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Court revokes membership of Dahoum, ignites political crisis

28 MPs vow to back lawmaker by changing 'undemocratic' laws

Amir heads to Europe after successful medical tests in US



HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah departed the United States yesterday, heading to Europe on a private visit. HH the Amir had undergone successful medical examinations in New York. — KUNA

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Kuwait's constitutional court yesterday revoked the parliamentary membership of leading opposition MP Bader Al-Dahoum for being convicted of insulting HH the Amir seven years ago, in a surprising ruling that is certain to ignite a political crisis that has engulfed the country for months.

The court, whose rulings are final, also deprived Dahoum from running for public office for life, applying a highly controversial law passed by the pro-government Assembly in 2016 that prevents people convicted of insulting the Almighty, prophets and the Amir from contesting parliamentary elections for life.

Twenty-eight MPs said in a statement following a hurriedly-arranged meeting that the court ruling violated logic, well-established legal principles and bases and breached the authority entrusted in the court, especially after the regular courts had unequivocally ruled in favor of Dahoum and closed the case.

The lawmakers vowed to change what they described as undemocratic laws, including the much-criticized law used by the court to revoke Dahoum's membership. The statement said Kuwait

has been a great democratic country, but has retreated in the recent past because of rife corruption and lack of justice.

The restrained statement came even as many opposition MPs said they will boycott the Assembly's next session to prevent the government from taking oath in the Assembly. Several opposition MPs called before the meeting to declare non-cooperation with the government, blaming it for the turn of events, but it appears that the 28 lawmakers have decided to use the Assembly to pass urgent laws.

Opposition MP Mohammad Al-Mutair however said that a grilling against HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah that he had filed along with Dahoum is still standing. MP Hamdan Al-Azemi said yesterday he will replace Dahoum in the debate of the grilling.

The constitutional court accepted three petitions contesting the election of Dahoum, who was cleared to run in the Dec 5 polls by the court of cassation, whose rulings are final. Dahoum, a professor of religious education, was convicted of insulting HH the Amir and was handed a suspended term by the court of cassation, which gave him three years to prove good conduct.

Continued on Page 2

News in brief

Jordan detains 5 over deaths

AMMAN: The director and four other officials of a Jordanian hospital treating coronavirus patients were detained yesterday over deaths at the facility after it ran out of oxygen, judicial sources said. A prosecutor decided to place them in custody for a week for questioning after seven patients died Saturday in the hospital in Salt, near Amman, they said. — AFP

388K killed in Syria war

BEIRUT: The overall death toll for Syria's civil war has reached 388,652 since it began a decade ago this month, a war monitor said yesterday. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the figures include almost 117,388 civilians, among them more than 22,000 children. Attacks by the Syrian regime and allied militia forces accounted for the majority of civilian deaths. — AFP (See Page 5)

Kosovo opens Jerusalem embassy

PRISTINA: Kosovo said yesterday it had officially opened its embassy in Jerusalem after becoming the first Muslim-majority territory to recognize the city as Israel's capital. The move was in exchange in for Israel recognizing Kosovo. The new embassy was opened during a brief ceremony during which Kosovo's flag was raised in front of the building in Jerusalem. The Palestinians claim east Jerusalem as the capital of their future state, and most countries have their embassies in Tel Aviv. — AFP

Zaghari-Ratcliffe back in court

TEHRAN: British-Iranian dual national Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe appeared in a Tehran court yesterday to face new charges of "propaganda against the system", a week after she finished serving a five-year sentence, her lawyer said. Hojjat Kermani said she is now being prosecuted for "propaganda against the system for having participated in a rally in front of the Iranian embassy in London" in 2009. — AFP



US weighs 1-m distancing rule, a major change

WASHINGTON: The United States' top pandemic advisor said yesterday that authorities were considering cutting social distancing rules to three feet (one meter), a move that would change a key tenet of the global fight against COVID-19. Anthony Fauci, a world-respected figure during the coronavirus crisis, said experts at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) were examining a Massachusetts

study that found "no substantial difference" in COVID cases in schools observing six-foot and three-foot rules.

Asked on CNN's "State of the Union" show whether that meant that a three-foot separation was sufficient, Fauci replied, "It does, indeed." While cautioning that the CDC was still poring over the new data and conducting tests of its own, he said its findings would come "soon". The six-foot social distancing rule has been a widely-adopted global measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, along with mask-wearing and hand-washing.

School officials across the world are under enormous pressure to fully reopen as soon as safely possible, but many say the six-foot requirement makes it extremely difficult without adding portable

classrooms or shortening the school day. Many teachers unions have also insisted on six-foot distancing. Policies on reopening schools and businesses have varied sharply across the US and around the globe as government try to balance quelling infections with a return to normal life.

The study led by the Beth Deaconess Medical Center in Massachusetts, surveying 251 school districts, found "no substantial difference in the number of cases of COVID-19 among either students or staff" between those observing the three- and six-foot rules when all wore masks. The findings, published in the journal Clinical Infectious Diseases, add to a growing body of evidence that COVID-19 transmission rates are low in schools.

Continued on Page 2

Lanka brings in detention, bans burqa

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka Saturday announced using a controversial anti-terrorism law to deal with religious extremism and gave itself sweeping powers to detain suspects for up to two years for "deradicalization". Separately, the government also said it will soon outlaw the burqa, formalizing a temporary ban imposed in April 2019 after deadly bomb attacks blamed on local jihadists.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa

promulgated regulations allowing the detention of anyone suspected of causing "acts of violence or religious, racial or communal disharmony or feelings of ill will or hostility between different communities". The rules, effective Friday, have been set up under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which both local and international rights groups have repeatedly asked Colombo to repeal.

Sri Lanka's previous government, which was defeated by Rajapaksa at 2019 elections, had pledged to repeal the PTA after admitting it seriously undermined individual freedoms, but failed to do so. Rajapaksa, who came to power with a promise to battle Islamist extremism, announced the

Continued on Page 2



COLOMBO: Burqa-clad Muslim women climb down a flight of stairs at a zoological park yesterday. — AFP

Christian ruins found in Egypt

CAIRO: A French-Norwegian archaeological team has discovered new Christian ruins in Egypt's Western Desert, revealing monastic life in the region in the fifth century AD, the Egyptian antiquities ministry said on Saturday. "The French-Norwegian mission discovered during its third excavation campaign at the site of Tal Ganoub Qasr al-Agouz in

the Bahariya Oasis several buildings made of basalt, others carved into the bedrock and some made of mud bricks," it said in a statement.

The complex is comprised of "six sectors containing the ruins of three churches and monks' cells", whose "walls bear graffiti and symbols with Coptic connotations", said Osama Talaat, head of Islamic, Coptic and Jewish Antiquities at the ministry. Mission head Victor Ghica said "19 structures and a church carved into the bedrock" were discovered in 2020, according to the statement.

The church walls were decorated with "religious inscriptions"

Continued on Page 2



A handout picture released yesterday shows a view of an ancient Christian structure carved in the bedrock discovered in Egypt's Western Desert. — AFP

Local

Kuwait customs seize Captagon pills, chewing tobacco, counterfeit goods



KUWAIT: Customs workers open one of the containers.



Captagon pills found in one of the containers.



KUWAIT: Customs officers found 292,000 bags containing chewing tobacco that were hidden in two containers that arrived at Shuaiba Port yesterday. The two 40-foot containers were searched after arriving from an Asian country, and the contrabands were found. They were taken to the

proper authorities for further action.

On Saturday, cooperation between customs detectives and the southern ports administration had resulted in the discovery of two containers containing 4.5 million Captagon pills, a large quantity of chewing tobacco and counterfeit



products. The contraband will be sent to concerned authorities.

Customs officers became suspicious after four containers remained at the port for 90 days without being claimed by anyone. The containers were searched - two did not contain anything illegal,

the third had nearly 4.5 million Captagon tablets hidden in it while the fourth container contained counterfeit goods, in addition to banned tobacco products. The customs administration thanked the Fire Force for helping in cutting into the metal to extract the pills.

Roads' repair ongoing during curfew hours



KUWAIT: The public works ministry takes advantage of the partial curfew to maintain and pave roads in several regions of Kuwait. The work is much easier in the absence of traffic during the lockdown hours from 5pm to 5am, effective between March 7 and April 8. — KUNA photos

Court revokes membership of...

Continued from Page 1

In 2016, he was disqualified from contesting the Assembly polls by the interior ministry. The exclusion was upheld by the administrative court at its three levels. In last year's polls, the interior ministry again disqualified him from contesting. The lower court supported the decision, but the courts of appeals and cassation overturned the decision and allowed him to run. He won a seat in spectacular fashion, coming in second place out of 10 and bagging the second highest number of votes in Kuwait.

The constitutional court said in its ruling yesterday that Dahoum is forbidden by law to be included in the electoral rolls because he was convicted of insulting HH the Amir. It added that losing his right as an eligible

voter makes him ineligible to run in elections, according to the election law.

The ruling cited the law as stating that "a member of parliament must not have been convicted of the crime of insulting the Almighty, prophets or the Amir". Because he was convicted of this crime, "his election to the Assembly is null and void".

Hundreds of MPs and activists thronged Dahoum's home to declare their total support for the opposition leader, who has vowed to fight corruption. Dahoum described the ruling as an interference by the court in the works of the legislative council, adding this represents "a demolition of state institutions and the constitution". He blamed the government for "the bad situation" in the country because of its alliance with "corrupt and influential" people.

MP Osama Al-Munawer said the constitutional court's ruling will "open doors wide for chaos", adding that he will submit a bill to allow Dahoum to contest the polls. The revoking of Dahoum's membership must be first approved by the Assembly in a vote to allow inviting voters of the fifth constituency to elect a replacement in supplementary polls.

The remote site, located in the desert southwest of the capital Cairo, was occupied from the fourth to eighth centuries, with a likely peak of activity around the fifth and sixth centuries, according to the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology, in charge of the mission. Cairo has announced several major new archaeological discoveries in recent months with the hopes of spurring tourism, a sector that has suffered multiple blows - from a 2011 uprising to the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

researchers found the rates of COVID-19 were lower in schools practicing masking than they were in the surrounding cities and towns. A three-foot rule would have an enormous impact on prospects for fully reopening schools, offices and even public areas such as sports venues. As the top school officials from Penfield, New York wrote in the journal Education Week, "The single biggest obstacle to fully reopening schools is the 6-foot distancing requirement." —AFP

Protesters attack Iran coastguards

TEHRAN: Several Iranian coastguard personnel were wounded as protesters attacked their base over the killing of a young man in a confrontation between their unit and fuel smugglers, local media reported yesterday. The incident occurred Friday after smugglers in boats in the Sirik area of the Hormuz Strait ignored coastguard warning shots, ultraconservative Kayhan newspaper quoted their provincial commander Hossein Dehaki as saying.

He said guards opened fire at several boats after coming under attack with fire bombs and other projectiles. Iranian media said a 31-year-old Sirik resi-

dent was killed. Hours later, villagers gathered outside the base to demonstrate against the killing, according to state television's Iribnews website, citing a local official.

Dehaki said the protesters, spurred on by "opponents" of the Islamic republic, launched an assault on the coastguard building, seriously injuring several members of the force and causing heavy damage. The violence comes less than three weeks after deadly clashes with fuel smugglers in the southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan bordering Pakistan that left two dead, including a policeman, according to Iranian authorities.

The UN Human Rights Office said at least 12 people were reportedly killed, two of them minors, and accused Iranian security forces of using excessive force. — AFP

Lanka brings in detention...

Continued from Page 1

"deradicalization from holding violent extremist religious ideology" measures in a gazette notification seen by AFP Saturday.

Meanwhile, Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekera announced Saturday that the burqa, a loose garment covering from head to toe and worn in public in many Islamic states, was a threat to Sri Lanka's national security. "The burqa is something that directly affects our national security," Weerasekera told reporters in Colombo. "This (dress) came into Sri Lanka only recently. It is a symbol of their religious extremism." Weerasekera said he signed documents outlawing the burqa, but they need to be approved by the cabinet of ministers and parliament where the government has a two-thirds majority to see its bills through. Sri

Lanka had used emergency laws to impose a temporary ban on the garment soon after the April 2019 jihadi bombings against three churches on the island killed 279 people.

Burqa wearers are not commonly seen in Buddhist majority Sri Lanka where Muslims are a small minority accounting for 10 percent of the country's 21 million population. The moves come ahead of the second anniversary of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks that killed 279 people and wounded over 500. The coordinated suicide bombings, against three churches and three high-end hotels, were blamed on a local Islamic extremist group.

But the new regulations do not only target Islamic extremism and could apply to any religious group or community. A presidential commission that probed the attacks called for the banning of both Islamic extremists as well as ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups, which were accused of feeding off each other. Tensions between Sri Lanka's minority Muslims and the majority Buddhists resurfaced after the 2019 bombings, which also seriously damaged the country's tourism-reliant economy. — AFP

Christian ruins...

Continued from Page 1

and biblical passages in Greek, revealing "the nature of monastic life in the region", Ghica said. It clearly showed that monks were present there since the fifth century AD, he added.

US weighs 1-m distancing rule...

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In another potentially significant finding,

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

Salmyia 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's Deputy Amir receives senior officials



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



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



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

KUWAIT: His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Seif Palace yesterday National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem. His Highness the Deputy Amir also hosted His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. Meanwhile, His Highness received Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Integrity Enhancement Abdullah Youssef Al-Roumi. — KUNA

National Guard Deputy Chief inspects troops

KUWAIT: Deputy Chief of Kuwait National Guard Lieutenant General Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday visit-



ed personnel of the third battalion for protecting key state installations. Kuwait National Guard said in a statement Sheikh Ahmad's tour included the forces stationed at the eastern and western Al-Doha power stations, Al-Metlaa broadcasting relay station and Cophthorne Al-Jahraa and Hotel Resort. Addressing the personnel at the power stations, Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf stressed on the necessity of ensuring safe environment for the engineers and workers for sake of ongoing water and energy supplies to the population. — KUNA

Central Circle granted 'Good Distribution Practices' certificate

KUWAIT: Central Circle Company was granted a new accreditation certificate for 'Good Distribution Practices' according to World Health Organization standards (WHO-GDP) following its successful completion of quality assessment and certification audits.

The certificate was received on behalf of Central Circle Company by CEO Dr Ziad Al-Alyan; in the presence of Deputy CEO of Pharma and Medical Consumables Dr Tareq Alaryan, Deputy CEO of Medical Equipment and Laboratory Dr Mohammad Al-Jafar and Quality Assurance Manager Mohammed Hinnawi. The Swiss accreditation company SGS was represented by Samir Ranjan, SGS Kuwait Branch Manager. SGS declared that Central Circle

Company is the first local company in Kuwait that achieved WHO-GDP Certificate from SGS that is granted based on Central Circle adherence with WHO standard practices of handling pharmaceuticals, medical devices and medical supplies as well as assures the implementation of best quality assurance systems regarding to all standard operational practices including procurement, clearance, receiving, inspection, storage, pick and pack, distribution, documentation and record keeping.

Central Circle Company was founded in 1970 and is recognized as one of the leading local companies in the health care field. It represents many key healthcare multinational research-based companies that are specialized in the manufac-



KUWAIT: Central Circle Company CEO Dr Ziad Al-Alyan (right) receives the certificate.

turing of pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and consumables and laboratory supplies.

It is noteworthy that SGS is a Swiss multinational company headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. It is a world leader in inspection, veri-

fication, evaluation and certification services and has more than 300 affiliated companies. SGS was founded in 1878 and has been recognized as the global benchmark for the highest standards of expertise, quality and integrity.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

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KUWAIT: KNPC CEO Walid Al-Badr (right) and OAPEC Secretary General Ali bin Sabt sign the deal. —KUNA

OAPEC, KNPC ink cooperation deal

KUWAIT: The Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) and Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) signed yesterday a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for cooperation in research and overhauling the oil sector and digital services. Walid Al-Badr, the KNPC Chief Executive Officer, who inked the memo along with OAPEC Secretary General Ali bin Sabt, underlined in remarks on sidelines of the signing ceremony necessity of research and development in the petroleum industry. This industry is heavily counting on modern technology to cut costs and produce clean and high-quality oil derivatives, Badr noted. Meanwhile, bin Sabt affirmed that the MoU was inked for exchanging expertise, amid rapid technological development in the energy sector at the Arab and international levels. The MoU also aims to boost mutual cooperation in research, upgrading, data and technology. — KUNA

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A general view of the Arabian Gulf beach in Shaab yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Over 102 million healthcare records exposed by cyber attacks in 2020

COLUMBIA, Maryland: Analysis by Tenable's Security Response Team (SRT) has determined that over 102 million healthcare records were exposed in 2020 as a result of data breaches. Almost three million health records have already been exposed in the first two months of 2021. The threat to healthcare should come as no surprise, given the growing demand for telehealth appointments, medical supplies and a race for vaccine development and distribution.

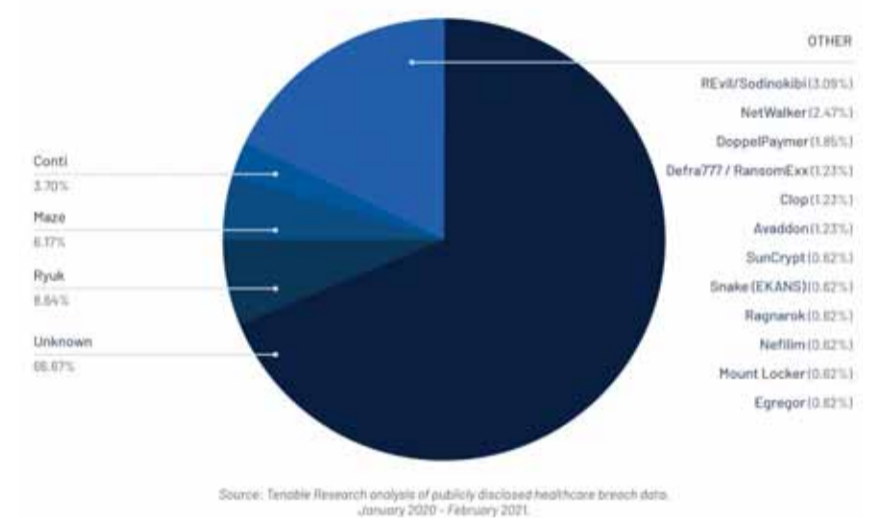
When looking at the root cause of these attacks, ransomware was by far the most prominent, accounting for a whopping 54.95 percent of breaches. Ryuk stood out above the rest, repeatedly appearing in breach disclosures and accounting for 8.64 percent of ransomware-related breaches, followed by Maze (6.17 percent), Conti (3.7 percent) and REvil/Sodinokibi

(3.09 percent).

