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Opposition activists freed on orders of 'political leadership'

Speaker was also referred to prosecution for violating health measures



KUWAIT: Policemen check the curfew passes of motorists at a checkpoint on Fourth Ring Road. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The country's top leadership yesterday intervened to defuse political tensions between the government and opposition MPs and activists, ordering the government to withdraw complaints filed against activists, leading to their release from detention. The public prosecution had ordered the detention of 15 former opposition MPs and activists after they refused to pay KD 100 bail after interrogating them for taking part in a public gathering and violating health restrictions imposed to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

Those detained included veteran former National Assembly speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun, 86, and about a dozen former opposition lawmakers who took part in a gathering to support leading opposition MP Bader Al-Dahoum around two weeks ago. After interrogating them over complaints filed by the interior ministry, the public prosecution ordered the release of the activists, provided each of them pays KD 100 in bail pending further investigation.

The activists refused to pay the bail money, and as a result, the prosecution ordered them detained at the central investigation department. As the situation was

heading for a major showdown between the government and the opposition, H.H. the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah said the "political leadership" ordered that the complaints be withdrawn.

Sheikh Sabah said the leadership stressed the need for cooperation between the government and the National Assembly, whose relations have been rocked by confrontations since the Assembly was elected in December. Relations worsened after the constitutional court on Sunday stripped Dahoum, a leading government critic, of his Assembly membership for being convicted in a court ruling seven years ago for insulting the Amir.

Dahoum and the opposition criticized the court verdict as political and charged it breached the country's laws and the constitution. Opposition MPs have vowed to amend laws they described as undemocratic to ensure that such verdicts are not issued in the future. They also vowed to submit three grillings against the prime minister and also stressed to declare non-cooperation with him.

It was not immediately known if the government's action of withdrawing the complaints will improve relations with the legislature and reduce tensions.

Continued on Page 2

News in brief

Chinese jab must for visa

BEIJING: China is poised to ease border restrictions to allow some foreigners - including from the US, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Italy and Australia - back in, provided they have taken a Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccine. This would apply from this week to those visiting the Chinese mainland for work resumption, business travel, or for "humanitarian needs", such as reuniting with family members. Those arriving in China will still have to face a grueling quarantine of up to three weeks. — AFP

Lebanon pound hits new low

BEIRUT: Lebanon's currency hit a new low against the dollar on the black market yesterday, continuing its free-fall in a country gripped by political deadlock and an economic crisis. The slide has picked up speed over the past two weeks, with the exchange rate soaring from 10,000 Lebanese pounds to the dollar on March 2 to around 15,000 yesterday. Protesters burned tires as they took to the streets in the capital and elsewhere in the country. — AFP

Instagram child protection tools

WASHINGTON: Facebook-owned Instagram unveiled technology yesterday aimed at preventing children under 13 from creating accounts and blocking adults from contacting young users they don't know. It was the latest move responding to concerns about inappropriate contact between adults and children on the platform. Instagram will begin using artificial intelligence to determine a user's age at sign-up in an effort to find underage users. — AFP

COVID protests in Jordan

AMMAN: Protesters clashed with police in Jordan's capital amid a second night of demonstrations against health restrictions Monday, even as the country posted a record high number of coronavirus cases. The mainly young demonstrators in Amman, numbering around 400, shouted slogans, set fire to tires and threw stones at policemen, who responded with tear gas. There were also protests in Madaba and Irbid. — AFP

Pollution high despite 2020 lockdowns

PARIS: Deadly small particle pollution in dozens of nations exceeded World Health Organization recommendations last year despite COVID lockdowns, according to a report released yesterday. The partial or complete shutdown of transport and industry for months at a time in 2020 reduced average levels of so-called PM2.5 pollution across the world, including in major cities, the IQAir

quality report found.

Concentrations of the life-shortening particles - cast off by traffic pollution and burning fossil fuels - dropped 11 percent in Beijing, 13 percent in Chicago, 15 percent in New Delhi, 16 percent in London, and 16 percent in Seoul. At least 60 percent of India's cities were more breathable last year than in 2019, and all of them had cleaner air than in 2018.

"Many parts of the world experienced unprecedented - but short-lived - improvements in air quality in 2020," said Lauri Myllyvirta, lead analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) and co-author of the report.

Continued on Page 2

Iraq chemical attack victims seek justice

HALABJA, Iraq: Hawker Saber is one of the survivors of the chemical attack Saddam Hussein ordered on the Kurdish town of Halabja 33 years ago but he needs a respirator to stay alive. Saber, who is hooked to the machine for more than 20 hours a day, was just three at the time but he still has terrible memories of March 16, 1988. On that day, for five hours, Iraq's air force rained down a

deadly cocktail of chemical weapons, including mustard gas, on Halabja in the mountains of north-eastern Iraq, according to experts.

In retribution for Kurdish peshmerga fighters backing Iran in its eight-year war with Iraq, around 5,000 Iraqi Kurds, the majority women and children, were killed in the largest ever chemical weapons attack on civilians. The attack still haunts Halabja as its residents, now estimated at around 200,000, still fight for justice, care for the ill and hunt for missing relatives.

"There are still 486 people who are seriously ill from the chemical attack in Halabja," Loqman Abdelqader, president of an association for victims of the attack, told AFP.

