didn't try ballet until he took part in a summer dance school in France aged 12, and an instructor told him to give it a try. "I was like ummm 'I don't want to do ballet, it's for girls,'" he said. But his mother kept encouraging him and eventually he joined a class in Egypt. He soon realized this was his passion, even if he was the only boy in the group. "I didn't really care if there were no boys," he said. "People at school knew because I was open about it. I would be called names but I didn't care. I used to tell them: 'You do your thing, I want to do my thing'."

Starstruck

Hard work helped him overcome his late start and by 14 he had won a year's scholarship to a dance school in Budapest. The following year, he won a full-time place at the elite Zurich Dance Academy. This was where things

became serious: he had to relearn everything from scratch, and overcome two leg injuries in his first year. But the work paid off at Lausanne last month. "When they announced the finalists, I couldn't believe it, I was on my way home from school on the train and I cried," he said.

Suddenly his phone was lighting up with messages from some of the biggest names in the business. "Dancers who are now directors who I have watched since I was a child were texting me saying 'You did a good job, we're interested in you'. I was starstruck and honored," he said.

'Worth it in the end'

His success has generated plenty of reaction back home in Egypt, with social media full of praise as well as the

inevitable sarcastic and even hostile commentary. "There are of course lots of negative comments and stuff, but there are a lot of people that have been really supportive of me doing it, saying I've inspired them to do ballet in a society where ballet is not really encouraged," he said. "You got the positive, you got the negative, and you have to choose what you want to listen to."

Abdel-Nour has accepted a place in a company, but is not yet allowed to reveal which one. "Every step of the way was hard," he said. "It's hard to leave your family and not see them for long periods of time but it was all worth it at the end."— AFP



Sneakers ecstatically modified by writer and sneakers decorator Rasik "Mr.ekse" Green are seen in Maboneng.



A general view of Court Order vintage sneakers reseller shop is seen in Rosebank, Johannesburg.— AFP photos

'Bringing us together': South Africa's sneaker craze

Queuing outside an upmarket Johannesburg clothing store, young fashion lovers hope to lay their hands on the latest sneakers to come out of the United States. For South Africa's city dwellers, sneakers are more than just shoes. As a marker of personality as well as social status, they are cared for and worn with pride, and youths compete to hunt down the rarest models from a market flooded with old and new sneakers-including many fakes. "Sneakers kind of tell your story," graffiti artist Rasik "Mr.ekse" Green told AFP as he was spray-painting a commissioned mural on the rooftop of a building in downtown Johannesburg.

Collecting and trading shoes has become a hobby in Africa's most industrialized nation, with aficionados known as "sneaker heads". In 2019, 800 pairs of Reeboks, created in a limited edition in collaboration with South African rap sensation AKA, sold out 10 minutes after their online release. A South African brand, Bathu-slang for "shoe"-conquered the local market with a unique mesh design. While its low-end sneakers cost 1,300 rand (\$84), Bathu came out with a limited edition, the Opel GSI, with only 80 pairs which it sold for 397,000 rand each in June 2019. "That wouldn't have happened 30 years ago," Green said. But another designer, Andile "ScotchIsDope"

designed as basketball shoes, acquired a "thug" reputation that stuck. "My parents didn't want me to get a pair because it was mixed up with a certain culture that was for criminals," recalled Hector Mgiba, 28, who has an extensive collection of Converse All-Stars. He said Converse shoes were also associated with "pantsula", a dance born among young black township dwellers as a form of protest against apartheid, and snubbed by older generations.

"Pantsula" dancers typically wore smart shirts, flare trousers and All-Stars-perfect for their quick steps and hops. Mgiba, a teenager at the time, saved up to buy a second-hand pair behind his parents' back. "I loved it so much and I wanted to pave my own way to how I express myself," he said. "The way it fades when it gets worn out, it becomes more of an art piece." A popular music genre known as Kwaito that emerged in Soweto during the 1990s cast Converse into a new light. Dancers in colorful All Stars turned the shoe into a symbol of township youth in post-apartheid South Africa. Today the rubber-soled shoe is worn with both formal fitted suits and casual dress by young South Africans of all backgrounds and skin tones.