SRT's analysis revealed that third-party breaches accounted for over a quarter of the breaches tracked and nearly 12 million exposed records. Other leading causes of data breaches included email compromise/phishing (21.16 percent), insider threat (7.17 percent) and unsecured databases (3.75 percent).

"As the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to place unprecedented strain on global healthcare infrastructure, attackers are finding what was already an attractive target even more enticing," explains Rody Quinlan, Security Response Manager, Tenable. "These attacks are not going away anytime soon so it's imperative organizations, particularly those being targeted in the healthcare sector, understand the threats against them and have the resources necessary to

RANSOMWARE GROUPS BEHIND HEALTHCARE BREACHES



reduce their cyber risk."

Ryuk ransomware, the leading culprit for ransomware attacks against the healthcare industry, is known to favor a number of vulnerabilities including Zerologon, one of the most prominent vulnerabilities of 2020.

In order to reduce the risk of compromise, healthcare organizations

should:

- Prioritize vulnerabilities: identify and remediate the most business-impacting vulnerabilities.
- Address the root cause: once the vulnerabilities most likely to introduce business risk are identified and prioritized, remediate them and continue regular maintenance check-ups.

FRONTLINE HEROES OF KUWAIT

Student Art Competition 2021



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

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

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(From left) Nazem Al-Ghabra, Mijbil Al-Ayoub, Dana Al-Othman, Sheikha Bibi Al-Sabah, Abdulaziz Al-Babtain and Fadi Qaawar.

Ooredoo Kuwait celebrates Int'l Women's Day

KUWAIT: Driven by their strong belief in the effective role of women, being the pillars of society, Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN migration agency in Kuwait, launched a series of psychosocial support workshops for women residing in the government of Kuwait's shelter for female foreign workers.

Titled "Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world," this initiatives provide the needed support to female breadwinners, who have left their country of origin to provide financial support for their families back home and who have faced some challenges along the way. More and above, these workshops were also a chance to mark International Women's Day and celebrate the tremendous efforts of all women and girls.

Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain, Chief Executive Officer, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "Woman's Day started as a mean by which to unite the community around a set of common goals and shared values that are meant to fight for gender equality in every aspect of life, and shade light on women's ability to lead and provide role models for other women worldwide. Today, we, at Ooredoo, take pride of all women of Kuwait who partake and positively impact our society."

On her visit to Ooredoo, IOM Goodwill Ambassador for Kuwait and the Gulf Countries,



Sheikha Bibi Nasser Al-Sabah



Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain

Sheikha Bibi Nasser Al-Sabah, said: "We can rebuild and repurpose, we only need to feel each other, listen to each other, see each other and work together in order to confront the humanitarian crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Working hand in hand to prioritize the needs of the migrant workers, protect their rights and shed the light on their essential role in our society, remain our goal."

"I would like to thank Ooredoo Kuwait for its continuous support and contribution to such humanitarian initiatives," Sheikha Bibi Nasser Al-Sabah added. In addition to the series of psychosocial workshops and in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, IOM also provided 200 Personal Hygiene and Protective kits to around 100 women residing in the shelter as a preventive measure against the virus.

It is noteworthy that, in November 2020 Ooredoo Kuwait collaborated with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a related organization of the United Nations (UN), the collaboration allows Nojoom members who are also Ooredoo customers to donate their points to IOM on MyOoredoo Application.



Syria's 'father of the martyrs' raises orphaned grandchildren

Myanmar 'shadow' parliament urges united opposition to coup



Bakri Al-Debs, a 29-year-old Syrian medic and an amputee below the knee, poses for a picture in the town of Ihsim in Syria's rebel-held northwestern Idlib province while holding a picture of himself in a similar pose from ten years prior at Tishrin University in Latakia. —AFP

10 years of Syria war killed over 388,000

1.5m Syrians suffered disability, 200,000 have gone missing: Monitor

BEIRUT: The overall death toll for Syria's civil war has reached 388,652 since it began a decade ago this month, a war monitor said yesterday. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the figures includes almost 117,388 civilians, among them more than 22,000 children.

Attacks by the Syrian regime and allied militia forces accounted for the majority of civilian deaths, said the Britain-based monitor which relies on sources inside Syria for its reports. The Observatory's previous tally was issued in December and stood at more than 387,000.

Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman said 2020 saw the lowest annual death toll since the war began with just over 10,000 deaths. Battles slowed this year as a ceasefire held in northwestern Syria and attention turned to containing the coronavirus pandemic. The Observatory also documented at least 16,000 deaths in government prisons and detention centers since the conflict erupted in 2011 after the brutal repression of anti-government protests. It said, however, that the real number was likely higher because its tally does not include 88,000 people believed to have died of torture in regime prisons.

Today the Damascus government controls more than 60 percent of Syria after a string of Russia-backed victories against jihadists and rebels since 2015. Among the regions still beyond its reach are the last rebel enclave of Idlib in the north-

west, Turkish-held areas along the northern border, and north-eastern parts of the country held by US-backed Kurdish forces. The war has forced more than half the country's pre-war population to flee their homes. Some 200,000 people have gone missing, according to the war monitor.

Samer became paralyzed, Bakri had a leg amputated and Rukaia fled to France: a decade of civil war in Syria has devastated millions of lives. As the conflict enters its 11th year this month, 10 Syrians shared with AFP pictures of themselves before the start of the 2011 war, and recounted how their lives have been changed by the fighting. Speaking from across fragmented Syria or even abroad, they give a personal account of a war that has killed more than 387,000 people and displaced millions from their homes.

In the capital Damascus, 33-year-old Samer Sawwan holds up a picture of himself standing on a beach in the coastal resort of Latakia. That was before a bullet shot through his car while he was driving in 2011, sending the vehicle into a barrel roll that paralyzed him forever.

"I passed out with two legs, and woke up in a wheelchair," he says. "My ambitions and dreams have changed." At least 1.5 million Syrians have suffered a disability as a result of the war, the United Nations says.

In the last major rebel bastion of Idlib, 29-year-old Bakri al-Debs rests on stone steps with one leg amputated above

the knee, his artificial leg resting beside him.

The former medic holds a picture of himself in a similar position at university a decade ago in Latakia where he studied sociology, before he was maimed in what he says was a government barrel bomb strike.

Battle wounds

In Idlib city, former rebel fighter 28-year-old Mohammed al-Hamid leans on crutches, holding a large picture showing him before the war in a military uniform and holding a weapon. He says he was wounded in a 2016 battle against government forces in Latakia, where his brother also died in his arms.

That same year, he learnt that three other siblings had died in prison. In 2017, warplanes bombed his home in Idlib, killing his daughter. Also in Idlib, Abu Anas, 26, holds an image of himself when he was 16 years old. A native of the Damascus countryside, Abu Anas was displaced to Idlib in 2018 where artillery shelling two years later caused him to lose his eyesight. In the northern city of Aleppo, retaken by government forces from rebels in late 2018, Ahmad Nashawi posed in front of his destroyed house. The man in his fifties, once one of the city's most popular fishmongers, said his home and shop were obliterated in clashes between rebels and pro-government fighters in 2015.

Exile

The war has also flung journalists into exile. Rukaia Alabadi, 32, arrived in Paris as a refugee in 2018 after escaping threats over her reporting about the reality of life in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor under the Islamic State jihadist group. Before that, the young woman had been jailed for months by the regime and accused of being a media activist.

The picture she shares with AFP shows her wearing a chador and a face veil in 2011 when she was studying economics at university. Anas Ali, 27, has lived in France as a refugee since 2019. Before that he was in the rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta on the doorstep of Damascus until government forces seized it in early 2018 following years of bombardment and a devastating siege. A citizen journalist, Anas covered fighting between both sides and in 2013 was wounded, sustaining face injuries, according to the picture he showed.

'Changing the world'

In Iraqi Kurdistan, Dima Al-Kaed, 29, clutched a memento of her graduation, one of the few belongings she kept after her family moved from Damascus and sold their home. "I dreamt of changing the world, but instead the war changed mine," she said. Life in exile has at times been tough. Fahad Al-Routayban, 30, works as a building concierge in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli. —AFP

US protesters seek justice for Breonna Taylor

LOUISVILLE, United States: Demonstrators demanded justice and police reforms on Saturday as they marched on the one-year anniversary of the death of Breonna Taylor, a young Black woman mistakenly shot and killed by officers during a raid of her apartment. "We got two different Americas. We got one for Black Americans and one for white Americans," Benjamin Crump, an attorney representing Taylor's family, told the crowd of hundreds in Louisville, Kentucky. "We got to get justice for all our people in America."

The deaths of Taylor and George Floyd, a Black man who died under the knee of a policeman in Minneapolis, became a focus of a wave of protests last year against police abuses and racism in the United States. On Saturday, Taylor's mother Tamika Palmer led hundreds marching behind a large purple banner with an illustration of Taylor's face, chanting "No justice, no peace."

"It's been a year and justice has not been served," Camille Bascus, a 50-year-old African American, told AFP, tears in her eyes. She said she had come to Louisville from Atlanta, more than 400 miles (650 kilometers) away, "to represent the people without voices, because they no longer have a heartbeat. We have a voice and our lives matter."

UK police under fire after crackdown on vigil for slain woman

LONDON: Police in London drew widespread criticism on after handcuffing mourners at a vigil for a woman who was murdered after setting out to walk home, in a case that has sparked national fury about violence against women. Officers scuffled with some members of the hundreds-strong crowd that gathered despite coronavirus restrictions for a candlelit tribute late Saturday close to the spot where 33-year-old marketing executive Sarah Everard disappeared on March 3.

Reclaim These Streets—who initially organized the event in south London's Clapham—condemned the actions of officers "physically manhandling women at

Twelve months after the killing-in which police shot Taylor while looking for a former friend of hers—only one of three police officers has been charged, and only for endangering Taylor's neighbors by firing wildly. The failure to press homicide charges—a decision denounced as "outrageous" by Taylor's family—sparked sporadic violence in Louisville last September. President Joe Biden on Saturday declared his support for reforms.

"Breonna Taylor's death was a tragedy, a blow to her family, her community, and America," he tweeted. "As we continue to mourn her, we must press ahead to pass meaningful police reform in Congress. I remain committed to signing a landmark reform bill into law." Taylor's family and friends are now looking to the results of a federal probe, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation saying Saturday its work was moving forward.

"Even though the COVID pandemic presented several unexpected obstacles, FBI Louisville has made significant progress in the investigation," the field office in that city said in a statement. The bureau remained "steadfast in its commitment to bringing this investigation to its appropriate conclusion," the statement said.

'We need justice'

Taylor and her boyfriend Kenneth Walker were sleeping in her apartment around midnight on March 13, 2020, when they heard noise at the door. Walker, believing it was a break-in, fired his gun. Police, who had obtained a controversial no-knock warrant to make a drug arrest, then fired some 30 shots back, mortally wounding Taylor. While Walker said police battered down the door unannounced, the officers insisted they

a vigil against male violence."

Social media footage showed police restraining and handcuffing some mourners, leading to an outpouring of criticism from across the political spectrum. Both Home Secretary Priti Patel and London mayor Sadiq Khan said they had asked for explanations from the Metropolitan police over how the vigil was handled. And Liberal Democrats leader Ed Davey called for Metropolitan police chief Cressida Dick to resign, having "lost the confidence of millions of women in London".

The murder of Everard, who vanished after setting out to walk home from a friend's flat, has shocked the country and brought discussion around women's safety to the fore once again.

Wayne Couzens, 48, a serving officer in the Metropolitan Police's elite diplomatic protection unit, appeared in court earlier on Saturday charged with kidnap and murder following his arrest at his home in Kent, southeast England. The victim's body was discovered in a nearby wood.



LOUISVILLE, KY: A group of protesters are illuminated by emergency lights from Louisville Metro Police Department vehicles after the Breonna Taylor memorial events on Saturday in Louisville, Kentucky. —AFP

had identified themselves.

Two of the officers involved were fired in December. Linda Sarsour, co-founder of the Until Freedom social justice organization, said the officers need to be held accountable. "Right now, the only thing that has happened is that the police officers have been fired from the police department, that is a human resources issue. We need justice," she said.

Taylor's death at first escaped widespread attention, but it suddenly became a focus for Black Lives Matter protesters following Floyd's death on May 25.

To settle a civil suit, Louisville authorities agreed to pay the Taylor family \$12 million and initiate police reforms. For Bascus, that is not enough. It "doesn't bring Breonna Taylor back." —AFP

Organizers had cancelled the vigil after police outlawed it because of COVID-19 restrictions, but hundreds still turned out, with tensions overspilling as Saturday night fell. Mourners shouted "shame on you" at police, with tensions running high as a man arrested in connection with the murder is an officer. In the hours following the vigil, rage mounted with pressure groups and politicians condemning police actions.

Opposition Labour MP Harriet Harman condemned the "terrible" scenes at Clapham in a tweet, adding: "Met mishandled vigil plan from the outset. They should have reached agreement."

Labour leader Keir Starmer called the scenes "deeply disturbing" and also criticised the way the vigil was policed. Caroline Nokes, the conservative chair of the women and equalities committee, said she was "truly shocked at the scenes from Clapham Common—in this country we police by consent, not by trampling the tributes and dragging women to the ground". —AFP

Algeria threatens to withdraw France 24's accreditation

ALGIERS: Algerian authorities on Saturday threatened to withdraw the media accreditation of international television broadcaster France 24, alleging "blatant bias" in its coverage of the country's pro-democracy protest movement.

"A final warning before the permanent withdrawal of accreditation was sent to France 24," a ministry statement said. "The bias of France 24 in the coverage of the Friday marches is blatant, going so far as to resort, without restraint, to archival images ... to help anti-national remnants consisting of reactionary or separatist organizations," the communication's ministry alleged.

It was referring to the outlawed Islamist movement Rachad and Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylie (MAK), a traditionally restive region in the northeast. "We are trying to do our work as honestly as possible," France 24 director Marc Saikali told AFP. "We're just doing our job within the rules which have been set out. We don't take sides, and we certainly don't have any kind of agenda aimed at destroying anything."

Anti-regime protests broke out in Algeria in February 2019 when then-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika said he would stand for a fifth term in office. The ailing strongman was forced to step down weeks later, but the movement has continued with demonstrations demanding a sweeping overhaul of a ruling system in place since Algeria's independence from France in 1962.

Communications Minister and government spokesman Annmar Belhimer summoned the France 24 bureau accredited in Algiers to warn "against what appears to be subversive activity, illustrated by unprofessional practices hostile to our country", the official APS news agency reported.

According to the ministry, the channel "is striving to rejuvenate at all costs these counter-revolutionary 'prefabricated upheavals' instigated by NGOs that are well-established in Paris and other European capitals"—a reference to press freedom watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and rights group Amnesty International, among others. Foreign media working in Algeria are subject to bureaucratic, opaque and arbitrary press accreditation procedures which grant them permission to work in the country. —AFP

International

Syria's 'father of the martyrs' raises orphaned grandchildren

Khatoun says will do everything to prepare the children for a better future

HARBANOUSH, Syria: Syria's war robbed 83-year-old Abderrazaq Khatoun of 13 of his children and one of his wives, but he was forced to overcome his grief quickly to raise 11 orphaned grandchildren.

In an encampment in Syria's last major rebel bastion of Idlib, the patriarch says he wears the nickname of "father of the martyrs" with pride, and will do everything to prepare the children for a better future. Displaced from his native home in central Hama province, Khatoun and 30 surviving family members have pitched four tents on a strip of land surrounded by olive trees in the village of Harbanoush. Inside one of the tents, Khatoun sat on a long thin mattress, his grandchildren aged from one to 14 huddled around him poring over schoolbooks. "What did you study today?" he asked the oldest among the boys and girls. "Did you learn the lesson?" "We did," they replied in enthusiastic unison. Before the war, Khatoun was a farmer and the proud father of 27 children, born from three different wives and some already well into adulthood.

But Syria's conflict, which enters its eleventh year this month, has torn away a huge chunk of his family for good. "Since the onset of the revolution, I have given seven martyrs," he said, referring to seven of his sons who died fighting in rebel ranks against government forces. Then air strikes on a petrol station in the town of Saraqeb, where his family had found shelter from advancing regime troops, piled more tragedy on his family. "I lost seven more members of my family—my wife and children," he said, adding that some of his offspring were small children.



IDLIB, Syria: Abderrazaq Khatoun, helps his 11 orphaned grandchildren with their school work, inside a tent in an encampment in the village of Harbanoush, in the northern countryside of Syria's northwestern province of Idlib. —AFP

'Sacrifice'

His eyes brimmed with tears as he pulled out his smartphone and played footage of rescue workers searching the rubble in the aftermath of that strike. "In an instant, I lost them all," said Khatoun, struggling to remember the exact date of the tragedy.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, says a deadly air raid by regime ally Russia hit a petrol station in the town in January 2020. Syria's war has killed more than 387,000 people and

displaced more than half the country's pre-war population since it started in 2011 with anti-government protests.

But Khatoun says he has no regrets. "Losing children is devastating, but defending your land requires sacrifice and I'm proud of them," he said of his sons who died on the battlefield.

"They were in the flower of their youth."

He hopes one day, justice will be done for his sons. In the meanwhile, "I will teach their children that sacrifice

is necessary to defend what is right and demand a dignified life," he said. Today the Damascus government controls more than 60 percent of Syria after a string of Russia-backed victories against jihadists and rebels since 2015. But a ceasefire has since March 2020 largely held in the jihadist-dominated region of Idlib, where two thirds of 2.9 million inhabitants have been displaced from other parts of the country.

'Tales of their fathers'

Inside one of the family tents, Khatoun's 11 grandchildren crouched in a circle for a meal of flatbread, olives, and dried thyme drenched in olive oil. The 14-year-old, clutching a toddler on her knee, passed around the bread.

Behind them, some towels hung on a line strung across the canvas wall. "Some days we go hungry, and some days we eat," said Khatoun, explaining that he was too old to work. But he said he would do anything for his grandchildren. I hope "they live happy lives and that they remember the tales of their fathers sacrificing themselves to defend the land," he said.

I want them to "have a house, not a tent, and a car to travel around in," he said. "I won't deprive them of anything as long as I live." Batoul, one of his widowed daughters-in-law helps him look after the children, after some of his surviving children left war-torn Syria seeking a better life in neighboring Turkey and Lebanon. "We have suffered a lot," she said, mourning her late husband. But "my father-in-law tries hard to provide us with a dignified life." — AFP

Nigeria jihadists ambush military convoy, 19 dead

KANO: Islamic State-aligned jihadists ambushed a Nigerian military convoy, killing 15 soldiers and four militia fighters in the northeastern state of Borno, security sources said Saturday.