Continued on Page 2

Russian sets record with icy plunge

MOSCOW: Russian freediver Alexei Molchanov claimed to have set a new Guinness World Record yesterday after plunging 80 m in the icy waters of Lake Baikal in Siberia. Clad in blue diving gear, Molchanov dropped into a hole in the Baikal ice before coming back up smiling, winking and forming the OK sign with his hand, video footage showed. His team claimed it was the deepest ever freedive under ice.

"I would like to dedicate this new record to this amazing place where we are now. Baikal is a unique natural phenomenon and a living organism, which is important to preserve for future generations," the 34-year-old freediver said in a statement. Igor Kobzev, governor of the Siberian region of Irkutsk where part of Lake Baikal is located, said on Instagram that the water was a chilly 3 degrees Celsius. "With his dives, Alexei draws attention to environmental issues and the purity of water. What he's doing deserves respect," the governor wrote.

Lake Baikal, the largest and deepest freshwater lake in the world, has been suffering from increased algae

Continued on Page 2



ZHANGYE, China: A farmer sprays pesticide over a field on a polluted day in north-western China's Gansu province yesterday. — AFP



HALABJA: Swiba Mohammed, a victim of the Halabja chemical attack in 1988, poses for a picture on March 13, 2021. — AFP



Russian freediver Alexei Molchanov reacts after setting a new Guinness World Record for plunging 80 m in the icy waters of Lake Baikal yesterday. — AFP

Local

Foreign Minister receives new Vatican envoy's credentials

Deputy Foreign Minister, US ambassador discuss ties



KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah receives a copy of the credentials of Ambassador of the Vatican Eugene Martin Nugent. — KUNA photos



Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets Ambassador of the Vatican Eugene Martin Nugent.



Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Majdi Al-Dhafiri meets with US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski.



Chief of Kuwait Fire Force Lt Gen Khaled Al-Mikrad meets Dr Amira Al-Hassan, head of mission of the UN-Habitat - Arabian Gulf Branch.

KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah yesterday received a copy of the credentials of Ambassador of the Vatican Eugene Martin Nugent, at the General Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the meeting, Sheikh Dr Ahmad wished the new ambassador success in his tenure and for relations between both sides to further progress and prosper. Senior foreign ministry officials attended the meeting.

Separately, Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Majdi Al-Dhafiri met yesterday with US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski. During the

meeting, both sides discussed bilateral ties and recent regional and international developments. Assistant Foreign Minister for the Deputy Foreign Minister's office Ambassador Ayham Al-Omar and Assistant Foreign Minister for Americas Affairs Ambassador Hamad Al-Mashaan were present at the meeting.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's Minister of Higher Education and Oil Minister Dr Mohammad Al-Fares had discussed on Monday with Ambassador Romanowski cooperation to dispatch Kuwait students to study at the US universities' specialties needed in the local labor market. In a press statement, the Ministry of Higher Education stated that during the meeting they

tackled key issues related to Kuwaiti students who are currently studying in the US. They also discussed issues of mutual interest in fields of higher education and scientific research.

In other news, Chief of Kuwait Fire Force Lt Gen Khaled Al-Mikrad received in his office yesterday Dr Amira Al-Hassan, head of mission of the UN-Habitat - Arabian Gulf Branch. The two sides discussed ways to enhance cooperation in order to improve the society's disaster response capabilities, Kuwait Fire Force said in a statement. Other officials from Kuwait Fire Force and the UN-Habitat - Arabian Gulf Branch attended the meeting. — KUNA



UN-Habitat,
KFF discuss
cooperation

Opposition activists freed on orders of...

Continued from Page 1

Dahoum said after the withdrawal that "wise people have intervened and reduced the level of tensions", but insisted this will not let them forget the constitutional court ruling, saying he will continue to

fight the verdict with "constitutional means".

Earlier in the day, Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said he was also referred to the public prosecution for interrogation for violating health measures when he celebrated his election win with a large number of supporters. Ghanem admitted that he violated the health measures and said he will ask the Assembly to lift his parliamentary immunity to be interrogated, a step which may not be needed after the government withdrew all complaints. The National Assembly is expected to hold next week its first regular session since Jan 5, when the government resigned.

Pollution high despite 2020...

Continued from Page 1

"This meant tens of thousands of avoided deaths from air pollution."

But only 24 of 106 countries monitored met WHO safety guidelines, said the report, based on the world's largest database of ground-level air pollution measurements. China and many South Asian nations experienced PM2.5 pollution several times greater than WHO recommended thresholds, and in some regions the concentration was six to eight times higher. Twenty-two of the world's more polluted cities are in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Mongolia and Afghanistan topped the 2020 ranking, with average annual PM2.5 concentrations between 77 and 47 micrograms per cubic meter (mcg/m3) of air.

The UN says PM2.5 density should not top 25 mcg/m3 in any 24-hour period, or 10 mcg/m3 averaged across an entire year. The most polluted capital cities in the world last year were New Delhi (84 mcg/m3) and Dhaka (77), with Jakarta, Kathmandu, Islamabad, Hanoi and Beijing all in the top 20. About half of all European cities exceed WHO's suggested limits.

Air pollution levels were made worse in 2020 - tied for the hottest year on record - by climate change, the report noted. Wildfires fuelled by scorching heatwaves led to extremely high pollution

levels in California, South America and Australia. Data from the first few months show PM2.5 pollution returning to pre-pandemic levels.

The European Space Agency (ESA) reported Monday that concentrations of another health-damaging air pollutant that dipped in 2020, nitrogen oxide (NO2), has also rebounded and, in some parts of the world, is on the rise. After dropping, for example, about 40 percent last February in Chinese megacities Beijing and Chongqing, NO2 levels shot back up last month to 2019 in Beijing, and nearly double from 2019 levels in Chongqing.