'Bringing us together'

As demand for sneakers has grown, local entrepreneurs have become fierce rivals to international brands. Unable to afford the latest sneakers as a young boy, local designer Lekau Sehoana made his first pair of sneakers from worn-out shoes, old jeans and polyurethane. His "Drip" footwear brand, launched in 2019, gained popularity with its brightly coloured bubble soles and stretchy material. Sehoana now uses part of the company's earnings to make shoes for children in townships. "I guess it's one way of uniting us and bringing us together, as a people, as a country, as different races," Green said. "Besides all our differences, at least we share one common thing... shoes."— AFP



Writer and sneakers decorator Rasik "Mr.ekse" Green works on his latest creation.

Green's elaborate graffiti designs-which he also uses to redecorate and personalize sneakers-are highly sought after. The shoes are often an expression of geographic roots in a country with 12 official languages and dozens of ethnicities. "For instance we know Cape Townians love their bubbles," said Green, referring to a chunky, thick-soled Nike design. And residents of the Johannesburg township of Soweto "love their (Converse) All Stars", he said. "It's kind of a code." The athletic footwear craze is linked to African American hip-hop culture, which infuses South Africa's rich musical heritage as well as its fash-

Cele, warned that sneaker fanaticism is "becoming about class." Paying extravagant amounts for the shoes is "almost like an investment to say, you're helping yourself, so that you can live with these (wealthy) people... almost like 'fake it till you make it' type of thing."

Worn 'art piece'

Sneakers have not always been viewed positively in South Africa. Gangsters terrorizing townships during the 1980s often wore Chuck Taylor All Stars, a high-topped stitched canvas shoe manufactured by the US firm Converse. The sneakers, originally

Ageing DR Congo artists keep music of the miners alive

The cone-shaped slag heap in the southeastern Congolese city of Lubumbashi is a mighty symbol of the time when copper was king. In that heady era, a vibrant and distinctive culture of music and dancing sprouted among miners who worked for DR Congo's state giant, Gecamines. Today, just a small number of performers are still around to play the songs and do the dances, and recount what it was like in the glory days. One of them is Marcel Tshibanda, once a guitarist with a Jecoke group-a troupe of employees who were paid by Gecamines' social club to sing and dance for mining communities in their spare time.

Their music had a distinctive, calypso-y beat and the dancers dressed in smart long-tailed suits, wowing the crowds with snappy trademark moves. The sound, said Tshibanda, was inspired by musicians in neighboring Zambia, previously a British colony. "The English had this rhythm, it was like this," said Tshibanda, tapping out a snazzy two-beat signature on his hand-made guitar. The Jecokes' name derives from the French words for Comic Youth of Kenya-Kenya being a rundown district of Lubumbashi. For decades, right until the 1980s, Gecamines was "a state within a state," recalled Pierre Katamba, a former member of the troupe. "We used to call it 'mum and dad.' You would get free medical treatment and the children got free education."

'Things are tough'

The halcyon era started to crumble in the 1990s, when globalization began to hit the mining industry, followed by political upheaval in distant Kinshasa and then two regional wars. In 2003, the World Bank funded a redundancy program to cut 10,655 workers from Gecamines' payroll of 36,000, although a chunk of the money has gone missing in a country notorious for corruption.



Sneakers ecstatically modified by writer and sneakers decorator Rasik "Mr.ekse" Green are seen in Maboneng.—AFP photos

Gecamines retains its central role in the Democratic Republic of Congo's economic strategy.

