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Assembly panel presses govt over multibillion-dinar profits

Finance minister says breakeven oil price is \$90 a barrel

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The National Assembly's budgets committee yesterday pressed government agencies, including Kuwait Petroleum Corp, to transfer to government coffers billions of dinars of profits they had "illegally" retained. Head of the committee MP Bader Al-Mulla said the panel meeting was supposed to be attended by the prime minister and the ministers of finance and oil, but they apologized at the last minute and sent senior officials instead.

Mulla said the committee found that

only 21 percent of profits posted by several state agencies had been transferred to state coffers, while 79 percent of the multibillion-dinar sums had been retained by the agencies in violation of the law. He said the main culprit is KPC, which has transferred just 19 percent of its profits, and although a previous agreement had been made to pay the sums in instalments, KPC has failed to fulfil its promises.

Mulla said the committee found that KPC alone has failed to transfer close to KD 6 billion since 2014. He added that other agencies have agreed to transfer

their profits to the government before the end of the current fiscal year. The committee called the meeting to explore ways to provide funds to the cash-strapped general reserve fund, which is responsible for all government expenditures.

The government had warned that the fund is almost empty because of the sharp drop in oil prices and asked the Assembly to approve a bill that allows the government to withdraw up to KD 5 billion annually from the future generations fund, the country's sovereign wealth fund. MPs have vowed to reject the bill.

Meanwhile, Finance Minister Khalifa

Hamada said yesterday that the relative and temporary rise in oil revenues is not sufficient to cover budget commitments, 71 percent of which are for wages and subsidies. Accordingly, the government will continue its efforts to explore various options to provide enough cash flows to the general reserve fund, the minister said. Hamada said the breakeven price for oil that will balance revenues and expenditures and make the budget deficit zero is \$90 a barrel. Brent crude was trading at around \$68 a barrel yesterday.

"We must address the scarcity of financial resources and the depletion of

liquidity in the treasury (the general reserve fund) as soon as possible, and they must be accompanied by radical economic and financial reforms that contribute to reducing expenditures and increasing non-oil revenues," Hamada said, adding he had full confidence in the Assembly's cooperation.

"Issuing bonds and other solutions are not reform solutions, but rather temporary measures that must be taken to fulfill the immediate obligations represented by salaries and subsidies, which constitute more than 71 percent of the state's total spending," Hamada said.

Notice

On the occasion of the Isra and Meraj holiday, Kuwait Times will not publish its print edition on Friday, March 12, 2021. Readers can stay informed with breaking news and information via KuwaitTimes.net and our digital media channels on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook: @KuwaitTimes

News in brief

Bird flu in Kuwait farms

KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources announced yesterday the presence of bird flu in some poultry farms in Kuwait. PAAAFR Spokesman Talal Al-Daihani said in a press statement that the authority has taken veterinary health measures and implemented an emergency plan to curb bird flu. He pointed out that some other countries have been informed to cooperate and join efforts to control it. — KUNA

Illegal creche closed down

KUWAIT: The interior ministry said criminal detectives, in cooperation with the investigation department of the social affairs ministry, discovered a creche with six female employees and 45 children aged 2 to 6 years. The social affairs ministry prepared a report, evacuated the building and handed the children to their families. The nursery will face further action. — MoI

Infiltration bid foiled

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti coastguards yesterday foiled a bid by two persons to infiltrate into the country via the sea. When coastguards approached the boat, the captain refused to heed orders and attempted to speed towards international waters. The coastguards trailed the fleeing boat and stopped the would-be infiltrators at gunpoint. The two were detained and referred to competent legal authorities. — KUNA

Taraweeh in fields eyed

KUWAIT: Government sources said the Cabinet sent a proposal to the health ministry to open football fields to allow performing taraweeh and qiyam prayers during the holy month of Ramadan instead of in mosques. The sources said this proposal was presented by the Public Authority for Manpower to the Cabinet, which referred it to the health ministry. — Al-Anbaa

Vaccinated, COVID negative tourists can visit Greece by May

ATHENS: People who are vaccinated against COVID-19, have antibodies or test negative can travel to Greece this summer, Tourism Minister Harry Theocharis said on Tuesday. Tourism is a major

income earner for Greece, which has led calls for an EU-wide vaccination certificate to help unlock travel.

The industry accounts for about a fifth of the Greek economy and employs one in five workers, but arrivals collapsed last year because of the pandemic. Greece is aiming to kick off its vital summer season by mid-May, said Theocharis as he addressed the ITB Berlin trade show from the Athens Acropolis Museum, home to sculptures from Greek antiquity.

"Greece is ready with a complete protocol for summer 2021," he said. "Tourists will be welcome if before travel they are either vaccinated, or have anti-

bodies, or test negative. All tourists will be subject to random testing."

He said the authorities would prioritize the vaccination of people working in the hospitality sector once the most vulnerable were vaccinated, and were mandating the frequent testing of employees.

Greece has imposed a lockdown in several parts of the country to stem the spread of the coronavirus pandemic after a surge in new infections piled pressure on its health system, but it has still fared better than most of Europe with almost 7,000 deaths since the pandemic began. — Reuters

Biden quietly triumphs in first weeks

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden hasn't done a press conference, maintains a vanilla Twitter presence, and, as detractors love to repeat, is the oldest man to become US president. Yet in under 50 days, the quiet veteran is racking up formidable victories. Yesterday the House of Representatives was expected to pass the American Rescue Plan, an economic stimulus package which at \$1.9 trillion is the biggest in history, by far, and aims to catapult the country out of its year-long COVID slump.

Along with that massive cash injection

is a coronavirus vaccine rollout that to the surprise of many is turning the United States into something of a success story, boasting a vaccination rate easily exceeding that of Canada and the European Union. And despite overwhelming hostility to the White House from Republicans in Congress, Biden's pledge to reunite a country left dazed by the Donald Trump era is also showing the first green shoots.

The fact is, a politician who ran a muted presidential campaign and continues to maintain a low profile is now pretty popular. Biden's average Gallup approval rating since taking office is a steady 57 percent. That might not sound dramatic but it's a world away from the 34 percent scored by Trump in his final days and miles ahead of most other current politicians.

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WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden gestures as he speaks during a virtual call to congratulate the NASA JPL Perseverance team on the successful Mars landing in the Roosevelt Room of the White House on March 4, 2021. — AFP

Child refugees dream of Syria they never knew

GAZIANTEP, Turkey: Mohammad is five years old, Areej six and Dalaa 10. Syrian refugees in Turkey, these children have inherited a yearning for a country they know little to nothing about. More than 3.6 million Syrians have found shelter from the decade-long conflict in neighboring Turkey, including around 1.5 million children under the age of 15, according to official figures.

Mohammad and his parents Maher Imadedine and Rawan Sameh, originally from Aleppo, are among the 450,000 Syrians who have settled in the frontline Turkish city of Gaziantep, where the couple wed. The little boy says he wants to "return" to Syria even though he has never stepped foot there in his life. "Because it is beautiful, Syria," he says with a slight lisp. "Mum and dad told me so."

Mohammad's mother has secured a job teaching Arabic at Gaziantep University and his father works for a charity. Although settled in a relatively upscale neighborhood, they still have their minds set on returning to Syria, where they joined demonstra-



GAZIANTEP, Turkey: Syrian refugee Dalaa Hadidi, 10, poses during an interview on Feb 26, 2021. — AFP

tions against President Bashar Al-Assad's regime at the start of the revolt.

But when might that be? "When Bashar Al-Assad is in prison," the little boy replies. "I don't like him because he kills people and puts them in jail." Mohammad says he learned about these things from his parents. "He has also seen it on television," his mother cuts in. "He watches the news with us. Some things are beyond him, but he gets a general idea of what Syria is going through."

The mother fears the pictures of destruction unleashed by the Syrian forces arouse "a desire for revenge in the little ones".

Continued on Page 2

Royal family contests racism claims

LONDON: Britain's royal family has begun a fight back against explosive racism claims made by Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, indicating the couple's comments will not go unchallenged as the country divides into partisan camps. A keenly awaited statement from Queen Elizabeth II issued yesterday was conciliatory towards her grandson and his mixed-race spouse after they had an interview with US chat show host Oprah Winfrey.

But it also stressed that "some recollections may vary", as the Buckingham Palace vowed to look into the couple's assertion that an unidentified royal had asked how dark their unborn son Archie's skin would be. The row is being watched worldwide, in the United States where the couple now live and across the multiracial Commonwealth, which the queen heads, dragging Britain's most famous family further into a debate about racism and the country's colonial past.

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Local

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 swabs 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

Salamiya 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

Rumaihiya 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

Kuwait Municipality inks KD 2.5m deal to develop Mubarakiya market

KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality signed a KD 2.5 million contract to develop the Mubarakiya market yesterday in the presence of Minister of State for Municipal Affairs and Minister of Housing Affairs Shaya Al-Shaya. In a statement to reporters on the sidelines of the signing, Minister Shaya stressed that the development process will continue to make the Mubarakiya a tourist and heritage area. Minister Shaya praised the efforts of the Municipality's Director General Ahmad Al-Manfouhi, head of the Voluntary Work Center and member of the Supreme Council for the Environment Sheikhha Amthal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and the Chairman of the Committee for the Preservation of Historical and Heritage Dr Hassan Kamal for their great efforts in developing Mubarakiya market in the first stage. He also stressed that the goal is always to preserve the Mubarakiya area as a tourist and heritage place and to preserve the history and identity of the historical markets, praising the comprehensive explanation provided about the components of the project and its importance during the second phase.

Meanwhile, Manfouhi said after signing the project's contract that the municipality will execute a number of vital ventures soon under supervision of the project development sector, including the enterprise to make Mubarakiya market an attractive destination for visitors from various countries. The project aims to stimulate domestic tourism in Kuwait, Manfouhi said, stressing the need to modernize the heritage markets to keep pace with the development that the country is witnessing to achieve the New Kuwait 2035 vision, he added. The development of the market aims to provide a more advanced tourism experience by developing its



KUWAIT: Officials sign a KD 2.5 million contract to develop the Mubarakiya market yesterday. — KUNA

facilities and improving the traffic movement inside the market to make it easier and more comfortable for its visitors to enjoy and shop in it, he said.

The Mubarakiya development contract will link the municipality park and the markets, in addition to entertainment activities and parking with a capacity of 1,655 cars, he added. The project will be distinguished by contemporary designs inspired by the heritage and history of the Mubarakiya market to harmonize with the external environment and preserve its distinctive identity, he said. He added that the project to develop Mubarakiya market will include the construction

of a mosque and an international hotel with a heritage character, with an information center for tourists and souvenirs, as well as developing the municipality park and linking it with Mubarakiya and establishing an open theater for various activities according to national and social events. The signing ceremony was attended by head of the projects sector in the municipality Nadia Al-Sharifah, the executive director of the Arabian Office for Engineering Consultancy Tariq Shuaib, and the Secretary-General of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature Kamel Abduljalil. — KUNA

NBK concludes training program for 'Ports Security'

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) finished its training program for the staff of Ports Security Affairs of the Ministry of Interior, which was attended by 75 participants and comprised of several training sessions and workshops.

The program's closing ceremony, which was held at NBK's headquarters, with strict adherence to all precautionary measures and social distancing rules, was attended by Isam Al-Sager, National Bank of Kuwait Group CEO, and Salah Al-Fulaij, CEO of National Bank of Kuwait - Kuwait, as well as Major General Mansour Al-Awadhi, Assistant Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior for Ports Security Affairs, and Emad Al-Ablani, General Manager of Group Human Resources at National Bank of Kuwait.

During the program activities, the participants showed noticeable interaction with the training content, which focused on the protocols for dealing



with the public and customer service. Through all its initiatives with government bodies, NBK aims to actively contribute to enhancing the skills and developing the capabilities of the human capital, reflecting the trust placed in it as the leading bank with a strong relationship with the local community.

NBK harnesses all its capabilities and takes it upon itself to develop human resources, as part of its partnerships with all institutions, especially government, and in line with the bank's social and development commitments, and stemming from its belief in the effective impact of these programs

aimed to serve the society and its people.

It is worth mentioning that over the past years, Group Human Resources at NBK made relentless efforts to develop the bank's training and development platforms infrastructure by introducing the latest technological solutions and interactive digital tools in cooperation with the most reputable universities around the world. In addition, the bank made substantial changes to the methodology of the training programs provided to its employees as well as to government bodies.

Man arrested for offending police

KUWAIT: The interior ministry commented on a video published on social media by an Arab expat who filmed policemen, ridiculed and criticized their actions and insulted Kuwait. It said criminal security arrested the expat, who admitted that he made the video in Khaitan. He was sent to concerned authorities for further action.

Farwaniya fire

Firemen in Farwaniya put out a blaze in the basement of a building in the area, Kuwait Fire Force said. Firemen evacuated the 11-storey building as a precaution. The fire was in a carpentry shop in the basement. No injuries were reported.

Hashish shipment

The interior ministry said the Drugs Control General Department arrested a person who received a parcel from Europe containing sweets stuffed with

1.25 kg of hashish. The parcel arrived by courier and arrangements were made to let the parcel reach the delivery company. The addressee was arrested upon receipt.

Subsidized supplies

The land customs directorate in Sulabiya foiled an attempt to smuggle out a large quantity of subsidized supplies. Officers at the inspection yard inspect all cargo, then place a lead seal on the way out. The goods were sent to the commerce ministry.

Biden quietly triumphs in...

Continued from Page 1

The stimulus bill is even more popular, consistently getting support from about three quarters of the country. The latest Pew poll found 70 percent overall approval, with 94 percent among Democrats and 41 percent among Republicans. A Morning Consult/Politico poll put Republican support at 60 percent. "We've never had anything this urgent and this ambitious that was so widely embraced," Biden said this month. "The show of unity we're seeing is unprecedented." Right-wing outlets like Fox News continue to push Trump's election campaign smear that

Biden, 78, is somehow out of energy or worse. But in the real world, the silver-haired former vice president, senator and twice failed presidential candidate is tearing it up. "Go big," Biden likes to say about the stimulus plan. He could, against the expectations of many, be talking about his entire presidential project.

All this has been done in a style unrecognizable from the Trump White House. Biden now holds the record for the length of time a president in recent history has not held a formal press conference. He has also not set a date for a first address to a joint session of Congress. Unlike Trump and his non-stop rallies, Biden has also barely traveled the country. And his social media output is restricted to a stream of gentle encouragement and polite pleas for unity. No insults, no tirades, not even nerve-jangling use of block capitals and multiple exclamation marks - but not much news either.

If detractors paint Biden as hiding, supporters see the school swot who skips parties to stay in the library,

working harder than everyone and getting better results. Certainly Biden came into office knowing that he'd rise and fall on ending the coronavirus nightmare and putting the economy back on its feet. And he appears to have stuck to his plan. "That's where his time, energy, his focus has been," Psaki said. "I think the American people would certainly understand." With the passage of the COVID relief bill this week, the stealth president will start appearing rather more on the public's radar.

Today will feature his first primetime television address, marking the anniversary of the start to the COVID-19 crisis in the United States, where more than half a million people have died - a world record. The press conference will take place by the end of the month, Psaki says, noting that he has taken questions from journalists in dozens of smaller, more hurried settings. The address to Congress and trips out of Washington are also being discussed, she says. Why come out from under cover? —AFP

Royal family contests...

Continued from Page 1

The UK government is refusing to get involved in the family's biggest crisis since the very public collapse of the marriage of Harry's parents, other than to praise Elizabeth's stewardship of the country and the 54-nation Commonwealth. But pointedly, Downing Street has declined to disown remarks by junior foreign minister Zac Goldsmith, who accused former army captain Harry of "blowing up his family".

"What Meghan wants, Meghan gets," added the Conservative politician, who is a close ally of Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Senior minister Jacob Rees-Mogg denied there were any wider ramifications for the 94-year-old queen, who has reigned over Britain and 15 Commonwealth realms including Australia and Canada since 1952. "She has done her duty. I think she is loved across her realms

for that," Rees-Mogg said. "And I don't think interviews with chat show hosts in the United States makes a great deal of difference to that."

However, former Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull said the allegations should pave the way towards his country holding another referendum on abolishing the monarchy. "The bottom line is that in Australia the scandals, the personalities, the dramas of the royal family are not really the issue," the former head of the Australian Republic Movement told Britain's ITV, which aired the Winfrey interview on Monday to an audience of more than 11 million. "The issue is that Australia's head of state should be an Australian citizen chosen by Australians, not the king or queen of the UK."

US network CBS, which first broadcast Winfrey's interview on Sunday, said close to 50 million people had watched worldwide, and the figure would rise as more territories air it. Winfrey said the racist remark did not come from either the queen or her 99-year-old husband Prince Philip. — AFP

Child refugees dream of...

Continued from Page 1

"Our role as parents is to channel these feelings into positive energy that can be used to help reconstruct the country," she says.

Six-year-old Areej Beidun had not yet been born when her father, who joined rebel fighter ranks, was killed in Aleppo. Since turning four months old, she has been living in a dilapidated Gaziantep apartment with her grandparents, uncles and their families - 13 people in all. Her mother has since remarried and in Areej's world, "mum and dad" are her grandparents, who have been taking care of her.

With a mischievous eye and her hair pulled back by a golden Alice band, Areej speaks of Syria with an eloquence that belies her age. "Over there, there is war everywhere. There are a lot of

planes and bombs blowing up the city," she explains. "Here, when I see dolls in the market, I ask mum to buy them for me and she says 'no' because we don't have any money," she laments. "I would like Syria to be the way it was before, without bombs, so that I could go back."

Ten-year-old Dalaa Hadidi's family lives in the same decrepit neighborhood of Gaziantep. Born 45 days before the start of the revolt, she was 15 months old when her parents fled Aleppo. But she talks about the Syrian city as if she has lived there her whole life. "I want to go back to Aleppo to find my home, my neighborhood and my loved ones. I wish Assad would die so we could come back," she says.