"We expected air pollution to rebound as lockdowns are lifted across the globe," Claus Zehner, ESA's mission manager for the Copernicus Sentinel-5P Earth monitoring satellite, said in a statement. "In the coming weeks and months, we expect increases of nitrogen dioxide concentrations also over Europe." Air pollution shortens lives worldwide by nearly three years on average, and causes more than eight million premature deaths annually, earlier studies have found.

The WHO calculates 4.2 million deaths from outdoor air pollution, but has underestimated the impact on cardiovascular disease, recent research has shown. Average lifespan is cut 4.1 years in China, 3.9 years in India, and 3.8 years in Pakistan. In Europe, life expectancy is shortened by eight months. PM2.5 particles penetrate deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream. In 2013, the WHO classified it as a cancer-causing agent. Compared to other causes of premature death, air pollution worldwide kills 19 times more people each year than malaria, nine times more than HIV/AIDS, and three times more than alcohol. — AFP

Russian sets record with...

Continued from Page 1

growth, a boom in tourism, and the effects of forest fires in the surrounding wilderness for many

Iraq chemical attack victims...

Continued from Page 1

"They have respiratory difficulties and eyesight problems," said Abdelqader, who himself lost six family members in the massacre. "Neither the federal authorities nor the Iraqi Kurdish authorities have set up a care program to help them," he added.

Up until the start of the coronavirus pandemic, it was Iran that each year took on the care of several patients, but always on a piecemeal basis. Halabja families are also still trying to find children that went missing amid the chaos of the attack, with many having been sheltered and treated in Iran, just 10 km away. "142 children are still missing", said Ayad Arass, who heads the local child protection commission.

Halabja resident Swiba Mohammed, 60, believed for a time that justice would be served. She even went in 2006 to Baghdad to testify against Saddam's cousin and henchman, Ali Hassan Al-Majid - an infamous general better known as "Chemical Ali". Majid was hanged four years later for ordering the attack, which he said was carried out to protect Iraq against its powerful neighbor Iran.

But his death brought little respite to Mohammed, who lost five of her children in the massacre, as well as her sight. "For years, officials have been promising to send me abroad to have surgery so I can finally again see the faces of my surviving children," she told AFP. "But not one of them kept their word," she said between sobs.

Saddam, overthrown in 2003 after a US-led invasion, was hanged in 2006, sentenced to death for the massacre of 148 Shiite Muslims - who make

years. Russian swimmers have previously competed in icy swims across the lake's frigid waters to draw attention to the ecological threats it faces.

Molchanov, a 14-time world champion freediver, claims to now hold 20 world records. His mother Natalia Molchanova was also a freediver and during her career was described as possibly the world's greatest. She went missing during a private lesson off the coast of Spain in August 2015 and was presumed dead a few days later. — AFP



HALABJA: A Kurdish woman prays yesterday over the grave of a relative killed in the Halabja chemical attack in 1988. — AFP

up the majority in Iraq but faced repression under the Sunni dictator's regime. His death put an end to proceedings against him for "genocide" over the deaths of 180,000 Kurds - including those killed in Halabja - during the ruthless 1987-1988 "Anfal" campaign.

Unable to convict Saddam, the residents of Halabja are now trying to force his accomplices out of the woodwork. On March 13, 2018, a total of 5,500 relatives of victims sued 25 European companies and individuals, including Iraqis, who they say aided Saddam's regime in developing its chemical weapons stockpile, one of their lawyers, Ayad Ismail, said.

"There have already been eight hearings and the next one is set for June," Ismail told AFP, adding that "summons will be sent to companies cited that have asked to see the evidence". But for Abdelqader, time is running out. Since the fall of Saddam, he said "116 survivors of the attack have died", and their living testimony of the massacre with them. — AFP

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

Salmiya Co-op
Tel: 22253225

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

Rawdha & Hawally
WhatsApp 9662-2883

Shaab Co-op
WhatsApp 9090-4455

Wafra Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-0539

Keifan Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-1719

Rehab Co-op
WhatsApp 9222-2358

Mishref Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-9900

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

Rumaithiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-0045

Bayan Co-op
WhatsApp 9004-2500

Fahaheel Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-9951

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

Salam Co-op
WhatsApp 9788-7832

Kuwait govt urges public to halt gatherings as COVID-19 cases surge

Cabinet approves SMEs loan guarantees bill



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

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti government urged the public to adhere to all precautionary measures and health requirements as well as halt all gatherings to curb the spread of coronavirus and maintain the safety of all. This came during the Cabinet's weekly meeting on Monday, during which Health Minister Dr Sheikh Basel Al-Sabah updated ministers on the COVID-19 situation. In his presentation, the minister laid it bare that the daily rise in the number of coronavirus infections and fatalities is still high. He also noted that the number of hospitalizations and intensive care units occupants are also surging despite the imposed lockdown measures and night curfew. He stressed that this situation requires more vigilance and abidance by the preventive measures. Kuwait had registered on Monday 1,332 new COVID-19 cases and seven deaths, while the percentage of new cases to swab tests reached 18 percent. The number of patients in intensive care units stood at 219 on Monday, up from 209 the previous day.