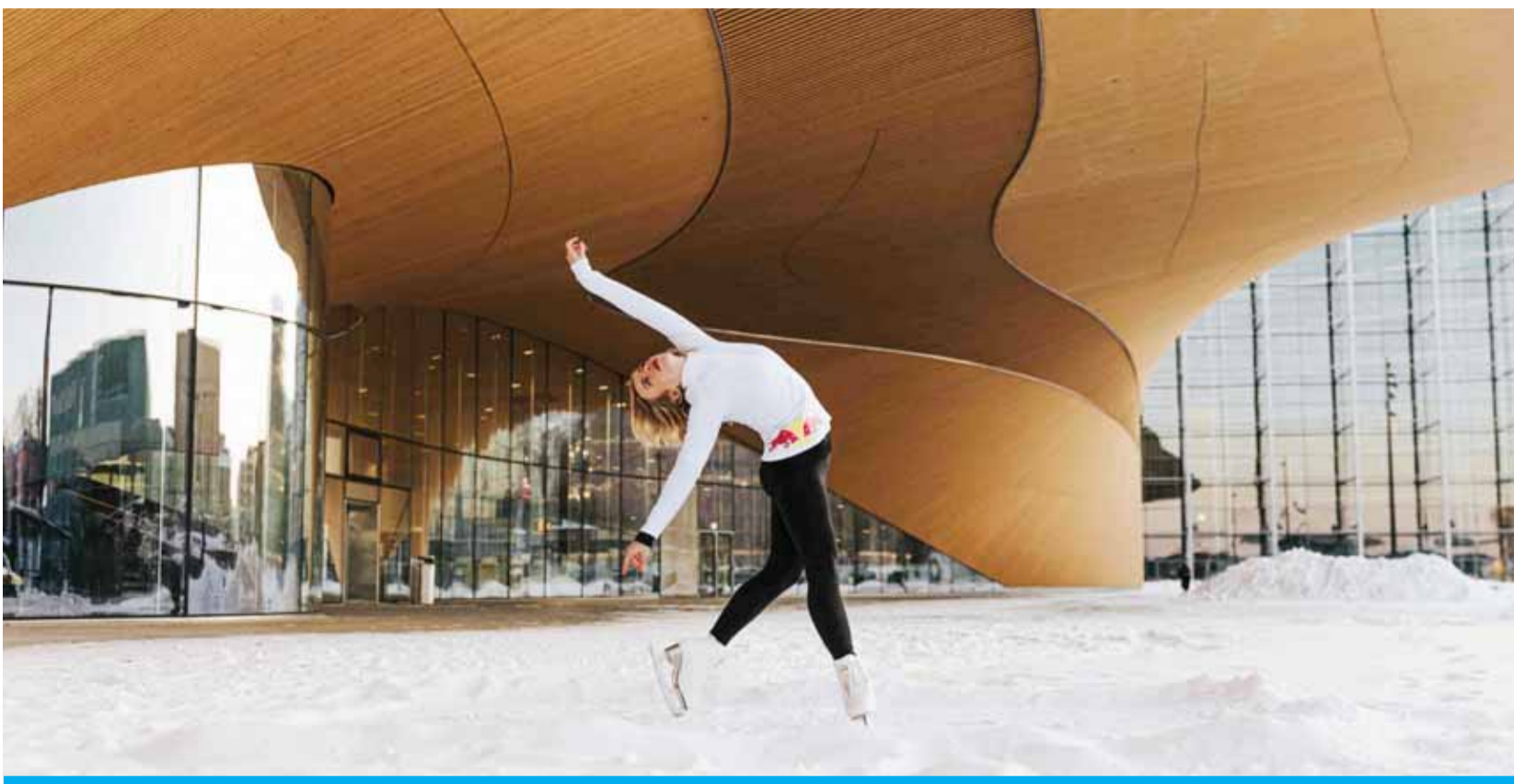
But its focus these days is cobalt, the key mineral in batteries for electronic devices. With Gecamines' decline, times and taste changed. A few years from now, who will remember the Jecoke? "Everyone abandoned Jecoke music to get into rumba," said Tshibanda. "To put it in a nutshell, things are tough," said fellow 74-year-old Laurent Ilunga Kazadi, still resplendent in his suit. — AFP



Dancer Jean-Marie Manga (left) and guitarist-singer Marcel Tshibanda (right) performs in front of the Gecamines industrial plant in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Sports

Photo of the Day



Emmi Peltonen ice skating in Helsinki, Finland. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Skriniar sends Inter back six points clear in Serie A

Nerazzurri extend winning streak to seven league games

MILAN: Milan Skriniar scored the only goal as Inter Milan moved back six points clear in Serie A with a 1-0 win over Atalanta on Monday. Inter extended their winning streak to seven league games as they push for a first title since 2010.

Antonio Conte's side are ahead of second-placed AC Milan, who beat Hellas Verona 2-0 on Sunday, with champions Juventus 10 points off top spot, with a game in hand, after a 3-1 win over Lazio. Skriniar found a way through after 54 minutes sending in off fellow defender Alessandro Bastoni after a corner resulted in a scramble on front of goal in the San Siro.

"Knowing that the closest direct pursuers had won it's inevitable that there was pressure, these are three important points," said Conte. Atalanta are fifth, outside the Champions League berths, and 13 points off top spot with 12 games left to play this season.

"We put in a great performance and lost on a corner," lamented coach Gian Piero Gasperini whose side are one point off fourth-placed Roma. Against Inter and Juventus we always lack that little detail we don't yet have, but we are close."

In a clash between the two biggest scoring teams in Serie A the defenders decided the tie with Atalanta's Berat Djimsiti giving little space to the Inter attackers. Romelu Lukaku and Lautaro Martinez lead the Inter attack, the best in the Italian top-flight with 63 goals.