The convoy came under heavy attack from Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) fighters near Gudumbali in the Lake Chad region on Thursday, the sources said. The attack was the latest in a jihadist conflict which has killed 36,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands in northeast Nigeria since it began more than a decade ago. "We lost 15 soldiers and four civilian JTF (militia) in the terrorists' ambush in the forest near Gudumbali," a military officer, who asked not to be identified, said. He said 13 government fighters, including 10 troops, were wounded in the ambush. The 10-vehicle convoy was on its way to Gudumbali from the town of Kukawa for a military operation against the insurgents when it came under fire, said another military source, who gave the same toll.

"The casualties were brought to Maiduguri this afternoon," the source told AFP, referring to the regional capital. Militia leader Umar Ari said a vigilante leader in the area was among those killed. Nigeria's army works with local militia forces as part of its battle against jihadists. "Four of our comrades were among the dead, including, Yusuf Baba-Idris, the head of Civilian JTF in Kukawa," Ari said. On Saturday, ISWAP issued a statement, claiming responsibility for the ambush, according to the SITE jihadist monitoring agency. The Islamist group said its ambush "led to killing 33 elements and wounding nearly 20 others and taking one of them prisoner, while the survivors fled." The group said its fighters also destroyed military vehicles, captured more and seized weapons and ammunition. —AFP

Argentine protesters attack bus carrying president Fernandez

Buenos Aires: Dozens of protesters kicked and threw rocks at a minibus carrying Argentine President Alberto Fernandez on Saturday as he visited an area devastated by forest fires, TV footage showed.

As he left a community center in the town of Lago Puelo in the southern Patagonia region, Fernandez had to take refuge behind a wall of people as a crowd of demonstrators pushed toward him and his delegation. The protesters later stopped the bus carrying the president, punching and kicking it and throwing stones that broke windows in the vehicle, according to footage broadcast by the TN network and the newspaper Clarin. Fernandez sought to downplay the violence, saying it was the work of a small number of people. "I am sure that this violence was not taken part in by the people of Chubut nor by those who inhabit our beloved Argentina," he wrote, referring to the province the surrounds the town.

With few police on hand, the crowd managed to halt the president's bus and other vehicles in his entourage for several minutes, with some protesters throwing themselves against the hood of Fernandez's vehicle. Once it was freed, several other vehicles snaked their way through the crowd and sped away with the presidential bus. Clarin reported that the demonstrators were angry over mining projects in Chubut province, which is part of Patagonia, and with the provincial governor. The fires that have blazed through Patagonia for days have claimed one life, while 11 other people are reported missing, officials said Friday. Dozens of people have been evacuated from the path of the advancing flames, and around 200 houses have been destroyed. The government said some towns were left without water or power. The fires, which authorities suspect were started deliberately early this week, have reached several towns near the foothills of the Andes mountains, and have consumed about 15,000 hectares (37,000 acres) of forest, media reported Saturday. —AFP

New Libya PM slams outgoing govt over COVID

TRIPOLI: Libya's interim prime minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah criticised on Saturday the outgoing government's management of the coronavirus outbreak and the delayed delivery of vaccines, promising to tackle the crisis. "The people are very unhappy with the measures taken... against this illness," said Dbeibah in the capital Tripoli at the opening of a national conference on managing the health crisis.

Dbeibah was named interim premier under a UN-sponsored transitional political process and is set to be sworn in today after parliament approved his proposed cabinet this week. His government is tasked with unifying the country's divided institutions after a decade of conflict and ensuring a transition toward elections scheduled for December.

Oil-rich Libya descended into chaos after dictator Muammar Gaddafi was toppled and killed in a NATO-backed uprising in 2011, resulting in multiple forces

vying for power. The prolonged instability has left Libya's infrastructure derelict, its economy in tatters and public services wretched, including the health system. Dbeibah said vigilance in the face of the health crisis had slipped and pledged to implement new measures. "At the beginning, the awareness campaign was good, but we apparently forgot that we are living in the middle of a pandemic," the 61-year-old premier said. He added that there would be a "new campaign with a new spirit" and that wearing "masks will again be compulsory". Acquiring vaccine doses is "at the top of the government's priorities", he said.

"We have spent enormous amounts of money and we still don't have vaccines. We must have vaccines as soon as possible, no matter the cost. We are very behind." On Thursday, Dbeibah said he was unhappy with the management of budgets for fighting the coronavirus outbreak.

His predecessor, Fayez al-Sarraj, in February allocated 600 million dinars (around \$133 million) for vaccines and isolation centers. But the centers are now starting to reach capacity, with the main public hospital in second city Benghazi saying on Monday it was no longer able to accept new patients. Libya, home to seven million people, has officially reported 143,671 coronavirus cases and 2,348 deaths since the start of the pandemic. — AFP



BERLIN: German Chancellor Angela Merkel waves as she can be seen on a screen inside the Chancellery during a video conference of the digital dialog series 'The Federal Chancellor in Conversation' at the Chancellery in Berlin. — AFP

Merkel party braces for drubbing in German state polls

STUTTGART: Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives were bracing for a rout in two key regional polls yesterday, with voters expected to punish Germany's largest party for a face-mask corruption scandal and a series of pandemic setbacks. The votes for new regional parliaments in the states of Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Wuerttemberg are seen as a bellwether of the nation's mood ahead of September 26 general elections—which will be the first in over 15 years not to feature Merkel. Things aren't looking good for the conservatives. Recent surveys have shown that support for Merkel's centre-right CDU/CSU alliance has fallen to a one-year low at around 30 percent as Germans sour on its coronavirus crisis management. The conservatives should brace for "a slap in the face from voters", said the top-selling Bild daily.

Merkel's centre-right CDU and its Bavarian CSU sister party have been roiled by damaging claims about MPs apparently profiting from face mask deals early on in the pandemic, forcing three lawmakers to step down in recent days. Deepening the conservatives' woes is growing public anger about a sluggish and bureaucratic vaccination campaign, a delayed start to free rapid testing and stubbornly high infection rates despite months of shutdowns.

Germans could perhaps look past the "mask affair", Der Spiegel weekly wrote, "if citizens felt that the government was doing its job, protecting it from the virus and guiding it through the crisis. But it's not". In Rhineland-Palatinate, the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) have overtaken the CDU in opinion polls, paving the way for popular state premier Malu Dreyer to head another coalition government with the Greens and the pro-business FDP.

Most closely watched will be the vote in Baden-Wuerttemberg, the only German state to have a premier from the Green party. The left-leaning ecologists there currently govern together with the CDU, in what could serve as a blueprint for the first federal government of the post-Merkel era. Opinion polls however show the CDU headed for its worst-ever result in the affluent southwestern state, while the Greens have widened their lead. The environmentalists have also seen their popularity rise nationwide in recent years, on growing concern about climate change.

Some German commentators have called the mask scandal the conservatives' "biggest crisis" since a slush-fund controversy in the 1990s ensnared former chancellor Helmut Kohl. New CDU chief Armin Laschet has rubbished the comparison as "absurd" but he too has sharply criticized the MPs caught up in the row, joining a chorus of condemnation from across the political spectrum. To stop the bleed ahead of Sunday's votes, the CDU/CSU gave all of its lawmakers until Friday evening to declare any financial benefits gained from the pandemic. CSU lawmakers Georg Nusslein and CDU lawmaker Nikolas Loebel resigned last week on allegations they pocketed hundreds of thousands of euros for acting as middlemen in the contracts. —AFP



TRIPOLI: Libya's interim prime minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah drinks coffee as he arrives to deliver a speech at a national conference on the COVID-19 pandemic, at a conference hall in the capital Tripoli, on Saturday. — AFP

Netanyahu: Master politician fighting for survival

JERUSALEM: Benjamin Netanyahu has remained in power as Israeli prime minister for a record 12 consecutive years, partly by convincing some voters that only he can keep the Jewish state safe while defending it on the world stage. But on March 23, the 71-year-old wily politician faces his fourth re-election contest in less than two years, after repeatedly failing to unite a coalition behind him, despite his devoted right-wing base. Polls indicate that this master political survivor, widely known as Bibi, could again struggle to forge the necessary 61-seat parliamentary majority.

Since Israelis last voted a year ago, support for Netanyahu's Likud may have even dipped, despite clinching historic normalization agreements with four Arab states and unrolling a world-beating Covid-19 vaccination campaign, the envy of many nations.

One reason why his political standing remains fragile is that his dealings with coalition partners are so often undermined by mistrust, said Colin Shindler, a leading Israel scholar at London's SOAS University. "You trust people insofar as you can use them, as you can pretend to forge friendships and alliances with them," said Shindler, author of "The Rise of the Israel Right: from Odessa to Hebron."

"But at the end of the day your core belief is to protect yourself and survive," Shindler told AFP. "That is how I perceive Netanyahu." Yet despite being the first sitting Israeli premier indicted while in office over corruption allegations which he denies,

Netanyahu may well survive the ballot box again. That is because part of the electorate still sees him as the safest available pair of hands to guide the nation, Shindler said.

"That's the reason he's still in power. He's the national goalkeeper and he doesn't let in any goals." He is the son of a historian who was active in right-wing Zionist groups, an ideological inheritance that helped shaped the premier's political career. Addressing the World Holocaust Forum last year, Netanyahu said the Jewish people had a mandate "to always take seriously the threats of those who seek our destruction". "To confront threats even when they are small; and above all, to always have the power to defend ourselves by ourselves." An occasional cigar smoker with a husky voice and greying comb-over, the broad, burly and square-jawed Netanyahu has two sons with his wife Sara and a daughter from a previous marriage. —AFP



JERUSALEM: Israeli protesters chant slogans during a demonstration against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu outside his official residence in Jerusalem on Saturday. — AFP

International

Myanmar 'shadow' parliament urges united opposition to coup

Despite growing death toll, protesters push on with demonstrations

YANGON: Anti-coup demonstrators pushed on with protests yesterday as Myanmar neared its seventh week under military rule, as a group of MPs in hiding urge them to move with "invincibility" to overcome the nation's "darkest moment". The country has been in turmoil since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi from power in a February 1 putsch, triggering a mass uprising that has seen hundreds of thousands protest daily for a return to democracy.

The junta has repeatedly justified its power grab by alleging widespread electoral fraud in November's elections, which Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party had swept in a landslide.

In response, a group of elected MPs, many of whom are in hiding, had formed a shadow "parliament" called the Committee for Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) — the Burmese word for the country's governing bloc — to denounce the military regime. The junta's security forces have staged near-daily crackdowns against demonstrators calling for a return to democracy, deploying tear gas, rubber bullets and live rounds to quell anti-coup protests which have seen more than 70 killed. Despite the growing death toll, protesters have continued taking to the streets — yesterday saw sit-ins in commercial hub Yangon, marches through the coastal city of Dawei, and civil servants hoisting Suu Kyi's poster defiantly at a gather in the central city of Monywa.

"May the fallen heroes who have given their lives in this spring revolution rest in peace!" changed protesters wearing hard hats in Yangon's Thaketa township — which has seen bouts of violence this week between security forces and residents. Their daytime gatherings come a day after the acting vice president of the CRPH called for the people to continue protesting against the military's "unjust dictatorship". "This is the darkest moment of the nation and the light before the dawn is close," said Mahn Win Khaing Than in a recorded video posted on the CRPH's Facebook page Saturday night.



YANGON: Protesters sit on a makeshift barricade erected to deter security forces during demonstrations against the military coup in Yangon yesterday. — AFP

"This is also a moment testing our citizens to see how far we can resist these darkest times," said the politician, a high-ranking NLD politician who served as speaker of the house during Suu Kyi's previous administration. Along with other top Suu Kyi allies, he had been placed under house arrest during the February 1 power grab, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group.

His address Saturday would be his first appearance in his capacity as CRPH's acting vice president, and he echoed the anti-coup movement's calls for a "federal democracy" — which would allow ethnic minority groups to have a role in Myanmar's governance. "This uprising is also the chance for all of us to struggle together

Hundreds of supporters of Bakayoko — known as "Hambak" — looked on from the sidelines as the coffin was taken to a funeral home, many of them wearing white T-shirts emblazoned with slogans including "Farewell Hambak, our inspiration!" or "Hambak forever in our hearts".

At ease in all walks of life, Bakayoko met regularly with religious leaders of all communities and ethnicities, political leaders and young people to urge them to listen to each other and not to resort to violence. Earlier in the week, Ouattara called Bakayoko "my son and close collaborator, torn from us too soon".

Bakayoko took over as prime minister in July last year after his predecessor Amadou Gon Coulibaly died following treatment in France for heart problems. Coulibaly had been chosen to run in last year's presidential election but his death prompted Ouattara to stand for a third term, a move that triggered a crisis with the opposition. — AFP

I Coast PM's body flown home after death in Germany

ABIDJAN: The body of Ivory Coast Prime Minister Hamed Bakayoko was flown home on Saturday, two days after he died in Germany. Bakayoko, who turned 56 last Monday and died following cancer treatment in Germany, was popular for reaching across the political spectrum in the bitterly divided West African country.

His death came just days after a rare trouble-free election in which all sides took part. President Alassane Ouattara, dressed in a dark suit and wearing a black hat, welcomed the coffin at Abidjan's international airport.



ABIDJAN: Ivorian soldiers carry the coffin of the late Prime Minister of Ivory Coast, Hamed Bakayoko, as it arrived by plane at the Felix Houphouët airport in Abidjan. — AFP

Pakistan couple expelled by university after public proposal

LAHORE: A university in deeply conservative Pakistan expelled two students who embraced after getting engaged on campus, after a video of the incident spread on social media this week. In the clip, a female university student gets down on one knee and proposes to her boyfriend; the couple can then be seen hugging and holding bouquets of flowers as onlookers cheer them on and film the scene.

The University of Lahore said the pair had acted "in violation of university rules". It added in a statement on Friday that they had failed to appear before a disciplinary hearing and were later expelled for "serious infraction of the code of conduct". Public displays of affection between couples — whether married or not — are viewed as culturally and religiously unacceptable. Many women in patriarchal Pakistan find it hard to defy tradition, with much of the society still operating under a strict code of honor. The couple has refused to apologize. "We did nothing wrong, and we are not sorry for this," Hadiqa Javaid tweeted. "Can anyone explain to us what wrong we did by proposal in public in University of Lahore?" her fiancé Shehryar Ahmed said, adding that couples had previously proposed to each other on campus. — AFP

Russian police detain dozens of opposition deputies

MOSCOW: Russian police on Saturday arrested around 200 opposition politicians and municipal deputies at a Moscow conference as authorities tighten the screws on Kremlin critics ahead of parliamentary elections. A police raid on an opposition conference dedicated to running for municipal office came after President Vladimir Putin's top critic Alexei Navalny was jailed for two and a half years last month and more than 10,000 protesters detained across the country. While Russian police routinely break up opposition protests, the mass arrests of municipal deputies at a conference in Moscow were unprecedented.

Participants from more than 50 of Russia's regions had gathered to discuss parliamentary and local elections in September at a forum organized by a project backed by prominent Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Forty minutes into the conference police broke up the event and detained the participants. "The ENTIRE forum of Russian municipal deputies has been detained in Moscow!" Khodorkovsky said on Twitter, calling the detentions "unconstitutional". As news of the detentions emerged, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for an end to "persecution of independent voices", noting the Kremlin had detained these people

hand-in-hand to establish a federal democracy union which we — all ethnic brothers and sisters who have been suffering various kinds of oppression from military dictatorship — have long desired," he said.

"The federal democracy union... is waiting for us in the near future if we move forward unitedly with invincibility," Mahn Win Khaing Than said. "We must win the uprising." The committee has issued several statements since its formation, but the protest movement on the ground appears largely leaderless — with daily rallies organized by local activists. The junta — self-anointed as the State Administration Council — had said the CRPH's formation is akin to "high treason", which carries a maximum sentence of 22 years in jail. — AFP



Floods and ashfall from rumbling volcano Sangay have destroyed around 60,000 hectares (150,000 acres) of land and crops across Ecuador, affecting 350,000 people, the risk management service (SNGRE) said on Saturday.

Floods and volcanic ashfall hit Ecuador

QUITO: Floods and ashfall from rumbling volcano Sangay have destroyed around 60,000 hectares (150,000 acres) of land and crops across Ecuador, affecting 350,000 people, the risk management service (SNGRE) said on Saturday. "We support the population affected by the fall of ash from Sangay and floods nationwide," President Lenin Moreno tweeted.

Moreno also announced the restructuring of "agricultural loans" and the dispatch of "teams to assist our farmers." About 16,320 hectares have been destroyed by floods that have affected several coastal and Andean provinces since the start of the rainy season on February 1, according to the most recent report on the SNGRE website. Six people have died with nearly 18,000 affected, it said. Volcanic ashfall from Sangay, which has seen an increase in activity over the past week, spewing vast clouds of ash, has destroyed about 43,000 hectares of crops, affecting around 330,000 people, it said.

Ashfall from the 5,230 meter (17,160 feet) volcano, located in the southeast Amazon province of Morona Santiago bordering Peru, had eased with none recorded on Saturday in the six affected provinces. The international airport at Guayaquil, capital of Guayas province, had to suspend operations the previous week due to the ash clouds. — AFP

"on dubious grounds". A number of well-known opposition figures including Ilya Yashin, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Yulia Galyamina, Yevgeny Roizman and Andrei Pivovarov as well as journalists have been detained.

"A very symbolic end to a short forum: deputies in police vans, and masked police are twisting people's arms," Yashin said on Facebook.