The Cabinet meanwhile approved a draft law on supporting and guaranteeing local banks' loans to clients who were affected by the coronavirus measures. The Cabinet endorsed the bill, which was proposed by its economic committee, and

referred it to His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, said Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Dr Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohamad Al-Sabah in a statement following the meeting. The Cabinet has also tasked minister of commerce and industry

to coordinate with the ministry of finance, the Kuwait Investment Authority, the Central Bank of Kuwait, the National Fund for the Supporting Small and Medium Enterprises, the Kuwait Economic Society and other relevant bodies to propose a slew of bills and executive measures to back small and medium-sized enterprises and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on them.

Earlier, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah briefed the Cabinet about the reassuring recent medical check-ups of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah in the United States. His Highness the Premier and the fellow ministers wished His Highness the Amir everlasting wellbeing. The Cabinet also mulled the grilling motion presented by a number of lawmakers against His Highness the Premier. His Highness the Premier stated that he will deal with the motion in line with the constitutional articles, National Assembly bylaws and the verdicts of the Constitutional Court.

The Cabinet also approved the draft decree to appoint Advisor Wael Al-Asousi as secretary general of the Cabinet and referred the decision to His Highness the Deputy Amir. The ministers also tackled the latest international and regional developments. In this regard, the Kuwaiti government welcomed the formation of a new executive power in Libya and lauded the UN efforts to achieve this goal. It also reiterated Kuwait's support to international efforts to continue the political process to meet the Libyan people's aspirations of security and stability. — KUNA



Grilling handled in line with constitution



Ministers attend the Cabinet's weekly meeting.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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News in brief

KD 4 billion payroll increase

KUWAIT: The total salaries paid to public sector employees and included in Kuwait's budget jumped by KD 4 billion in the past 10 fiscal years (2009/2010 to 2018/2019), rising from KD 3.2 billion to KD 7.2 billion at a compound annual rate of 9.5 percent, Al-Anbaa reported yesterday. This means around KD 52 billion has been paid in salaries to workers in government entities during the past 10 years. A local study revealed consumption and spending by citizens and expats in Kuwait and abroad during the past 10 years (2010 to 2020) shows that high salaries in the government and private sectors, in addition to facilities given by Kuwaiti banks, are the main spending motivators.

Curfew violators arrested

A security source said a police patrol in Bneid Al-Gar spotted a vehicle with two persons inside in violation of the curfew. Al-Rai Arabic daily reported. When pulled over, both were found under the influence. When asked for IDs, they said they were not carrying any, insulted the officers, exchanged blows and injured one of the officers. Backup was called and the two suspects were brought under control and taken to Dasma police station. The injured officer received eight stitches in the head. Both suspects were detained and will face further legal action.



KUWAIT: Policemen check the curfew passes of motorists at a checkpoint on Fourth Ring Road on Monday. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

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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BANGKOK: Kuwaiti Ambassador to Thailand Mohammad Al-Failakawi meets with Thailand's Parliament Speaker Chuan Leekpai. — KUNA

Kuwaiti Ambassador, Thai top lawmaker discuss bilateral ties

BANGKOK: Kuwaiti Ambassador to Thailand Mohammad Al-Failakawi met yesterday with Thailand's Parliament Speaker Chuan Leekpai. In a statement to the press, the Kuwaiti embassy in Thailand said that Ambassador Failakawi and

Speaker Leekpai discussed ways to enhance and support the development of relations between the two countries. It added that Leekpai expressed his wishes to visit Kuwait as soon as the coronavirus pandemic is resolved. — KUNA

Stoltenberg lauds role of Kuwait's NATO-ICI center

BRUSSELS: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg yesterday expressed his appreciation for the Alliance's partnership in the Gulf region and praised the role of NATO-ICI center in Kuwait which was established in 2017. "We very much appreciate and value the partnership that we have in the Gulf region as part of the ICI (Istanbul Cooperation Initiative) framework that we have," he told an online press conference while presenting his Annual Report for 2020. "We of course also welcome the regional training center we have in Kuwait. I had the honor of visiting the center several times. I welcome the fact that in that center we bring together NATO allies and partners in the region and that we strengthen our partnership and we work together on wide range of concrete tasks and issues," he said.

"We are open to further step up our cooperation with partners in the Gulf region and therefore we continue to consult and work with different partners in that region because the Gulf region and the Mediterranean region both regions are important for NATO," he stressed. The ICI initiative includes Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE. NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, launched at the Alliance's Summit in the Turkish city in June 2004, aims to contribute to long-term regional



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg

security by offering countries of the Gulf region practical bilateral security cooperation with NATO. Commenting on the current NATO mission in Iraq, he said that "everything we do in Iraq will be based on the request by the Iraqi government fully respecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Iraq."

Stoltenberg stressed that the NATO mission in Iraq is a training and advice mission and not a combat mission. The 142-page report covers NATO's work and achievements throughout the year of 2020. The report said that the Kuwait based NATO-Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Regional Centre delivered its first course online in September 2020. Since its inauguration in 2017, the center has hosted more than 1,000 participants from the Gulf, as well as more than 200 experts from NATO countries. — KUNA



'The fighting continues': A Tigray town reels from drawn-out war

US, Japan officials warn China on 'coercion, destabilizing behavior'



YEMEN: In this file photo Yemeni soldiers stand near a rocket launching during a major offensive against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the Maifaa region of Shabwa province on May 4, 2014. —AFP

Yemen's Al-Qaeda regenerates as battle rages

US revives Yemen peace process but battle for Marib a new hurdle

ABU DHABI: Years of setbacks have weakened the once mighty Yemeni branch of Al-Qaeda, but the militants are seizing the opportunity to regenerate while the government and Houthi rebels are locked in a fight to the death in the north.