If the feeling of belonging to Syria is handed down to the children by their parents, it is reinforced by media outlets targeting the diaspora, especially in Turkey. Himself a refugee, Mahmoud Al-Wahab, 14, presents a children's radio program called "I want to play" on Rozana, a Syrian radio station with offices in Gaziantep and Paris. — AFP

Local

Prophet Muhammad's Ascension

By Hassan Twaha Bwambale

On March 11, 2021, Muslims across the globe commemorate the auspicious event of Al-Israa wal-Meeraj, famously known as Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) Ascension. In its commemoration, today is declared an official holiday in Kuwait. Do you know why this day is so special?

Al-Israa refers to travelling by night from the Sacred Mosque in Makkah to the Farthest Mosque in Jerusalem. And Al-Meeraj refers to Prophet Muhammad's Ascension from Jerusalem to a place above the seventh heaven. This is a very important occasion for Muslims as it provides a glimpse into the unseen, among other things.

In life there are unseen physical things such as atoms, radio waves, electric currents, etc. There are also unseen spiritual things such as God (Allah), angels, Satan, heaven, hell, the soul, etc. When Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was 52, likely on the 27th of Rajab (the seventh month of the Islamic calendar) the ascension took place. That date was and is an important milestone for Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as well as all Muslims. It was during this meritorious event that the five daily prayers were legislated.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, "Al-Buraaq was brought to me; it is a white-colored, tall beast larger than a donkey and smaller than a mule. I rode on it until I reached Jerusalem. Once there, I tied it to the very same ring (of the Jerusalem Mosque door) to which the prophets tied their riding animals. I then entered the mosque and prayed in it, after that I left..." (Al-Albani said that its chain of narrators is Hasan (authentic), see As-Silsila As-Saheeha # 874.)

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) rode on Al-Buraaq with Archangel Gabriel, until they reached the first heaven where he met Adam (peace be upon him). In the second heaven, he met Jesus (Eisa) and Yahya (John the Baptist). He met Yusef (Joseph) in the third heaven, Idris (Enoch) in the fourth and Haroun (Aaron) in the fifth. In the sixth and seventh heavens he met Mousa (Moses) and Ibrahim (Abraham), respectively, peace be upon them. There were some reasons why Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) met specifically with those eight prophets and messengers during his sojourn in the heavens. The most prominent is that all of them are brothers in the sense that their Creator is one and they all came with the same message: to worship only God the Creator, far from associating partners with Him, and to spread good morals and manners.

Above the heavens

The Prophet (PBUH) reached a place where he heard the scratching of the pens used by the angels who copy from the Preserved Tablet. There, he heard the speech of God (the Almighty and Majestic) which in no way resembles our speech. Rather, it is an attribute of God, which is eternal and everlasting and is not like the attributes of His creation. Conversation took place between God Almighty and the Prophet (PBUH). It is during this time that the five daily prayers were legislated. At first, 50 daily prayers were prescribed, but Moses (peace be upon him) advised Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to ask for a reduction, stating that his own people were given only two prayers a day but couldn't manage to perform them. Eventually, five daily prayers were mandated.

Makkan reaction

The Prophet's miraculous night journey ended up being a difficult test for certain people who had believed in his message - the test that some failed. Some polytheists of Makkah approached Abu Bakr (the prophet's close companion) and said, "Will you not go to your companion and listen for yourself what he is claiming? He claims that he made a journey during the night to Jerusalem - the journey that takes us a month!" Abu Bakr (ra) replied, "Did he say so?" "Yes," they replied. Abu Bakr (ra) then said, "If he said so, then I believe him because I do believe him in more than that when he tells us that he gets revelation from Allah (the Almighty and Majestic)." Because of the stance Abu Bakr took during the trial and test that followed the prophet's miraculous night journey to Jerusalem and ascension to above the seventh heaven, he was named "As-Siddeeq (the truthful one). When they asked the Prophet (PBUH) to describe the mosque in Jerusalem, he did it meticulously to the utter surprise of some people.

Important lessons

Every trial or tribulation is followed by some form of relief or reward. The three years preceding the Prophet's ascension were replete with trials and tribulations for him and his devoted followers. First, the nascent community was besieged in a mountain pass that belonged to Abu Talib. There, they were subjected to an economic boycott resulting in food shortages that took them to the brink of starvation, to the extent that they resorted to eating the leaves of trees. Second, the Prophet (PBUH) lost, in the span of few months, his uncle Abu Talib, his greatest protector from humankind, and his wife Khadijah, his human source of comfort; this year was described as the year of sadness. Third, The Quraish took advantage of Abu Talib's death, considering it a carte blanche to persecute and harm the Prophet (PBUH) more severely than ever before. Fourth, the people of At-Ta'if, to whom the Prophet (PBUH) had resorted for support and help, rejected his message and rather treated him in a vile and despicable manner.

The Prophet's miraculous night journey and ascension was a precursor of a new stage in his mission: it occurred shortly before his emigration to Madinah. That new stage in the Prophet's mission involved the establishment of a strong and coherent Muslim state in Madinah.

Finally, God said regarding Prophet Muhammad's night journey and ascension what can be translated as: "Glory to (Allah) who did take His servant for a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque whose precincts We did bless - in order that We might show him some of Our Signs. For He is the One Who hears and sees all things." (Al-Isra'a 17:01)

—Courtesy of the TIES Center

Deputy Amir receives top state officials



KUWAIT: His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday at Bayan Palace National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem (left). His Highness also received His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. —KUNA

Foreign Minister commends British envoy's contributions

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister and Minister of Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah praised British Ambassador Michael Davenport's contribution to strengthening bilateral ties. He made the remarks Tuesday while receiving Davenport who was ending his tenure in Kuwait, a ministry statement said. Assistant Foreign Minister for the Minister's Office Ambassador Saleh Al-Loughani, Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister for Minister's Office Counselor Ahmad Al-Shuraim and a number of senior officials of the Foreign Ministry attended the meeting. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister and Minister of Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets British Ambassador to Kuwait Michael Davenport. —KUNA

Education Minister meets US Ambassador

KUWAIT: Minister of Education Dr Ali Al-Mudhaf met on Tuesday with US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski to discuss ways of bolstering cooperation between the two countries on the educational level. The talks also dealt with cooperation to enhance the English curriculums and ways of teaching them by the English Assistance Programs, through arranging visits for specialized American lecturers, said the ministry in a statement. During the meeting, the two sides discussed different ways of returning to schools and training courses amid the spread of the coronavirus, it added. The US ambassador appreciated the efforts of the Kuwaiti minister and his support for the PCELT program which is supervised by AMIDEAST institute and the US Embassy in Kuwait, it noted. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Minister of Education Dr Ali Al-Mudhaf meets US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski. —KUNA

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Japan's envoy marks ties' 60th anniversary

KUWAIT: Japan's Ambassador to Kuwait Masato Takaoka released the following statement to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between his country and Kuwait:

"Japan and Kuwait established diplomatic relations sixty years ago and have since come a long way together. Our two countries are friends in need and friends indeed. The most unforgettable episode was ten years ago when Japan was devastated by horrible earthquakes and tsunamis on March 11, 2011.

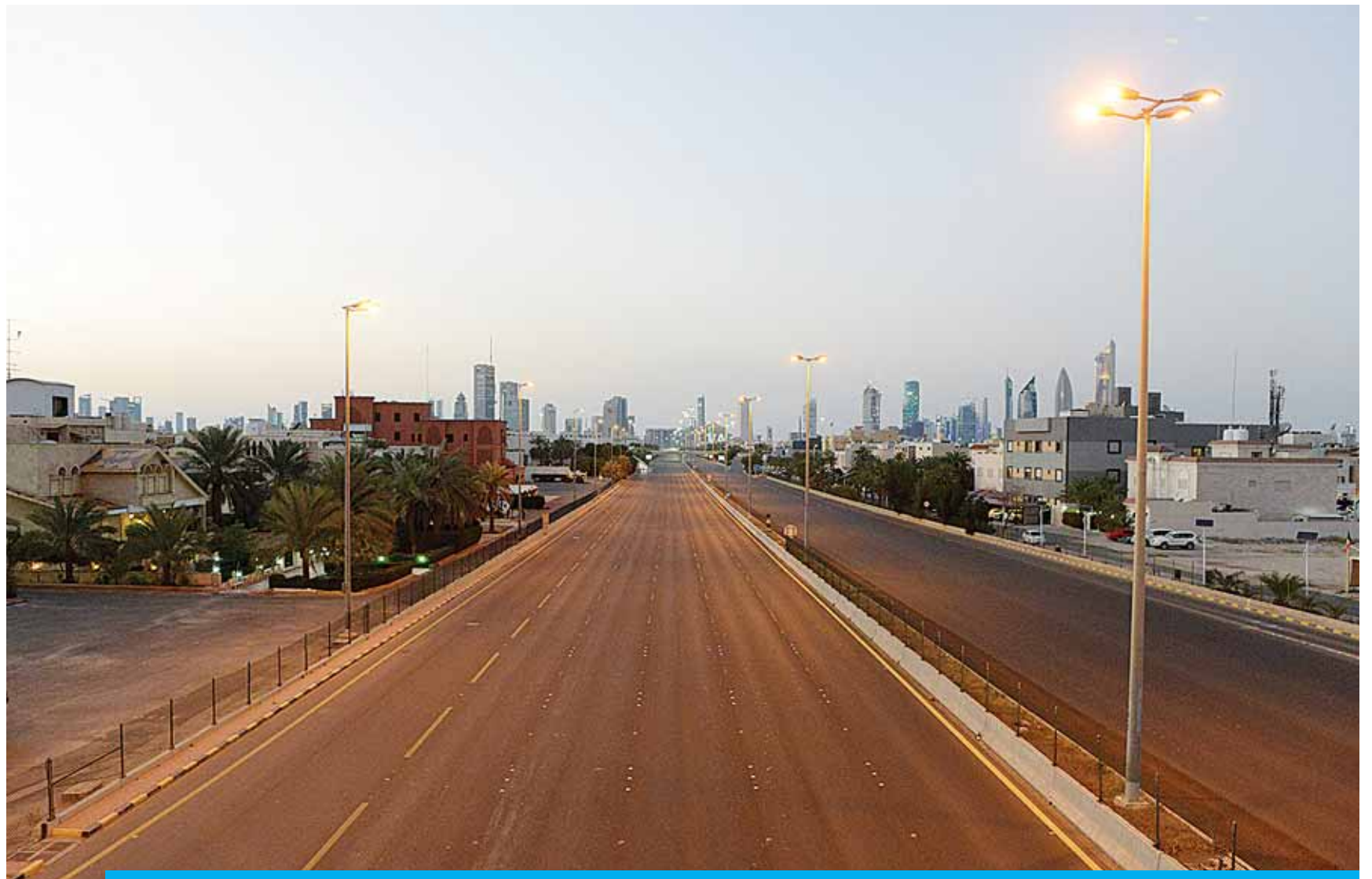
"At the time of deep despair for Japan, Kuwait came to help us with incredible support, including five million barrels of crude oil. His Highness the late Amir Sabah paid a state visit to Japan a year later to reaffirm the ties of friendship between our two countries. We will never forget the Kuwaiti kindness and generosity.

"I take this opportunity to thank the people of Kuwait once again for the warm and caring gesture to the people of Japan as the Kuwait Towers will soon be illuminated with our two countries' national flags to mark the day of March 11th."



Masato Takaoka

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Shortly after the nightly curfew starts, streets in Kuwait become deserted. People have been abiding by the Cabinet's latest decisions to curb the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The government has declared a partial lockdown from 5:00 pm to 5:00 am effective for a month from March 7 as part of the efforts against the virus. —KUNA photo

WCSS organizes webinar on gender equality

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: On the occasion of International Women's Day, the Women's Cultural and Social Society in Kuwait organized a webinar on gender equality on Monday. Speakers included Dr Tarek El-Sheikh, United Nations Secretary General Representative and Resident Coordinator in Kuwait, Anne Claire Legendre, Ambassador of France to Kuwait, Miguel Angel Isidro,

Ambassador of Mexico to Kuwait and Sharifa Al-Khamis, Board Member of the Women's Cultural and Social Society. Legendre spoke about the upcoming Generation Equality Forum to be held both in France and Mexico, as they are the current chair and co-chair of the forum. The Generation Equality Forum is a civil-society centered global gathering for gender equality convened by UN Women and co-hosted by the governments of Mexico and France.

Kicking off in Mexico City and culminating in Paris between June and July 2021, the forum will launch a series of concrete, ambitious and transformative actions to achieve immediate and irreversible progress towards gender equality. On its website, it says this time is a critical moment for everyone, as COVID-19 has exacerbated existing gender inequities, with reports of rising violence against women, as well as higher adverse economic impacts caused both by increased unpaid caregiving and the fact that women work in more insecure, low-paid and informal jobs. Women of color, indigenous women and youth face compounded risks and barriers. So the Generation Equality Forum offers a critical opportunity to confront a gender equality crisis.

"Equality and women's rights are part of our government's priorities headed by Emmanuel Macron. That is why we are honored and happy to be here today to talk about gender equality. The Generation Equality Forum - arranged with the United Nations - marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Conference. Women's rights are also human rights, and that conference actually pushed for the Beijing Declaration. Twenty-five years later, France has become the chair. This will be the biggest gathering of feminist activists, global leaders and people who are willing to participate and contribute to women's rights issues," said Legendre.

"Our aim is to not again make another declaration - we already have the Beijing Declaration and we believe

that is the legal framework we want to keep. But we need to build a concrete coalition, and here we want to focus on our six main coalition principles to be tackled during the forum. The six main priorities in advancing women's rights were discussed earlier, but during the forum they are going to deliberate it broadly," Legendre said.

"The first is gender-based violence - this issue is a global phenomenon. Violence against women is rampant all over the world, even in their own homes at the hands of their partners or husbands. We've been working on this issue, including here in Kuwait, so we are ready to move forward. The second is economic justice and rights; women can express themselves when they have economic autonomy as they can protect themselves from any kind of domination, and this issue is also critical to uphold," she said.

The other issues to be discussed during the forum include body autonomy (sexual and reproductive rights), feminist action (movements) and gathering all of them to create dialogue among them, and technology, innovation and leadership.

"We want to get women empowered. We added to this climate transition - we want to highlight this as well. When we look at male domination, it starts with the body. But women can decide for their own body and themselves, so this must be discussed as well. This is a very sensitive and critical issue for women, and across cultural boundaries, it is not being tackled with the same passion," Legendre pointed out.



Anne Claire Legendre

FRONTLINE HEROES OF KUWAIT

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- 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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She is Arab raises mental health awareness

DUBAI: On the occasion of International Women's Day, this year held under the theme 'Choose to Challenge', She is Arab, the first platform dedicated to increasing the representation of Arab women in business leadership and at speaking events, held a webinar on the importance of mental health. The panel discussion featured prominent speakers from the Arab region.

Rania Atalla, Mental Health Specialist and Psychotherapist, moderated the session, held under this year's IWD theme 'Choose to Challenge'. Panelists included Sheikha Intisar Al-Sabah, Founder of Intisar Foundation from Kuwait, Sayyida Basma Al-Said, Mental Health Specialist and Founder of Whispers of Serenity Clinic from Oman, and Dr Mariam Ketait, Founder of Ebb & Flow from the UAE.

The 90-minute conversation explored the diversity of the Middle East and the issues of relevance to mental health and overall wellbeing in the region. The participants called for focused and targeted efforts in responding to specific needs facing Arab men and women living through these realities.

Anxiety, depression, and myriad other conditions have been on the rise in the Middle East. However, the culture surrounding mental health in the region is full of misconceptions, prejudice, and judgment stemming from religion, tradition, and family, among others. The talk highlighted the importance of mainstreaming the mental health discourse in the Arab world.

During the webinar, Sheikha Intisar said: "We have gathered great evidence that women keeping what they think are great secrets and not sharing them with anyone else, even if to find solutions, is one of the biggest causes of poor mental health, and that sharing our problems with others and by sharing them, leads to a better life."

Meanwhile, Al-Said said: "Women need to appreciate where they are and what they've done and not doubt themselves a lot as they do. In the end, once a woman's mental health is well, then the whole family's mental health becomes well and the society's mental health becomes better."

In the meantime, Dr Ketait said: "It is very important to remind ourselves that life continues to ebb and flow, and that we are able to restore the light of hope and create the



future we seek." Atallah added: "The COVID-19 pandemic has fueled a global mental health tsunami, the ramifications of which we are yet to fully comprehend, and women are affected disproportionately. She continued: "This challenging situation also presents an opportunity to place mental health higher on the priority list."

Explaining the purpose of the webinar, Samar Al-Shorafa, Founding CEO of She is Arab, said: "The notion of mental health still remains a stigma in the Arab world, even though it shouldn't. We hope that through our conversations, we can bring to light the importance of addressing such issues without fear or judgment." She added: "This was the first digital session in a series of upcoming ones, and we hope that today's discussion has helped encourage women to give priority to their mental health."

Vishnu Kalra, Managing Director of The Janssen Pharmaceuticals Companies of Johnson & Johnson, provided opening remarks at the webinar: "Today, the world is facing a mental health crisis that has impacted everyone, especially women, yet it has showed us that women are an integral part of the solution. We at Johnson & Johnson support She is Arab and other initiatives that showcase the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion within the region and to celebrate International Women's Day by raising awareness on the importance of wellbeing and mental health."

She is Arab has built itself into a platform with a powerful vision to increase Arab women's representation in the global economy by building a support network for them and providing a range of customized services and opportunities dedicated to their growth and development which in turn supports the region's path towards women's economic empowerment.



No class for a year now: Pandemic worsens Latin America inequality

China: US admiral 'hyping up' threat of Taiwan invasion

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WASHINGTON, DC: President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg meet with a bipartisan group of House members on infrastructure in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC. —AP

Biden to meet Australia, India, Japan PMs

In message to China, President to boost a four-way alliance in tomorrow's talks

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden will hold first-ever joint talks tomorrow with the leaders of Australia, India and Japan, boosting an emerging four-way alliance often cast as a bulwark against China. It will be one of the first summits, albeit in virtual format, for Biden, who has vowed to revive US alliances in the wake of the disarray of Donald Trump's administration.

"That President Biden has made this one of his earliest multilateral engagements speaks to the importance that we place on close cooperation with our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific," White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters Tuesday.