'Undesirable' organization

Moscow police said in a statement that around 200 people had been detained. Many of the conference participants did not wear masks, while some were members of an organization whose work had been declared "undesirable," police said. Pivovarov, speaking to AFP from a police station, said the forum participants had been detained because authorities believe the conference was organized by Open Russia, a movement founded by Khodorkovsky and designated as an "undesirable organization". The municipal forum — the first of its kind — was organized by United Democrats, another project backed by Khodorkovsky, Pivovarov said. The authorities had appeared to look for a pretext to interrupt an opposition event, he said. A number of the detained activists said Saturday evening they had been released but ordered to appear in court at a later stage. Kara-Murza said he had been freed, adding that a probe had been opened into the work of an undesirable organization. The team of jailed Kremlin foe Navalny accused authorities of seeking to further intimidate critics ahead of the September elections. "It is clear why the forum has been broken up — authorities are afraid of any competition during elections," the team said on the Telegram messaging app. — AFP

News in brief

Two arrested at Denmark protest

COPENHAGEN: Two people were arrested on the sidelines of a weekend protest against anti-coronavirus restrictions in Denmark's capital Copenhagen, the police said yesterday. One person was arrested for throwing fireworks at police during the Saturday march, while another was detained over violent behavior, the police told AFP. The rally was organized by a group calling itself "Men in Black Denmark" which has called regular demonstrations since the end of last year against what it calls the "dictatorship" of the country's COVID-19 restrictions. — AFP

Four police killed in Haiti raid

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti: Haitian authorities said Saturday that four police agents were killed and several wounded the day before during a botched anti-gang operation in the capital Port-au-Prince that also saw officers lose some of their equipment. The ill-fated operation drew harsh criticism on social media after a video emerged of assailants dragging and beating the lifeless bodies of two members of a special police unit. Eight other officers were wounded, three of whom remained hospitalized Saturday in stable condition, said national police director Leon Charles. — AFP

Germany newspaper chief quits

BERLIN: The editor-in-chief of German newspaper Bild is stepping down temporarily while he is investigated over several complaints made by women, publisher Axel Springer group said on Saturday. Julian Reichelt had "asked the board of directors to be temporarily relieved of his duties until the allegations have been clarified", the group said in a statement. The complaints prompted the company to launch an internal investigation led by lawyers. Reichelt is suspected of having promoted interns with whom he had affairs and then sidelining or firing them, the Spiegel newspaper reported. — AFP

Violence breaks out in Belgium

LIEGE, Belgium: Several police officers were wounded when violence and looting broke out on the sidelines of a Black Lives Matter demonstration in the eastern Belgian city of Liege on Saturday, police said. The marchers were protesting at the arrest of a woman for "rebellion" in the city on Monday who has since accused the police of racism. The police have rejected the charge and claimed that the woman had resisted arrest. The spokeswoman said that on Saturday "young people joined the group of peaceful protesters and then left the demonstration to go and wreck the city center". — AFP

Lula gets first dose of virus vaccine

BRASILIA, Brazil: Ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva received his first coronavirus vaccine dose Saturday, calling on Brazilians to "avoid gatherings" just days after his return to politics following overturned corruption convictions. With Brazil facing a second and particularly virulent coronavirus wave, the left-wing former leader said in a video broadcast on social media that he "would be much happier if there were vaccines for everyone." Lula, who led Brazil from 2003 to 2010, received a shot of the Chinese-developed CoronaVac vaccine in Sao Bernardo do Campo on the outskirts of Sao Paulo, stating that "all people who are forced to work, who cannot stay at home, must be vaccinated." — AFP

Chad president kicks off campaign

N'DJAMENA, Chad: Chad President Idriss Deby Ito kicked off his campaign for a sixth term on Saturday, calling for unity after rival protests were banned and broken up. The first rally since the start of the official election period on Thursday was held by Deby's Patriotic Salvation Movement (MPS) at a packed stadium in the capital, N'Djamena. Deby, who has ruled for 30 years and is widely deemed a shoo-in for another term, said he had fought for national unity, while also drawing a line in the sand for his opponents. — AFP

Russia deploys giant space telescope

LAKE BAIKAL, Russia: Russian scientists launched one of the world's biggest underwater space telescopes to peer deep into the universe from the pristine waters of Lake Baikal. The deep underwater telescope, which has been under construction since 2015, is designed to observe neutrinos, the smallest particles currently known. Dubbed Baikal-GVD, the telescope was submerged to a depth of 750-1,300 meters (2,500-4,300 feet), around four kilometers from the lake's shore. Neutrinos are very hard to detect and water is an effective medium for doing so. — AFP

Business

MONDAY, MARCH 15, 2021

US workers faced harrowing year on pandemic front lines

COVID has transformed how business is done in the world's largest economy

WASHINGTON: One year ago, workers across the United States learned they'd been divided into two categories: those who would work from home, and those who would have to keep showing up to workplaces where they risked exposure to COVID-19.

Matt Valentin was among the latter, and in the months that followed, the Starbucks cafe where he worked in Monroe, Michigan became an increasingly anxiety-ridden environment.

"From my perspective, it went from 'get these drinks and orders done as fast as possible' to 'do all of that, and try not to bring a deadly virus home to your vulnerable family,'" the 21-year-old said in an interview. As Americans mark the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the pandemic that transformed how business is done in the world's largest economy, those whose jobs required them to show up to work as the virus raged told AFP of a year of fear and uncertainty.

"It seemed like it went from zero to 100 in a matter of days," said Julie Mann, a midwife at a Boston-area hospital. "We didn't have (personal protective equipment), we didn't have testing. We didn't know who was infected, we didn't know if our colleagues were infected."

Divided workforce

Tens of millions of people lost their jobs after US states closed or restricted businesses as the pandemic intensified in March 2020. Among those who stayed employed, the division between those who could work from home and those who couldn't became one of the first of many inequalities widened by the pandemic.

A study from the University of California, San Francisco found that working-age adults in the state experienced a 22 percent overall increase in mortality during the pandemic, with larger jumps seen in industries like agriculture, transportation and others

where in-person labor is common. Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to hold risky positions. The Urban Institute think tank found that more than half of Black, Hispanic and Native American workers do their jobs in-person, compared to 41 percent of white workers.

"It's just the patterns that are baked into our society in terms of who we value and who we don't, and how we pay people," Lisa Dubay, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute, said of the findings.

'A spacesuit look'

At Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the 44-year-old Mann works, the pandemic began with a terrifying two-week period where protective gear was needed yet was in short supply, forcing staff to take unheard of steps like reusing or jury-rigging equipment. Something like normalcy returned once those shortages were resolved and COVID-19 testing became widespread, but Mann had to wear a gown, mask and glasses during visits with patients—a "spacesuit look" she tried to soften by attaching a family photo to her scrubs to give the interactions a bit of the intimacy they once had.

A thornier problem was how to take care of mothers who were COVID-19 positive, particularly in the days after giving birth. "If you want zero risk, then you isolate fully from the baby and the baby isn't with you," she said. "No mom that I know of chose to do that."

Mask wars

The Starbucks where Valentin works part-time while studying for his college degree also faced trouble with masks, but in his conservative county the issue was not supply but suspicion. "Even to this day, we have people walking in with no mask, or barely trying to keep it on. They'll walk in and say, 'Oh, I forgot to wear one,' which we all obviously don't believe



One year ago, workers across the United States learned they'd been divided into two categories: those who would work from home, and those who would have to keep showing up to workplaces where they risked exposure to COVID-19.

because it's been over a year," Valentin said.

Some customers would take one of the free masks on offer, wear it improperly, or rip it off before leaving the store. Entire families would make no effort to mask up. One time, a maskless customer screamed at Valentin's co-workers that they "can't control him," shouting expletives until the staff called the police. "To react that way over something so minimal is still shocking to me, but these are the kinds of people we get to encounter every day since last March (or) April," he said.

Wait for vaccines

Two of Valentin's co-workers came down with Covid-19 after the store temporarily closed early in

the pandemic, but it managed to avoid further infections even when the country's outbreak was at its worst. Despite an entire year of tense in-person shifts, Valentin expects he will have to wait for weeks to be eligible for his vaccine.

"I'm very frustrated that my line of work that was once considered 'essential' has been put on the backburner," he said. In the meantime, Mann, like many healthcare workers, has already been vaccinated. Despite the relief that brought, she can't forget the disaster of the past year, when the United States saw the world's worst Covid-19 outbreak, leaving more than 530,000 people dead. We are "not as great as we think we are," Mann said, "and it's been humbling." —AFP

Australia says working on travel bubble with Singapore

SYDNEY: Australia is "working with Singapore" to create a travel bubble between the two nations as early as July, officials said Sunday, in an effort to restart tourism and travel put on hold by COVID-19.

Early in the pandemic Australia effectively closed its international border to slow the spread of the coronavirus, with non-citizens banned from visiting except in special circumstances. Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack said Australia was "working with Singapore at the moment potentially for a bubble (beginning) in July". "As the vaccine rolls out, not only in Australia but in other countries, we will reopen more bubbles," he told public broadcaster ABC.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported the deal would allow Singaporeans and Australians who had been vaccinated to travel between the countries without quar-

antining. The newspaper said Canberra is also hoping that people from third countries—such as international students, business travellers and returning citizens—could complete two weeks' quarantine in Singapore before flying to Australia.

But Singapore, which has already opened its border to a handful of countries that have controlled the virus, including Australia, said it was "not in discussion on the concept of a quarantine centre or vaccination hub". "Singapore is currently in discussions with Australia on the mutual recognition of vaccination certificates and resumption of travel with priority for students and business travellers," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement yesterday. "We are also discussing the possibility of an air travel bubble which will allow residents of Singapore and Australia to travel between both countries without the need for quarantine." Australia's



SYDNEY: Australia is "working with Singapore" to create a travel bubble between the two nations as early as July, officials said yesterday, in an effort to restart tourism and travel put on hold by COVID-19. —AFP

14-day hotel quarantine requirement for arrivals has left tens of thousands of Australians stranded overseas, with caps on returnees introduced as the limited system has been unable to cope with large numbers.

International tourism—worth about Aus\$45 billion (US\$35 billion) a year

to the country's economy before the pandemic hit—has evaporated. Australia already has a one-way "travel bubble" with New Zealand, allowing Kiwis to visit without quarantining, though the scheme has been suspended a number of times in response to virus outbreaks. —AFP

'Valheim' rides Viking gaming mania to 5m sales

BRUSSELS: If you've felt a recent urge to unleash your inner Viking, you're not alone: millions of people have been riding the waves, swigging mead and slaying the enemy in a craze for the video game "Valheim". Designed by a tiny Swedish games studio, "Valheim" has proved an unexpected smash-hit, selling five million copies since its early-access release last month on the online gaming platform Steam.

At one point, more than half a million people were playing online simultaneously. "We didn't expect this kind of success at all," said Henrik Tornqvist, co-founder of Iron Gate, the company behind it.

"We are overwhelmed, humbled, and under a lot of pressure." The five-strong team that developed the survival game have not yet been able to meet up to celebrate due to the pandemic, Tornqvist said.

"Valheim" players can learn to hunt, make armor, build Viking longhouses and eventually slay terrifying monsters as they explore the vast and fantastical world. "It's quite a refreshing game and a really great one, whether you're talking about the light, the backdrop or the music," said 25-year-old player Pierre Galissant, who has already

spent 60 hours roaming its plains, forests and swamps with three comrades.

Tornqvist suspects the ability to team up with friends is part of the game's appeal. "Our game being co-op focused is part of our success for sure," he said. "And also the Viking theme."

Viking revival

"Valheim", which is still in development, is just the latest hit video game set in the vital and violent world of medieval Scandinavian warriors. Norse mythology has inspired game designers for decades, from late-90s series Baldur's Gate to strategy games like Age of Empires II.

But Jean-Christophe Piot, a writer and host of a podcast about mythology, said there had been "a real revival" around the seafaring Vikings, who raided, traded, and settled around Europe between the 9th and 11th centuries. Norse influences are hardly new in pop culture, he pointed out—Marvel Comics introduced Thor, god of Thunder, as a character in 1962. "But they've appeared in video games on an unprecedented scale in recent years," he said.

Iron Gate consciously chose this setting for "Valheim" because of the existing Norse craze, Tornqvist said, citing the 2013 TV series "Vikings" as a contributing factor.

Historical correctness

The latest instalment of the wildly popular game franchise "Assassin's Creed", released in November, plays out in several different historical periods—but it too takes players on a Viking adventure.



BRUSSELS: A screen displaying the video game "Valheim" from Swedish studio Iron Gate in Brussels.

"Fans had been demanding it for ages," said Thierry Noel, a historian who worked with French studio Ubisoft on the development of "Assassin's Creed: Valhalla". Far from sticking to stereotypes of bloodthirsty barbarians in horned helmets, Ubisoft wanted to avoid clichés and introduce a degree of historical rigor, said Noel.

"The idea was to try to identify grey zones—parts of history where you can slip in without affecting the historical version of events as we know it," he said. "In the case of the Vikings, it was relatively easy. We don't know that much about this period, they left few traces," he explained. —AFP

'Markets be damned!': Fed standing firm on inflation fears

WASHINGTON: Skittish investors have seen-sawed between celebration about the expected US economic recovery and nail-biting over a possible price spiral, but the Federal Reserve is standing firm on keeping interest rates low.

In the balance between allowing faster growth—and rising prices—in order to restore some of the more than nine million jobs still missing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Fed Chair Jerome Powell's message has been clear: he wants to see more people back to work. Analysts are expecting the Fed's policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) to maintain its very "dovish" stance when it holds its two-day policy meeting next week.

Powell on Wednesday is expected to stress once again that the Fed is willing to accept higher inflation to get back to full employment, a goal that took a decade to achieve following the 2008 global financial crisis. "I think it's 'markets be damned' at this point," said Robert Frick of Navy Federal Credit Union.

"The Fed has said that until the real improvement in employment and in the economy, they're not going to budge," Frick told AFP. "I really don't think they're going to waver." From a 50-year low of 3.5 percent unemployment before the pandemic lockdowns began in early 2020, the jobless rate spiked as millions of workers were sent home, but gradually fell back to 6.2 percent in February amid businesses reopenings.

As vaccine rollouts have picked up speed and President Joe Biden signed a massive \$1.9 trillion stimulus package, boosting the chances the world's largest economy can soon reopen, investors have begun to fear an inflationary spiral. That is reflected in the spike in government debt yields, particularly on 10-year Treasury notes, a canary in the coal mine for coming price increases.

While the jump back to its early 2020 level could be viewed as something of a market freak-out, there are real-world consequences of rising Treasury yields, since lending rates for home mortgages and car loans are linked to them. Mortgage rates have begun to creep up, which could price some buyers out of an already-hot housing market, while existing homeowners will find it harder to refinance their loans, said Kathy Bostjancic of Oxford Economics. —AFP

Business

Baltimore Sun deal sets up major test for nonprofit news model

Bainum in deal to acquire the Sun and affiliated newspapers for \$65m

BALTIMORE: After years of staff cuts, shrinking budgets and declining readership, the Baltimore Sun finally has some good news to report about itself: a deal for a new nonprofit group to take over, and potentially revive the struggling newspaper. The plan unveiled in February comes in response to an extraordinary movement-supported by civic and business leaders, sports figures, journalists and others—to rescue the 184-year-old newspaper and bring it back to local ownership.

The nonprofit Sunlight for All Institute, led by businessman Stewart Bainum, struck the tentative deal to acquire the Sun and affiliated newspapers for \$65 million as part of the sale of parent firm Tribune Publishing to Alden Global Capital.

The agreement represents a major new test for the nonprofit model which has gained momentum in recent years in response to the deepening crisis in the sector. Newsroom employment at newspapers fell by half between 2008 and 2019, according to Pew Research Center, with more cuts reported during the pandemic.

The idea had been circulating in Baltimore for years but gained steam with the "Save Our Sun" campaign launched last year by journalists, union and civic leaders and others. "There was a huge amount of community support," said Sun journalist Liz Bowie, one of those behind the campaign. Bowie said Baltimoreans appeared to understand the value of the longtime news organization and what might happen if it failed or was hollowed out.

"That void can't be filled by a digital startup," she said. Ted Venetoulis, a former county executive and gubernatorial candidate who joined the campaign, said the initiative drove home the notion that the newspaper was the "soul" and "conscience" of the community.

"They're watchdogs, they keep people honest, but they also are cheerleaders. They magnify the good things about our society," Venetoulis said. The "Save our Sun" campaign got more than 7,000 signatures and was endorsed by prominent locals including baseball icon Cal Ripken, TV producer David Simon and film director John Waters. The deal for Bainum's group to buy Sun Media Group would depend on Alden's acquisition of the rest of Tribune Publishing, including the Chicago Tribune, Hartford Courant and other regional dailies.

Going nonprofit

The nonprofit model has been growing in recent years in the United States, and now includes some 300 news outlets, according to University of Illinois professor Brant Houston, a founder of the Institute for Nonprofit News. Nonprofits have made inroads during

a crisis that has seen many local newspapers disappear and others consolidated by big chains and hedge fund owners, most of which have cut staff and coverage. "The business model for newspapers was just not working," Houston said.

"If you have an organization beholden to stockholders, you end up with a business model of laying people off and cutting coverage," Houston said. "That's not a strategic plan." The Sun has won 16 Pulitzer prizes including one last year for a story on a corruption scandal which led to the resignation and prosecution of mayor Catherine Pugh. But it has been reeling like many of its peers, with print circulation has fallen

to just 43,000 on weekdays and 125,00 on Sunday, a fraction of the level from its peak years. Newsroom staff has been slashed over the years, and is now less than 100. Sun journalists expressed hope the new model could help reverse the newspaper's decline.

"We were blown away and psyched by this," said reporter Colin Campbell. Health reporter Meredith Cohn said she hopes the deal will lead "getting more reporters and covering the community," including areas neglected in recent years.

Philadelphia experiment

One hopeful sign comes from Philadelphia, where the Inquirer newspaper has been under nonprofit ownership since 2016 when owner Gerry Lenfest donated his stake to the Lenfest Institute along with a \$20 million endowment. Since then, "there has been an outpouring of community financial support" for the daily with some \$7 million in grants in 2020 alone, said Jim Friedlich, chief executive of the nonprofit group.

The Inquirer has been able to maintain a newsroom staff of 200, far bigger than most of its peers, said Friedlich. The Philadelphia group offered informal advice to Bainum, who has not publicly discussed his plans for the Baltimore Sun, he added.

Bainum, chairman of Choice Hotels, "has become something of a student of the news business and has been inspired by and is replicating the Lenfest nonprofit model," Friedlich said. John Schleuss, president of the NewsGuild which represents newsroom staff and helped organize Save the Sun, is optimistic that the Sun can open the door to similar deals. "I hope we can get back to publications which are accountable to the community, and not just interested in short-term profits," Schleuss said he was disappointed that similar efforts failed at other Tribune dailies which will be taken over by a company "with a history of cutting a large number of jobs." "It's good that people in Baltimore stepped up," Schleuss said. "We need that to happen all across the country." — AFP



BALTIMORE: Baltimore Sun reporters and photographers share doughnuts during an interview in Baltimore, Maryland. — AFP

ball icon Cal Ripken, TV producer David Simon and film director John Waters. The deal for Bainum's group to buy Sun Media Group would depend on Alden's acquisition of the rest of Tribune Publishing, including the Chicago Tribune, Hartford Courant and other regional dailies.