Government security officials and tribal leaders said that the fierce battle for Marib, which has raged for the past month, is creating a security vacuum that is being exploited by the jihadists. Once seen as the most potent Al-Qaeda franchise, they have suffered multiple defeats in the past three years, leaving them deprived of territory and fighters, and with mystery surrounding the fate of the leadership.

"The governorate of Marib has been AQAP's main stronghold for years," said one intelligence official. While the main combatants in Yemen's six-year war sustain heavy losses in an effort to control Marib city, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula remains "at ease" elsewhere in the region where it retains strong influence in villages and small towns. "As others get busy fighting, they are training fighters again, planning, rebuilding relations" with local tribes and chasing "financial support" from local communities, the official added. Marib city, the capital of the oil-rich governorate, is the last northern stronghold for the internationally recognized government which is backed by a Saudi-led military coalition.

Rapid rise.

The Houthis control the rest of the north after years of conflict which has plunged Yemen into the world's worst humanitarian crisis. "The war in Marib could be ending the maximum pressure campaign that almost wiped (AQAP) out" in Yemen in the last few years, another Yemeni intelligence official said.

Born at a meeting of jihadists on a January evening in 2009, in

southern Abyan's rugged mountains, AQAP was a marriage of convenience between the network's offshoots in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, as they faced the onslaught of US and regional military campaigns. The group led by Nasser Al-Wuhayshi and his deputy Said Al-Shihri, former prisoners in Sanaa and Guantanamo respectively, found immediate success as Yemen grappled with growing instability—a secessionist movement in the south, a rebellion in the north, and a crippling economic crisis.

In one year, the group recruited hundreds of fighters with the help of local tribes, attracted jihadists from Asia and Africa, claimed deadly attacks, and attempted to kill a senior Saudi official and bomb a US civilian plane. It even issued one of the first English online jihadist magazines, called Inspire.

Even before that, the shadow of al-Qaeda hung over Yemen—the group claimed responsibility for the 2000 attack against the destroyer USS Cole in the southern city of Aden that killed 17 US military personnel. By the end of that decade "they had a strong basis for their movement and many safe havens," said Hossam Radman from the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies.

AQAP peaked in 2014, invading towns and taking control of the southern city of Mukalla in 2015, while its main competitor the Islamic State group was gaining ground in Iraq and Syria.

...and decline

Outside Yemen, the group attacked the French satirical publication Charlie Hebdo in 2015, killing 12, showing its ability to strike far from home. "It is logical that the continuation of the battle in Marib and the inability of any of the two sides to win will be a major gain for the organization as it rearranges its ranks," said Saeed Bakran, an expert on Yemeni extremists.

When Saudi Arabia launched a military intervention in Yemen in March 2015, aimed at halting the Houthis' astonishing gains, its eye was also fixed on AQAP. The UAE, a key member of the Saudi-led coalition, took the lead in driving AQAP out of villages one after the other with the help of US forces, weapons, and intelligence. US drones and special forces managed to locate and kill leaders including the long-feared Al-Wuhayshi in 2015.

Another challenge was the ambition of the Islamic State, as the rivals tussled for territory and support over the years. "All these elements weakened AQAP. Today, it is facing financial problems, many members are accused of treason, and others joined IS," a tribal leader in Marib said.

Despite that, it "continued to exploit the security vacuum created by the ongoing conflict" and to "conduct attacks and operate in areas of southern and central Yemen with relative impunity," according to a 2019 US report on terrorism. AQAP fighters are estimated to number in the low thousands, according to the report. Then came the battle for Marib, some 120 kilometers (75 miles) east of the rebel-controlled capital Sanaa.

"The fighting is helping the group reorganize. They even pushed some of their fighters to join the ranks of the resistance battling the Houthis, to benefit from the financial support they receive," the tribal leader said, referring to salaries believed to be paid by the coalition. Last month, the group called on Yemenis to raise arms against the Houthis in Marib, portraying itself once again as the "defender of Muslims" in the region.

Meanwhile, the United States' intervention to end Yemen's long conflict has energized a once lifeless peace process, observers say, but savage fighting in the country's north has thrown up yet another barrier. After six years of

relentless fighting, the conflict that has brought Yemen to its knees appears to be at a turning point, just as the United Nations warns the country could tip into wide-scale famine at any moment. The US has withdrawn support for the Saudi-led coalition's offensive in Yemen, and sources say its new envoy Tim Lenderking met face-to-face with the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who unleashed the conflict when they seized the capital Sanaa. After the free-wheeling approach under former US president Donald Trump, the might of Washington's diplomacy has now swung back behind the UN pointman on Yemen, Martin Griffiths, whose unenviable job it is to get the two sides to the table.

And Saudi Arabia, with its poor rights record back in the spotlight under Joe Biden's administration, is under pressure to find a way out of the quagmire it waded into when it swooped in to support the internationally recognized government in 2016. "Lenderking has been doing the rounds in the region, engaging with parties to the conflict," a Gulf-based Western official said. "American involvement is bringing new momentum" to end the stalemate, the official said. "The support for Griffiths has never been stronger."