Atalanta are second best with 60, with forward Duvan Zapata starting up front, being replaced by fellow Colombian Luis Muriel for the final 20 minutes. Chances were few in the first half. Atalanta goalkeeper Marco Sportiello used his head to clear for a corner off a Cristian Romero cross after quar-



MILAN: Inter Milan's Belgian forward Romelu Lukaku (2ndR) shoots past Atalanta's Argentine defender Cristian Romero during the Italian Serie A football match Inter Milan vs Atalanta at the San Siro stadium in Milan on Monday. — AFP

ter of an hour.

Inter goalkeeper Samir Handanovic denied a Zapata header six minutes before the break and Marcelo Brozovic was cleared off the line just after. Josip Ilicic replaced Ruslan Malinovskyi after the break for Atalanta with Conte sending on Christian Eriksen in place of Arturo Vidal.

And the Dane's corner which resulted in the goal. Skriniar's third in the league this season. Inter threatened a second just after but Romero slid in to deny a Lukaku finish just before the hour. "One goal

but we missed sensational opportunities," said Conte. "It was a very tactical match."

Atalanta broke their four-match winning run in Serie A as they remain in the running in the Champions League and the Italian Cup final. Inter are without European commitments with nothing left to target but the league and are next at relegation-threatened Torino. Atalanta play at home against promoted Spezia before their Champions League last 16, second leg visit to Real Madrid. — AFP

Kuwait, Qadsiya play to a 1-1 draw

KUWAIT: Qadsiya and Kuwait played a 1-1 match yesterday in 7th round of the Kuwaiti premier league. Yousef Nasser of Kuwait scored

the first goal in the sixth minute, prompting Qadsiya to intensify efforts to try and equalize. However, the first half of the match ended with their foes ahead by a single goal. In the second half, the game saw attacks and counter attacks until Saif Al-Hashan of Al-Qadsiya, in the 85th minute, got a pass from Badr Al-Mutawaa which he translated into a goal, raising the team's point total to 14 compared to 11 for Kuwait. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Qadsiya vs Kuwait in action. — KUNA

Fans likely to be barred from Olympic torch relay start: Report

TOKYO: The starting ceremony for this month's Olympic torch relay will likely be held without spectators, a Japanese newspaper reported yesterday, but fans will still be able to line the route. The Yomiuri Shimbun daily reported that organizers feared crowding at the March 25 event in Fukushima, and would probably bar the 3,000 spectators initially planned.

A spokesman for Tokyo 2020 organizers would say only that "details of the (relay) Grand Start are still under discussion". The organizers have already laid out strict rules for the virus-delayed, nationwide relay, which was called off in 2020 after the historic decision to postpone the Games by a year.

Cheering along the relay route will be strictly banned, and people are asked to only attend sections near their homes and avoid crowding. Mask-wearing will be mandatory, and spectators are asked to offer "support with applause and by using distributed goods rather than shouting or cheering".

Portions of the relay could also be suspended if there is overcrowding. Organizers are battling persistent doubts about whether the Games can be held safely this summer and have unveiled a rulebook with various virus countermeasures. They are set to decide this month whether foreign fans will be able to attend, with limits on overall spectator numbers to be set next month. — AFP

Nets complete Griffin signing

NEW YORK: The Brooklyn Nets completed the signing of free agent Blake Griffin on Monday following the former number one NBA draft pick's exit from the Detroit Pistons. Griffin, who turns 32 next week, bolsters a Brooklyn side second in the Eastern Conference standings with hopes of challenging for a championship. The arrival of the 6ft 9in (2.06m), 250lb (113kg) six-time All-Star gives Nets coach Steve Nash another option to complement playmakers James Harden, Kyrie Irving and forward Kevin Durant. "We're fortunate to be able to add a player of Blake's caliber to our roster at this point in the season," Nets general manager Sean Marks said in a statement. "Blake is a versatile frontcourt player with a long track record of success in our league, and we're excited about the impact he'll make for us both on and off the court in Brooklyn."