The meeting of the so-called "Quad" comes amid rising tensions with China, which is seen as flexing its muscle both in trade and security realms. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that Biden was "taking this to another level." "It will be an historic moment in our region and it sends a strong message to the region about our support for a sovereign, independent Indo-Pacific," Morrison told reporters.

Both Psaki and India, which earlier announced the participation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, said that the talks would take up climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic-two key priorities for Biden.

"The leaders will discuss regional and

global issues of shared interest, and exchange views on practical areas of cooperation towards maintaining a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region," the Indian foreign ministry said in a statement. The talks, also involving Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, will touch as well on promoting maritime security and "ensuring safe, equitable and affordable vaccines" to fight COVID-19 in Asia, the Indian statement said.

China's growing assertiveness

Japan said that Suga spoke separately Thursday to Modi and voiced alarm about China's "unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East and South China Sea" as well as the status of rights in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters that the Quad was well-equipped to deal with the world's "urgent challenges" but, asked about China, said, the format is "not about any single competitor."

The summit follows talks on February 18 among the foreign ministers of the Quad when they pressed jointly for a restoration of democracy in Myanmar after the military ousted democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1. US officials cast the meeting as a key way of exerting pressure as India and Japan enjoy closer relationships with Myanmar's

military—which has historically counted on China as its main source of support.

The Quad foreign ministers, however, were careful not to make an explicit mention of China, which has voiced alarm at what it sees as an effort to gang up on its interests in Asia.

After Biden's election, Chinese state media had printed articles calling on India to end the Quad, seeing New Delhi as the most likely opponent. But views have hardened in India after a pitched battle in the Himalayas last year killed at least 20 Indian troops. China has named four dead in confirmation that took half a year.

Australia has also shown growing willingness to participate in the Quad as relations deteriorate with Beijing, last year joining naval exercises with the three other nations off India's shores.

The Quad was launched in 2007 by Japan's then prime minister Shinzo Abe, who was alarmed at China's growing assertiveness around Asia. Biden has pledged in general terms to continue his predecessor's hawkish line on China, including by pressing on human rights and territorial disputes.

But the Biden administration has promised what it considers a more productive approach that includes boosting ties with allies and finding limited areas for cooperation with Beijing such as climate change. —AFP

Child refugees dream of Syria they never knew

GAZIANTEP, Turkey: Mohammad is five years old, Areej six and Dalaa 10. Syrian refugees in Turkey, these children have inherited a yearning for a country they know little to nothing about.

More than 3.6 million Syrians have found shelter from the decade-long conflict in neighboring Turkey, including around 1.5 million children under the age of 15, according to official figures. Mohammad and his parents Maher Imadine and Rawan Sameh, originally from Aleppo, are among the 450,000 Syrians who have settled in the frontline Turkish city of Gaziantep, where the couple wed.

The little boy says he wants to "return" to Syria even though he has never stepped foot there in his life. "Because it is beautiful, Syria," he says with a slight lisp. "Mum and dad told me so."

'When Assad is in prison'

Mohammad's mother has secured a job teaching Arabic at Gaziantep University and his father works for a charity. Although settled in a relatively upscale neighborhood, they still have their minds set on returning to Syria, where they joined demonstrations against President Bashar al-Assad's regime at the start of the revolt.

But when might that be? "When Bashar al-Assad is in prison," the little boy replies. "I don't like him because he kills people and puts them in jail." Mohammad says he learned about these things from his parents. "He has also seen it on television," his mother cuts in. "He watches the news with us. Some things are beyond him, but he gets a general idea of what Syria is going through."

The mother fears the pictures of destruction unleashed by the Syrian forces arouse "a desire for revenge in the little ones". "Our role as parents is to channel these feelings into positive energy that can be used to help reconstruct the country," she says. —AFP

First jurors selected for George Floyd murder trial

MINNEAPOLIS, US: The first jurors were selected on Tuesday in the high-profile trial of the white police officer accused of killing George Floyd, an African-American man whose death laid bare racial wounds in the United States and sparked "Black Lives Matter" protests across the globe.

Former Minneapolis Police Department officer Derek Chauvin is facing charges of second-degree murder and manslaughter in connection with Floyd's May 25 death, which was captured by bystanders on smartphone video.

Jury selection had been scheduled to begin on Monday but was delayed for a day as prosecutors sought to reinstate a third-degree murder charge against the 44-year-old Chauvin. A Minnesota court of appeals has not yet issued its ruling but Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill, clearly impatient to get the landmark trial moving, decided to go ahead with jury selection anyway.

After hours of detailed questioning by the defense team and prosecutors, three jurors were selected on Tuesday for the 12-member panel that will decide Chauvin's fate.

Second-degree murder carries a maximum sen-

tence of 40 years in prison. The jury selection process could take up to three weeks with opening arguments expected to begin on March 29.

Chauvin was dismissed from the police force after he was captured on video with his knee on the neck of a pleading, gasping Floyd for nearly nine minutes. Chauvin, who has been free on bail, appeared in court on Tuesday surrounded by plexiglass as a Covid-19 precaution.

He frequently jotted down notes on a yellow legal pad and conferred with his lawyers as prospective jurors were being questioned. Lawyers for both sides face the difficult task of finding jurors who have not already made up their minds about the widely publicized case.

One potential juror, a Hispanic woman with halting English, was dismissed by the defense team using one of their 15 peremptory challenges. The woman had referred to Floyd's "unjust" death on a 16-page questionnaire that jurors had been asked to fill out.

Another potential juror, a white man in his 20s or 30s who said he was a chemist, was selected. Asked by the judge if he could be "fair and impartial," the man, identified only as Juror No. 2, replied "Yes." He told the defense team that he had never watched the viral video of Chauvin with his knee on Floyd's neck. Also selected was a young woman who appeared to be biracial who said she would be "super-excited" to serve on the jury and would not be influenced by the fact her uncle is a police officer. —AFP

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No class for a year now: Pandemic worsens Latin America inequality

Some 168m kids are affected worldwide including 98m in the region

PANAMA CITY: Like some 890,000 other pupils, eight-year-old Brithany has not been to class in a year in Panama—the country with the most missed in-person school days due to the coronavirus pandemic. Brithany attends an occasional online lesson on the prepaid cellphone of her single mother, Milena Mendosa, who works two jobs cleaning houses and selling wares at a market. On some days, the online classes get canceled. On others, the cellphone network cannot handle the traffic, and Brithany ends up playing instead of learning. According to UNICEF, the UN's children agency, schools in 14 countries have remained largely closed since March 2020 — two-thirds of them in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Some 168 million kids are affected worldwide, including nearly 98 million in the Latin American region, where 158 school days have been missed on average out of 190 on the annual calendar. "Of the 14 countries, Panama has kept schools closed for the most days, followed by El Salvador, Bangladesh and Bolivia," the agency said this month. Ecuador and Peru, too, have yet to welcome pupils back to class this year. Globally, some 214 million children—or one in seven—have missed more than three-quarters of their in-person learning, said the UN agency. For Mendosa and millions of other parents, especially in countries with limited access to the internet and social support, it can all seem a bit much. "They are giving us too many papers, there is too much pressure, it is very difficult because it is another job," Mendosa told AFP of the learning materials she receives to further her daughter's education at home.

Casino's open, schools not

Panama is among countries to have kept schools closed for fear that they may be hotbeds of virus con-



PANAMA CITY: A group of children are homeschooled in Panama City.—AFP

tagion, especially in places with inadequate access to water for handwashing, and where widespread vaccination may be a ways off. But UNICEF points to research showing that schools are not important virus vectors and insists they must reopen—not only for academic learning but also for the emotional and physical wellbeing of children. "It is not possible that they open restaurants, that they open malls, that they open casinos, that they open cinemas, but they don't open schools," UNICEF Latin American specialist Ruth Custode told AFP.

"I believe the most important thing is that we prioritize the opening of schools," she said, which can be done with face masks, adequate hygiene, and social distancing. Children denied access to classrooms are falling behind more fortunate peers in terms of academic attainment but also in other ways, argued Custode, who is based in Panama. "School is often the place where children receive their only nutritious meal of the day. If they don't go to school, they don't have access to health services, to immunization, to protection," she said. "Cases of violence (against children) have

increased, not only maltreatment but also sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy. There have been cases of children committing suicide," Custode added.

Nothing to tell

Children worst affected by the closures are the disabled, migrants, those in rural areas and the poor. "This inequality will become worse with the pandemic," said Custode. UNICEF says that as many as three million children in the world are falling so far behind that they will likely never return to school. The longer the closures continue, the more and more children will fall by the wayside. In Panama City's San Francisco neighborhood, five-year-old Rafael learns his letters and numbers on a computer screen. But his mother, Ana Maria Areiza, is worried about his lack of socialization.

"I miss him coming home from school and telling me about his day. Now he sees his little friends on the computer and doesn't even recognize them. He has nothing to tell me," she said. Pediatrician Enrique Ruidiaz said children need human contact "to learn how to behave and (about) the culture in which they live. Not being around humans can delay (this learning) and can cause behavioral problems."

Let it 'be over'

Panama's Education Minister Maruja Gorday told AFP schools will reopen in a manner that is gradual, progressive and safe. "To the extent that we advance in vaccination and that the health authorities give us the go-ahead to start mingling again, we are ready to do so," she said. News on this front is expected in April. Meanwhile, Brithany—who loves English and knows how to count to 1,000 — expressed the overriding sentiment of a generation: "I want this to be over."—AFP

Burkina Faso makes moves towards talks with jihadists

OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso: While he was on the campaign trail last November, President Roch Marc Christian Kabore had a mantra—"We shall not negotiate"—when talking about Burkina Faso's jihadist insurgency. The policy set Kabore apart from former president Blaise Compaore, whose view was that dialogue with jihadists from neighboring Mali had discouraged attacks on Burkina Faso itself. Kabore's declared refusal has been strongly backed by France, whose military campaign against jihadism in the Sahel is now in its ninth year.

But sources say contacts have taken place with jihadists at the local level in part of northern Burkina Faso. The initiative is limited in scope, they say, and among jihadist groups, the so-called Islamic State remains beyond the pale. In February, Prime Minister Christophe Dabire broached the delicate question of dialogue by saying "all major wars come to an end around a table." A Sahel diplomat in Burkina described those words as "setting the cat amongst the pigeons."

"This amounts to recognition that the official break with the Compaore regime is only a facade and that the will to dialogue is still there," the source said. The Burkinabe investigative fortnightly, L'Evenement, then reported that 29 jihadists were released as part of negotiations in 2020. The minister of territorial administration, Clement Savadogo, told AFP "I have never heard of released terrorists—I can neither confirm nor deny that." But, he contended, "there is not a leader in the world who prefers war over peace."

"If there are claims where we see issues on which we can negotiate, I don't see why we shouldn't do it." The war in the Sahel began in Mali in 2012 before spreading to Burkina Faso and Niger three years later. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), an international NGO specialized in data collection, reported 2,293 fatalities in Burkina in 2020, the deadliest year yet.

Divisive issue

The question of dialogue with the armed Islamists divides Sahel nations. The military-led government which took power in Mali after a coup last August has sketched it as an option. But Niger, which is facing jihadist offensives mounted from both Mali and Nigeria, rejects any negotiations. Despite the official refusal in Burkina, several signs of contact have emerged. A high-ranking security source told AFP that "initiatives... emanating from local communities" had taken place in the Djibo region—a northern Burkinabe city in the jihadist-hit "tri-border" area where the frontiers of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger converge. It is "not about dialogue or direct exchanges" but rather "an appeal made by the communities to the fighters who come from these places to lay down their weapons", the source said.

According to another source familiar with the matter, in June 2020 "contacts took place after President Kabore came to Djibo. He told community leaders that he was ready to pardon those who lay down their arms." The initiatives are admittedly "vague", said Mahamoudou Savadogo, a consultant and specialist in security issues. "It has to be noted, though, that attacks have largely declined in the area in recent months." "The message seems to have got through," said an NGO official in Djibo. "Some young people who feel trapped (in jihadist groups) are keen to lay down their arms but are in fear for their lives." A United Nations source in Bamako said there was a strong qualifying factor in these initiatives. These tentative contacts have been with the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (GSIM, an Al-Qaeda affiliate) "but in no case with the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara", the local IS affiliate, the source said. Groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda seek to forge links with local communities and have reached some governance agreements on a small local scale in central Mali.—AFP



WASHINGTON: This screengrab made from surveillance footage released by the FBI on their official YouTube channel shows the person suspected of placing pipe bombs in Washington, DC.—AFP

FBI releases footage of Washington pipe bomb suspect

WASHINGTON: The FBI on Tuesday released new images of the man suspected of placing homemade pipe bombs in Washington on January 5 — the night before the assault on the US Capitol—in an effort to gather identifying information about him. The video, published on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's official YouTube channel, shows several angles of surveillance footage of the suspect as he walks along streets in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of the city. Dressed in dark pants, a light-colored hoodie and gloves, the man's face is obscured by glasses and a mask as he carries a bag in one hand.

The FBI had already released still photos of the suspect—including ones that showed identifying details of his Nike sneakers—offering \$100,000 for any information leading to his arrest. The man is suspected of planting the homemade bombs near the headquarters of both the Republican and Democratic parties, which are near the Capitol. The bombs never detonated and may have been placed as a distraction to keep police away when a pro-Trump mob breached the building where lawmakers were voting to certify Joe Biden's election victory. "We still believe there is someone out there who has information they may not have realized was significant until now," Steven D'Antuono, assistant director of the FBI's Washington office said, asking for the public's help in identifying the suspect.

"These pipe bombs were viable devices that could have been detonated, resulting in serious injury or death," he said. Five people died in the course of the Capitol attack January 6, and more than 300 people have been arrested for their participation so far, including some charged with conspiracy. On Tuesday, the deployment of National Guard troops sent to protect the Capitol since the attack was extended until May, with numbers cut by half to 2,300.—AFP

S Leone government under fire over graft accusations

FREETOWN, Sierra Leone: After casting itself as a fighter against corruption, Sierra Leone's government is under fire over allegations of irregular spending by its first lady and a senior minister. The scandal has come as an embarrassment to the West African state's president, Julius Maada Bio, who after coming to power in 2018 launched a graft probe into his predecessor. Scrutiny of his inner circle began in January, after an African news website reported that the president's wife, Fatima Bio, had spent the equivalent of about \$3 million (2.5 million euros) in government funds as part of an anti-rape cam-

Latest mass hacks highlight challenge for Biden govt

WASHINGTON: The potentially devastating hack of Microsoft email servers, the second major cyberattack in months, adds pressure to the Biden administration as it weighs options for "hacking back" or other moves to protect cyberspace. Security analysts say stronger actions are needed to deter the attacks which exploited vulnerabilities in corporate and government networks and opened opportunities for espionage and cybercrime. The latest hack exploiting flaws in Microsoft Exchange service is believed to have affected at least 30,000 US organizations including local governments and was attributed to an "unusually aggressive" Chinese cyberespionage campaign.

The news comes on the heels of revelations that Russia was probably behind the massive SolarWinds hack that shook the government and corporate security last year. "These are two very big incidents and represent a significant litmus test for the early stages of the Biden administration," said Frank Cilluffo, a former homeland security adviser in the George W. Bush administration who is now the director of Auburn University's McCrary Institute for Cyber and Critical Infrastructure Security. "A response is important because it sets a precedent and sets the tone for the administration's response to unacceptable cyber behavior."

Cilluffo added that any action would not simply respond to the perpetrators, noting that "everyone else is watching, and other state and nonstate actors are going to pay attention to our ability to respond." James

Lewis, a cybersecurity specialist with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the two incidents suggest "that our cybersecurity strategy isn't working against our most skilled and dangerous opponents." "This means that the espionage advantages are endless," Lewis said. "The Biden team understands this and is trying to change things, but we are far from having a solution."

Hacking back?

Until recently, the notion of "hacking back" counterstrikes was considered too politically risky under international norms. But a 2019 agreement among 28 countries set a legal framework for such retaliation, Lewis noted. "Hacking back by private entities is still illegal, but the case has been made that it is legal for a state to do so in response to an attack," he said. R. David Edelman, a former digital security adviser to the Obama administration who is now on the faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said the new administration faces difficult choices.

"The administration has said it wants to impose costs—and it's unclear what costs are commensurate. Just like with Solar Winds, the private sector is going to have to pay for another state's adventurism," Edelman said. "Indictments? Sanctions? They only have so much effect when we're talking about agents safely ensconced in a foreign security state thousands of miles away."

Microsoft said a state-sponsored hacking group operating out of China is exploiting previously unknown security flaws in its Exchange email services to steal data from business users. The hacking group, which it has named "Hafnium," is a "highly skilled and sophisticated actor," according to the company. This comes following revelations that hackers managed to compromise and install malware on a piece of security software developed by SolarWinds which is used for management and supervision of networks at many large companies and several US government agencies.—AFP



HAUTS-DE-SEINE, France: In this file photo the logo of French headquarters of American multinational technology company Microsoft, is pictured outside in Issy-Les-Moulineaux, a Paris' suburb.—AFP

paign. Sierra Leone forbids the office of the first lady from using taxpayers' money, according to Marcella Samba Sesay, the director of the Campaign for Good Governance, an NGO. Africanist Press, the news website, then reported in February that Chief Minister David John Francis had claimed the equivalent of some \$1 million dollars (830,000 euros) in "irregular" expenses. Sierra Leone boasts huge mineral and diamond deposits, but it remains one of the world's poorest nations and is still recovering from decades of war and disease.

President Bio, 56, was elected after a tumultuous campaign on promises to tackle corruption and eliminate wasteful government spending. In 2019, he launched an investigation into his predecessor, Ernest Bai Koroma, who governed from 2007 to 2018. Last November, the authorities banned Koroma, 67, from leaving the country after officials found that funds worth tens of millions of dollars from his time in office were missing. Bio also suspended his own labor minister last

year in a corruption case involving rice donations from China, and vowed to restore "probity in governance" in the country.