Despite the optimism, Lenderking received a cool response to his proposal to kick off a revived peace process, and a source close to the UN efforts said the initiative is effectively on hold until the battle raging outside the city of Marib is won or lost. The Houthis are throwing everything they have at the fight for the capital of an oil-rich region, sustaining heavy casualties as a price worth paying for the last piece of the north that the government still controls. Its capture would hand the rebels an important new revenue source as well as a stronger position at the negotiating table, or even embolden them to push for more territory. —AFP

George Floyd Square: Scene of tears and tensions

MINNEAPOLIS, United States: Memorial or no-go zone? The Minneapolis intersection where George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, was killed last summer by a white police officer has become a bit of both.

"George Floyd Square" is a public shrine, a focal point for debate and a canvas for artistic expression denouncing racial injustice and police brutality. Surrounded by concrete barricades and patrolled by self-appointed "guardians," the intersection at 38th and Chicago has also been the scene of several shootings, at least one of them fatal. Bouquets, candles and handwritten messages mark the spot where the handcuffed Floyd died, his neck pinned to the ground by police officer Derek Chauvin's knee.

Jeanelle Austin, a 36-year-old woman who grew up in the neighborhood, describes herself as the "lead caretaker" of the George Floyd memorial. "I started caretaking for my own well-being," Austin told AFP, carefully preserving and archiving the tributes left by visitors. "People who remember me say, 'You held each flower as if it was precious gold.'" Austin said. "At first we were just tending to the space, to keep it clean and

tidy," she said. Now, "we are part of the fight to rehumanise Black people." "The stories that we are conserving emerge out of Black narrative," she added. "Our job is to be keeper of this story."

'Celebrate Black culture'

The Floyd family has pledged \$500,000 from a \$27-million "wrongful death" settlement with the city of Minneapolis to help improve the historically Black neighborhood. "When people come to 38th and Chicago, they will witness a marker of a turning point in civil rights," said Ben Crump, a lawyer for the Floyd family. "They will learn more about Black history," Crump said. "They will support the thriving Black businesses that were able to survive, not only COVID, but this terrible tragedy where George Floyd was killed. And they will be able to celebrate Black culture."

Access to the square has been restricted by the "guardians" since a 30-year-old man was shot dead there on the evening of March 6. The Hennepin County Attorney's Office announced on Monday that a 31-year-old man had been charged with murder in connection with the shooting, which it said stemmed from an internal dispute in the "Rolling 30s Bloods" gang. Checkpoints have been set up at entry points, and a banner hangs at one of them proclaiming the site the "Independent State of George Floyd." "You are not safe here," a "security guard" told a group of visitors during a recent visit to the area before asking them to leave to "let the community mourn."

A day of silent prayer had been scheduled last week to

The Zulus are popularly known for their vibrant culture, especially the timeless and riveting ancient war dance performed by the rhythmic stomping of feet. The late king exuded the image of a traditional chief, typically sporting a poncho-like leopard-skin chest cover and wielding an unquestionable spiritual authority.

He spoke to powerful political leaders, and appeared in public with Nelson Mandela. He also had visits from President Cyril Ramaphosa and ex-president Jacob Zuma, during which they were seen performing the gripping Zulu war dance, known as "umzansi." Even though he lacked executive power under the South African system, he still had moral clout over more than 11 million Zulus, nearly a fifth of the country's population.

At the fall of apartheid, traditional leaders were constitutionally recognized and they continue to play an important symbolic and spiritual role. They advise



NEW YORK: A person holds a placard with George Floyd's face during a protest to mark the one year anniversary of Breonna Taylor's death in New York City. —AFP

mark the start of Chauvin's trial but was called off. The neighborhood around 38th and Chicago has been tense since Floyd's May 25 death. Gunshots can be heard most nights. An Uber driver recounted to AFP how he recently drove away a bleeding man who did not want to wait for an ambulance.

Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey said the area has "two truths associated with it." "There are certainly times that it's a beautiful community gathering space," Frey said. "And I think that needs to be honored and respected. And there have been times where it has been absolutely unsafe." Minneapolis police chief Medaria Arradondo said the situation cannot continue forever. —AFP

legislators and have a say in cultural, land management and justice administration in their territories. The Zulu king remains the most influential of all these traditional leaders.

For now, secrecy shrouds the identity of Zwelithini's successor, although the question is on everybody's lips. Ordinarily it would have been the eldest son born to the senior of his six wives, with whom he sired 28 children. But his first son, Prince Lethukuthula Zulu, was killed aged 50 last November at his Johannesburg home.

It is a "complicating factor" that the man who would likely have been the "designated" king is already dead, said Somadoda Fikeni, a cultural heritage expert. Historian and cultural analyst Ntuli Pikita said that while the palace will have resorted to a "very intricate way" of picking the successor, its inner circle should know already who the next king will be. —AFP

South Africa's largest ethnic group, Zulus, await new king

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa's largest ethnic group, the Zulus, will bid farewell tomorrow to their king, Goodwill Zwelithini, who for half a century was their charismatic but also controversial figurehead. The longest-serving king in Zulu history, the monarch died on Friday after 50 years on the throne. Under Zulu funeral rites, he should be interred by a few select men-an event the palace calls a "planting" of his remains rather than a burial.

Greece and Turkey meet for fresh talks on maritime dispute

ATHENS: NATO members Greece and Turkey meet in Athens yesterday to try once more to settle their standoff over eastern Mediterranean borders and energy rights. Ankara ratcheted up the pressure a notch on Monday with a diplomatic note to Israel, Greece and the European Union, Turkish media reported. It told them to seek its permission before assuming work on a proposed undersea power cable in disputed eastern Mediterranean waters, Turkish state media reported Monday.