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NBK announces winners of NBK Mobile Banking App draw

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) seeks to promote its customers' reliance on the bank's digital channels to make their transactions, and encourage them to use electronic payment solutions. In this context, the bank gives NBK Mobile Banking App users the opportunity to enter a draw and win wonderful prizes, as part of the bank's endeavors to reward its customers all year round, through a variety of campaigns, draws and prizes that are tailored to meet their needs and expectations.

NBK announced the names of the winners of smart watches: Garmin, Fitbit, and Samsung, which can be linked to NBK Credit Cards and used to make all payments. Also, Apple Watches were given to winners where they can manage their accounts and credit cards via this smartwatch. The new winners are as follows:

- Ahmad Khalil Al-Rafaie
- Jafaar Sadeq Al-Bather
- Wafaa Shuaib Al-Ali
- Loulwa Faihan Al-Muhaisen
- Eman Abdulreda Buftan
- Abdullah Sameer Asaad

In addition, Ali Rahme Janami Nia was the lucky winner of the GAC Motor car GS5.

Participants get two chances to the draw when they sign up for NBK Mobile Banking App for the first time, and use NBK Quick Pay, or open a Term Deposit, whereas they get one chance when they use the following services in the app: transfers to local or international beneficiaries, applying for a loan or credit card, increasing credit card limit, or increasing monthly transfer limit.

On this occasion, Hala Al Shoabi, Head of Digital Service Quality Management, National Bank of Kuwait said: "We are keen to continuously develop NBK Mobile Banking App. During last year, we added more updates to it, which is reflected in customers' growing interest in using it along with other digital channels to make their transactions, especially during the prevailing exceptional circumstances."

Al Shoabi emphasized that rewarding customers is a key part of NBK's strategy to enrich their banking experience, therefore, the bank seeks to launch outstanding campaigns all year round, which are tailored to meet their needs and expectations.

Gulf Bank announces Al-Obaid as winner of cash prize worth 12 times his salary

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank conducted its second monthly Salary Package draw of the year to announce the winner for February 2021. The lucky winner, Abdulrahman Saleh Ismael Al-Obaid, will claim a cash prize worth 12 times his salary. The draw was held on Monday at Gulf Bank's main branch, in the presence of a representative from the Ministry of Commerce & Industry.

On this occasion, Mohammad Al-Qattan, General Manager of Consumer Banking at Gulf Bank, said: "Gulf Bank would like to congratulate Abdulrahman Al-Obaid on winning the Salary Package prize for the month of February, thereby taking home a cash prize worth 12 times his salary! At Gulf Bank, we are constantly striving to offer the very best services and products to our esteemed clients, and we are especially proud of what we have been able to



Al-Shoabi also highlighted NBK's endeavors to promote the use of digital banking services and advanced electronic payment solutions, which the bank is continuously working to develop.

The winners in the campaign expressed their great pleasure with winning NBK's valuable prizes offered in the campaign, showing their appreciation of the advanced digital services and solutions provided on NBK Mobile Banking App that help them meet their needs and expectations in view of the rapid changes in their daily lifestyles, especially by enabling them to make all their banking transactions anywhere, 24/7.

Al-Tijari announces winners of Al-Najma draws

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

The results of the draws were as follows:

1. Al-Najma weekly account - the prize of KD 5,000 went to the winner minor Khadejah Abdullah Al-Failakawi
 2. Salary account campaign - the prize of up to KD 1,000 went to the winner Wafaa Fawzi Al-Ahmad
- The bank stated that the salary campaign is aimed at customers who transfer their salaries of KD 500 or more to the bank, especially Kuwaiti employees and residents working in the government, oil sectors and companies listed with the Bank as well as retirees, and take advantage of the benefits of this campaign and get an instant cash gift from KD 250 to KD 500 or an interest-free loan of 5 times the salary and a maximum of KD 10,000, Kuwaiti pensioner, along with expatriate customers who transfer their debt amounting to KD 10,000 or above to the bank will receive an instant cash gift of 1 percent from their transferred debt.

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

Al-Najma Account can be opened by depositing KD 100, and customer should maintain a minimum amount of KD 500 to be eligible to enter all draws on Al-Najma Account prizes. As for the chances of winning, the more balance a customer maintains in Al-Najma Account, the more chances the account holder will get to win, the account also offers additional benefits like the ATM card, a credit card against customer's account and all CBK banking services that customer can enjoy.

The bank revealed that Al-Najma account is available to everyone, and anyone can open Al-Najma account through CBK mobile application in simple steps from anywhere and at any time.

est-free loan of up to KD 10,000 or a special car loan offer from approved showrooms. They will also be eligible to receive a Visa or MasterCard credit card with all annual fees waived for the first year, a free MasterCard World card (upon KD 5,000 expenditure), in addition to 15,000 Gulf Bank Rewards Points credited in the card. The frontline offer also consists of other benefits, including a free safety deposit box for a period of one year upon opening the account, free concierge services, preferential FD rates, and a customer segment upgrade. The new frontline offer is open to Kuwaiti employees working in the Fire Brigade, National Guard, Civil Aviation (including Kuwait Airways) and in the following Ministries: Health, Defense, Information and Interior.

Salary package - exclusive offer

As part of the vast range of services and benefits available to Salary Account customers, Gulf Bank offers its clients the opportunity to choose the most appropriate benefits from a wide selection of attractive options. With the 2021 Kuwaiti Salary Offer, new customers who transfer their salaries to Gulf Bank are automatically enrolled in the monthly draws, giving them the chance to win cash prizes of up to 12 times their salary. Customers are also enrolled in a yearly draw of Kuwait's largest salary prize, a cash prize of up to 100 times the winner's salary.

Frontline workers salary package

Gulf Bank recently tailored a special offer for employed Kuwaiti frontline workers who wish to transfer their salaries to Gulf Bank. Upon transferring their salaries, these clients will immediately receive a set of benefits, including a cash gift of KD 200, or an inter-



US moves closer to retaliation over hacking as cyber woes grow

WASHINGTON: A senior US official said Friday the Biden administration is close to a decision on retaliation for state-sponsored hacking as fears grew over the fallout from the latest of two major cyberattacks. The official said the White House was working closely with the private sector to ramp up cyber defenses following the attacks which targeted Microsoft Exchange servers and SolarWinds security software, potentially compromising thousands of government and private computer networks. US officials had previously hinted at moves against Russia, which has been linked to the massive SolarWinds hack that shook the government and corporate security last year. The latest comments suggested forthcoming actions.

"You can expect further announcements on that in weeks, not months," the senior official said, in reference to SolarWinds, in a briefing with reporters on the two hacking incidents. The official, who asked not to be identified, said federal agencies had made progress in patching systems at nine federal agencies affected by the SolarWinds attack. But an urgent effort is underway to remedy the Microsoft Exchange hack, which opened security holes that are actively being exploited by cybercriminals and others. To help find solutions, "for the first time we've invited private sector companies to participate" in key national security meetings on the attacks, the official said. The response "is still evolving," according to the official, who noted: "We really have a short window to get vulnerable servers patched, measured in hours, not days."

New ransomware emerges

The comments came as a new strain of ransomware has emerged which exploits a security flaw in Microsoft Exchange servers, signaling potentially damaging consequences from the high-profile hack. Microsoft and other security researchers said the new ransomware dubbed "DearCry" was showing up in servers affected by the breach attributed to a Chinese hacker group. "We have detected and are now blocking a new family of ransomware being used after an initial compromise of unpatched on-premises Exchange Servers," said a tweet from Microsoft Security Intelligence. Other researchers including Michael Gillespie, founder of the ID Ransomware service, noted the new strain of malware on Thursday, which could lead to a new wave of attacks that encrypt computer systems and seek to extract payments from operators. This is the latest sign that the security flaw which became public this month could open the door to a variety of hackers, cybercriminals and cyberespionage operators. "While patching to prevent compromises will be easy, remediating any systems that have already been compromised will not," said Brett Callow of the security firm Emsisoft. "At this point, it's absolutely critical that governments quickly come up with a strategy to help organizations secure their Exchange servers and remediate any compromises before an already bad situation becomes even worse." — AFP



Mohammad Al-Qattan

Business

Japan-trained Darfur rebel chief turned Sudan finance minister

Ibrahim holds the keys to Sudan's economic future

KHARTOUM: Sudan's new finance minister, Gibril Ibrahim, is a veteran rebel leader who fought against marginalization under ousted president Omar Al-Bashir. Now, the Japan-educated former professor holds the keys to the country's economic future.

Ibrahim, 66, has for nearly a decade led the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), a key rebel group in Sudan's western Darfur region that played a major role in the bitter conflict which erupted there in 2003. A polyglot and holder of a PhD in economics from Japan, he now is part of a government tasked with steering the country through a transitional period following Bashir's ouster in April 2019.

"Ibrahim's political expertise played a role in choosing him as finance minister," said Mohamed Latif, a Sudanese analyst and columnist. "His appointment also served as assurance that the government is committing to the peace deal with rebel groups." In October, Sudan's transitional government signed a peace deal with key rebel groups including JEM which stipulated giving rebels top positions in the government and in a parliament that is yet to be formed. Ibrahim's appointment came as Sudan faces daunting economic challenges, including galloping inflation of over 300 percent and severe bread and fuel shortages that have triggered protests in several parts of the country.

Darfur conflict

Ibrahim was born in 1955 to a family from the African Zaghawa ethnic group in North Darfur. He earned a

bachelor's degree in business administration from Khartoum University before receiving a scholarship in Japan, where he completed his master's degree and doctorate in economics and became a fluent Japanese speaker. He also taught in universities in Saudi Arabia and set up several private air and cargo transport companies in Sudan, the United Arab Emirates and Chad.

As a young man, he joined the Muslim Brotherhood group and was once affiliated with the Islamist movement that brought Bashir to power in a 1989 military coup. He later turned against the movement to join the Darfur insurgency led by African minority rebels who complained of discrimination under Bashir's Arab-dominated government. Though largely focused on his career in trade and economy, Ibrahim says his interest in politics goes back to the days he "was a high school student".

"I even led a Muslim student union when I was studying in Japan," he told France 24 in a 2016 interview. He said it was the marginalization of the people of Darfur—where a conflict from 2003 killed 300,000 people and displaced 2.5 million—that pushed him to play a more active role in Sudan's politics. "It is not possible for any sane person with a conscience to stand idle before all this," he said.

Political focus

Ibrahim officially joined JEM in 2002 as an economic adviser to the movement which was founded by his brother, Khalil. In 2006, he moved to London and



KHARTOUM: Sudanese Minister of Finance Gibril (Jibril) Ibrahim speaking during a press conference in the capital Khartoum. — AFP

held the position of the movement's external affairs officer. He became JEM's leader after the 2011 killing of his brother in an air strike in North Kordofan, central Sudan.

"His leadership is marked by expanding JEM's political role and the diminishing of its fighting edge," said analyst Al-Nour Ahmed. "Khalil had more experience in armed fighting but Gibril was more focused on politics." In 2015, the movement suffered heavy losses in what became known as "the battle of Goz Dongo" in South Darfur that saw hundreds of its fighters captured by

Bashir's forces. Ibrahim however expanded JEM's presence across Sudan, establishing several bases outside of Darfur. The movement also took part in several political coalitions including Nidaa Al-Sudan and the Sudanese Revolutionary Front, both opposed to Bashir's rule.

Future ambitions

Under the October peace deal, JEM completely laid down their guns, turning from an armed rebel group into a political movement. And as finance minister, Ibrahim has promised "not to sleep" until he ends shortages that have engulfed the country in recent years.

Shortly after his appointment, Sudan announced it was ditching its fixed exchange rate and adopting a managed float in line with an IMF program. The bold move, intended to help fix Sudan's battered economy, came despite the risk of sending prices up and fanning popular discontent. "The success of his finance policies is directly linked to keeping the Sudanese streets calm," said senior JEM adviser Gabriel Adam, who has worked closely with Ibrahim. Ibrahim urged people to endure the impact of the policy change, saying it "will require a high patriotic spirit" and "cooperation". But the veteran rebel leader has his sights set on a bigger, longer-term goal beyond the transitional period. "We want to become the biggest party in Sudan," he said in a November speech at JEM's headquarters in Khartoum. "We have to prepare for the upcoming elections. We want people to give us the mandate to rule Sudan... and to make real change." — AFP

NBK Money Markets report

Currencies	Previous Week Levels				This Week's Expected Range		3-Month Forward
	Open	Low	High	Close	Minimum	Maximum	
EUR	1.1920	1.1989	1.1834	1.1952	1.1750	1.2150	1.1975
GBP	1.3835	1.4004	1.3798	1.3922	1.3725	1.4120	1.3926
JPY	108.40	109.23	108.29	109.00	108.00	111.00	108.90
CHF	0.9294	0.9375	0.9233	0.9297	0.9200	0.9495	0.9272

Biden signs relief package, pushes for vaccine eligibility

KUWAIT: President Joe Biden signed the highly anticipated \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package into law, representing a drastic measure by his administration with one of the largest stimulus packages in US history. It was reported that the first round of payments of up to \$1,400 may begin delivery as soon as this weekend. Among the benefits in the "American Rescue Package" bill is the authorization of a third round of one-time stimulus payments of up to \$1,400, an extension of unemployment support to those still jobless, and changes to the tax code benefiting families with children. The benefits including federal unemployment insurance payments will remain at \$300 per week and will continue through September 6 - down from \$400 per week. More than 19 million were still receiving jobless benefits as of mid-February.

Republicans have heavily criticized the bill, notably arguing that only 9 percent of the funds go directly toward COVID-19 relief. In response, democrats argued that the bill takes a more well-rounded look at the entire economy and the pandemic's effect on it. Nevertheless, the plan has voter approval ratings of around 60 percent and was celebrated by the IMF which sees the package expanding US GDP by 5-6 percent over the next three years. The recovery, according to IMF spokesman Gerry Rice, can lead to "potentially significant positive spillovers in terms of global growth." He explained, "Most countries should benefit from stronger US demand... so this will help global growth and recovery."

Addressing the country a year after COVID-19 halted the US economy, President Biden announced he will order states to allow all adults to receive vaccines by May 1st, adding Americans can again celebrate Independence Day together by July 4th. He announced his goal of vaccinating 100 million Americans within his first 100 days in office would now be met on day 60.

Steady inflation

Consumer prices in the US increased solidly in February alongside a rise in prices of gasoline, however underlying inflation remained tame amid weak demand for airline travel and hotel accommodation. The consumer price index increased 0.4 percent last month following a 0.3 percent gain in January, boosted by a 6.4 percent advance in gasoline prices which accounts for more than half the gain in CPI. On a yearly basis, CPI climbed to a 1-year high of 1.7 percent after rising 1.4 percent in January. Looking at the core figure which excludes volatile food and energy items, CPI nudged just 0.1 percent after remaining unchanged for two straight months, and 1.3 percent on a yearly basis. Looking forward, what is called the "base effect" has come into play which means the headline rate will be pushed up due to sharp declines at the start of the pandemic which will now influence year-on-year calculations.

The US Federal Reserve tracks the core personal consumption expenditure price index for its inflation target, which currently sits at 1.5 percent. Recently, the US central bank signaled it would tolerate higher prices on the road to economic recovery. However, the fear moving ahead is that the central bank would be forced to act sooner than expected. The expansionary monetary policy illustrated by President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion relief package is a primary concern for fueling inflation. This, coupled with the Fed's monthly bond purchases and a

spike in Treasury yields are all worrying indicators for the market. However, plenty of slack remains with around 19 million Americans on unemployment benefits. Fed Chair Jerome Powell has attempted to calm markets from such inflationary fears, indicating policymakers have no intention in reducing stimulus or raising rates until the economic recovery and more specifically employment has recovered. The central bank will allow inflation to run its course, acknowledging the rise in inflation we are likely to see this year is to be expected and is merely "transitory" due to the severe drops in 2020.

Market reaction

Tame inflation readings out of the US eased prior concerns of rising prices, sending the dollar on a slight decline marking its first weekly dip after rallying a total of 1.81 percent the two weeks prior. The safe-haven metal gold fell below the \$1,700 mark though later recovered, while prices for 10-year Treasury bonds continued to decline sending the corresponding yield above 1.60 percent. On Wall Street, the S&P 500 ended the week 0.48 percent higher after reaching new record highs. Tesla shares gained over 4.7 percent while Apple and Amazon rose over 1.5 percent, sending the Nasdaq on a rally for the week.

ECB surprises with faster bond buys

The European Central Bank announced plans to purchase bonds at a "significantly higher pace" over the next quarter during its meeting last week. According to ECB President Christine Lagarde, the move was motivated by the recent rise in yields and worries that "headline inflation is likely to increase in the coming months." The decisions reveal the difference in strategies between the ECB and the FED, with the FED currently not concerned with rising bond yields and inflation. This year, the ECB expects the annualized CPI rate to hover near 1.5 percent, adding that it may rise to 2 percent on a temporary basis. As expected, the central bank left its deposit rate at -0.5 percent and reiterated that changes to its €1.85tn pandemic emergency purchase program will depend on its progress in stimulating a recovery in output and inflation.

Vaccine rollout setbacks are still a major struggle for the euro-area, lagging well behind the US and the UK. Multiple factors including lower supplies, production issues, and a row with AstraZeneca have led to the EU receiving far fewer vaccines than it initially ordered. China and Russia have now stepped in, with the Prime Minister of Hungary ordering 5 million doses of China's Sinopharm vaccine and 2 million doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, fast-tracked their approval, and began administering both last month.

Oil signals recovery

So far this year, oil prices have rallied more than 30 percent amid output cuts from OPEC+ members and a steady global economic recovery. Even the more recent reports of a buildup in crude inventory have done little to send prices lower. US commercial crude oil inventories increased by 13.8 million barrels from the previous week. At 498.4 million barrels, inventories are about 6 percent above the five year average for this time of year. Additionally, the American Petroleum Institute reported an estimated crude oil inventory build of an astounding 12.79 million barrels for the week to March 5, versus expectations of just \$16,000 barrels. Nevertheless, the recent rally spurred by OPEC+'s decision to delay production cuts for another month was maintained alongside a global pickup in demand. The price for Brent crude touched a high of \$71.38 last week.

Kuwait

Kuwaiti dinar USD/KWD closed last week at 0.30220.

Google slams Microsoft over media payments

SAN FRANCISCO: Google on Friday took aim at Microsoft, accusing its technology rival of "distraction" for siding with governments seeking to force tech platforms to pay media organizations for news content. In a blog post, Google argued that Microsoft was trying to divert attention from a potentially devastating attack on Exchange emails servers by hackers taking advantage of software vulnerabilities.