Griffin reportedly forfeited \$13.3 million in order to secure his early exit from the Pistons last month — a fact that has impressed his new team-mates at Brooklyn. "I'm sure he wants to win," Harden told the Nets official website. "If he's passed up more money to obviously stay in Detroit, he wants to win and he wants to have an opportunity to play meaningful minutes and I'm assuming that's one of the reasons why he came ... He can be a great contribution to this team." Griffin has played in 642 games across 11 seasons with the Los Angeles Clippers and Pistons, averaging 21.4 points per game. This year he has played 20 games for Detroit, averaging 12.3 points and 5.2 rebounds per game. — AFP



BELGRADE: Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic celebrates 311 weeks as world number one with his family and supporters in front of family restaurant "Novak" in Belgrade on Monday. — AFP

Djokovic sets record for weeks at world No 1

PARIS: Novak Djokovic set a new landmark of 311 weeks as world number one on Monday, one week longer than Roger Federer whose tally of a record 20 Grand Slam titles the Serb is now "devoted" to breaking. Djokovic, 33, won his 18th major at the Australian Open in February.

With Federer turning 40 in August, the Serb has time on his side. He is a year younger than Rafael Nadal who also has 20 majors. "The two main goals in tennis are probably the number of Grand Slams won and the number of weeks spent at number one," Djokovic told Serbian broadcaster RTS. "I am honored to have achieved one of them, now I will devote myself to the second."

Djokovic reclaimed the top ranking from Nadal in February 2020 and finished as year-end number one for the sixth time, tying the record set by Pete Sampras. "It really excites me to walk the path of legends and giants of this sport," said Djokovic, in a statement released by the ATP whose rankings have been running since August 23, 1973. "To know that I earned my place among them by following my childhood dream is a beautiful confirmation that when you do things out of love and passion, everything is possible."

ATP chairman Andrea Gaudenzi said: "Novak's many achievements in tennis are nothing short of extraordinary. Among them this record may stand as his single most impressive. Reaching No. 1 is something many players dream of and very few ever accomplish, and to have held the top spot for longer than anyone is testament to the levels of sustained excellence that Novak has redefined in our sport."

Federer, who returns to action in Doha this week after more than a year out of action to recover from two knee operations, slipped out of the top five on Monday to sixth. His place was taken by Stefanos Tsitsipas.

Fans invited

Djokovic made his top 100 debut in July 2005, just weeks after Nadal had won his first Roland Garros. He was top 50 in June 2006, top 20 for the first time in October 2006 and top 10 by March 2007. He first became world number one at the age of 24 on July 4, 2011, the day after winning Wimbledon for the first time, beating Nadal in the final.

Only a six-month injury absence in 2017 saw his ranking plunge, all the way to 22 the following summer. It was just a blip — Djokovic was back at number one again by November and with the exception of November 2019 until January last year, when Nadal reclaimed pole position, he has been rock solid.

Few would bet against Djokovic, who in 2016 was the first man to break the \$100 million prize money barrier, ending his career with more Slams than Federer and Nadal. In head-to-heads, he leads Federer 27-23 and has won all six of their last meetings at the majors, including 2019's epic Wimbledon final where he saved two match points.

Djokovic's record was top news in his native Serbia on Monday, with headlines like "No one was ever like Nole" in daily newspaper Vecernje novosti. Videos of the most important moments of his career were projected onto Belgrade's town hall, with fans invited to gather and honour Djokovic despite coronavirus measures. Messages addressed to the tennis star were also displayed on billboards in the Serbian capital, reading "Bravo Nole", "311", and "the best player of all time". — AFP

Sports

Messi to Paris: Barca's nightmare and PSG's unattainable dream?

PSG, Man City remain likely potential destination

PARIS: As Lionel Messi comes to Paris this week with Barcelona in the Champions League, the inevitable temptation is to think ahead to next season and wonder if the Argentine might be a regular fixture in the French capital. That remains the nightmare scenario for Barcelona fans, even if their new president Joan Laporta announced following his election victory on Sunday that he was "convinced he wants to stay."

Barcelona, like Real Madrid, fear the threat to their status at the top of the European game posed by Qatar-owned PSG and Abu Dhabi-owned Manchester City. On the evidence of the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie, PSG have bypassed Barca. Their 4-1 win at the Camp Nou means it would take a stunning turnaround in today's return to stop them reaching the quarter-finals.

A move to one of Spain's giants was long seen as the pinnacle for any player, but times have changed, as proven by Neymar's transfer to Paris for a world record 222 million euros (\$264m at the time) in 2017. PSG and City are probably the only likely destinations for Messi should he leave. But could a switch to Paris really happen?

'Reserved a seat just in case'

"Great players like Messi will always be on PSG's list," insisted the French champions' sporting director Leonardo in a January interview with France Football magazine. "We are sat at the big table with all those who are keeping a close eye on it. Well, we are not sat down yet, but we have reserved a seat

just in case."