Both sides cite a range of decades-old treaties and international agreements to support their conflicting territorial claims. Hostilities flared last year when Ankara sent a research ship accompanied by a navy flotilla into waters near the Turkish coast that Greece asserts are theirs—a claim the EU supports. Those waters are thought to be a possible source of natural gas reserves. Turkey is furious that Athens is using its web of islands to lay claim to huge swathes of the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. Yesterday's meeting follows one in Istanbul in January, the first direct talks between the two sides on the dispute in nearly five years—and which happened only after pressure from the EU. But the discussion will also be the 62nd such meeting since 2000, a long series that so far has little to show for it.

Athens, so far, has only wanted to discuss the border around the Aegean, where some of its islands lie close to the Turkish mainland. Ankara however insists that the talks should include setting out the exclusive economic zones and air space of the two states. Little has been released about the agenda for yesterday's talks, which will take place behind closed doors. But Turkey knows that at a December EU summit, member states drew up a list of Turkish targets for sanctions over what it said had been Ankara's "unilateral actions and provocations" in the eastern Mediterranean. A Greek diplomatic source told AFP the bloc's March summit would return to the question. Greece is also counting on the support of US President Joe Biden, the same source said. —AFP

International

'The fighting continues': A Tigray town reels from drawn-out war

Rising civilian casualties ignite anger against Nobel Peace Prize-winner Abiy

WUKRO, Ethiopia: Kibrom Hailu wasn't too worried when his 15-year-old son stepped out to play volleyball one morning last month near their home in Wukro, in Ethiopia's conflict-hit Tigray region.

There had been protests in town that week—young men burning tires and denouncing Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed—but his son, Henok, wasn't involved and promised not to go far. Only when he heard gunfire did Kibrom realize the danger, and by then it was too late: Henok's body lay dead in the dirt road right outside the gate of their compound. Henok was one of 18 civilians shot and killed that day by Ethiopian soldiers, according to a tally provided by St Mary's College in Wukro, which has documented abuses by security forces against civilians in the town since fighting erupted last November. For Kibrom, though, the timing was just as revealing as the toll: the killings came around two and a half months after Abiy announced military operations in Tigray had "ceased" and life would return to normal.

In fact the opposite is true, Kibrom and other Wukro residents told AFP journalists who reached the town earlier this month. "The war is escalating. Now it is focused on the civilians," Kibrom said.

'How can we live like this?'

Every phase of the four-month-old conflict in Tigray has brought suffering to Wukro, a fast-growing transport hub once best-known for its religious and archaeological sites. Ahead of federal forces' arrival in late November, heavy shelling leveled homes and businesses and sent plumes of dust and smoke rising above near-deserted streets. Since then the town has been heavily patrolled by soldiers—Eritreans at first, now mostly Ethiopians—whose abuses fuel a steady flow of civilian casualties and stoke anger with Nobel Peace Prize-winner Abiy. "We are constantly receiving patients who are injured by the war," said Dr Adonai Hans, medical director of Wukro General Hospital. "If somebody says there is no war in Tigray, that would be a joke for me."

'Sons of the junta'

Abiy sent troops into Tigray on November 4 after blaming the region's once-dominant ruling party, the



People react as they stand next to a mass grave containing the bodies of 81 victims of Eritrean and Ethiopian forces, killed during violence of the previous months, in the city of Wukro, north of Mekele. — AFP

Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), for attacks on army camps. Several weeks later, as federal forces advanced on the regional capital Mekele, Wukro residents realized their town, 50 kilometers (31 miles) north, would be overrun. Many fled to the surrounding mountains, looking on in horror as shells rained down on the town, some recording the carnage with their cellphones.

What they returned to was even worse: Angry Eritreans who spent days looting homes, banks and factories and shooting dead scores of young men suspected of sympathizing with the TPLF "junta", according to religious and medical officials. "Killing is their kind of daily work. They don't even sense they are killing people," a Catholic official in Wukro said of the Eritreans, requesting anonymity to avoid reprisals. Nebiyu Kiflom, a building materials vendor, was home with his housemates—including three of his brothers—when Eritreans barged through the door one night in late November. "They said, 'You are the sons of the junta,'" he

recalled. "We were just sitting at home. We weren't doing anything." The soldiers killed six people that night, and Nebiyu was stuck indoors for three days with the bodies before he summoned the courage to go for help.

By early December, scores of young men were dead in Wukro, including 81 now buried at the back of an Orthodox church. "We have seen the bodies with our own eyes. We have buried them," said priest Gebrehana Hailemariam. "They were killed in the town and brought to us." None of the death tolls provided could be independently verified.

Hospital shelled

During the first wave of killings, Wukro residents had almost no access to medical care. Damage from shelling and looting destroyed 75 percent of the hospital's facilities and equipment, forcing it to close for a month, said Dr Adonai, the medical director.

The timing could not have been worse for Elisabeth Gebrekidan, who delivered twins in early December and suffered what her family believes was postpartum hemorrhage. Her brother, Elias, pleaded with a soldier for permission to hire an ambulance to take her to Mekele for treatment but was rebuffed. "He said to me, 'Get out of my face, you are a son of the junta,'" Elias recalled, tears streaming down his face at the memory.

Elisabeth died after four days at home, leaving Elias to raise the twins—girls named Tsion and Roda—with the help of his mother. These days, the hospital is open and running, albeit at limited capacity. Patients include rape survivors—some of whom wait weeks or months before seeking medical care—and freshly-wounded civilians who give an idea of just how close fighting continues to be.