But in a reversal for the president, Sierra Leone's anti-corruption agency announced in February that it would investigate the office of the first lady. The agency is set to examine the expenditures of both Fatima Bio and the former first lady as part of the probe. According to Africanist Press, Bio used government money on flights, hotel accommodation and office furniture. The first lady has admitted that she received government funds, but denies that money was misspent. "I'm not a thief," she said. "I'm not getting a fraction of what other African first ladies are receiving in the region." Chief Minister David John Francis also denies wrongdoing. Sierra Leone's government did not respond to requests for comment from AFP. "Corruption has persisted, even flourished under this government," said Kande Kolloh Yumkella, the leader of an opposition party, who is demanding a parliamentary investigation.—AFP

International

China: US admiral 'hyping up' threat of Taiwan invasion

Davidson says Beijing could invade Taiwan within next six years

BEIJING: China yesterday accused a top US commander of attempting to "hype up" the threat of an invasion of Taiwan to inflate Washington's defense spend and justify its own military chicanery in Asia.

The US' top military officer in Asia-Pacific, Admiral Philip Davidson, on Tuesday said China could invade Taiwan within the next six years, as Beijing accelerates its moves to supplant American military power in Asia. Democratic and self-ruled Taiwan lives under constant threat of invasion by authoritarian China, whose leaders view the island as part of their territory and which they have vowed to one day take back.

"I worry that they're (China) accelerating their ambitions to supplant the United States and our leadership role in the rules-based international order ... by 2050," Davidson said.

"Taiwan is clearly one of their ambitions before that. And I think the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years," he told a US Senate committee. Taiwan split from China at the end of a civil war in 1949 and exists under the constant threat of invasion by the mainland.

Washington switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 1979, but remains the island's most important unofficial ally and military backer. Beijing was swift to bat away the admiral's comments.

"Some US people continue to use the Taiwan issue to hype up China's military threat," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters in Beijing. "But in

essence this is the US searching for a pretext to increase its military spending, expand its forces and interfere in regional affairs."

Donald Trump embraced warmer ties with Taiwan as he feuded with China on issues such as trade and national security. President Joe Biden's administration has offered Taiwan cause for optimism for continued support aside from the State Department saying in January that US commitment to the island was "rock-solid".

Taiwan's de facto ambassador to the US was formally invited to Biden's inauguration, an unprecedented move since 1979. China also has made expansive territorial claims in the resource-rich South China Sea and even threatens the American island of Guam, Davidson stressed. "Guam is a target today," he warned, recalling that the Chinese military released a video simulating an attack on an island base strongly resembling US facilities in Diego Garcia and Guam.

He called on lawmakers to approve the installation on Guam of an Aegis Ashore anti-missile battery, capable of intercepting the most powerful Chinese missiles. Guam "needs to be defended and it needs to be prepared for the threats that will come in the future," Davidson said. In addition to other Aegis missile defence systems destined for Australia and Japan, Davidson called on lawmakers to budget for offensive armaments "to let China know that the costs of what they seek to do are too high." — AFP



Taiwanese sailors salute the island's flag on the deck of the Panshih supply ship after taking part in annual drills, at the Tsoying naval base in Kaohsiung in this file photo. — AFP

Myanmar security forces target railway workers

YANGON: Hundreds of soldiers and police swooped on a railway station in Yangon yesterday seeking to arrest workers on strike to protest against the military coup in Myanmar. The country has been in turmoil since the military ousted and detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi last month, triggering daily protests around the country to demand the return of democracy.

Security forces have responded with an increasingly brutal crackdown involving tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets, as well as isolated incidents of live rounds. Close to 2,000 people have been arrested and the death toll has climbed to more than 60.

Thousands of government workers across the country have been participating in a civil disobedience movement aimed at choking the state's institutions and paralyzing the economy. The movement has resulted in hospital disruptions, bank closures and empty ministry offices.

Hundreds of soldiers and police were deployed to Ma Hlwa Gone rail-

way station and its staff housing compound early Wednesday morning where about 800 workers are participating in strike action.

"We are united," railway workers chanted as authorities blocked off a road, according to a live feed on Facebook. "Around 300 security personnel are blocking the road searching for the people who are involved in the civil disobedience movement," a 32-year-old woman who lives at the site told AFP.

"I escaped, but there were many left, I am worried about the remaining workers. I just hope they don't arrest the people, if they do it is troubling because they could beat and kill them."

Sarong arrests

There was another heavy police presence in Yangon's central San Chaung township yesterday morning following tensions two nights ago in which security forces sealed off a block of streets, confining around 200 anti-coup protesters before searching



YANGON: Railway staff gather by the train tracks as security forces arrived at the Mahlwagon Railway Station to arrest workers involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), in protest over the military coup, in Yangon yesterday. — AFP

apartments. State media reported yesterday the arrest of seven protesters in that area for hanging the pictures of a monk on female longyis or sarongs Monday morning.

Protesters have been hanging women's longyis across streets to play on security forces' fears of Myanmar traditions that say women's lower parts and the garments that cover them can sap men's power. "A total of seven rioters were investigated and (action will be taken) according to the law for their

act of (insulting) the religion," the state-run Global New Light of Myanmar said.

It was another restless night in parts of Yangon Tuesday, with security forces setting fire to protesters' makeshift barricades at Thingangyun township.

One 26-year-old resident said authorities were trying to incite fear and had threatened to set peoples' homes on fire. "But they did not succeed," she said. — AFP

Planetary pact: China, Russia to launch lunar space station

MOSCOW: Russia and China unveiled plans for a joint lunar space station, as Moscow seeks to recapture the glory of its space pioneering days of Soviet times, and Beijing gears up its own extraterrestrial ambitions. Though Moscow was once at the forefront of space travel-it sent the first man into space-its cosmic ambitions have dimmed thanks to poor financing and endemic corruption.

It has been eclipsed by China and the United States, which have both clocked major wins in space exploration and research in recent years. The Russian space agency Roscosmos said in a statement that it had signed an agreement with China's National Space Administration (CNSA) to develop a "complex of experimental research facilities created on the surface and/or in the orbit of the Moon". The CNSA, for its part, said that the project was "open to all interested countries and international partners" in what experts said would be China's biggest international space cooperation project to date.

Moscow is seeking to re-take the lead in the space race. This year, it celebrates the 60th anniversary of Russia's first-ever manned space flight-it sent Yuri

Gagarin into space in April 1961, followed by the first woman, Valentina Tereshkova, two years later. The United States NASA space agency launched its first manned space flight a month after Russia, in May 1961, sending Alan Shepard up aboard Mercury-Redstone 3. But Moscow has lagged behind both Washington and Beijing in the exploration of the Moon and Mars in recent years. In the meantime, China-which has sought closer partnership with Moscow-has started a successful space program of its own.

'Big deal'

Last year, it launched its Tianwen-1 probe to Mars that is currently orbiting the Red Planet. And in December, it successfully brought rock and soil samples from the Moon back to Earth, the first mission of this type in over 40 years. Chen Lan, an independent analyst specializing in China's space program, said the joint lunar space station was "a big deal".

"This will be the largest international space cooperation project for China, so it's significant," Lan told AFP. Roscosmos chief Dmitry Rogozin wrote on Twitter that he had invited CNSA chief Zhang Kejian to the launch of Russia's first modern lunar lander, Luna 25, scheduled for October 1 — the first lunar lander to be launched by Russia since 1976.

The US space agency NASA has now set its sights on Mars, with its Perseverance rovers last week conducting their first test drive on the planet. NASA eventually intends to conduct a possible

human mission to the planet, even if planning is still at a very preliminary stage. Moscow and Washington are also collaborating in the space sector-one of the few areas of cooperation left between the Cold War rivals. — AFP

three had benefited from immunity from prosecution-but they now risk being sent back to Spain to face trial and potential prison. Their lives could be about to become "complicated", a European Parliament official said.

However, Puigdemont has announced he intends to appeal the decision. And in January, a Belgian court refused to execute a European arrest warrant targeting another former Catalan regional minister, Lluís Puig, saying there was a risk that he would not receive a fair trial.

Around a hundred people took to the streets of Barcelona on Tuesday night to protest against the EU decision, holding placards calling for an amnesty for the trio. "It's very sad and this will have very serious consequences," 63-year-old protester Rosa Ferrer said. But opinions were mixed on the streets of Catalonia, which has long been split over the thorny question of whether or not it's the region should separate from Spain. Blai Heredia, an 18-year-old student, thinks Puigdemont should be extradited. — AFP



This file photo taken on June 10, 2019 shows the moon in the sky above Mandalay city in central Myanmar. Russia and China on Tuesday signed a memorandum of understanding for the joint construction of a lunar space station, Russia's space agency Roscosmos said in a statement. — AFP

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News in brief

COVID death record in Brazil

SAO PAULO: Brazil broke its record for new daily COVID-19 deaths on Tuesday with nearly 2,000 fatalities, as the pandemic overwhelms hospitals and vaccinations progress slowly. The Health Ministry reported a daily total of 1,972 new deaths in the country, which has the world's second-highest overall toll, exceeded only by the United States. It also reported 70,764 new cases of COVID-19, meaning 11.1 million people have now caught the virus in the country, while a total of 268,370 have died. The previous daily death record was set on March 3 with just over 1,900 fatalities. The figure has been rising steadily over the past two weeks. — AFP

Nicaragua volcano spews clouds of ash

MANAGUA, Nicaragua: The San Cristobal volcano, the highest in Nicaragua and one of its most active, spewed a cloud of ash Tuesday that blanketed the city of Chinandega and surrounding communities, a local journalist told AFP. The surprise eruption ejected a column of smoke and ash that was dumped as far as 17 kilometers (10.5 miles) from the volcano's foot, Nicaragua journalist Carol Altamirano said. "Everything is grey, the crops of rice, sesame, vegetable gardens and fruit trees and the cattle pasture is covered in ash," said Altamirano. The INETER territorial studies institute predicted less intense action in the coming days and no threat to residents. — AFP

Arkansas outlaws abortions

WASHINGTON: The US state of Arkansas Tuesday passed a law banning abortion even in cases of rape or incest, in a move supporters hope will push the Supreme Court towards overturning its landmark 1973 ruling protecting abortion rights nationwide. The only exception to the Arkansas law is "to save the life of the mother in a medical emergency," announced Asa Hutchinson, the governor of the southern state known for its Christian conservatism. Hutchinson said he signed the law due to his "sincere and long-held pro-life convictions," adding that "it is the intent of the legislation to set the stage for the Supreme Court overturning current case law." — AFP

Orphanage abuse victims in Panama

PANAMA CITY: Panama prosecutors said Tuesday they have identified 20 child victims of sex abuse and other maltreatment at orphanages and have charged eight people to date. An investigation was launched after a report by a parliamentary committee found dozens of children had suffered sexual, physical and verbal abuse at state-funded orphanages since 2017. The report also listed forced abortions among children and poor living conditions at the shelters, most of which were run by publicly funded NGOs under the supervision of the government body SEN-NIAF, which is responsible for child care. — AFP

Sixth woman accuses Cuomo

NEW YORK: A new woman has said the governor of New York state inappropriately touched her, bringing to six the number of women who accuse Andrew Cuomo of harassment or inappropriate behavior, local media reported Tuesday. But the 63-year-old Democrat stuck to his guns, ruling out resignation once more. Saying he was "not aware" of the new accusation, Cuomo repeated that he would await the results of an independent investigation into the allegations, overseen by the state Attorney General Letitia James. — AFP

Catalans divided as Spain hails EU lifting of MEPs' immunity

BARCELON: Spain's foreign minister on Tuesday hailed the European Parliament's decision to lift the immunity of three wanted Catalan MEPs, although reactions were divided on the streets of Catalonia. The decision relates to former regional president Carles Puigdemont and two others who are wanted by Madrid over their role in the failed Catalan independence bid of 2017, which triggered Spain's worst political crisis in decades.

Puigdemont blasted the decision, calling it "a sad day for the European Parliament" and saying he and the other two MEPs were victims of "political per-

Business

THURSDAY, MARCH 11, 2021

NBK Economic Report

OPEC+ supply restraint decision sends oil prices towards \$70

Prices jump in the face of a near-term supply deficit, more rapid drawdown

KUWAIT: The recent OPEC+ decision to roll over supply cuts until May sent oil prices surging as surprised markets started to price in the prospect of tighter supplies amid expectations of a vaccine-mediated economic and oil demand recovery this year. Brent futures looked to break through \$70, in the face of a near-term supply deficit and more rapid drawdown of global crude stocks. Oil price expectations for the year have been raised upwards, though these favorable dynamics are unlikely to persist beyond this year.

The Saudi-inspired decision by OPEC+ to restrain crude output in April for at least one month sent oil prices surging by as much as 8 percent by Friday's close. ICE Brent, the international crude benchmark, settled at \$69.4/bbl, its highest close since May 2019 and a seventh consecutive weekly gain. Brent is up almost 34 percent so far in 2021—one of its best ever starts to a year—and 69 percent since the start of 4Q20 as traders reckon on tightening oil markets thanks to the efforts of Saudi Arabia and its allies.

The prospect of a significant economic and oil demand rebound this year made possible by the rollout of vaccines in some major oil importing countries has been the oil rally's main driving force. Global economic stimulus, such as the \$1.9 trillion package of pandemic support measures on the verge of being approved by the Biden administration is seen as exceptionally supportive.

Financial flows into oil and changing market expectations about near-term supply tightness are best reflected in the steepening backwardation (where futures prices are cheaper than prompt prices) of the Brent forward curve since the middle of January. Speculative net length (the difference between the number of 'long' and 'short' contracts that bet on prices falling) has surged in recent and is back near record, pre-pandemic highs.

The OPEC+ decision once again surprised the markets that had been expecting the group to respond to market tightness and falling inventory

levels by opening the taps. At the very least, 500 kb/d of additional supply was expected, with the only uncertainty being whether Saudi Arabia would return its additional 1 mb/d of supply cuts in April all at once or gradually. Saudi Prince Abdulaziz had been urging caution for months as oil demand growth remained uncertain while the coronavirus pandemic still raged. "The right course of action now is to keep our powder dry and to have contingencies in reserve to insure against any unforeseen outcomes", he remarked before the close.

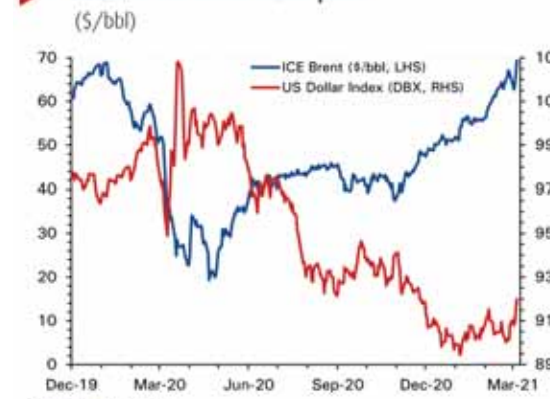
In the end, OPEC+ rolled over its nearly 8 mb/d of production cuts, equivalent to around 8 percent of pre-pandemic supply, for an additional month until May. However, it did concede a second round of output increases to Russia and Kazakhstan of 130 kb/d and 20 kb/d, respectively, to reflect 'seasonal consumption patterns'.

This outcome was by far the most bullish among the range of scenarios being considered ahead of the meeting. The group anticipates in the near term a period of oil demand weakness and crude stock builds associated with the Spring refinery maintenance season before oil demand growth recovers ahead of the summer. The priority remains bringing global crude stock levels down to within its target 5-year avg. range. OPEC+ is more concerned about overshooting rather than undershooting oil demand.

As for the risk of higher oil prices re-incentivizing further US shale production down the line, a frequently voiced concern for Russia, the Saudis believe that the era of "drill, baby, drill", is gone forever. The view is that shale producers are now prioritizing profits and dividends over output growth. While US crude production is recovering, both from February's deep freeze—which knocked out around 1 mb/d of crude production and shuttered several key oil refineries—and last April's historic price drop into negative territory, it remains well below its record highs of early 2020.

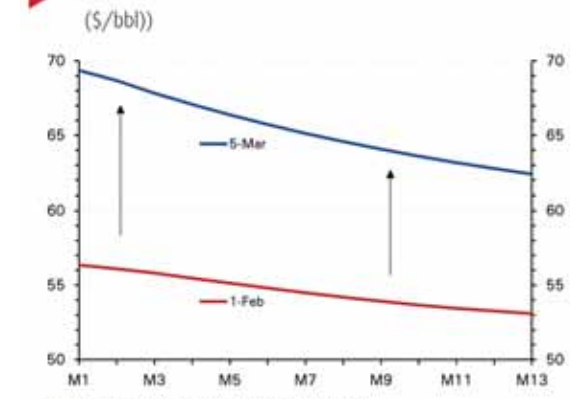
Prior to February's Arctic blast, US shale had recovered around 40 percent, or 1.4 mb/d, of the

Chart 1: ICE Brent crude price (\$/bbl)



Source: Refinitiv

Chart 2: ICE Brent forward curve (\$/bbl)



Source: Intercontinental Exchange (ICE)

3.4 mb/d of supply lost (peak to trough) due to the pandemic. The most recent EIA data shows production reaching 10 mb/d in the week-ending 26 Feb, still a way off peak output of 13.1 mb/d. This is despite an increase in US oil rig counts to last May's levels (310).

On the oil demand front, recent economic and high frequency indicators from the world's three largest oil consumers are promising. Consumer spending over the Lunar New Year in China rose by almost 29 percent y/y amid travel restrictions, while India's economy, supported by government stimulus, returned to growth in 4Q20 (+0.4 percent q/q). The expectation now is that fuel demand growth will surge to a record high of 215.2 million tons by March 2022. In the US, work commutes hit their highest level since March 2020, according to Google Mobility Reports.

The International Energy Agency (IEA), taking its cue from the IMF's recent World Economic Outlook Update, in which it forecast a 5.5 percent increase in global output (8.1 percent and 11.5 percent for China and India, respectively), expects oil demand to increase by around 5.4 mb/d in 2021, about 60 per-

cent of the volume of oil lost in 2020 due to the pandemic. This would bring total oil demand back up to 96.4 mb/d by end-2021, led by gasoline, diesel and petrochemicals, but still short of the pre-pandemic 100 mb/d thanks to lagging aviation fuel demand.