The comments came amid a heated battle of words over efforts in Australia and elsewhere to require digital services to negotiate payments for news content. Google and Facebook have resisted mandatory payments, while Microsoft has taken a more collaborative stance.

Microsoft president Brad Smith, in a letter to a congressional subcommittee hearing, blamed Google's business model for "devouring" ad revenue on which news groups rely. Google senior vice president of global affairs Kent Walker fired back in the blog post, saying of Microsoft: "They are now making self-serving claims and are even willing to break the way the open web works in an effort to undercut a rival."

Walker added, "This important debate should be about the substance of the issue, and not derailed by naked corporate opportunism." In his letter, Smith lauded the role news organizations play in defending democracy and contended that the "internet gutted the already ailing local news business by devouring advertising revenue and luring away paid subscribers."

Microsoft has lobbied for other countries to follow Australia's lead in calling for news outlets to be paid for stories published online, a move opposed by Facebook and Google. "News today is part of the technology ecosystem, and all of us who participate in this ecosystem have both an opportunity and responsibility to help journalism flourish," Smith said. —AFP

Digital transformation and sustainability performance

By Lisa Johnston

This past year, industries from all corners of the globe have experienced a challenge that's unique in scale and scope. The pandemic presented an immediate threat to business continuity, but it also served as a catalyst for rapid digital change. Not only has this change helped businesses conquer near term challenges like the pandemic, but it has also opened the doors to an intelligence revolution that will enable even the most unlikely organizations to tackle global issues such as climate change and social inequality.



It's difficult to overestimate just how much businesses have had to adapt in recent months. Never before have eight billion people worked together to lock down economies, close borders and restrict movement in the interests of a common good. According to Science Magazine, human-related seismic vibration - a useful proxy for human activity across the globe - reduced by half in 2020. It's also well publicized that gas emissions reduced by 17 percent at the height of global lockdowns. These rapid reversals truly are unprecedented, and they create a once in a generation platform from which to pursue real change.

Technology, the great enabler

The so-called "new normal" has been a moving target since the early weeks of the pandemic, but as businesses and individuals have adapted to new ways of working, they've found their own priorities shift. Even with vaccines currently being distributed, it's hard to envisage things going back to how they were before. The most outstanding business leaders are proactive and forward-thinking, only allowing themselves to see opportunities where others might see obstacles. It's now, in the face of a global crisis, those leaders are beginning to realize a sustainable future is possible through data-driven digital transformation.

It's well documented that digital technology is already helping to cut carbon emissions by up to 15 percent in energy, manufacturing, agriculture, building infrastructure, services, transport and traffic management. This offset is equal to the combined carbon footprints of the EU and US combined. Similarly, when the World Economic Forum partnered with PwC to look at Fourth Industrial Revolution technology applications across the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, they found that technology can have a high impact on at least ten of them. If that's correct, it means that 70 percent of 169 targets underpinning the world's sustainability goals could be met using existing technology appli-

cations. However, the next ten years, which many have dubbed the 'Decade of Action', will be critical.

From footprint to handprint

Four of the most common drivers behind sustainability in 2021 are climate change, circularity, the transition to renewable energy, and increased transparency and traceability across supply chains. However, if companies are to tackle these difficult challenges, they must first establish the scope of the problem. In other words, businesses need to gain a solid understanding of their own environmental footprint before they can take action to mitigate it. During its own period of introspection, which included making its own GHG emissions profile a matter of public record, AVEVA realised its contributions alone wouldn't be enough to tip the sustainability scale. The company's most significant opportunity lay in how it could affect other organizations' sustainability journeys through the technology it had developed. In other words, focus moved from footprint to handprint. With this in mind, AVEVA has also joined The UN Global Compact to share and collaborate with businesses on the world stage in the pursuit of sustainability objectives.

Sustainability for the many

Businesses have countless opportunities to further their sustainability goals, many of them hidden in plain sight. With the application of new technologies and a data-centric approach to problem-solving, even the most unlikely candidates from a diverse range of sectors can turn the tide. Take National Grid UK, for instance. The company partnered with AVEVA in pursuit of a digital solution to help them preserve the reliability of their network while coping with the intermittent nature of renewable energy. Today, the business can process up to 1.2 million data points which are refreshed every five seconds, allowing it to optimize energy traffic in real-time.

Nava Raipur, India's first new-build smart city, is another example of how digital transformation can enable social, environmental and economic value. It uses AVEVA's Unified Operations Center to streamline city operations, minimize risk and lower the cost of operating the city's infrastructure. This real-time management results in more efficient use of resources such as water, street-lighting, electrical and sewerage services, whilst also ensuring the people of Nava Raipur enjoy safe, green and reliable living standards. The technology has been instrumental during lockdown, allowing local authorities to keep civic services running smoothly without putting staff at risk.

The past year may have been one of the most difficult on record, but in pushing businesses to adapt and embrace technologies that they might otherwise have overlooked, new economic, social and sustainability goals can - and will - be realized. *Note: Lisa Johnston is Chief Marketing and Sustainability Officer, AVEVA*

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Lifestyle | Features

Arab troubadour **Madfai** longs to get back on stage

The Arab world's favorite troubadour Ilham Al-Madfai, who last year had to perform in an empty Roman amphitheatre and scrub concert dates across Europe and the Gulf, can't wait to get back on stage. Unveiling his latest work in Amman where he has lived since 1994, the Iraqi star widely known as simply Ilham has tried to break free of the shackles imposed by Covid-19 with a song of hope entitled "After the Absence", taken from a poem by Omar Sari, a young Jordanian.

"After the absence, you must come back, your dream is a cloud, your sadness is a mirage," the 79-year-old veteran performer with the world-weary voice sings, strumming a guitar.

"Come back tenderly, your voice rings in my ears, leave behind the sadness, forget the past," read the lyrics of the song posted this week on YouTube, in which Madfai is accompanied by young Iraqi-Egyptian female vocalist Nadin Al-Khalidi, also on guitar. Ilham was a dashing-handsome rebel in his younger days, replacing the stringed oud and qanun, the flute and violin with electric guitar, piano, drums and saxophone, to the delight of young Arabs if not musical purists. That dates back to his time in London in the 1960s where he had been sent to study architecture like his two brothers and their sister.

Later, he blended in the traditional instruments in a fusion of the East and West, an Arab jazz crossover with a flavor of Andalusia, accompanying European songs with Middle Eastern sounds and also vice versa.

'The Baghdad Beatle'

"In Arabic, the instrumental intros are endless and the melodies sad," the musician nicknamed "The Baghdad Beatle" told AFP. "Me, I shortened the opening and chose the instrument which adds an upbeat rhythm and stays in the listener's ear," Madfai explained.

The lyrics of most of his songs, apart from those he writes himself, come from ancient poetry and Iraqi folk music.

"I interpret them by mixing in musical influences that I've discovered," said Madfai, whose work has inspired a generation of modern artists in the region. "All I've done is reinvent old Iraqi songs for them to survive the passage of time."

Madfai, who grew up in a house filled with music, hopes he helped "save the heritage of Iraqi songs from oblivion".

"Men, women, children, everybody would sing at our house. I grew up nurtured by love of music," he fondly recalled, harking to the Baghdad of the 1950s as a cultural oasis where he said as many as 85 women singers alone performed in different clubs.



Iraqi musician Ilham Al-Madfai is pictured with his guitar in the ruins of the Amman Citadel in the Jordanian capital on March 6, 2021.—AFP

In his apartment in the upmarket district of Abdoun, among the books, paintings and a large portrait of his wife Hala who died in 2014, Madfai spends his time sketching, composing music, writing poetry and, of course, singing.

But he is anxious to spread his wings again and get back on stage before live audiences, and also longs for his old haunts in Baghdad.

"We must carry on singing whatever happens to send a message of hope to the world, because music is the univer-

sal language of the people," he said. "It crosses borders and reaches all parts of the world."

From Albert Hall to Baghdad café

Coronavirus lockdowns and his isolation have left him frustrated. "If the pandemic carries on much longer, I'll open the window and sing from the balcony like Europeans have done."

Last May, Madfai and his band gave a closed-door concert at Amman's 6,000-capacity Roman amphitheatre, broadcast

on Iraqi and Jordanian television.

The musical legend who now also holds Jordanian citizenship had to call off concert dates in 2020 in Britain, Germany, Sweden, Italy and the Gulf. He has crossed the globe and performed at prestigious venues such as London's Royal Albert Hall and Queen Elizabeth Hall as well as Le Trianon theatre in Paris, but his heart yearns to sing again in Baghdad's modest Al-Zahawi café.

"We've all left our country for a variety of reasons. It's true that I live in Jordan but I remain an Iraqi attached in every way to my native land."

Al-Zahawi, established in 1917, sits on a corner of the Iraqi capital's famed Moutanabi Street where book fairs are held every Friday. It owes its own spot on Baghdad's cultural map to legends of the traditional Iraqi "maqam" music such as Mohammad al-Qubani and Youssef Omar.

"It's on this little Moutanabi Street, where writers, intellectuals, musicians and artists of all religions cross paths, and which breathes culture, that I dream to go to and sing again after the pandemic," said Madfai, who last played back home three years ago. — Agence France-Presse



Kate Winslet goes fossil hunting

Kate Winslet has become an avid fossil hunter. The Oscar-winning actress has developed a passion for fossil hunting after working with a paleontologist to prepare for her role in 'Ammonite', the romantic drama film written and directed by Francis Lee. Kate, 45 - who plays real-life paleontologist Mary Anning in the film - said: "I worked with a wonderful paleontologist and he knows every nook and cranny. I did also find a piece of an ichthyosaur's skull and was able to identify it. I was very proud of myself. "It was really exciting. It was almost at the waterline as the tide had gone out - tucked away in a rock pool."

Kate stars in the movie alongside Saoirse Ronan, and the plot centers on their relationship. Despite developing a passion for fossil hunting, Kate admitted she struggled with some of the outfits she was asked to wear, revealing she refused to wear a corset under her period costume. She told the Sunday Mirror newspaper: "I just know that with all the bending and twisting and heavy lifting on beaches, there's just no way that Mary wore a corset. "We went down this road of putting her in work trousers underneath her dress. "We also put her in a chunky jumper that made me so boiling hot. In the end I had it without the sleeves."

Meanwhile, Kate previously admitted that comments about her weight damaged her self-confidence earlier in her career. The acclaimed actress revealed she questioned whether she was ready to deal with scrutiny that comes with working in Hollywood. She explained: "It damaged my confidence.

Model regrets lack of control over career

Rosie Huntington-Whiteley was told she would stop getting work by her mid-20s. The 33-year-old model - who got her first fashion job when she was just 16 - recalled how one of her bookers advised her to go back to school in order to have an alternative to fall back on because her career wouldn't last for long.

She said: "I remember very early on a booker of mine said to me, 'Rosie, my one piece of advice to you would be to make sure you save your money and go back to school at some point, because it's more than likely you won't be working by your mid-twenties.'"

The 'Transformers: Dark of the Moon' star admitted she felt frustrated by how lit-

BTS WINS BIG AT KIDS CHOICE AWARDS, VP HARRIS MAKES APPEARANCE

BTS were among the big winners at the Kids' Choice Awards this weekend. The chart-topping K-pop group claimed three gongs during the remote ceremony, including Favorite Music Group, Favorite Song and Favorite Global Music Star. Other big-name winners included Ariana Grande, who was named the Favorite Female Artist, while Justin Bieber was awarded the Favorite Male Artist gong. Ariana and Justin also won a joint award, as they were given the Favorite Music Collaboration accolade for their track 'Stuck with U'. The song was released as a charity single in May and was co-written by their manager Scooter Braun.

Elsewhere, Millie Bobby Brown was handed two awards, including Favorite Female TV Star and Favorite Movie Actress. The 17-year-old star is best known for playing the role of Eleven in the hit Netflix series 'Stranger Things', but she's also starred in and produced the mystery film 'Enola Holmes', in which she played the teenage sister of Sherlock Holmes.

'Stranger Things' - which also features the likes of Finn Wolfhard and Noah Schnapp - was named the Favourite Family TV Show at the event. Meanwhile, Robert Downey Jr won the award for Favorite Movie Actor, while 'Wonder Woman 1984' - which saw Gal Gadot reprise her role as the iconic superhero - was named the Favorite Movie. Other award winners included Anna Kendrick, who claimed the gong for Favorite Voice From an Animated Movie, while Charli D'Amelia won the prize for Favorite Female Social Star. The remote ceremony was hosted by Keenan Thompson and also featured an appearance from US Vice-President Kamala Harris, who dedicated



the Generation Change Award to all of the "young leaders" across the country.

She said: "Thank you for being so incredible, and for all that you do, and will do. From social distancing to remote learning, you've been through a lot this year. "But through it all, you young leaders have really stepped up."

Full list of award winners

Favorite Female Artist: Ariana Grande
Favorite Male Artist: Justin Bieber
Favorite Music Group: BTS
Favorite Music Collaboration: Ariana Grande and Justin Bieber, 'Stuck With You'
Favorite Song: BTS, 'Dynamite'
Favorite Global Music Star: BTS
Favorite Kids TV Show: 'Alexa & Katie'
Favorite Family TV Show: 'Stranger Things'

Favorite Reality Show: 'America's Got Talent'
Favorite Animated Series: 'SpongeBob Square Pants'

Favorite Female TV Star: Millie Bobby Brown
Favorite Male TV Star: Jace Norman
Favorite Movie: 'Wonder Woman 1984'

Favorite Movie Actress: Millie Bobby Brown
Favorite Movie Actor: Robert Downey Jr.
Favorite Animated Movie: 'Soul'

Favorite Voice From an Animated Movie: Anna Kendrick
Favorite Female Social Star: Charli D'Amelia
Favorite Male Social Star: James Charles
Favorite Female Sports Star: Simone Biles
Favorite Male Sports Star: LeBron James
Favorite Video Game: 'Among Us'

le control she had early in her career, which ultimately led to her lingerie collaboration with Marks & Spencer.

She said: "I'd go to a casting, show somebody my portfolio and then just be waiting for the call back. And I did not like that. And so gradually, from my early twenties, I started finding ways to be like, 'Well, how can I pull back a bit of control here and what can I put in?'"

But Rosie insisted she isn't a control freak. She said: "I remember doing an

interview and someone asked me, 'Are you a control freak?' And I was taken aback by that because I thought, No, I would never consider myself to be a control freak at all.

"Actually, I like people around me to bring their own thing to the table, I don't like to micromanage people, but deep down I do believe that you are in control of your own destiny, your own mood, your own success."

Though Rosie admitted she's had a lot of "good fortune", she believes her success is down to hard work. She told ELLE magazine: "I'm hesitant to say I've worked really, really hard, I've had so much good fortune and my work rewards me in such a wonderful way.

"My mum drilled into me from a young age that life doesn't hand you stuff on a plate. It might, but that's if you're lucky. And even then you've got to work really hard to make sure that something else will come your way. She taught all of us that, but especially me and my sister."

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Royal son rift would sadden Princess Di

The late Princess Diana would be "heartbroken" by the rift between her two sons, it has been claimed.

Paul Burrell - who was the princess' butler and confidante for 10 years until her death in 1997 - thinks it is "desperately sad" that relations between Princes William and Harry have broken down and thinks their mother would have been distraught to see the "division" between them. He said: "It's just so desperately sad that Harry and William are clearly so detached - both emotionally and geographically. "William will be reeling over how things have turned out. "And Diana would be absolutely heartbroken that it's come to this... this division between them."

Though he thinks Diana would have backed Harry and his wife Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, in their decision to quit royal life and move to America, Paul doesn't think it's right to compare the two women's experiences, insisting his former boss had things far more difficult.

He said: "There are some similarities in that both Meghan and Diana clearly had tension and issues within the royal family - both were strong women who wanted to stand their ground. "Diana would be proud that Harry and Meghan decided to leave and pave a new way for themselves.

"But that's where it ends. Meghan has a tiny fraction of what Diana went through. She was in the royal family for 20 months; Diana had it for 16 years!"

"Meghan had it far easier than Diana did. "On her first royal engagement, the Queen attended with Meghan and showed her the ropes. "At 36, Meghan knew what she was getting into - Diana didn't as a teenager. The royals welcomed Meghan with open arms - with Diana they didn't."

Harry and Meghan's bombshell interview with Oprah Winfrey aired this week, but Paul claimed Diana herself rejected an approach from the media mogul in favour of her famous tell-all chat with 'Panorama' host Martin Bashir.

He told Closer magazine: "Oprah came to Kensington Palace in 1995. "She wanted to secure an interview with Diana, and while Diana loved having her for tea, she didn't want to go down that path. "She politely declined and did BBC 'Panorama' instead. "Oprah' was an American commercial chat show - Diana knew that if she was going to do an interview, she wanted to be taken seriously and do it on British soil."

Sarah Harding fights breast cancer

Sarah Harding can't "look at herself in the mirror any more" after her mastectomy. The Girls Aloud hitmaker had to have her breast removed as she continues to fight her breast cancer, which she was diagnosed with in summer, and she has admitted the devastating fight - which has since spread to other parts of her body - has left her unable to recognize herself.

She said: "Now there's just a bunch of stitches where my breast used to be. As much as I know it had to happen and I want to be brave, I can't look at myself in the mirror any more. I can't face it. On top of everything else, I just don't look like me anymore. I don't recognize myself. It's very hard to wake up every morning knowing that a part of me is missing; that part of my womanhood is gone. The loss of it breaks my heart. Some women can have reconstruction, but I know I'd just end up back in intensive care because I'm too ill. I suppose it had crossed my mind at one point, the idea of reconstruction, but now I have to be realistic. I have to let go."

And the 39-year-old singer admits she "screamed the place down" when she woke up after the surgery and felt lucky her mother was there to be with her.



Writing in her memoir, Hear Me Out, as shared with The Times magazine, she explained: "The mastectomy was something I'd hoped wouldn't have to happen, but looking back, I suppose it was inevitable. I remember the surgeons saying they would make a drawing of what parts of my breast needed to be taken away, and it was virtually all of it.

"They also took a skin graft from my back, somehow managing to work around my tattoos. Coming round from that operation was one of the worst moments of my life. I'm so grateful that Mum was there waiting for me because when I woke up I screamed the place down."