Neymar would be delighted to team up with the Argentine again. "It's what I most want," he told ESPN in December. PSG would not need to pay a transfer fee, and Messi — who turns 34 in June — would be joining a club surely better placed in the short term to win the Champions League.

He would also be teaming up with a coach in Mauricio Pochettino who is a fellow Argentine. Indeed, Pochettino was born in Murphy in the province of Santa Fe, just 150 kilometers from Messi's home city, Rosario. Both started playing at Newell's Old Boys.

"I have to be careful not to talk about players who are at other clubs," Pochettino said of Messi in an interview with AFP last week. "In any case it is an easy answer. Great players can play for any team." Yet Messi does not represent the future. Kylian Mbappe, scorer of a hat-trick in the first leg, does. He is 22, the age Messi was when he won his first Ballon d'Or.

New contracts for Mbappe and Neymar?

PSG's energy and finances need to be focused on the future of Mbappe and the 29-year-old Neymar. Both are out of contract at the end of next season. Leonardo recently said a new deal for the Brazilian was "on the right track".

Meanwhile Mbappe has admitted he is still mulling over what to do next. "I am very happy here. I have always been very happy," he declared recently. "But I want to think about what I want to do in the

he said. When Barcelona drew at home to Cadiz the following weekend, Koeman said he was more disappointed with that result than the loss to PSG. "Maybe I'm just more realistic than other people," said Koeman.

New system

Since then Barca have won four in a row, scoring 10 goals and conceding none. They have moved to within two points of Atletico Madrid in the league and reached the Copa del Rey final, coming back from losing a first leg 2-0 against Sevilla to win 3-2 on aggregate. Koeman has shifted to a new system, with three central defenders, two wing-backs and two up front. It could give them more protection against Mbappe and Neymar, who is expected to be fit this time.

Good form, though, against less impressive opponents in the league and cup proved a poor gauge of Barcelona's chances in the first leg. Unlike in 2017, they will not have a lethal front three to instigate fear, nor will there be 99,000 fans at Camp Nou, or any at all, to ignite momentum. "Let's be realistic," says Joan Bertran, president of Barca fan group Penya Anguera. "For Barca fans, this last 16 tie is basically already lost. Barca can win in Paris maybe 2-0, 3-1 at best but to score four without conceding any? It's practically impossible."

Yet perhaps that is all they need — any victory at all, a positive performance even — to sustain the current incline ahead of the final two months of the season. It is a mark of how far Barcelona have fallen that a dignified exit in the last 16 of the Champions League could be considered a success but it is also the reality for a club in crisis.



BARCELONA: In this file photo taken on March 8, 2017, Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi (center) celebrates after scoring a goal with Barcelona's Uruguayan forward Luis Suarez (left) and Barcelona's Brazilian forward Neymar during the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second leg football match FC Barcelona vs Paris Saint-Germain FC at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. — AFP

coming years, where I want to be." According to documents released in 2018 by Football Leaks, Neymar's existing after-tax salary is 30 million euros (\$35.8m) a year while Mbappe's was due to rise to 11 million euros this year. It is safe to assume neither will be taking a wage reduction to stay.

Meanwhile, in January El Mundo published details of Messi's current contract, which it said is worth up to 555 million euros over four years. PSG are rich but are far from immune to the economic crisis hitting football due to the pandemic and also the collapse of France's domestic television deal. — AFP

Remontada unlikely, but Barca can regain dignity against PSG

MADRID: "Let's go to Paris and see if we can pull off a comeback," shouted Joan Laporta, the cheers rebounding around the room as he and his team celebrated his election on Sunday as Barcelona's new president. It was almost midnight and the result was not yet official, but victory was clear and already Laporta was imagining the kind of result in Paris tonight that an incoming club president could only dream of.

Barca will carry a 4-1 deficit into the second leg and not only that but memories fresh of a hiding at Camp Nou, a 45-minute whirlwind when Kylian Mbappe ran and ran, and Paris Saint-Germain ran riot. The gulf in class, not just the score, meant nobody was talking up a repeat of the famous 'remontada' of 2017 in the return game, least of all Barcelona's coach and players. "I don't know, there is one leg left. It will be very difficult, we all know that," said Frenkie de Jong moments after full-time, barely able to find the energy to speak.