Oil price expectations have been revised upwards, with the year-average consensus for Brent settling firmly in the \$65-75/bbl range. The balance of oil price risks for 2021 are tilted to the upside given the state of undersupply, though oil prices will not surge to levels that could dampen the pace of global economic growth. Downside risks to demand include delays in global vaccine penetration and/or the proliferation of new coronavirus strains. Beyond the near term, supply side factors such as OPEC spare capacity, returning Iranian production following renegotiation of the previous nuclear agreement (JCPOA) and recovering US shale will likely begin to influence prices. OPEC+ will meet again in early April to reassess the state of the market. It is likely that supply will increase in May, with domestic refining needs increasing ahead of peak summer electricity demand in this region and the onset of the northern hemisphere driving season.

A cloudy, but improving, outlook for US airlines

NEW YORK: US airlines are set to receive another round of support from Washington as the industry continues to await the first tangible signs of real recovery from the coronavirus downturn.

President Joe Biden's new \$1.9 trillion economic relief package includes \$14 billion to keep thousands of flight attendants, pilots and other staff on payroll through the end of September. The hope and expectation is that the funding-Congress' third round of payroll support since the coronavirus devastated the US travel industry—will be the last needed before carriers can return to profitability.

The improving pace of vaccinations in the United States has raised hopes a travel recovery may finally be on the horizon, with airlines planning to add flights this summer to meet the expected pent-up demand. But industry leaders remain cautious after earlier hopes for a recovery dissipated as the coronavirus crisis lurched on. Major airlines lost \$35 billion in 2020 and they continue to burn through \$150 million a day. "You can plan with this virus but you can't forecast very well," Nicholas Calio, president of Airlines

for America, told a congressional hearing earlier this month.

Raising, and burning, cash

US traffic counts are still less than 50 percent of their pre-coronavirus levels most days, an improvement from the slowest period of COVID-19 lockdowns, but still an unsustainable situation.

Airlines have retired older aircraft, shuttered airport lounges and deferred plane deliveries to reduce costs during the downturn. Tens of thousands of workers have also left the industry through early retirement and other voluntary initiatives, but Congress has stepped in to prevent mass involuntary layoffs. On Monday, American Airlines became the latest big carrier to use its frequent flyer program as a guarantee in financing, raising \$7.5 billion in additional debt. US carriers at the end of 2020 had \$164 billion in debt, up more than 56 percent from 2019, according to Airlines for America. The industry in 2021 is expected to pay \$5.2 billion in interest payments, compared with \$1.9 billion in 2019.

In a presentation accompanying its debt offering, American predicted a "non-linear recovery with an accelerating pace once we see widespread vaccination and government restrictions ease."

"The airlines all set the bar really low" for the first quarter, said Peter McNally, an analyst at Third Bridge, who said investors see a demand pickup as inevitable. "People keep giving them money until the recovery happens," he said. Google Trends data show



NEW YORK: US airlines are set to receive another round of support from Washington as the industry continues to await the first tangible signs of real recovery from the coronavirus downturn

searches for airlines like Southwest and JetBlue have risen 50 percent or more since the week of Christmas last year, DataTrek Research said in a note. "Americans are already becoming more interested in flying again ahead of spring break," DataTrek's Jessica Rabe said in the note. "Leisure activity tends to come back quicker and stronger after a recession than business travel, and improving stimulus checks should help." —AFP

A year after crash, markets boom but bust fears loom

PARIS: A year ago, stock markets went into free-fall as the scale of the coronavirus crisis became apparent and countries desperately locked down to try to halt the pandemic.

A year on, they have more than recouped the lost ground, some of them even driven to record highs by a tidal wave of cheap stimulus money and the hope that vaccination programs will allow a return to normality sooner than anyone could have expected. But now analysts worry markets may have got too far ahead of themselves and face a sharp reverse if and when governments decide to dampen down the party.

"In my opinion, it would be extremely dangerous to think that the end of the health crisis will be tantamount to the end of the (economic) crisis," said Vincent Mortier at asset manager Amundi. "In fact, it's the contrary," he warned. World Health

Organization's declaration on March 11 that the coronavirus outbreak was a pandemic sparked spectacular losses the following day, with New York falling 10 percent while London shed 11 percent, matching the worst days of the 1987 crash.

The downturn did not end on March 12, with further heavy losses over the following days as investors tried to get a fix on what the pandemic would mean for the global economy—a deep but relatively short global recession. Factories shut, borders closed, airlines grounded, shops and restaurants shuttered—the world came to a halt.

"It was crazy. The market was falling at a pace (that) we thought there would be no bottom," said Ipek Ozkardeska, an analyst at Swissquote Bank in London.

In response, central banks and governments acted "very strongly, without



SAN FRANCISCO: Gap clothing is displayed at a Gap store in San Francisco, California. — AFP

having to be accountable" for what they were doing, Mortier said. In an effort to keep their economies afloat until the pandemic—or at least the first wave—was over, governments simply resorted, massively, to debt, he said.

Globally, rescue packages total some \$24 trillion, according to Kokou

Agbo-Bloua, global head of economic research at French bank Societe Generale. That only served to buoy markets that had already become addicted to cheap money, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis, said Eric Bourguignon, investment manager with Swiss Life Am. —AFP

Demise of financier Greensill sparks global jobs panic

LONDON: The collapse of British finance firm Greensill has sparked panic and threatened 50,000 jobs, in particular at the sprawling steel empire of Indian-British billionaire Sanjeev Gupta. Greensill specialized in short-term corporate loans via a complex and opaque business model that ultimately sparked its declaration of insolvency on Monday.

The bankruptcy marks a major fall from grace for a company that won a key \$1.5-billion investment from Japan's SoftBank in 2019 — and employs former British Prime Minister David Cameron as an advisor. Its demise has now created massive uncertainty for clients, who depended on its finance services to pay their bills and could now potentially default on payments and lead to further turmoil.

"For companies reliant on its service, the great scramble has begun to find other ways of covering the looming cavern in their finances," said Susannah Streeter, an analyst with financial services company Hargreaves Lansdown. "Those investors who had bought the debt sold on the market are now staring at potentially big losses."

Jobs disruption

Greensill's failure has put 50,000 jobs at risk, both at the London-headquartered group and across its customer base. One that could be hit hardest is Gupta's GFG Alliance empire, which has 35,000 staff worldwide, including Britain where its Liberty Steel division employs 5,000 people. Bloomberg news reported that Greensill had close links with Gupta, who told the financial news agency in October that it was the company's biggest lender.

Sanjeev Gupta himself met for "productive" talks with trade unions in Britain on Tuesday, GFG said in a statement. The company is seeking "additional working capital facilities to support the business" and continues "to work closely with the unions and our employees to identify the most effective ways of supporting the business and preserving jobs". A Downing Street spokesman said the news "will be very worrying for employees", adding the UK government was following the matter closely. GFG also operates three large sites in France, comprising Ascovall steelworks, Hayange rail plant and an aluminium facility in Dunkirk. —AFP

Business

Reclusive Chinese water tycoon is now Asia's richest person

Zhong's net worth surges to \$85 billion after stock listings of his firms

BEIJING: Until recently, few people had even heard of the Chinese billionaire with a gruff reputation who built a fortune on China's seemingly unquenchable demand for his ubiquitous red-capped bottled water. But reclusive Zhong Shanshan has become Asia's richest man following the stock listings last year of his Nongfu Spring mineral water and separate pharma company Wantai Biological Pharmacy Enterprise, which has tapped into massive demand for COVID-19 test kits. Zhong's net worth has surged to \$85 billion and made him the seventh-richest person on the planet, Hurun Report, a China-based compiler of "rich lists", said last week.

Called a "lone wolf" by Chinese media for his rare public appearances and aversion to interviews, Zhong has achieved one of the fastest accumulations of wealth in history, according to Bloomberg.

He became the first Chinese entrepreneur to enter Hurun's top-ten global rich list this year, leaping out of nowhere to put him hot on the heels of Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and American investor Warren Buffett. Not bad for someone who dropped out of school at the age of 12 during the political upheaval of China's 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, and whose later jobs included bricklayer, carpenter and news reporter,



Zhong Shanshan has a stake, investment or board role in more than 100 companies.

according to Chinese media. Zhong founded Nongfu Spring in 1996 and still owns an 84 percent stake in the company which, according to market research firm Mintel, holds more than a quarter of the bottled water market in China, where many people avoid tap water over health concerns.

In contrast to charismatic Alibaba founder Jack Ma-who Zhong dethroned as China's richest man-little

is known about Nongfu's billionaire boss aside from his gruff image. "I don't have the habit of flattery in my personality," he once told Chinese media in a rare interview. "I don't like to deal with people and have to drink," he added, referring to a Chinese business culture that encourages excessive wining and dining to cement deals. His fortunes have risen just as those of Chinese tech companies have slid.

Political scrutiny

Ma is now worth a comparatively paltry \$55 billion, according to Hurun, after government regulators launched an anti-monopoly investigation into his tech empire, which has pummeled Alibaba's share price and left a massive IPO by financial arm Ant Group in limbo. Although Alibaba and Nongfu are headquartered in the humming eastern tech hub of Hangzhou, Zhong is not a regular attendee at the city's business events, one local entrepreneur told China Economic Weekly.

A former business partner told state media he once attended an industry conference with Zhong, who "went to the stage to give a speech, and offended everyone as soon as he opened his mouth", without providing details of the offending words. Alongside Nongfu, which listed last year in Hong Kong, Zhong is

also the biggest shareholder in Wantai, which went public in Shanghai. The group's rapid COVID-19 test gives results in 75 minutes and, according to its website, has shipped more than 10 million kits. Wantai is also developing a Covid-19 vaccine nasal spray in conjunction with a prominent university.

Wantai is the biopharma arm of Yangshengtang Group, a medical company Zhong founded three years before Nongfu, which specialises in infectious diseases and says it is the largest production base in Asia for HIV diagnostic reagent. Hurun says the share listings make Zhong one of only a handful of entrepreneurs in the world today to have founded more than one \$10 billion business. Zhong has a stake, investment or board role in more than 100 companies, according to Chinese business data. But like other high-profile Chinese industrialists, he has to tread a line between commercial success and official scrutiny. "The Chinese Communist Party wants Chinese businesses to become big and become international, but it also wants to retain some degree of control over them," said Yun Jiang, director of China Policy Centre in Canberra. She says no high-profile business people can entirely hope to "escape political scrutiny"-particularly once they appear on rich list rankings. — AFP

Vaccines, US stimulus boost global GDP forecast: OECD

PARIS: The OECD sharply raised its 2021 global growth forecast on Tuesday as the deployment of vaccines and a huge US stimulus program have greatly improved economic prospects. The Paris-based Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development says it now expects the global economy to grow by 5.6 percent, an increase of 1.4 percentage points from its December forecast. "Global economic prospects have improved markedly in recent months, helped by the gradual deployment of effective vaccines, announcements of additional fiscal support in some countries, and signs that economies are coping better with measures to suppress the virus," it said in a report.



WASHINGTON: The world recovery will be largely carried by the United States, thanks to President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion stimulus program, Laurence Boone, chief economist of the OECD, said.

The world recovery will be largely carried by the United States, thanks to President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion stimulus program, Laurence Boone, chief economist of the OECD, told AFP. The OECD now sees the US economy climbing by 6.5 percent this year, an increase of 3.3 percentage points from its previous forecast. Boone said the US recovery accounts for one percentage point of the global growth revision.

The OECD said global output could rise above the pre-pandemic level in mid-2021. It noted, however, increasing signs of divergence between countries as some nations are faster to roll out vaccines while others employ containment measures. "Despite the improved global outlook, output and incomes in many countries will remain below the level expected prior to the pandemic at the end of 2022," said the organization which

advises advanced economies. For the moment, only China, India and Turkey have surpassed pre-pandemic levels of economic output. The OECD said the "top policy priority" is to deploy vaccines as quickly as possible throughout the world, to save lives as well as to speed economic recovery.

"There are huge and significant risks to our economic projections, most notably the pace of vaccination," Boone said. "What we know if the faster countries vaccinate, the quicker they can reopen their economy," she said, adding that Europe should speed up its vaccination efforts. Britain, which has rolled out vaccines quickly, got a 0.9 percentage point increase to 5.1 percent-higher than the UK's own forecast, which was lowered last week. The eurozone, where vaccination campaigns have been slower, received only a 0.3 percentage point bump to 3.9 percent, as the recoveries in both Italy and France were revised lower.—AFP

LinkedIn China suspends new member sign-ups

BEIJING: Microsoft-owned social network LinkedIn has halted new member sign-ups for its service in China while it reviews its compliance with local laws, the company said in a statement.

The careers-focused site has had a Chinese-language presence since 2014, when it decided to expand by agreeing to stick to strict censorship laws, and now has over 50 million users in the country. It is one of few international tech platforms to enjoy access to China, where all subjects considered politically sensitive are censored in the name of stability and internet giants are urged to block unwanted content online. "We're a global platform with an obligation to respect the laws that apply to us, including adhering to Chinese government regulations for our localized version of LinkedIn in China," the firm said in a notice dated Tuesday, without providing further details. Tech giants who refuse to comply with the smothering censorship laws, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, have long been blocked behind the country's "Great Firewall". Microsoft, however, operates LinkedIn by complying with the rules through a local joint venture. LinkedIn has been criticized in China for pulling the professional accounts of dissidents-which it later said was in error-and scratching politically sensitive content from its pages.—AFP

Efforts Daher added, "We are very pleased with the latest campaign's initiative to spread financial literacy and a culture of savings and investment, in an effort to educate customers about various banking services and how to benefit from them. We appreciate the latest initiative spearheaded by the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Kuwait Banking Association to educate the general public about financial and banking matters, and are fully committed to providing any support from our various departments in service of this campaign and its objectives."

Borrowing and Financing

The Central Bank of Kuwait has set clear and specific policies to direct borrowing and financing operations for banks. With this in mind, the Central Bank of Kuwait has issued clear and specific instructions to banks and financing companies to provide their customers with loan details, including: the value and number of installments, payment dates, the ratio of the installment to the net salary, and the consequences of non-payment.

Clients are also entitled to a period of at least two days to review the contract comprehensively before signing it. Upon signing the contract, clients can also obtain a draft of the contract, which includes details such as: the type of loan, the repayment period, the amount of the installment, and the loan return.

The instructions from the Central Bank of Kuwait necessitate that banking and financing establishments provide financial advice to the customer before and during financing. As per the instructions, financial institutions are obligated to clarify the risks of increasing financial obligations to the client, especially in the event of a change in the client's financial conditions, whether due to a change in work, retirement or even a change in the absolute interest rate.



MOSCOW: An X5 group representative demonstrates a facial recognition payment system at a self-checkout machine in a Perekrestok supermarket in Moscow on Tuesday. — AFP

Russian retailer launches facial recognition payment system

MOSCOW: Russia's X5 group, the country's leading food retailer, announced yesterday the launch of a facial recognition payment system, the latest expansion of a technology that has sparked privacy and security concerns. To launch its facial recognition payment system the X5 group, which owns the Pyaterochka convenience stores and the Perekrestok supermarket chain, has joined forces with the Visa payment system and Russia's state giant Sberbank that is striving to become an IT company.

The service has rolled out in 52 Perekrestok supermarkets and will expand to a total of 150 by the end of the month, X5 innovation director Ivan Melnik told AFP, adding that the system will also be available in 30 Pyaterochka stores by the end of April. He said some 3,000 stores across Russia will feature facial recognition payment systems by the end of the year.

At a Moscow supermarket on Tuesday, the service appeared to be winning the support of younger customers. "It's great because the 21st century is the era of technology," said 28-year-old banker Andrei Epifanov. But he added that he thinks older people may not trust the new technology.

The service will only be available at self-service

checkouts for Sberbank customers after the bank recently allowed its users to set up facial recognition to pay from their accounts.

To complete the transaction in the pandemic era, customers will need to remove their facemasks "for a second and look into the camera", the companies behind the payment system said in a statement.

"This is convenient for customers since they don't have to carry a wallet or take their phone out of their pocket," Melnik said. "They can just use a button and pay with their face."

He said the system also ensures that facial recognition transactions are "encrypted and protected" and identity theft attempts are prevented by a 3D camera that measures the depth of a user's face.

Facial recognition is rapidly developing in Russia, raising the concerns of activists over state surveillance. At the start of the pandemic Moscow used its tens of thousands of surveillance cameras to monitor compliance with lockdown measures.

The Roskomsvoboda digital rights NGO launched a campaign last year against the mass use of facial recognition by the authorities, highlighting abuses of the system, data leaks and lack of consent. — AFP

Gulf Bank supports Diraya campaign

KUWAIT: As part of its commitment to educating customers about their banking rights and raising awareness about cybersecurity, Gulf Bank is participating in the Diraya campaign, an awareness campaign initiated by the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Kuwait Banking Association. The latest campaign aims to provide awareness to customers about their rights and to educate the general public about all matters that are related to banking and finance.

The Diraya campaign spans several topics, including the borrowing process, bank cards, cybersecurity, security tips, and services for customers with special needs. The campaign also aims to clarify the mechanisms for raising official complaints in an effort to protect customers' rights, and also aims to highlight the banking sector's tasks and roles in stimulating and developing the economy.

Customer Awareness Crucial Aspect of Digital Transformation Strategy

Commenting on the Diraya campaign, Gulf Bank's CEO, Tony Daher, remarked: "With the latest advancements and progress witnessed by the financial and banking industry, the need for greater financial awareness is ever more apparent, in the hopes that customers can make the most of all the services available to them, without compromising their cybersecurity. Gulf Bank fully supports the Diraya campaign and encourages all its customers to follow the campaign's activities and stay tuned to all its awareness messages."

Appreciation & Commitment of Awareness

Loan Types

There are two types of personal loans available to clients: consumer and housing loans. It is important for clients to be aware of the differences between the loans, and the instructions related to each of them, in order to be able to assess their financial requirements in the best possible way.