Lifestyle | Features

Bloom boom: Malaysians get passionate about pot plants



This picture taken on March 8, 2021 shows Zalina Bakar and Daud Kasim inspecting caladium plants for sale at their nursery in Sungai Besar outside Kuala Lumpur. —AFP photos

Learning to tell your elephant ears from your flamingo flowers has become the latest virus lockdown escape in Malaysia, where houseplants are very much in season. Collectors are searching out specimens with intricate patterns in a dazzling array of reds, yellows and greens, and sharing their best on social media. "It's like looking at a painting," collector Leister Soon told AFP, admiring the broad-leaf caladium - elephant ear plants - at his Kuala Lumpur home.

"Taking care of plants meant that I can divert my

attention - (it is) better than watching the number of COVID cases going up." The plants are known as "keladi" in the local Malay language, but the trend has grown to encompass other species, such as anthuriums - known as flamingo flower, or laceleaf - and alocasias, whose varieties include the silver dragon.

Once relatively cheap, prices surged last year when lockdowns confined Malaysians to their homes, and many collectors started posting images of their favorite plants on social media. While some still cost as little as 20 ringgit (\$4.80), the rarest can now fetch up



This picture taken on March 7, 2021 shows Leister Soon pruning his plants in his home in Kuala Lumpur.

to 6,000 ringgit each. Soon says he spent more than 20,000 ringgit on plants in the past year alone.

"During the lockdown, people were at home thinking about how to beautify their homes," nursery owner Daud Kasim told AFP in Sungai Besar, 100 km northwest of Kuala Lumpur. "They could look at these plants - and their stress would go away." An avid collector himself, Daud said he started selling keladi plants in late 2018 but demand exploded during the pandemic.

Nearly half of his nursery's inventory is now made

up of such plants, with foreign varieties from countries such as Thailand, China, the United States and the Netherlands. Standing among thousands of potted specimens, Daud said the trend was here to stay, even as authorities gradually begin lifting restrictions. Malaysia first imposed curbs last year shortly after the start of the pandemic and had to implement restrictions again in January when a new wave hit, but the outbreak is slowing. Health authorities have reported more than 300,000 infections and over 1,000 deaths. — AFP



A photo taken on Feb 23, 2021 in Florence shows Italian criminal lawyer Alessandro Traversi with a facsimile reproduction of the "Book of the Nail" (Libro del Chiodo). —AFP photos



A visitor views the exhibition "Dante 700 - A portrait of Dante and the poet's places in Massima Sestini's photographs" on Feb 23, 2021 at the Santa Maria Novella church in Florence.

Can Dante have justice, 700 years after his death?

Dante's "Divine Comedy," considered one of the world's greatest literary works, came to light after a miscarriage of justice which Italian legal experts now want to correct - some seven centuries on. The man whom Italians call the "Supreme Poet" was exiled from his native Florence in January 1302, after finding himself on the losing side of a feud between the city's "White" and "Black" political factions.

"Our objective is to assess, in the light of new evidence that may emerge, if these (three) verdicts (against Dante) could be the subject of a retrial, or ideally be quashed," criminal lawyer Alessandro Traversi told AFP. To do that, Traversi has invited fellow lawyers, senior judges and prosecutors - plus the descendants of both Dante and the judge who banished him from Florence - to reopen the case at a May 21 conference.

Count Sperello di Serego Alighieri, an astronomer with a direct bloodline to Dante, will take part alongside the scion of Cante de Gabrielli, the judge who exiled the poet. "I find it interesting to review this affair," said the judge's descendant, Antoine de Gabrielli. But he added that he would not seek to uphold his ancestor's position that Dante was guilty. "I'm not going to fight," the Frenchman told AFP.

Even if a full-blown retrial is unlikely to materialize, given all the practical and legal issues, Traversi stressed the value of a symbolic gesture of reparation towards Dante, who "legally speaking, for the City of Florence is still a person with a criminal record".

Burnt at the stake

As well as a poet, Dante was a politician who served as one of Florence's nine elected rulers, or priors, for a regular two-month term in 1300. It was this post that landed him in trouble. When the "Blacks" faction retook Florence in 1301 with the help of Charles of Valois, brother of King Philip IV of France, and the support of

Pope Boniface VIII, Dante and other "White" priors were tried in absentia.

In Jan 1302, Cante de Gabrielli found them guilty of corruption and political patronage, gave them three days to pay a huge fine and banned them from public office. Dante and the others were also stripped of their assets. Two months later, de Gabrielli sentenced them to be burnt at the stake if they tried to return to Florence.

In 1315, after Dante refused the terms of an amnesty, another judge changed the sentence to death by beheading, also for the poet's sons. Dante survived, roaming from one Italian city to another. Relatively little is known about his life, but he is believed to have completed the "Divine Comedy", an imaginary journey through hell, purgatory and heaven, shortly before his death in 1321. Exile is a major theme in the book, which also offered Dante the chance for some personal score-settling: in it, he made sure to find a place in hell for Boniface VIII and his other earthly foes.

Political trial

Experts have long agreed that Dante was the victim of biased judges. But Alessandro Barbero, Italy's most famous medieval historian, recently suggested that certain charges against him may have had some substance. Dante definitely did not take bribes, but it is "not exactly impossible" to imagine he exploited his role in office to favor his political allies, Barbero wrote in a recent biography. Traversi hopes to set the record straight on this - and dispel any doubts about Dante's rectitude. His conference will be one of several events honoring the poet on the 700th anniversary of his death - most set to be celebrated in a rather subdued fashion due to coronavirus restrictions. "We hope to do it in person, but we are ready to do it remotely if necessary," the Florentine lawyer said.

Margherita Cassano, a judge from the Court of Cassation, Italy's supreme court, will draft a final report from the conference, and all deliberations will be published in a book, Traversi said. However, Serego Alighieri - the descendant who not only carries Dante's name, but also shares with him the distinctive family trait of an aquiline nose - noted it all came a little late. "Dante was convicted, he went into exile, he was exiled all his life, he never returned to Florence," he told AFP. "Anything that can be done for him (today) will not change any of that." —AFP

KOSOVO'S ABUSED 'RESTAURANT BEARS' MOVE TO GREENER PASTURES

Having only just woken up from hibernation, a brown bear named Ero lazily strolls between the trees under a snow-capped mountain in central Kosovo, enjoying life alongside his chubby partner Mira. Yet just eight years ago, he was a so-called "restaurant bear" - chained up in front of an eatery, forced to drink alcohol and serve as entertainment for customers in a bizarre and cruel practice that was popular in Kosovo after its late 1990s war with Serbia.

Ero is one of nearly 20 bears rescued from that abuse who now live in a rolling 16-hectare refuge near the capital Pristina, replete with trees, berry bushes, ponds and artificial dens. Named the Pristina Bear Sanctuary, it is a rare conservation success story in Kosovo, where poverty, corruption and political crises are still overwhelming the former Serbian province 13 years after it declared independence.

That leaves the environment low on the scale of priorities, with plastic bags a common sight along rivers and roadsides, while coal plants pump black smog into the sky outside Pristina. "From the beginning, it was clear to us that saving bears was only the first phase of a larger project, to raise awareness of the need to defend the wild," said Afrim Mahmuti, director of sanctuary. "Kosovo belongs to us, its environment, too, we are responsible for it," he added.

Tense rescues

The story of the sanctuary began after a group of Austrian soldiers deployed as part of KFOR - a NATO force in Kosovo - were shocked by the sight of bears trapped in cages for the amusement of restaurant patrons. They alerted their embassy in 2011, who then urged local authorities to stop the practice. Eventually it was agreed that Austrian NGO Four Paws would create a refuge on land provided by the municipality of Pristina. The harder part turned out to be rescuing the bears from their owners. The tense operations were carried out under the protection of special police forces supported by KFOR soldiers, recalled Dardan Gashi, who was minister of the environment at the time and a key champion of the project. "Some of the owners were members of the former (pro-independence) guerrillas, they thought they were invulnerable and imagined we wouldn't dare go there," he told AFP. In one case, an owner "killed three bears before we arrived", Gashi added. Before their transfer, the animals had to be tranquilized "because they were also very aggressive", and for some, getting off the alcohol - which was used by owners to sedate the bears - was challenging.

'Papa bear'

The first resident of the sanctuary was Cassandra, a brown bear that had been abandoned in a cage in front of a restaurant when the owner closed the business. She was in "terrible shape, in a metal cage no larger than two-by-three meters, exposed to the elements without any protection or shelter," said Roswitha Brieger, the wife of the former Austrian ambassador to Pristina, Johann Brieger, and a key player in the project.

For months, the bear was living in her own excrement, surviving off of food brought by locals who took pity. Mustafe Gashi, a mellow 57-year-old who works at the sanctuary, recalls how Cassandra's arrival in early 2013 earned him the nickname "Papa Bear". Despite his current reputation as an animal lover, Gashi was brought up in the rural highlands and therefore taught to be on guard with wildlife.



A brown bear plays at the Pristina Bear Sanctuary in the village of Mramor on Feb 12, 2021. — AFP photos



A visitor stands outside the fence of the Pristina Bear Sanctuary.

"When I was a kid, the (adults) used to scare us by telling us that the bears were going to eat us," he told AFP. But while waiting for construction of the sanctuary to be completed, Gashi, who was originally hired as a security guard, offered to sleep in a building next to the one where Cassandra was housed. He regularly checked on his neighbor's well-being, and developed a loving relationship. "I saw that the bears did not eat us", he laughed. Gashi also recalled bottle-feeding three wild cubs who were brought to the sanctuary after their mother was killed. "Never in a million years would I have imagined holding a bear in my arms and raising it like my children," he said, explaining that he "never took care" of his two sons "like he took care of the bears."

The site's core mission has been achieved - since 2014, there have been no more cases of detained bears in Kosovo, said director Mahmuti, whose next project is to find a home for a lion and wolves that were held illegally. The sanctuary employs about 30 people and its operating costs, some 400,000 euros (\$480,000) annually, are funded in large part by Four Paws. The year before the pandemic, the site welcomed some 40,000 visitors, mostly families and students. "It's a success story," said Milot Kurshumlia, a 39-year-old environmental activist who hopes it "won't be the last". "We can see how useful the interaction between institutions, civil society and wildlife defenders is." —AFP

Frosty reception for China hotel with polar bears on show



People look at polar bears inside an enclosure at a newly-opened hotel, which allows guests views of the animals from rooms on the premises in Harbin, northeastern China's Heilongjiang province, on March 12, 2021. —AFP photos

A Chinese hotel built around a central polar bear enclosure for the non-stop viewing pleasure of its guests opened Friday to immediate condemnation from conservationists. At "Harbin Polar Land" in northeastern China, the hotel bedrooms' windows face onto the bears' pen, with visitors told the animals are their "neighbors 24 hours a day".

A video shows the bears - a threatened species - photographed by crowds of guests under harsh warm lights, in a space consisting of fake rocks and icicles, and a white painted floor. Animal rights organizations reacted with outrage, urging customers to stay away from establishments profiting "from animals' misery". "Polar bears belong in the Arctic, not in zoos or glass boxes in aquariums - and certainly not in hotels," said PETA Asia's Vice President Jason Baker.

In the wild, polar bears usually roam territories that can span thousands of miles, Baker added.

Harbin is famous for its ice-carving festival, and the hotel resembles a giant igloo, with its roof topped by artificial ice. But some Chinese social media users expressed unease at the theme being taken to this extreme.

"A panoramic prison for polar bears... haven't we learned anything about animal cruelty?" one commentator said. "Gaps in China's wildlife protection law allows businesses to exploit animals without any concern for their welfare," a spokesman for China Animal Protection Network, who declined to be named, told AFP.

Chinese authorities recently changed the law to ban the consumption of wildlife for food, after speculation over the origins of the coronavirus nudged investigators towards a Wuhan market selling animals. But the use of parts of endangered species in traditional medicine remains rampant, and Chinese circuses and zoos are often criticized for poor standards in animal housing and care. —AFP



People take photos of a polar bear inside an enclosure at the hotel.

Sports

Photo of the day



Adrien Fourmaux racing during the M sport PET in Rovaniemi, Finland. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Abu Dhabi-owned Mumbai City win first title

NEW DELHI: Mumbai City have clinched their maiden Indian Super League title just over a year after being taken over by the owners of English Premier League giants Manchester City. India midfielder Bipin Singh scored a 90th-minute winner to edge out three-time winners ATK Mohun Bagan 2-1 in the final played behind closed doors in Goa on Saturday.

The Sergio Lobera-coached Mumbai, who had already qualified for the AFC Champions League by finishing top of the regular-season standings, became just the second team to complete the double by going on to win the four-team finals. Bengaluru FC first achieved the feat in 2019.

The Abu Dhabi-controlled City Football Group took a majority stake of the Indian club in November 2019 to add to their stable of seven other clubs, including Manchester City, who have won the Premier League four times since they were bought by the company in 2008. City Football Group's majority shareholder is Abu Dhabi United Group, the investment company owned by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a member the Abu Dhabi royal family.

Ranbir Kapoor, a Bollywood actor, and Bimal Parekh, a fund manager for Bollywood stars, also own a 35 per cent stake in Mumbai, who joined the Indian Super League when it began in 2014. All 11 Indian Super League teams were confined to separate biosecure 'bubbles' for the seventh edition of the tournament played across three venues in Goa because of the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

Middleweight great Marvelous Marvin Hagler dies at 66

Undisputed champion from 1980 to 1987

WASHINGTON: Boxing legend Marvin Hagler, the undisputed middleweight champion from 1980 to 1987, died on Saturday at age 66, his wife said. In a posting on the famed fighter's Facebook page, Kay G. Hagler said her husband passed away at the family home in Bartlett, New Hampshire.

"I am sorry to make a very sad announcement. Today unfortunately my beloved husband Marvelous Marvin passed away unexpectedly at his home here in New Hampshire," she wrote. "Our family requests that you respect our privacy during this difficult time."

"Marvelous" Marvin Hagler fought from 1973 to 1987 and delivered some of the epic bouts in a golden era of the sport, finishing with a record of 62-3 with two drawn and 52 knockouts. The southpaw's most heralded triumph came in a 1985 matchup at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas against Thomas "Hitman" Hearns that lasted only a tick over eight minutes but was regarded as a classic that became known simply as "The War."

After a first round filled with power punches in which Hearns suffered a broken right hand, Hagler suffered a cut to the head early in the second. A ringside doctor examined Hagler in the third round and the fight went on. Hagler wobbled Hearns with a powerhouse right and sent him to the canvas moments later, Hearns rising only to collapse into referee Richard Steele's arms.

Hagler won the World Boxing Council and World Boxing Association middleweight titles in 1980, stopping Britain's Alan Minter in the third round at London's Wembley Arena, and added the International Boxing Federation's inaugural title in 1983.

Hagler defended the undisputed crown 12 times, including a 15-round unanimous decision victory over Panama's Roberto Duran in 1983 and his final triumph, an 11th-round knockout of unbeaten Ugandan John Mugabi in 1986.

"Marvelous Marvin Hagler was among the greatest athletes that Top Rank ever promoted," legendary US promoter Bob Arum said. "He was a man of honor and a man of his word, and he performed in the ring with unparalleled determination."

"He was a true athlete and a true man. I will miss him greatly," Arum added of Hagler, a member of the middleweight division's "Four Kings" of the 1980s along with Hearns, "Sugar" Ray Leonard and Duran. Former fighter and legendary trainer Freddie Roach said Hagler visited Roach's hometown to watch one of his fights.



MONACO: In this file photo Ex professional boxer Marvin Hagler of the US waves to supporters before the Gennady Golovkin of Kazakhstan versus Japan's Nobuhiro Ishida middleweight WBA boxing match, on March 30, 2013 in Monaco. — AFP

"Marvin Hagler came to my fight in Boston," Roach wrote on his social media account. "I appreciated what he said to me after my fight. Rest In Peace, my friend. Condolences to the Hagler family. Thank you Marvelous Marvin Hagler for all you gave to boxing."

Over a decade from 1976 to 1986, Hagler went unbeaten with 36 wins and a draw. Named Fighter of the Year in 1983 and 1985 by the Boxing Writers Association of America, he was named Fighter of the Decade in the 1980s by Boxing Illustrated. He carried a 16-fight win streak into what proved to be his final fight, a showdown with Leonard in 1987 at age 32.

Leonard, coming off three years of retirement at age 30, captured a controversial 12-round split decision and launched his return to the ring as Hagler - angered by the

scoring — bid farewell. After stepping out of the ring, Hagler pursued acting in Italy and a career as a boxing commentator. He was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1993.

Sports streaming service DAZN honored Hagler with a 10-count salute during a boxing card in Dallas, Texas, on Saturday night. "Rest in eternal peace the Marvellous One!" said promoter Eddie Hearn. Famed ring announcer Michael Buffer was devastated by the news of Hagler's passing.

"I am crushed at the news that MARVELOUS MARVIN HAGLER has passed away!" Buffer wrote on social media. "He was in his prime-POUND4POUND-the best, going 11yrs in 38 fights w/o defeat! He dominated the MW division 4 a decade! 62 wins/52KOs-3 losses R.I.P. 4EVER CHAMPION-4EVER REMEMBERED." — AFP

'Voice of Formula One' Murray Walker dies, aged 97

LONDON: Murray Walker, the British broadcaster regarded as the 'Voice of Formula One', has died aged 97. Walker, who served in the Second World War, became a Formula One icon during more than 30 years as a commentator for the BBC and ITV.

Known for his passionate vocal style while commentating, he reported on his first Grand Prix for BBC radio at Silverstone in 1949. Walker became a full-time F1 commentator in 1978 and only hung up his microphone when he retired in 2001 after a 52-year broadcasting career.

"So sad to hear of Murray's passing. I remember growing up hearing your voice over the races," said seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton. "You made the sport so much more exciting and captivating. The iconic voice of our sport and a great man, thank you for all you did, you will never be forgotten. Rest in peace."

From James Hunt's 1976 championship triumph over Niki Lauda at a rain-lashed Fuji, to Ayrton Senna's intense rivalry with Alain Prost and Nigel Mansell's 1992 title glory, Walker's voice was synonymous in the UK with some of F1's most memorable moments.

When Britain's Damon Hill took the chequered flag at Suzuka to win the Japanese Grand Prix and become world champion in 1996, an emotional Walker said during his commentary: "I have got to stop because I have got a lump in my throat."

Walker graduated from Sandhurst's Royal Military College and went on to command a Sherman tank in the Battle of the Reichswald in World War Two. He left the Army after the war and eventually joined the BBC, where he was handed commentating duties after an explosion of interest in Formula One following Hunt's 1976 triumph. Walker battled health problems in his later years. He was diagnosed with a form of lymphoma during tests in hospital after he suffered a fall while on holiday when he was aged 89.