"There is always another match," said coach Ronald Koeman. "But after a 1-4 at home I'm not going to lie to you, there is very little chance." Koeman had taken off Gerard Pique with 12 minutes left, not because the defender was injured but because he wanted to preserve his fragile knee for games to come. "There was no need to take risks,"

Fans of fallen Chinese football champions forced to suffer in silence

SHANGHAI: Fans of Chinese football champions Jiangsu FC say police have warned them not to protest or "make trouble" after the club's abrupt financial collapse, and describe themselves as angry, heartbroken and powerless. Jiangsu said it had "ceased operations" after its backers, retail conglomerate Suning, who also own Serie A leaders Inter Milan, pulled the plug on February 28.

The club's sudden implosion came just over three months after Jiangsu won the Chinese Super League for their first domestic title and highlights wider problems undermining China's bid to be a leading football country.irate supporters have pledged to boycott struggling Suning.

A small group of fans were pictured on social media last week, their faces blurred, outside the Nanjing-based club with a banner reading: "Hot blood is hard to cool, defend the Jiangsu team." Liu Yu, a member of a fan group of more than 400, said supporters also lobbied outside Jiangsu province's governmental sports office.

But they have now been warned by authorities against more protests, especially with the annual National People's Congress, China's legislature and biggest political event of the year, under way in Beijing. "The police called the people in charge of fan groups and told them not to go there anymore because gathering is not allowed, so there's nothing they can do now," the 31-year-old accountant said.

Liu said that she has "a very strong sense of powerlessness" and can only stand and watch as the club she loves — which was founded under a different guise in 1958 — disintegrates. Jiangsu FC have not officially disbanded but that appears certain to happen, becoming the highest-profile casualty among more than a dozen Chinese clubs to disappear in little over a year.

The speed at which Jiangsu went under, just over 100 days after the biggest triumph in their



SHANGHAI: This file photo taken on March 2, 2021 shows an aerial view of an empty training center of Jiangsu FC, formerly known as Jiangsu Suning in Nanjing, in eastern China's Jiangsu province, after Jiangsu FC on February, 28 said they had "ceased operations". — AFP

history, is especially hard to bear. "I feel that something very close to my heart suddenly disappeared," said Liu. Another fan, who did not wish to be named — underlining how even football can be sensitive in Communist Party-ruled China — backed up the assertion that "people in charge of the major fan clubs received calls from the police and were asked not to make trouble".

'Boycott together'

Chinese state media has tried to cast Jiangsu's demise, which is expected to soon be followed by that of fellow CSL outfit Tianjin Tigers, as a chance for Chinese football to reset after the heady days of big spending on foreign stars. Bereft Jiangsu supporters do not share that optimism but their opinions have been given scarce coverage in the heavily vetted Chinese media.

A Jiangsu supporter who asked to be called "Oscar" — the name of the Brazilian who joined



Lionel Messi (left) and Kylian Mbappe

Laporta's task is to pull them out of it and his return has already created a feeling of jubilation, stemming from a nostalgia for the past but also the symbolism of a new leader looking to the future. In his victory speech on Sunday, Laporta made sure to focus on Lionel Messi, the Argentinian who had voted in the elections for the first time and then congratulated Laporta on his success.

For now at least, there is renewed hope that Messi can be persuaded to stay. "Seeing Leo, the best player in the world, come to vote with his son is for me a sign of what we've said all along," said Laporta. "Leo loves Barca." Messi may have to leave if his heart is set on winning the Champions League again but under a new president with an idea he believes in, progress could yet be enough. For Barca in Paris, it would be something to hold on to. — AFP

Liverpool seek solace in Europe but Leipzig loom

LONDON: Liverpool have a rich history of turning on the style in Europe to make up for disappointing domestic form, but even a 2-0 first-leg lead over RB Leipzig in their Champions League last-16 tie looks precarious. Jurgen Klopp's stumbling English champions will approach tonight's second leg with trepidation — knowing they will not even be at Anfield for the "home" match. Liverpool's dramatic exploits in European competition over the years have been fuelled by the colour, noise and energy provided by fans packed into their famous old stadium.

In 2005, Rafael Benitez's league also-rans were inspired to thrilling wins over Juventus and Chelsea before producing the greatest comeback in Champions League final history in Istanbul against AC Milan. Klopp's first season in charge, in 2015/16, ended with Liverpool a lowly eighth in the league, but they were roared on as they battled back from 3-1 down to beat Borussia Dortmund 4-3 in the second leg of their Europa League last-eight tie on their way to the final.