Consumer Loans

A consumer loan is a medium-term personal loan with a loan period not exceeding five years. The maximum amount that can be granted under a consumer loan is KD 25,000 and is provided to clients for the purpose of financing personal needs, such as the purchase of a car, furniture, or obtaining various educational and health services.

Housing Loans

A housing loan is a long-term personal loan meant to be repaid over a period not exceeding 15 years. The maximum amount that can be granted under a housing loan/financing facility per customer is KD 70,000, and is provided to clients for the purpose of buying, building or renovating a private residence.

As part of the regulatory process of granting personal loans, and in an effort to enable customers to benefit while averting the risk of difficulties in repayment, and in an effort to avoid burdening clients with financial obligations, the Central Bank of Kuwait has allocated a clear set of controls for banks to adhere to when financing clients. The set of controls apply to all clients, both employees and retirees, and take into account the various financial conditions of each of these two categories, mandating the provision of financial advice and all the necessary details of the financing contract, including the clarification of the various features of the financing process, including: the interest rate to the amount of financing, the



Tony Daher

ratio of the monthly installment to the net monthly salary, the number of installments that the customer must pay, the components of each installment, and other related information. Details regarding the financing process must be provided before the contract is signed, with the loan institutions factoring in a two-day period for their clients to review the contracts and read their terms and conditions carefully, in an effort to guarantee that every client is fully aware of their rights and obligations under the contract before signing.

It is worth noting that Gulf Bank is keen on spearheading numerous awareness campaigns and initiatives as part of its ongoing commitment to economic sustainability, and regularly highlights similar awareness initiatives on social media. Last year, Gulf Bank launched "Let's Talk Business," a series of interviews with local entrepreneurs designed to stimulate an entrepreneurial culture in Kuwait, and discuss how to overcome business challenges during an economic crisis such as the pandemic. As part of the series, business leaders and entrepreneurs discuss the keys to success for small businesses, how to conduct business during times of crisis, how to successfully diversify and expand your business, and more. Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining a robust sustainability program at the community, economic, and environmental levels through sustainability initiatives that are strategically selected to benefit both the country and the Bank.

Business

Cathay Pacific posts record loss, warns of long recovery

Airline posts \$2.8bn loss last year as pandemic wipes out demand for travel

HONG KONG: Hong Kong carrier Cathay Pacific said yesterday it suffered a record \$2.8 billion loss last year as the coronavirus pandemic wiped out demand for travel—and the airline warned of a long road to recovery ahead. Chairman Patrick Healy described 2020 as the “most challenging” in the airline’s 70-year history and said much will now depend on how effective and widespread global vaccination programs are.

“It is by no means clear how the pandemic and its impact will develop over the coming months,” he warned, saying the group expected passenger traffic to remain “well below” half of pre-pandemic levels throughout 2021. The company’s losses were higher than estimates compiled by Bloomberg News.

Cathay racked up an attributable loss of HK\$21.6 billion (\$2.8 billion) for 2020, going deeper into the red as the year wore on. Its second half losses clocked in at HK\$11.8 billion, up from HK\$9.9 billion in the first six months of the year when the pandemic first emerged.

Like all major airlines, Cathay Pacific has seen its business evaporate during the coronavirus pandemic but the Hong Kong carrier has had an especially torrid year because it has no domestic market to fall back on. It also entered the pandemic in an already vulnerable position. When the coronavirus first emerged Hong Kong had fallen into recession and Cathay Pacific in the red as months of huge and disruptive democracy protests in 2019 led to a plunge in customers, especially from the lucrative mainland Chinese market.

The airline also found itself punished by authorities in Beijing because some of its employees joined

or voiced support for the protests.

First vaccinations

As the pandemic spread, the airline went on a cost-cutting spree, closing its Cathay Dragon subsidiary, making about 8,500 redundancies and slashing executive pay. With the help of a government bailout it underwent a recapitalization in July that raised HK\$39 billion. But passenger numbers have been some 98 percent below pre-pandemic levels since April and for much of last year the company was burning through cash at a rate of up to HK\$1.5 billion a month. By the time 2020 closed, Cathay’s shares had fallen 29 percent for the year.

In Wednesday’s annual report, Cathay said it had managed to reduce the cash burn towards the end of the year but longer quarantine restrictions that Hong Kong placed on all long-distance flight crew in January was now cancelling out most of those savings. Cathay said it would keep executive pay slashed and ask staff to go on a third round of unpaid leave—to which some 80 percent of employees have already signed up.

Its liquidity at the end of 2020 was HK\$28.6 billion and Cathay also issued HK\$6.74 billion in convertible bonds in January to secure more funds. Hong Kong managed to keep coronavirus infections comparatively low by bringing in strict quarantine measures for all arrivals early on in the pandemic.

Currently, most of those arriving in the city must quarantine in a hotel for 21 days, one of the longest mandatory quarantine periods in the world. Outbound travel is almost non-existent. And there is little sign of those measures being lifted any time soon.



HONG KONG: A Cathay Pacific airlines passenger plane preparing to take off from the international airport in Hong Kong. Hong Kong carrier Cathay Pacific said yesterday it suffered a \$2.8 billion loss in 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic hammered its business. — AFP

The first vaccinations began last month but so far only 114,000 of the city’s 7.5 million population have received a first dose, the vast majority China’s Sinovac jab. Authorities say they hope to vaccinate

all residents by the end of the year.

Last week, the head of the city’s tourist board warned it could be at least six months before residents would be able to travel again. — AFP

KFH launches ‘It’s Worth Transferring your Salary’ campaign

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) launched “It’s Worth Transferring your Salary” Campaign that includes a plethora of offers and discounts to customers.

With the new KFH salary transfer, customers can choose all or any of these offers: 0 percent profit on selected car brands up to KD 25,000 and payment period up to 5 years, Special discount from more than 10 car brands, Special offer on Tayseer cards with credit limit up to KD 5000, Up to 50,000 miles with “Oasis Club” Mastercard World, and a chance to win 77 kg with Alrabeh Account.

Group General Manager Retail Banking at KFH, Khaled Yousif Alshamlan said that “It’s Worth Transferring your Salary” campaign encompasses all existing and new customers of the bank. He added that customers can apply for all or any of these offers based on their eligibility at the time of application for the offer, indicating terms and conditions apply.

Alshamlan pointed out that this campaign comes as part of KFH’s keenness to offer the best to its customers, while enhancing its products and services that allow customers to avail them when transferring their salaries to KFH. He explained that customers are eligible to these offers providing that they are obligated to transfer salaries for period of the offer taken. He reiterated KFH’s continuing endeavors to pay great attention to its customers while rolling out unique products and services that meet their requirements and aspirations. This also contributes in distinguishing KFH among peers and increases its market share.



Khaled Alshamlan

Markaz: SIG Combibloc leads top GCC M&As in Q4 2020

KUWAIT: SIG Combibloc claimed the top spot among GCC mergers and acquisitions (M&A) transactions during Q4 2020 as per a report recently issued by the Investment Banking Department at Kuwait Financial Centre “Markaz”. The report highlights the \$571.0 million transaction through which the Swiss packaging company will acquire a 50 percent stake in SIG Combibloc Obeikan, a joint venture it established alongside Obeikan Investment Group. Upon the successful closing of the transaction, SIG Combibloc will retain full ownership of the venture.

Gulf Insurance Group rounded in the second-largest transaction with its announcement to acquire AXA’s Gulf-based insurance operations for a total consideration of \$474.8 million. As part of this transaction, the group will acquire the following stakes from AXA S.A. and Yusuf Bin Ahmad Kanoo Group AXA Gulf (100 percent), AXA Cooperative Insurance Company (50 percent) and AXA Green Crescent Insurance Company (28 percent).

The third biggest transaction oversaw National Central Cooling Company acquire 100 percent of Saadiyat Cooling LLC and Saadiyat District Cooling Sole Proprietorship for a total consideration of \$262.2 million. Collectively, these two companies have the capacity to generate 88,000 refrigeration tons. Moreover, Saudi Telecom Company announced the signing of an agreement with Western Union Company to sell a 15 percent stake in its wholly-owned subsidiary, Saudi Digital Payments Company, for a total value of \$200.0 million. Lastly, Agthia Group has announced that it has received an offer from General Holding Company (“Senaat”) to combine its subsidiary, Al Foah Company LLC (“Al Foah”), with Agthia Group. The key terms state that Senaat will transfer Al Foah to Agthia Group in exchange for the issuance of a convertible instrument valued at \$122.5 million.

years just to draw up project documentation and purchase software. And while attacks are hitting almost half of organizations in the industrial sector and becoming increasingly sophisticated, it is important for these companies to not let the process take even longer. Below are some management and process hints that should help avoid that.

1. Assign clear responsibilities between departments

The speed of project realization highly depends on project ownership and coordination between the departments involved in the process. Therefore, it’s important to determine which team is the project driver, and which is involved in approval and implementation. For example, a project can be initiated by an OT engineering team, while deployment is catered for by the IT security department, or vice versa.

2. Optimize approval processes

How quickly the project goes from decision to implementation depends on management effectiveness within the company. There is a concept in computing systems called latency (or timing), which determines the speed of the processor. It shows the delays that occur when the processor executes a command. The better the processes – such as standard development, project design and approval at all levels, piloting, budgeting, and procurement – the lower the latency.

An unstructured approval process at all levels can affect that latency. The more teams involved,

GCC M&A growth

According to Markaz’s report, the total number of GCC M&A transactions that closed during Q4 2020 increased by 200 percent, relative to Q4 2019, and 57 percent relative to Q3 2020. Apart from Oman and Qatar, each of the remaining markets recorded a growth in the number of closed transactions compared to the previous quarter.

Acquirers and targets

The majority of transactions closed during Q4 2020 and Q3 2020 were carried out by GCC acquirers. Of the total number of closed transactions during Q4 2020, GCC acquirers accounted for 81 percent while foreign acquirers accounted for 11 percent. The remaining 8 percent represents transactions for which the buyer information was not available. GCC acquirers also dominated the market during the previous quarter as they accounted for 65 percent of the total number of closed transactions while foreign acquirers accounted for 13 percent. Meanwhile, the remaining 22 percent represents transactions for which the buyer information was not available.

Furthermore, GCC acquirers actively acquired both local and international companies whereas they shied away from acquiring regional companies, except for the UAE. Throughout Q4 2020, GCC acquirers closed a total of 27 transactions within their local markets, compared to 14 transactions in Q3 2020, and 10 cross-border transactions, which is slightly less than the number of cross-border transactions that closed in Q3 2020.

It is worth noting that UAE and Bahraini buyers accounted for 50 percent and 20 percent of the cross-border activity (closed), respectively, followed by Omani, Qatari and Saudi buyers, whom accounted for the remainder of the transactions. Lastly, Kuwaiti buyers did not close any cross-border transaction.

Foreign buyers

The GCC market received a slightly greater level of interest from foreign buyers in Q4 2020 when compared to the previous quarter. Throughout Q4 2020, foreign buyers closed four transactions, whereas in Q3 2020, they completed three transactions. The total remains far behind the level of foreign activity recorded in Q4 2019. This is pri-

marily driven by the uncertainty hovering around the GCC markets and the prevailing fear that was onset due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus and its underlying impact on oil prices. As most GCC economies are dependent on oil and natural gas, many foreign players were hesitant to invest in the region without any outlook as to where the oil and gas industry was headed.

Moreover, the UAE continues to be one of the most attractive markets relative to its peers, however this time around, Saudi Arabia proved to be a competitive market as well after ending the previous quarter with zero transactions. Neither of the remaining GCC countries recorded any closed foreign buyer deals throughout the quarter. It is worth noting that neither Kuwait, Oman nor Qatar have recorded any transactions throughout the past three consecutive quarters.

Sectorial view

Further, the transactions that closed throughout the quarter spanned across multiple sectors, a trend that has persisted through the past few quarters. With that being said, the sectors witnessing the greatest level of activity throughout Q4 2020 were the Consumer Discretionary, Education, Financials and Industrials sectors. Collectively, these four sectors accounted for greater than 55 percent of the total closed transactions throughout the quarter. In addition, the Financials and Industrials sectors have been among the sectors witnessing the greatest level of activity throughout the past two consecutive quarters.

Deals pipeline

By the end of Q4 2020, there was a total of 26 announced transactions in the pipeline, which is slightly higher than Q3 2020, during which 23 transactions were announced. The majority of these transactions involved Saudi and UAE targets, each of whom accounted for 42 percent of the total number of announced deals. The remaining transactions primarily included Omani, Bahraini, and Kuwaiti targets while Qatar announced no transactions. Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were the only markets to witness a slight growth in activity, whereas the remaining market recorded zero to negative growth.

How to speed up cybersecurity implementation in organizations

By Alexander Moiseev

It is often said that cybersecurity is a process, not a result. But in business, it is regularly implemented in pieces, or projects – each of which has its own timeline, finite goal and results. The way a company conducts such projects can actually reveal where there is room for improvement in terms of management and processes which, in the end, will speed up cybersecurity implementation.

In heavy industry, project implementation for industrial control systems is not easy. In particular, to install protection for computers which control an electric turbine or an automobile conveyor, for example, you need to consider numerous impacts. This includes making sure that implementation does not affect the production process, and that the protection will be built according to necessary standards and regulations.

Projects in these settings can take several years in some instances. From speaking to a number of our customers, I know that it can take up to two

the more time needed to get all required approvals. This is one of the most frequently cited obstacles in industrial cybersecurity projects, along with delays in approval from a top-management level, as we found in a recent market survey.



3. Engage your C-level and speak to them in their language

There are also occasions where the C-suite is not properly involved in cybersecurity discussions, and therefore don’t see any value investing in it. This may be due to the fact that OT teams and management speak different languages. OT practitioners often use the wrong arguments and include too many technical details when protecting a project. Alternately, they say too little about the business goals the project will solve, what risks it will eliminate, and how much money it would ultimately save.

4. Align compliance with vital protection demands

Typically, a cybersecurity initiative comes from the bottom up. However, there is also a reverse case where management decides to invest in security, as there is a demand to comply with regulatory requirements. This trend was confirmed by market research that we conducted last year. For more than

half of companies (55 percent), the main reason for investing in information security for ICS was regulation requirements.

Although such a project may be better than nothing, it would be much more efficient to synchronize the business request and the needs of IT security. It is important to motivate OT, IT, information security, the C-suite and the board for a dialog and conjoined efforts. Experts from consulting firm Oliver Wyman named such joint efforts as a fundamental culture shift which is necessary to close the gap in industrial protection.

5. Enhance your team’s expertise

Another obstacle to implementing information security projects is the lack of dedicated expertise. Project development, implementation and operation, and especially large complex projects such as SIEM, require special processes and practices. In a developing industry, these are not available to all specialists and can hardly be created overnight.

Therefore, along with the optimization of decision-making and approval processes, companies need to constantly drive employee education. Across both IT and OT, this means providing them with the most up-to-date information about threats, as well as conducting specialized training on solutions. This will help departments better understand each other’s priorities and areas of responsibility, to communicate more effectively, and to then negotiate faster during projects. Note: Alexander Moiseev is Chief Business Officer at Kaspersky

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Lifestyle | Features

Hopkins and McDormand head diverse Bafta shortlist

Anthony Hopkins and Frances McDormand are the biggest names on the Bafta film awards shortlist released on Tuesday, which includes a diverse raft of actors and directors following criticism last year. Hollywood legend Hopkins is nominated

The film's Chinese director Chloe Zhao is one of four women on the six-person shortlist for the best director prize. Also nominated are Shannon Murphy for "Babyteeth", a 2019 Australian coming-of-age drama, Bosnian Jasmila Zbanic for war film "Quo Vadis, Aida?" and

no female directors shortlisted.

Bafta introduced changes to voting and membership processes as a result and the outstanding British film category was expanded to 10 nominations to increase the focus on domestic works. It also expanded the nominations for best director, actor and actress from five to six for this year's awards, which were delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic. "Black Panther" star Chadwick Boseman received a posthumous nomination for his performance as troubled trumpeter in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom". He died of cancer last year, aged 43.

Also nominated in the best actor category is "Rogue One" star Riz Ahmed for his portrayal of a drummer who loses his hearing in "Sound Of Metal". "This year's nominations showcase and celebrate the remarkable range of performances and nominees behind the camera from 50 films and we're delighted to recognize such high-quality work," said Krishnendu Majumdar, chair of Bafta. "After last year's nominations, we started the Bafta review process with the intention of leveling the playing field and introduced a range of measures to ensure that all entered films were seen by our members and judged on merit." The ceremony will take place on April 11.—AFP



In this file photo Welsh actor Anthony Hopkins attends the AFI FEST gala screening of "The Two Popes" at TCL Chinese Theatre in Hollywood.



In this file photo US actress Frances McDormand gives a masterclass during the 11th edition of the Lumiere Film Festival, in Lyon, central eastern France. — AFP photos

for the prestigious British film award for his performance in "The Father", in which he portrays a man slipping into dementia. Fargo actress Frances McDormand is shortlisted for her role in acclaimed independent road movie "Nomadland", which she also produced, in which she plays a woman who leaves home to travel around the American West.

Britain's Sarah Gavron for "Rocks". "Rocks" stars Bukky Bakray as a black London teenager who is left to fend for herself after being abandoned by her mother. Bakray will go up against McDormand in the best actress category. The British Academy of Film and Television Arts came under fire over a lack of diversity in last year's line-up with

UK TV host Piers Morgan steps down amid Meghan controversies

British television host Piers Morgan on Tuesday left his role presenting ITV breakfast show "Good Morning Britain", shortly after sparking 41,000 complaints and storming off the set in a row over Meghan Markle. "Following discussions with ITV, Piers Morgan has decided now is the time to leave Good Morning Britain," the network said in a statement. "ITV has accepted this decision and has nothing further to add."

Morgan has been a vocal critic of Markle ever since she cut off contact with him after she met Prince Harry, and he launched a scathing attack on her following the couple's interview with Oprah Winfrey. The former CNN host said he did not believe Markle when she said at one point she "didn't want to be alive anymore", sparking a deluge of complaints. Barely a day after his remarks, regulator Ofcom said that it had already received more than 41,000 complaints. Morgan also stormed off the set on Tuesday morning after clashing with fellow presenter Alex Beresford over the interview. Beresford



In this file photo TV presenter Piers Morgan arrives for the 2019 British Academy Britannia (BAFTA) awards. — AFP

told Morgan "I understand you've got a personal relationship with Meghan Markle, or had one, and she cut you off."