F1 led the tributes to Walker on social media, tweeting: "We are immensely sad to hear that Murray Walker has passed away. His passion and love of the sport inspired millions of fans around the world. He will forever be a part of our history, and will be dearly missed."

McLaren, Britain's most successful F1 team, said: "Like millions of F1 fans, all of us at McLaren are deeply saddened by the news that Murray Walker has passed away. He brought our sport to generations by sharing his passion and knowledge with humor and humility. Our thoughts are with all who had the fortune to know him."

Murray attracted a legion of fans for both his knowledge of the sport and colorful, verbal slip-ups which formed part of his legacy. Amongst these were: "There's nothing wrong with the car except it's on fire", "Now excuse me while I interrupt myself", "I'm ready to stop my start watch" and "Unless I'm very much mistaken... I am very much mistaken!" — AFP

Bottas turns F1 testing on head

SAKHIR: Valtteri Bottas set the fastest time on the second day of pre-season testing in Bahrain on Saturday while world champion teammate Lewis Hamilton said there "was no point being worried" despite spinning off the dusty Sakhir circuit. Bottas clocked 1min 30.289sec off 58 laps in his Mercedes, 24 hours after finishing the opening day at the bottom of the time charts due to a gearbox problem that restricted him to just six laps.

Seven-time world champion Hamilton, who was down in 10th place on Friday, was 15th on Saturday. Only four-time champion Sebastian Vettel, in his first season with Aston Martin after leaving Ferrari, was slower. Hamilton suffered a rare spin in the morning session before Bottas took over driving duties under the lights in the afternoon.

"It's very gusty, as I found out into Turn 13. The rear doesn't feel particularly great but we are trying to find the sweet spot," said the Briton. "It's day two of testing so we're just focused on understanding the car so there is no point being worried just yet."

Pierre Gasly, in an AlphaTauri, was second fastest, ahead of McLaren's Lance Stroll. Vettel, like Hamilton, preferred to shrug off the trials of testing, insisting March 28, the date of the opening race in Bahrain, is the key performance indicator. "Unfortunately, we did not have a very productive morning," said Vettel. "It's a long season (23 races) and I am sure that everything will be fine."



SAKHIR: Mercedes' Finnish driver Valtteri Bottas drives during the second day of the Formula One (F1) pre-season testing at the Bahrain International Circuit in the city of Sakhir on Saturday. —AFP

Another former world champion Fernando Alonso also took to the track after two years away. The Spaniard was 10th fastest after completing 128 laps in the Alpine car. Making it to the Gulf is an achievement in itself for the 2005 and 2006 world

champion who is competing with two titanium plates in his upper jaw following a cycling accident last month. "He is in great shape, he is sharp," confirmed Alpine executive director Marc Gené Budkowski. —AFP

Sports

As Platini faces his days in court, FIFA's legal woes pile up

Platini interrogated over cases that ended presidency dream

LAUSANNE: Michel Platini will face Swiss prosecutors on three consecutive days this week as he answers questions in two of the raft of cases that still beset global football and its leaders, past and present. Platini is due to be interrogated in Bern today and tomorrow over the corruption case that shattered his dream of taking over world football's governing body FIFA after the fall of Sepp Blatter.

On Wednesday, he is expected in Sarnen, 80 kilometers to the east, but this time as a witness in an investigation into the actions of the man who instead took over FIFA, Gianni Infantino. These are only two of the proceedings involving FIFA. Here AFP rounds up the legal state of play.

The case of the two presidents

When Blatter fell as head of FIFA in 2015 he quickly took his would-be successor and the head of European governing body, Platini with him. FIFA banned both men from football at the end of 2015. The accusation against Platini revolves around a payment of 2 million Swiss francs from FIFA authorized by Blatter in 2011. Swiss prosecutors responded by opening an investigation of the two men on accusations of "disloyal management", "breach of trust" and "fraud".

As Platini's final hearing approaches on Monday and Tuesday in Bern, he and Blatter insist that, even though there was no written contract, the payment, made just before Platini opted not to challenge Blatter in the 2011 FIFA election, was for consultancy work dating back to 1999-2002.

Platini insists the affair was a "plot" to block him from the FIFA presidency, which went instead to his former UEFA number two, Infantino. Platini counter-attacked at the end of 2018 by filing a complaint in the courts accusing unnamed enemies of "slandering denunciation" and "criminal association".

The case of Infantino and the prosecutor

The boot will be on the other foot on Wednesday when Platini appears as a witness in a Swiss investigation into Infantino. Elected in 2016 promising to "restore the image of FIFA", Infantino last year became the target of a criminal procedure for "incitement to abuse authority", "violation of official secrecy" and "obstruction of criminal proceedings" over three secret meetings in 2016 and 2017 with Michael Lauber, then head of the Swiss Federal Prosecutor's Office (MPC).

Those meetings fuelled suspicions of collusion over cases that involved FIFA. Infantino says he wanted to show the MPC "that the new FIFA was a world away from the old one", which had been led astray "by corrupt officials". The Swiss prosecutor in the case has also said he is curious about a private jet flight Infantino took in 2017 that was paid for by FIFA.

The case of the Qatari World Cup

The most embarrassing investigation for FIFA, because of the shadow it casts over its flagship competition, concerns the award of the 2022 World Cup and also involves Platini. The vote in December

2010 to make Qatar the hosts has been the subject of investigations by FIFA and both the Swiss and French justice systems.

Swiss prosecutors have been investigating "money laundering and unfair management" since May 2015. The French justice system is looking into "active and passive corruption" in relation to a lunch held in November 2010 hosted by then French president Nicolas Sarkozy whose guests included two senior Qatari executives and Platini, who as UEFA president was one of the FIFA voters.

The 2018 World Cup in Russia, awarded in the same vote, and the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, awarded in 2004, are also tainted by suspicions of corruption. Switzerland in April had to drop an investigation over the awarding of the 2006 World Cup to Germany, due to the statute of limitations.

The case of the TV bribes

In addition to being a major source of revenue for FIFA, television rights are also turning into its main source of legal problems, starting with the seven arrests in Zurich on the eve of the 2015 presidential election. "Fifagate" was primarily concerned with the sale of continental TV rights by football officials in the Americas, who were also FIFA committee members, in cases where US prosecutors could claim jurisdiction.

US courts have sentenced Paraguayan Juan Angel Napout to nine years in prison and Brazilian Jose Maria Marin to four years. Cayman Islander Jeffrey Webb, a former head of the North and



BERN: In this file photo taken on August 31, 2020 former head of European football's governing body UEFA, Michel Platini arrives at the building of the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland to a hearing summoned by Swiss prosecutor in Bern. — AFP

Central America and Caribbean confederation, has pleaded guilty and agreed to pay \$6.7 million. He is awaiting sentencing.

Meanwhile, Swiss prosecutors said in February they are appealing the acquittal in October of Nasser Al-Khelaifi, the Paris Saint-Germain president and broadcasting group beIN Media chief, over the allocation by FIFA North African and Middle Eastern TV rights for the 2026 and 2030 World Cups. — AFP

Man City extend Premier League lead

LONDON: A much-changed Manchester City stretched their Premier League lead to 17 points with a 3-0 win at Fulham on Saturday. Pep Guardiola could afford the luxury of making seven changes ahead of City's Champions League last 16, second leg against Borussia Monchengladbach in midweek with Kevin De Bruyne among the key players handed a rest.

However, City's strength in depth shone through once more as the visitors struck three times in the first 15 minutes of the second-half at Craven Cottage. John Stones opened the floodgates before an emphatic finish from Gabriel Jesus and Sergio Aguero's first Premier League goal for 14 months from the penalty spot round off the scoring.

"We've all played so many games, we know the squad is rotated because of the schedule," said Stones. "We all know our roles and responsibilities and everyone who came in today deserves all the credit for the way we played, fought and stayed so patient." Fulham remain rooted in the bottom three after just a second defeat in eight games.

Everton are still five points adrift of the top four as Burnley won 2-1 at Goodison Park. The visitors' bright start was rewarded with a vital three points in their battle to beat the drop. Chris Wood opened the scoring before Dwight McNeil's sensational strike doubled the visitors' lead.

Dominic Calvert-Lewin pulled a goal back for Everton, but Burnley comfortably held out to open up a seven-point gap above the relegation zone. "It is a big disappointment because we lost a great opportunity to climb the table," said Everton boss Carlo Ancelotti. "We made the same mistake as most



LONDON: Manchester City's English defender John Stones scores his team's first goal during the English Premier League football match between Fulham and Manchester City at Craven Cottage in London on Saturday. — AFP

of the games in Goodison Park, we didn't start well."

Crystal Palace's Wilfried Zaha became the first Premier League player not to take a knee prior to kick-off of a 1-0 win over West Brom. The Ivory Coast international stood tall while the rest of his Palace team-mates and their opponents took the knee. The 28-year-old revealed last month that he would no longer perform the gesture against racial injustice, which has been followed by Premier League players, officials and staff since June.

"As a society, I feel we should be encouraging better education in schools, and social media companies should be taking stronger action against people who abuse others online - not just footballers," Zaha said in a statement. "I now just want to focus on football and enjoy being back playing on the pitch. I will continue to stand tall." Once the action began, Luka Milivojevic scored the only goal from the penalty spot to plunge the Baggies ever closer to a return to the Championship. — AFP

Lewandowski equals goal milestone as Bayern power past Bremen

BERLIN: Bayern Munich romped to a 3-1 win at Werder Bremen on Saturday as Robert Lewandowski claimed another goal-scoring milestone in the Bundesliga and hit the woodwork three times in a dynamic display. Bayern dominated their final fixture before hosting Lazio in the Champions League last 16, second leg, on Wednesday holding a 4-1 lead.

Goals by Leon Goretzka and Serge Gnabry put Bayern 2-0 up in Bremen before Lewandowski claimed his 32nd league goal this season. "He fights for his goals for the team in every game," Bayern midfielder Thomas Mueller said of Lewandowski to Sky. "We were fresher and more active. We had control of the game. We should have scored more," added Mueller, who set up the first two goals. Despite hitting the post and clipping the crossbar, Lewandowski finally scored with an hour gone to equal former Schalke striker Klaus Fischer's tally of 268 Bundesliga goals.

Only Bayern legend Gerd Mueller has scored more in Germany's top-flight with 365 in 427 league games. A superb save from Bremen goalkeeper Jiri Pavlenka also prevented Lewandowski scoring with a powerful header late on. The victory extends Bayern's lead at the top of the table to five points.

Mueller was outstanding in Bremen as his deft flick allowed Goretzka to head home the opening goal from a corner on 22. With a superb piece of skill, Mueller then deftly chested down the ball and rolled a pass into Gnabry's path to score on 35 minutes.

It was 2-0 at the break and Lewandowski hit the post twice in quick succession early in the second-half. The Poland star finally got on the scoresheet when he tapped home from close range before



BREMEN: Bayern Munich's Polish forward Robert Lewandowski (center) and Bremen's German midfielder Christian Gross (right) vie for the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match between Werder Bremen vs Bayern Munich in Bremen, northern Germany, on Saturday. — AFP

Niclas Füllkrug scored Bremen's consolation after a counter-attack.

Moukoko scores

Later, Borussia Dortmund's 16-year-old striker Youssoufa Moukoko scored his first goal at Signal Iduna Park to seal a 2-0 win over Hertha Berlin. Dortmund took the lead when a long-range shot by Julian Brandt evaded the grasp of Hertha goalkeeper Rune Jarstein on 54 minutes.

With ten minutes left, Hertha midfielder Vladimir Darida was shown a straight red card for a scything tackle on Dortmund captain Marco Reus. Moukoko, who made his Bundesliga debut last November, completed a miserable night for Hertha's goalkeeper by firing between Jarstein's legs on 90 minutes.

The victory moved Dortmund up to fifth, a point from the Champions League places, while only goal difference keeps Hertha out of the relegation places. Third-placed Wolfsburg put another nail in the coffin

of bottom side Schalke who crashed to a 5-0 defeat away from home. Schalke's former Arsenal defender Shkodran Mustafi headed into his own net in the first half. The floodgates opened after the break when Wout Weghorst, Ridle Baku, Josip Brekalo and Maximilian Philip all scored for Wolfsburg.

With nine games left, Schalke have only a mathematical chance of avoiding a first relegation in 30 years. With just one league win all season, they are 11 points from escaping the bottom three with a horrendous goal difference of -50. Mainz claimed a huge win in the relegation battle when Swedish striker Robin Quaison scored six minutes from time in their 1-0 win over Freiburg.

Moments after a stunning save by Freiburg goalkeeper Florian Mueller, on loan from Mainz, Quaison tapped in the winning goal from close range. Union moved two points from the European places after their captain Christopher Trimmel scored their winner in a 2-1 home victory against Cologne. — AFP

Atletico held, Benzema double saves Real

MADRID: Atletico Madrid slipped up again in La Liga on Saturday as they failed to break down 10-man Getafe in a goalless draw that gives further encouragement to Barcelona and Real Madrid in the title race. Real Madrid had earlier come from behind to beat Elche 2-1 thanks to a late double from Karim Benzema, with Atletico's stalemate meaning the gap is down to six points between the city rivals. Barcelona, meanwhile, can move to within four points of the leaders by beating bottom club Huesca tonight.

Getafe were reduced to 10 men when Allan Nyom was sent off in the 70th minute before Luis Suarez hit the post and Moussa Dembele twice went close during a period of sustained Atletico pressure. But they failed to find the finishing touch, meaning Diego Simeone's side have now won only two of their last seven games in all competitions, with a trip to Chelsea up next on Wednesday in the Champions League.

Atletico will be attempting to overturn a 1-0 deficit at Stamford Bridge. "We did everything we could but the ball wouldn't go in. We have to take a point," said goalkeeper Jan Oblak. "It was the game I expected," said Simeone. "A point is still a step forwards."

Nyom was sent off for a high tackle on Renan Lodi, with referee Jose Sanchez needing only one look at the replay to decide a yellow card needed to be upgraded to a red. Joao Felix had already had a goal ruled out and with 20 minutes left and a man extra, Atletico poured forward.

Dembele shot from close range but was denied by David Soria while Lodi made a mess of finishing Suarez's cross to the back post. Suarez then went closest, a curling effort with his left foot beating everyone only to pop back off the post. Dembele should have scored late on but headed wide. Benzema's late equaliser salvaged a draw against Atletico last weekend and the Frenchman came up trumps again for Real Madrid, a brilliant shot flying in off the post in the 91st minute to secure victory at Valdebebas. "It was a beautiful goal and it won us three points, so I'm happier than ever," he said. — AFP



VALDEBEBAS: Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema celebrates after scoring a goal during the Spanish League football match between Real Madrid and Elche at the Alfredo Di Stefano stadium in Valdebebas, northeast of Madrid, on Saturday. — AFP

Giannis triple-double fuels Bucks

Harden powers Nets • Knicks notch 20th win • LeVert makes Pacers debut

LOS ANGELES: Giannis Antetokounmpo's triple-double of 33 points, 11 rebounds and 11 assists propelled the Milwaukee Bucks to a 125-119 NBA victory over Washington on Saturday, despite Russell Westbrook's 42-point triple-double for the Wizards. It was part of an explosion of five triple-doubles on the day — an NBA single-day record.

Westbrook added 10 rebounds and 12 assists for Washington, but even with his league-leading 11th triple-double of the season the Wizards missed the production of NBA leading scorer Bradley Beal, who sat out with a sore knee.

Jrue Holiday added 10 of his 18 points in the fourth quarter for Milwaukee as the Bucks held on in the back-and-forth battle despite a fierce late challenge from the Wizards, who knotted the score at 119-119 with 41 seconds remaining.

Milwaukee's Khris Middleton made two free throws with 32.9 seconds to play then forced a driving Westbrook into a miss with 25 seconds left. "No doubt, that's the game right there," Bucks head coach Mike Budenholzer said. "You talk about wanting to win a game with stops and that's what we were able to do."

On the other end, Middleton drained two more free throws to help the Bucks seal the win. Antetokounmpo's triple-double was his second straight and his sixth of the season. He was just one of eight Bucks players to score in double figures as Milwaukee won their third straight and solidify their hold on third place in the East behind the Philadelphia 76ers and the Brooklyn Nets — who beat the Detroit Pistons 100-95 on Saturday behind a triple-double from James Harden.

Aggressive Harden

Harden scored 12 of his 24 points in the fourth quarter. He added 10 rebounds and 10 assists and the Nets hung on after the Pistons took a one-point lead with less than three minutes remaining to pull off the gritty win. Kyrie Irving added 18 points for the Nets, who remained without star Kevin Durant as he recovers from a hamstring strain.

The game was tied at 92-92 with 1:47 remaining.

Two Harden baskets — the second after a steal by Irving, put the Nets up 96-92, and his floater with 19.1 seconds left put Brooklyn up 98-93. Two free-throws from Harden effectively sealed the win.

"I had to be aggressive," Harden said. "Things weren't going great for us offensively. I think defensively we were playing hard and it showed, but it was one of those nights where we've just got to find a way to win. I just wanted to be a little more aggressive in the last two minutes."

The New York Knicks notched their 20th win of the season, 119-97 over the Thunder in Oklahoma City, fueled by Julius Randle's second triple-double of the season. Randle scored 26 points with 12 rebounds and 12 assists, becoming the first Knicks player since Mark Jackson in 1987-88 to post multiple triple-doubles in the same season. "Obviously the Knicks have so much history and tradition, so to be a part of that is obviously a blessing for sure," Randle said. RJ Barrett added a career-best 32 points on 12-of-21 shooting as the Knicks bounced back from a 33-point loss to the Bucks on Thursday.

LeVert back

Indiana forward Domantas Sabonis joined the triple-double outburst with his fifth of the season, scoring 22 points with 13 rebounds and 10 assists to help the Pacers to a 122-111 victory over the Suns in Phoenix. Malcolm Brogdon scored 25 points for the Pacers, who had 13 from Caris LeVert — who made his Indiana debut almost two months after a post-trade physical exam revealed a small cancerous mass on one of his kidneys.

LeVert, who arrived with the Pacers from Brooklyn in the multi-team deal that sent Harden from Houston to the Nets, had surgery in January, when the team said he would require no further treatment. "I'm just happy to be on the court," said LeVert, who admitted that two months earlier he didn't know when he might return. "The main thing for me was to try to contribute to a win," added LeVert, who got the start and played almost 27 minutes. "That's what I'm all about." — AFP



WASHINGTON: Giannis Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks dunks the ball during the game against the Washington Wizards on Saturday at Capital One Arena in Washington, DC. — AFP



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