Arguably the greatest night Anfield has ever seen came against Barcelona in May 2019. The Spanish giants were demolished 4-0 in the second leg of the Champions League semi-final, 24 hours after Manchester City landed a vital blow in a titanic title race with Klopp's men. Liverpool went on to beat Tottenham in the final to be crowned European champions for a sixth time.

Fear factor

But after a year of largely empty stadiums as a result of the coronavirus, Anfield's fear factor has vanished. Klopp's men had been unbeaten in 68 Premier League games at home until January, but they have now lost a club-record six in a row. Liverpool's "home" match against Leipzig will be played in the Puskas Arena in Budapest as a result of COVID-19 travel restrictions, the same stadium that hosted the first leg. European football's governing body UEFA is determined that the show must go on — fearful of taking another sharp economic hit.

But the unusual circumstances of this year's Champions League have robbed the competition of much of its sparkle, with various teams forced to travel to neutral venues for home matches while the public remains locked down in many countries. Without their fans at Anfield, Liverpool's Premier League title defense has collapsed. Sunday's 1-0 defeat by relegation-threatened Fulham left them eighth in the table. — AFP



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's German manager Jurgen Klopp gestures on the touchline during the English Premier League football match between Liverpool and Fulham at Anfield in Liverpool, north west England on March 7, 2021. — AFP

Chelsea cruise, West Ham win

Premier League's top four race heats up

LONDON: Chelsea strengthened their hold on fourth place in the Premier League as Kai Havertz inspired a vital 2-0 win over Everton, while West Ham boosted their surprise top four challenge with a 2-0 victory against Leeds on Monday.

Havertz has endured a disappointing first season following his £70 million (\$96 million) move from Bayer Leverkusen last year. But the Germany forward was given a rare start by Chelsea boss Thomas Tuchel and he responded by playing the key role in both goals at Stamford Bridge.

Havertz's shot was deflected into the Everton net for a Ben Godfrey own goal in the first half. The 21-year-old has not scored in the league since October, but Tuchel entrusted him with an important role as Chelsea's false nine and Havertz's intelligent movement put him in position to earn the second-half penalty that Jorginho converted.

"I'm very happy with his performance, no doubt about his quality, his talent and also his character," Tuchel said. "He needs to adapt to the Premier League, he needs to be at a club where you play to win every game, where the highest standards are normal. That's a normal process for him to adapt to this mentality."

Chelsea are unbeaten in 11 games in all competitions — winning eight times — since Tuchel replaced the sacked Frank Lampard in January. They are two points ahead of fifth placed West Ham, who have a game in hand in a tense race to qualify for next season's Champions League via a top four finish. The Blues have kept nine clean-sheets under Tuchel and only their former Italian boss Maurizio Sarri, who went 12 games unbeaten, has enjoyed a

better start with the west London club.

"If you share special moments and good results, this is the thing that lifts you up to the special performances you need," Tuchel said. "I can feel a strong bond between the players in the dressing room. I feel positive energy from everyone around the team. We need this to have a run like this."

Lingard shines

Sixth placed Everton are four points behind Chelsea after their first away defeat since November. "They played better than us," Everton manager Carlo Ancelotti said. "Once they scored it was more difficult. We are disappointed, but not too much."

West Ham's unexpected bid to finish in the top four gathered pace with a confident dismantling of Leeds at the London Stadium. Leeds boss Marcelo Bielsa might have known it wasn't going to be his night when his side had two early goals disallowed.

Tyler Roberts' effort was ruled out for offside against Helder Costa before Patrick Bamford netted from Raphinha's cut-back, only for replays to show the ball had gone over the touchline before the cross. West Ham took the lead in the 21st minute after Luke Ayling tripped Jesse Lingard in the area.

Lingard took the penalty and although Illan Meslier saved his shot, the on-loan Manchester United midfielder snapped up the rebound. West Ham doubled their advantage seven minutes later when Craig Dawson was left unmarked to head in Aaron Cresswell's corner.

David Moyes' side were battling rele-



LONDON: Everton's English goalkeeper Jordan Pickford brings down Chelsea's German midfielder Kai Havertz for a penalty during the English Premier League football match between Chelsea and Everton at Stamford Bridge in London on Monday.— AFP

gation at this stage of last season. But they have won four of their last six league games to leave Hammers fans dreaming of

a place in Europe's elite club competition. "We are doing really well and having a good season. It could be a great season,"

Moyes said. "I'm not saying we will finish in the top four but we need to hang in and see what we can do." — AFP



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