"She's entitled to cut you off if she wants to. Has she said anything about you since she cut you off? I don't think she has but yet you continue to trash her," he added, leading to Morgan's departure. Morgan has also been the most outspoken media critic of the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic over the past year, leading to many high-profile rows with ministers. Morgan hosted his CNN show for three years until it was axed due to falling ratings in 2014. He irked US gun owners after launching a crusade for greater gun control and struggled after stepping into the shoes of popular host Larry King in the coveted 9:00 pm primetime slot.—AFP

Instagram-ready: Vietnamese influencer teaches art of posing

How to smile, where to place a hand, which direction to face: young Vietnamese social media users are snapping up a popular influencer's course on posing for the perfect photo. In communist Vietnam, where 70 percent of the population is under 35, the classes are particularly popular with young women. Instructor Pham Kieu Ly—who has hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram and TikTok—set up the \$130 course in Hanoi after women began asking her how to look their best in photos,



This photograph shows a participant checking her photographs on her mobile phone during a course teaching them how to pose for photographs on their phones at a studio in Hanoi.

largely for social media.

The lessons also teach aspiring amateur photographers how to take snaps themselves. Ly told AFP she saw women in the class who wanted "to learn how to pose and take photos to help their work, while others wanted to build confidence".



This photograph shows participants looking at their mobile phones after taking photographs during a course teaching them how to pose for photographs on their phones at a studio in Hanoi.

Disneyland in California eyes 'late April' reopening

Disneyland is aiming to reopen in late April at limited capacity after California eased COVID-19 restrictions, Disney CEO Bob Chapek said Tuesday. The world's second-most visited theme park has been closed for almost exactly a year, with the mega attraction near Los Angeles unable to reopen last summer even while other Disney resorts did so worldwide. "Here in California, we're encouraged by the positive trends we're seeing and we're hopeful they'll continue to improve and we'll be able to reopen our Parks to guests with limited capacity by late April," said Chapek.

A precise opening date would be confirmed "in the coming weeks," he added. The statement during Disney's annual shareholders meeting follows state officials' announcement last week that reopening criteria for theme parks and outdoor stadiums will be relaxed from April 1, as a winter spike in coronavirus

cases rapidly recedes. Theme parks will only be allowed to reopen if their county drops below the state's most-restrictive coronavirus "tier," and then initially at 15 percent capacity and for California residents only. Chapek cautioned that Disneyland could not reopen on the first day of next month as it would take time to recall more than 10,000 furloughed staff members, and to retrain them in pandemic safety measures.

Disney, along with other operators and local officials, has ramped up pressure on state officials to allow swifter reopenings, after previous guidance meant theme parks would be among the last places to reopen in California. The com-

pany had to scrap a planned July restart for Disneyland last year following a public row with state officials over safety guidelines, and partly blamed California restrictions for 28,000 job losses in September. Chapek said the reopening would be welcomed by Disney staff and was "also good news for the Anaheim community, which depends on Disneyland for jobs and business generated by visitors." During the shareholders meeting, Chapek also announced that streaming service Disney+ had passed 100 million subscribers, just 16 months after its much-hyped launch.—AFP



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



In this file photo Emerald Fennell attends the 2020 Sundance Film Festival - "Promising Young Woman" Premiere at The Marc Theatre in Park City, Utah. — AFP photos

HOLLYWOOD DIRECTORS NOMINATE TWO WOMEN FOR TOP PRIZE

A year after omitting women entirely, Hollywood's directors Tuesday nominated two female filmmakers for their top prize for the first time in the awards' seven-decade history. "Nomadland" director Chloe Zhao and "Promising Young Woman" Helmer Emerald Fennell become the ninth and tenth women nominated for the Directors Guild of America's outstanding feature film category. "I congratulate our five nominees whose diverse and extraordinary films embodied that universal power in a year that will never be forgotten," said DGA president Thomas Schlamme in a statement.

Beijing-born Zhao and British director

Fennell are joined on the diverse shortlist by Lee Isaac Chung, who drew on his Korean-American immigrant family history for acclaimed drama "Minari." The category is rounded out by David Fincher-for Hollywood Golden Age reimagining "Mank"—and Aaron Sorkin for 1960s courtroom drama "The Trial of the Chicago 7." The DGA Awards are a strong indicator of the Oscars best director prize.

Only one woman—Kathryn Bigelow—has won the DGA top honor, and she went on to scoop the only female best director Oscar win in history for 2009's "The Hurt Locker." Last year the major award shows including the DGAs and Oscars shut out all female-helmed films in their director categories, with the absence of Greta Gerwig for her acclaimed "Little Women" drawing a particular backlash. The industry has come under increasing scrutiny for its lack of diversity in recent years.—AFP



In this file photo Disney characters wave from Disneyland Resort's "Diamond Celebration" float celebrating the park's 60th anniversary, in the 127th Rose Parade in Pasadena, California. — AFP



This photograph shows instructor Vu Dieu Thuy (center) demonstrating a pose to participants during a course teaching them how to pose for photographs on their mobile phones at a studio in Hanoi.



This photograph shows instructor Vu Dieu Thuy (center) demonstrating a pose to participants during a course teaching them how to pose for photographs on their mobile phones at a studio in Hanoi.

Lifestyle | Features



A pigeon flies in the sky above the Egyptian capital's twin city of Giza, with the Pyramid of Khafre (Chephren) in the background. — AFP photos



Omar Gamal, a 28-year-old pigeon keeper, tends to pigeons in a coop atop his rooftop in the Egyptian capital's twin city of Giza.

Passion for pigeons persists in Arab world

Atop his humble wooden dove-cote overlooking the majestic Giza pyramids, Abdel-Rahman Gamal released 20 homing pigeons sending them soaring up into the Cairo sky red-dened by the setting sun. "It's a lovely hobby that keeps you busy while you're at home and keeps you on the straight and narrow," said Gamal, 30, who has been raising pigeons since he was six. He told AFP he inherited his deep love for pigeons from his grandfather and uncle. Along with his younger brother Omar, 28, they keep about 40 pigeons on the roof of their family building in Nazlet Al-Samman, in western Cairo.

Ahmed Khalifa, head of the Egyptian Federation for Homing Pigeons, said the ancient tradition dates back to the time of the pharaohs. "Pigeons were engraved on the walls of temples," he said. Handed down through the generations, the practice of domesticating pigeons stretches across borders from the banks of the Nile across north Africa and beyond, with people not only training birds for competitions, but also serving them up as a dining delicacy.

Sky-high prizes

Neither regional instability nor the COVID-19 pandemic have dampened enthusiasm for keeping the birds and popular pigeon races still draw crowds. In war-torn Syria, the battered economy has forced some pigeon fanciers to sell their precious birds to make ends meet. Markets for breeders have sprung up in refugee camps in rebel-held northwestern Idlib, while races still attract ardent fans seeking a respite from the conflict, an AFP reporter said. In Yemen where a six-year deadly civil war has left the



Pigeons perch on a coop atop a building.

country on the brink of famine, according to the UN, pigeon races were still being held last year.

And in Iraq, where breeders were once viewed as immoral or unreliable, the practice has taken flight again in recent years. At auction, racing pigeons can fetch from tens of dollars to several thousands for the most prized, and one Iraqi feathered friend was sold in recent years for an eye-popping \$180,000. The pandemic however has forced a temporary pause in competitions in Morocco. "We hope that they come back this year," said Salaheddine Khannouss, deputy head of the kingdom's national organization for pigeon racing. Racing pigeons can reach speeds of up to 100 kilometers (60 miles) per hour and can cover distances of hundreds of kilometers, the Egyptian Federation's Khalifa said.

The body organizes two major contests annually, with one race from Cairo to Salloum, near the Libyan border, a distance of about 600 kilometers, and a second from the capital to Aswan deep

in Egypt's south-over 700 kilometers away.

'Pigeon wars'

Dotted around the rooftops of Cairo's greying buildings are colorfully painted dove-cotes — known as gheya in Arabic—which provide huge shelters to house pigeon nests. In daily ad-hoc contests involving thousands of birds launched from the rooftops, fanciers try to poach each other's pets to add to their own flock in a fierce competition which can net prizes of up to \$160,000. Gamal's family mark their pigeons with rings attached to their feet carrying their date of birth, and his name and contact details.

"If a rogue pigeon flies down to me, it's mine. It's my hostage," Gamal said. In the coming days his rival fancier will try either to win back the lost pigeon or fork out a 'ransom' for it. Gamal said he pays between \$1 to \$65 for each of his birds, depending on their breed, their



A keeper tends to a pigeon in a coop atop a building.



A pigeon perches on a coop atop a rooftop.

feather color and their racing stamina. Younger brother Omar prefers to focus on the competitive aspect of keeping birds. "Pigeons are like soccer players when they enter the pitch and I'm their coach," he joked.

Delicious grilled or stuffed

Others prefer a more culinary experience when it comes to pigeons, opting for stuffed or grilled choices served up in dishes from Morocco to the Gulf. In Egypt, rice or freek (a green grain made from wheat) is masterfully stuffed into the birds' diminutive bodies. At Farahat, one of the most popular Cairo chains specializing in pigeon fare, diners jostle for seats, with hungry male customers salivating over the tiny delight believed to possess other benefits. "Since the

dawn of time, Egyptians have believed that pigeons give them vigor for performing on their wedding night," said restaurant manager Khaled Ali mischievously.

But at 70 Egyptian pounds (\$4.50) it's an expensive treat "for those who do not have the means". Regular customer Jordanian medical student Bashar Al-Malkawi said: "Eating stuffed pigeon is the best way to embrace Cairo." But Omar, the Cairo pigeon fancier, does not have the stomach for such notions. "If you love pigeons, you can't eat them. They just won't taste any good," he declared.—AFP



Pigeons hover above a coop on a rooftop.



Pigeons fly above a coop on a rooftop in the Egyptian capital's twin city of Giza.



Omar Gamal, a 28-year-old pigeon keeper, releases his pigeon from a coop on a rooftop in Giza with the Pyramids of (right to left) Khufu (Cheops), Khafre (Chephren), and Menkaure (Menkheres) in the background.



Pigeons fly off a rooftop.

Sports

Photo of the day



Nasser Al-Attiyah races during Rally Dakar 2021 in Saudi Arabia. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

News in brief

Man City v Gladbach moved

LONDON: Manchester City's Champions League last-16 second leg against Borussia Mönchengladbach has been switched from the Etihad Stadium to Budapest due to coronavirus travel restrictions, UEFA said yesterday. Man City won the first leg which was also held in the Hungarian capital 2-0. European football's governing body UEFA confirmed the match "will now be played at the Puskas Arena in Budapest." The date and kick off time - March 16 at 20:00 GMT - remain the same. It is the latest match to be moved to a neutral venue in the Champions League and Europa League this season. —AFP

Ikee returns from leukemia

TOKYO: Japanese swim star Rikako Ikee will enter four events at next month's national championships, reports said yesterday, as she vies for a Tokyo Olympics spot in her comeback from leukemia. The 20-year-old, who was diagnosed with leukemia in February 2019, will compete in the women's 50 meters and 100m freestyle, the 100m butterfly and the non-Olympic 50m butterfly at the April 3-10 nationals in Tokyo. The event doubles as a qualifier for this summer's coronavirus-delayed Tokyo Games. Ikee, who has played down her chances of appearing at Tokyo 2020 since launching her comeback last year, will secure an unlikely Olympic spot if she finishes in the top two at the nationals and meets the entry time. —AFP

England must take India humiliation 'on the chin'

Root admits players were 'outplayed' by India

AHMEDABAD: England must take their Test mauling by India "on the chin" and not just blame the conditions, according to captain Joe Root. Root also staunchly defended the rotation policy that has seen mass team changes between the six Tests in Sri Lanka and India.

After seeing his side go down by an innings and 25 runs in Ahmedabad on Saturday, the England skipper admitted his players had been "outplayed" by India who won the series 3-1. India "performed very well, they exploited the surface very well, they showed us how to bat on that wicket. And similarly today with the ball they were excellent," he said.

Root said there had been times in the games when the two sides had been "at parity" but India better "exploited" the crumbling pitches that became a spinners' paradise. "Their experience of these conditions as a whole probably just outweighed us and was a big difference in this series," he said.

Can do better

England can now look forward to inquests with particular attention on team selection and the changes forced by the rotation policy that saw star spinner Moeen Ali go home for the two final tests. Batsman Jonny Bairstow played in Sri Lanka, missed the opening tests in India and then scored three zeros in four innings on his return.

Root, whose double century in the first Test has been overshadowed by the following losses, said both issues would be looked at because defeat had been "disappointing" and "frustrating" and that errors could have been made in team choices. "That's something that you as captain have to take on the chin and you have to understand that every now and again, you're going to make mistakes," he said.

"I think the guys have to embrace what has happened. They have to be realistic. There are areas where we can get better," he said. "We would be stupid to come away from this trip and say: 'Oh it was India, it was extreme conditions, the ball was spinning, it was skidding, it was impossible to bat'. That is the wrong attitude. The most



AHMEDABAD: England's captain Joe Root plays a shot on the third day of the fourth Test cricket match between India and England at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Motera on March 6, 2021. — AFP

important thing is to come away and say 'you know there are things we can get better at'."

Root said England's rotation policy was introduced because of the pressure of the coronavirus pandemic and the heavy schedule this year with 17 Tests, the Twenty20 World Cup bringing them back to India and then a crunch Ashes tour in Australia.

"We have said all along that making sure that players are looked after and that their welfare and wellbeing is paramount," he said. "It is difficult, of course as a captain

you want all the players available all of the time. But in the current climate it's just not possible. We have got to get away from playing guys and running them into the ground until they fall over."

And Root concluded with a veiled warning for when India visit England this summer. "We know when we come home and play in our own conditions, it will be very different. Yes, there will be things to look at, but also we're not a bad side just because of these three games." —AFP

birthday. Musiala signed the deal which will reportedly earn him five million euros (\$6 million) per year. Bayern's players each receive a car provided by the club's sponsor. Musiala says he has no idea which car he will be given, but he doesn't mind "as long as it drives and has a good music system." The teenager has so far made 27 appearances for the Bundesliga leaders. He scored his first Champions League goal in the 4-1 win over Lazio in the last 16, first leg. The return leg is in Munich next week.

Stuttgart-born Musiala came through Chelsea's academy and played for England Under-21s last November but has opted to play senior football for Germany. Germany coach Joachim Loew, who will step down after the European championships in July, reportedly plans to call up Musiala for World Cup qualifiers later this month. The teenager says he wants to "win titles with Bayern and Germany". Musiala hopes Loew reverses his 2019 decision to permanently

The greater Tokyo region — including Yokohama — is currently under a coronavirus state of emergency that is set to end on March 21. Under the restrictions, attendance at sporting events is capped at 5,000 or half capacity, whichever is lowest. Japan have not played at home since losing 4-1 to Venezuela in November 2019, but they played four friendly matches in Europe last year using entirely overseas-based squads.

"I think the fact that we're able to play this game in the middle of a pandemic is down to the efforts of a lot of people," Japan manager Hajime Moriyasu said in a statement. "I'm grateful for everyone's cooperation. For everyone who's done everything to make this match happen and for everyone who supports us, we want to deliver a win and give everything to give everyone a lift."



Jamal Musiala

drop Thomas Mueller so the Bayern team-mates can play for Germany. "I would be happy to play a European Championship with Thomas," Musiala added. —AFP

The match will coincide with the March 25 start of the postponed Olympic torch relay. Organizers are currently battling public skepticism about whether the Games can be held safely this summer, and are expected to soon announce that foreign fans will be barred from attending. Japan were originally scheduled to restart their 2022 World Cup qualifying campaign at home to Myanmar on March 25, but the match was postponed following the military coup in Myanmar.

They will now resume their qualifying campaign against Mongolia on March 30. The match will be played in Japan despite Mongolia being the home team, because of the pandemic. Japan's under-24 Olympic team, which Moriyasu also manages, will play home friendlies against Argentina on March 26 and 29. —AFP

Football's head injury policy a 'shambles': Brain specialist

LONDON: A concussion expert told British lawmakers on Tuesday that football's management of head injuries was a "shambles" during a parliamentary inquiry on the issue. The House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport committee probe into concussion in sport comes as concerns grow over the potential risks of long-term brain injury.

England 1966 World Cup winner Bobby Charlton has recently been diagnosed with dementia and a group of former rugby internationals are involved in a legal case against a number of governing bodies after being diagnosed with neurological conditions.

Consultant neuropathologist Willie Stewart, speaking to MPs, said he could not understand why football had not followed rugby's path in introducing temporary substitutions, which allow a longer period of time for a potential concussion to be assessed.

"Football has a habit, whenever it is forced to develop, of going out on their own and trying to develop something unique to everybody else as if the problem never occurred before," he said. "What football has introduced is a shambles in 2021."

Football's lawmaking body, the International Football Association Board (IFAB), has approved trials of permanent concussion substitutes, with the initial on-field assessment period remaining at three minutes before next steps — further examination or a substitution — are taken.

Asked whether temporary substitutions were preferable, Stewart added: "Unquestionably. Rugby has made great developments in understanding how you can assess and identify players with brain injury on the field, and that should be the model and the benchmark that (other) sports start from. They shouldn't be starting with a blank page and drawing up a protocol, they should just be saying 'how do we make that happen in football?'"

Stewart led a 2019 study which found that professional footballers were three-and-a-half times more likely to die from neurodegenerative disease compared with members of the general population. He said head impacts were probably leading to long-lasting brain injuries in athletes across a range of sports but that it would be a "virtual impossibility" to prove it beyond reasonable doubt.

Women's risk

Stewart said rugby could be made safer even though it was a contact and collision sport. "On the one hand, the global business, the industry, there is a reveling in the collisions and the contact, but it's doing a lot of damage to young men and women so they are desperately trying to find a solution," he said. One area of particular concern to the neuropathologist is the lack of research on the impact of head injuries among women.

"I think what does concern me is that while the rules for men's football and women's football are exactly the same, the risk of concussion in women's football is about twice that in men's football," he told MPs. "So the risk of injury is doubled. That repeats itself through rugby and various other sports, so we would definitely have a concern about what the long-term consequences of that might be."

Peter McCabe, the chief executive of brain injury charity Headway, said he and his organization felt "patronized" by the football authorities, and had engaged more closely with rugby and hockey. "It's been a bit one-sided to be honest," he said. "We've made efforts going back as far as 2013 to have dialogue and we feel like we have been a bit patronized, to be frank." —AFP

Mum drives Bayern starlet Musiala to training

BERLIN: Bayern Munich starlet Jamal Musiala has revealed that his mother has to drive him to training while the 18-year-old works on getting his driving license. "So far I've been very happy that my mum has been so nice as to drive me to training," Musiala told magazine Sport Bild. "I'm currently working towards getting my driving license and I'm really looking forward to driving myself soon."

Last Friday, Musiala signed a five-year contract — his first as a professional — with the club world champions, which he described as a "childhood dream come true". Just a week after his 18th

Japan to face South Korea in first home game since pandemic

TOKYO: Japan will play South Korea in a friendly in Yokohama on March 25, the Japan Football Association announced yesterday, in their first home game since the coronavirus pandemic began. The four-time Asian champions will take on their Korean neighbors at the 72,000-capacity Nissan Stadium, although attendance restrictions have yet to be announced.

Sports

Ronaldo silenced as Porto knock Juventus out of Champions League

Italian champs fail to reach last 8 for second straight year

TURIN: Cristiano Ronaldo's Juventus crashed out of the Champions League in the last 16 for the second year running on Tuesday, losing to 10-man Porto on away goals despite winning the second leg 3-2 in Turin. Sergio Oliveira's extra-time free-kick sent twice former winners Porto through to the quarter-finals as the tie finished 4-4 on aggregate.

Leading 2-1 from the first leg in Portugal, Oliveira's first-half penalty increased Porto's advantage but Juventus leveled the tie through two goals from Federico Chiesa, which came either side of Porto striker Mehdi Taremi's red card.

Oliveira then rifled home a low free-kick on 115 minutes, which passed through the legs of Ronaldo, with Adrien Rabiot's header in reply coming in vain for Juventus. "When you make four big errors over two legs in the Champions League last 16, you can get eliminated," said Juventus coach Andrea Pirlo. "It will take a few days to wipe this game from our minds, but then we must play every game with the right attitude, realize we're still only in March and have time to climb the Serie A table."

Juventus had been counting on Portuguese striker Ronaldo, the competition's record goalscorer, and in-form Spaniard Alvaro Morata, who had scored six goals in the competition this season, to pull them through. But Juventus' Champions League heartache stretching back 25 years continued, falling in the first knockout round the second consecutive year after losing to French club Lyon last season.

"The work of the whole team was important to

go through in a manner that was fully deserved," said veteran Porto defender Pepe. "It's hard to explain by words the way we managed to react (playing with 10 men). Today we showed lots of character: the players were focused and that made it easy for us."

Pirlo, in his first season as Juventus coach, had regained several injured players including midfielder Arthur and defender Leonardo Bonucci, but captain Giorgio Chiellini remained on the bench with Danilo suspended. Porto goalkeeper Agustin Marchesin produced a sharp early save to turn away a Morata header, while Taremi nodded against the crossbar at the other end in a lively start to the game.

The Italian champions fell behind on the night when Merih Demiral conceded a penalty after bundling over Taremi in the box, with Dutch referee Bjorn Kuipers pointing to the spot. Oliveira made no mistake, sending Wojciech Szczesny the wrong way to give the visitors a 3-1 advantage overall. Marchesin continued his heroics, the Argentine blocking from Morata on 26 minutes and Rabiot minutes later after the French midfielder took aim from distance.

Chiesa revives Juve hopes

Juve hit back after the break thanks to Chiesa's double, the first on 49 minutes when Ronaldo controlled and knocked it back for Chiesa to curl in past Marchesin from a tight angle. Porto soon went a man down with Taremi sent off for two quick yellow cards, the second for recklessly kicking the ball away.



TURIN: Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo (right) reacts as FC Porto's players celebrate at the end of the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second leg football match between Juventus Turin and FC Porto on Tuesday at the Juventus stadium in Turin. —AFP

Despite the Iranian's absence Porto managed to hold on, with Pepe intervening brilliantly to force Chiesa into striking the post after rounding Marchesin. Chiesa made no mistake just after the

hour getting his head to another perfect Juan Cuadrado cross which Marchesin again got a hand to but could not stop as Juve pulled level 3-3 on aggregate. —AFP

Haaland double fires Dortmund into quarter-finals

DORTMUND: Erling Braut Haaland scored twice as Borussia Dortmund held off a late Sevilla fightback to reach the Champions League quarter-finals with a 'crazy, amazing' 5-4 aggregate win after a frantic 2-2 second-leg draw on Tuesday.

Haaland, who also netted a double in Dortmund's 3-2 last 16 first-leg victory, tapped in a first-half opener and scored a retaken penalty after the break behind closed doors at Signal Iduna Park. "It was a hard game — I'm tired now, but to be in the next round feels very good," Haaland told Sky. "It was a crazy game and a crazy, amazing win."

Sevilla forward Youssef En-Nesyri scored a 69th-minute spot-kick and a last-gasp equaliser but Dortmund clung on. "We're not happy with the result. Truth is, we didn't have any luck — they had one chance and they scored," En-Nesyri told Movistar. "We fought until the last minute."

Haaland, the man of the match, is the competition's top-scorer this season with 10 goals in six games. The 20-year-old is the youngest player to reach 20 Champions League goals, in just 14 appearances, breaking the previous mark set by Kylian Mbappe.

"We have been punished by a player (Haaland) who will make his mark on this era," predicted Sevilla coach Julen Lopetegui.

Although they had lost three of their four previous games, Sevilla dominated the opening exchanges and Dortmund had to withstand intense early pressure before taking the lead against the run of play. When the Spaniards lost possession in their own half, Dortmund midfielder Mahmoud Dahoud slipped a pass to Marco Reus, who sprinted to reach the ball at the byline and Haaland diverted in his cut-back.

'Turbulent' finish

He had the ball in the net again just after the interval, but the goal was disallowed after the referee decided Haaland had fouled Sevilla defender Fernando before firing home from a tight angle after consulting the pitchside monitor. However, the referee also awarded a penalty after spotting a foul on Haaland earlier in the build-up.

Reus, Dortmund's usual penalty taker, stepped aside to allow Haaland to take the spot-kick. Although his first effort was tipped onto the post by Yassine Bounou, the Sevilla goalkeeper moved before the kick was taken and Haaland made no mistake with his second attempt.

Both Haaland and Sevilla midfielder Joan Jordan were booked for some pushing and shoving, with the La Liga



DORTMUND: Dortmund's Norwegian forward Erling Braut Haaland (right) gets past Sevilla's Spanish midfielder Joan Jordan Moreno during the UEFA Champions League, Last-16 2nd-Leg football match BVB Borussia Dortmund v Sevilla FC at the Signal Iduna stadium in Dortmund, western Germany on Tuesday. —AFP

side angered by Haaland's celebrations. "I missed the first penalty, but if he'd stood on the line I'd have scored, but he cheated," added Haaland. "I was a little bit nervous on the second penalty, but I knew it would be nice to score a second goal."

Dortmund defender Emre Can also earned a yellow card and gave away a penalty for a blatant push on Sevilla forward Luuk de Jong, which Morocco striker En-Nesyri blasted home. With five minutes left, Bounou

produced a stunning reflex save from Dahoud's shot in the area.

However, Sevilla were not finished and En-Nesyri netted again with a powerful header just before the final whistle as Dortmund weathered a late storm. "It was a turbulent game," said Dortmund caretaker coach Edin Terzic. "It's not a given for us to get this far, so now to be among the best eight in Europe makes us very happy. Erling Haaland was just outstanding." —AFP

Man Utd face AC Milan in Europa League battle of recovering giants

LONDON: Manchester United and AC Milan meet in the Europa League last 16 tonight in a battle of European royalty, with both clubs showing signs of revival. With 10 Champions League titles between them, United and Milan were once feared across Europe for their swashbuckling play and financial muscle.

But both clubs have lost their luster in recent years, making their first meeting since 2010 an intriguing affair. In a sign of the drop in standards at Old Trafford and the San Siro, the 11th encounter between two of the world's most historic teams will be their first outside the Champions League knockout stages.

United, 20-time English champions, have not won the Premier League since Alex Ferguson's last season in charge in 2013. Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side are unlikely to end that drought this season as they trail leaders Manchester City by 11 points with 10 games left.

Sunday's impressive 2-0 win at City was a sign United are at least heading in the right direction at last after losing their way under several of

Ferguson's successors. Calling for United to build on that success, Solskjaer praised his side's energy levels.

"We are going to do everything we can to keep the performance levels up every day," he said. "I feel we are a better team to 12, 16, 18 months ago. We have improved massively. We are more robust, resilient and there is more personality in the team. That is what I like."

The most recent of Milan's 18 Serie A titles came in 2011, with a sixth-place finish last term earning a return to Europe after a one-season absence. That was a small step in the right direction for Milan, who have not played in the Champions League since 2014.

Ibrahimovic return?

Milan's gradual improvement under boss Stefano Pioli has taken them to second in Serie A this term. The seven-time European champions are six points behind leaders Inter Milan — a 3-0 defeat against their city rivals in February was a significant blow to their title aspirations.

Trying to restore their domestic dominance is the first goal for United and Milan on a long journey they hope will eventually lead them back to the Champions League summit as well. Winning the Europa League would be another welcome sign of better days to come.

Milan have never reached the final of the com-



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Norwegian manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer congratulates Manchester United's Portuguese midfielder Bruno Fernandes as he is substituted during the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Manchester United at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on March 7, 2021. —AFP

petition but their striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic was a United player when the English giants won the Europa League in 2017. Ibrahimovic has missed Milan's past two games due to a muscle injury, but Pioli hopes the 39-year-old Swede will be fit for an Old Trafford return. "He is better... he will have another examination to see how his recovery is going, we hope he can recover by Thursday," Pioli said. —AFP

Aguero struggling to get on Man City teamsheet

LONDON: Pep Guardiola says he may not be able to give Sergio Aguero much time on the pitch before his contract is due to end as Manchester City chase an unprecedented quadruple. The club's record goalscorer,

32, is back in contention after a season ravaged by injury and illness but is short of match fitness and there is little opportunity for the City boss to ease him back into action. There is growing uncertainty over the Argentine forward's future, with his current deal expiring at the end of the season. Asked if he hopes Aguero stays longer at the Etihad, Guardiola said: "As a human and as a person, even as a player, of course — but we have to see what happens at the end of the season."

"We cannot forget how long he was out. He has started getting better. I know he needs minutes to get to his best condition but we are not maybe in the moment

to give him minutes for minutes' (sake) because it is an important part of the season. We have to be calm. The club will speak to his agent to know the situation and we are going to talk at the end of the season."

The City boss said he did not know how the issue would be resolved as his focus was firmly on the rest of the current campaign. City look almost certain to win a third Premier League title in four seasons and are well placed to reach the Champions League quarter-finals after beating Borussia Moenchengladbach 2-0 in the first leg of their last-16 tie.

They face Everton in the FA Cup quarter-finals later

this month and play Tottenham in the final of the League Cup in April. Guardiola's immediate focus is the Premier League and getting back to winning ways after Sunday's derby loss to Manchester United, which ended their 21-game winning run in all competitions.

The Catalan insisted he was not nervous as he approached the final stage of the season with four pieces of silverware in sight. "I'm less nervous being in this position than being in a position behind," he said. "I was more nervous last season when we were behind Liverpool from November. I am more relaxed than ever." —AFP



Edinson Cavani

Cavani 'proud' to wear Man Utd shirt after father's talk of exit

LONDON: Edinson Cavani said he was proud to wear the Manchester United shirt after his father claimed the Uruguayan striker was unhappy in England and wanted to finish his career in South America. Luis Cavani told media in Argentina on Tuesday that the 34-year-old star was eyeing a possible move to Boca Juniors later this year. "Edinson today does not feel comfortable where he is," Luis Cavani told Argentine television channel TyC Sports. "He has been thinking for more than two years that he wants to be closer to the family."

Luis Cavani said his son was also unhappy with his treatment by English football authorities over his suspension earlier this season for using a racial term in a social media post. The striker was banned for three games after an exchange on Instagram in which he addressed a friend, Pablo Fernandez, using the commonly used Spanish term "negrito" (small black person).

Although a disciplinary panel found Cavani had not intended to cause offence with the remark, he was still sanctioned-triggering an outcry in Uruguay. "That he was suspended for three games is a nonsense," Luis Cavani said. "Here we always use that word. We are not racists. Part of that is weighing on his decision." But Edinson Cavani later uploaded a photo of himself to his Instagram page along with the caption "Proud to wear this shirt @manchesterunited."

Speculation about the forward's future comes after United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer indicated last month that he would attempt to persuade him to remain at Old Trafford. Cavani has impressed on and off the pitch since joining on a free transfer from Paris Saint-Germain in October, scoring seven goals in 25 appearances.

The Uruguayan signed a one-season deal with United with the option to extend by a further year. However, Cavani's father said his son had long dreamed of playing for Boca Juniors. "Imagine him celebrating a goal with the fans," Luis Cavani said. "We know what Boca and Argentine football is. There is a 60 percent chance Edinson will come to South America." —AFP

US sport inching back to normalcy

One year on from shutdown, leagues continue to count pandemic cost

LOS ANGELES: One year after COVID-19 sent sport across North America grinding to a halt, professional leagues and tours are inching back towards normalcy after absorbing a multi-billion-dollar financial hit. Twelve months ago on March 11, NBA commissioner Adam Silver sent shockwaves across the sporting world after dramatically halting the season following confirmation of Utah Jazz player Rudy Gobert's positive test.

The NBA decision triggered a domino effect, with baseball, soccer, golf, ice hockey and other sports swiftly following suit either by suspending their seasons or cancelling events altogether. A year after the start of the shutdown, US leagues are continuing to count the cost of the pandemic as they adjust to the new realities of sport in the age of COVID-19.

The NBA has reached the halfway point of its abbreviated 2020-2021 season after losing an estimated \$1.2 billion through its interrupted 2019-2020 campaign, with a \$4 billion loss projected for 2020-2021. NBA chief Silver however is hopeful that the worst may be over, noting that next season may resemble something like a return to normality as more Americans get vaccinated against COVID-19 and fans return to arenas.

"I'm fairly optimistic at this point that we will be able to start on time," Silver said ahead of Sunday's All-Star game. "If vaccines continue on the pace they are, and they continue to be as effective as they have been against the virus and its variants, we're hopeful that we'll have relatively full arenas next season." Silver added that despite losses he described as "considerable", the "long-term health of the league is very solid."

Baseball revenues hit

Major League Baseball, meanwhile, is also counting the cost of coronavirus. The league slashed its 2020 season from 162 games to 60, finally starting in late July before wrapping the World Series in October. Although fans were allowed to return for the late stages of last year's playoffs, regular season games in 2020 took place in empty arenas, denying clubs game

day revenue and contributing to collective losses estimated by MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred at around \$2.8-\$3 billion.

A full 162-game regular season is planned when the 2021 campaign gets under way on April 1, but spectator access will vary depending on city and state health regulations where each team is based. The World Series champion Los Angeles Dodgers will only be allowed a maximum of 100 fans at Dodger Stadium under current rules; the St. Louis Cardinals have been approved to allow 14,500 spectators.

Major League Soccer is bracing for another hefty financial loss after taking a \$1 billion hit in 2020. MLS was halted just two weeks into its new season last year, returning with a tournament staged in a bubble in environment in Florida before the regular season resumed in August. "We are forecasted to lose pretty close to \$1 billion, if not \$1 billion (exactly), that we have been talking about," Garber said in February. "When you don't have fans for the majority of your season, it's just pure math."

The National Football League, meanwhile, provided a template for professional leagues in North America by completing its season in February with the Super Bowl in Tampa. A robust testing program and strict health and safety protocols allowed the league to fulfill all of its 256 regular season games and playoff schedule successfully.

A crowd of 25,000 fans, including several thousand vaccinated healthcare workers invited as guests, attended last month's Super Bowl, but NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell admits it is unclear what fan attendance may look like when the 2021 season kicks off next September.

'They got lucky'

"One of the things that I think I have learned and I think all of us have learned is try not to project too far in advance because it's difficult to do," Goodell said. "I know this: We've learned to operate in a very difficult environment. We have found solutions, and we'll do it again."



ATLANTA: Adam Silver Commissioner of the NBA looks on during the second half in the 70th NBA All-Star Game at State Farm Arena on March 07, 2021 in Atlanta, Georgia. — AFP

Zach Binney, an epidemiologist at Oxford College of Emory University in Atlanta, believes that major US sports "did some really good things" as they plotted a return from COVID-19. "The NBA, Major League Baseball and the NFL all found various ways to bring sports back without having a lot of cases among their players and staff," Binney told AFP. "The various models were quite strong on that front."

Binney noted however that some NFL and college football teams allowed large numbers of fans back into arenas before being certain it was safe to do so. "I think they were reckless and got lucky," Binney said.

Other aspects of the US sporting landscape, meanwhile, shifted in more profound ways by the

pandemic. In almost every major sport, television ratings were down sharply, sometimes by striking margins.

The NBA finals ratings nosedived by 51 percent, while the battle for ice hockey's Stanley Cup cratered by 61 percent. The US Open tennis tournament slumped by 45 percent and even February's dream NFL Super Bowl pitting Tom Brady against Patrick Mahomes drew its lowest audience since 2006.

In college sports meanwhile, budget shortfalls caused by the pandemic have led to the elimination of more than 350 sports programs — the vast majority in Olympic sports including athletics, swimming and volleyball. — AFP



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