One recent afternoon, a 45-year-old construction worker named Meles was being treated for a gunshot blast to his right thigh. He said Eritrean soldiers had opened fire on civilians in his hometown of Agula, 12 kilometers south of Wukro, one morning in late February after pro-TPLF forces ambushed one of their positions in the town. "Still the fighting continues," Meles said. —AFP

Biden. "My husband told me to come at this time," said Rubia Tabora, a 25-year-old mother of one.

"At home there are no jobs, no money." In February, the US Customs and Border Protection Agency (CBP) arrested about 100,000 people at the southern border—including nearly 9,500 unaccompanied children—a 28 percent jump over January. In line with a pandemic-rooted policy adopted by Trump, who cracked down on immigration both legal and illegal as part of his "America First" doctrine, the Biden administration is deporting most of the undocumented people who arrive at the southern border. But unlike Trump, Biden has opted against expelling minors who show up unaccompanied and are filling shelters set up to hold them, with limited capacity because of the coronavirus crisis.

Still, Brownsville mayor Trey Mendez said authorities in his community at the southern tip of Texas were not overwhelmed. "I don't feel that it's a crisis for the city of Brownsville," he told reporters. He said about 150 migrants daily are processed in the city, most of whom leave within 24 hours.

'Record' levels

The Biden administration over the weekend ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to support an effort to temporarily house thousands of children who crossed the US-Mexico border alone. While detained migrant adults and families continue to be sent back to Mexico, unaccompanied children are being processed and then get help resettling with US relatives.

Dallas County commissioner J.J. Koch said that FEMA had asked the city to lease them a hall at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center as a "decompression center" to house up to 3,000 teenage boys aged between 15 and 17 for as long as 90 days, "while plans for more permanent sheltering or connection to sponsor families can be arranged."

He said FEMA "desires to begin operations as early as this week." Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said Saturday that numbers of unaccompanied child migrants had reached "record" levels, but dated the surge back to April 2020 and blamed ongoing violence, natural disasters, food insecurity and poverty in parts of Central America. —AFP

Biden immigration policy takes heat as migrants soar

BROWNSVILLE, US: President Joe Biden faced mounting pressure Monday from Republicans over his handling of a surge in migrants—including thousands of unaccompanied children—arriving at the US-Mexico border. While successive administrations have dealt with seasonal spikes in migration, Biden's critics claim he has driven the latest uptick by taking a softer stance on the flashpoint issue than his predecessor Donald Trump. On January 20, his first day in office, Biden scrapped several of Trump's contentious immigration policies, including halting new construction of a border wall and proposing legislation to create a citizenship pathway for the nearly 11 million people living illegally in the US.

Republican congressman Kevin McCarthy of California, who leads his party in the House of Representatives, described Biden's policies as having created "more than a crisis." "You can continue to deny it but the only way to solve it is to first admit what he has done, and if he will not reverse action, it takes Congressional action to do it," McCarthy told a press conference on the border in the Texas town of El Paso. Republican congressman Chuck Fleischmann said Biden's administration had "created an environment" that caused an increase in migration. Other Republican lawmakers said human traffickers were profiting from Biden's policies. White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Biden had inherited "a dismantled and unworkable system" from Trump. "Like any other problem, we're going to do everything we can to solve it," she said.

'No jobs, no money'

At a bus terminal in the border town of Brownsville late Sunday, a Guatemalan woman told AFP she had crossed the border illegally after her husband, who is already in the US, told her things may be simpler under



Migrants who had been in Mexico under the Migrant Protection Protocols, or the "Remain in Mexico" program, enter the United States at the Paso del Norte Bridge in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. — AFP

How a remote Portuguese island dodged COVID

AZORES, Portugal: Battered by North Atlantic weather and sometimes starved of vital supplies, the tiny Portuguese island of Corvo has a crucial advantage in the fight against the pandemic: its remoteness.

Lying hundreds of kilometers from continental Europe, the smallest island in the Azores-dominated by a volcanic crater and dotted with lakes—appears to have escaped unscathed. By Saturday, almost its entire 400-strong population had been vaccinated, its only doctor rejoicing as people lined up at a sports com-

plex for their second Pfizer dose. "We're already living a life that's very close to normal," beamed Antonio Salgado, checking names off his list. "And now it will be even more so!"

The 62-year-old physician arrived on Corvo less than a year ago but he is already accustomed to occasional shortages of fruit and fuel—and he has learnt to make homemade yoghurt. "This makes up for all the difficulties we experience daily," he said.

Portugal decided to fully vaccinate the island without moving through priority groups. Local health official Clelio Meneses explained that the number of jobs needed to immunize Corvo would not affect rollouts elsewhere in the Azores. "The only responsible thing to do was to vaccinate the whole population in one go to create an immunized territory," he said. With only one ventilator on the island and no hospital beds at all, an outbreak on Corvo could have been devastating. —AFP

News in brief

Journalist blames Colombia for rape

BOGOTA: World Press Freedom winning journalist Jineth Bedoya on Monday accused the Colombian state of torture, rape and kidnapping during a virtual hearing at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. "My life was destroyed, they killed me the morning of May 25" 2000, said Bedoya. She testified that she was seized by a group of right-wing paramilitaries from outside a prison in the capital Bogota and then tortured and raped for 16 hours before being abandoned on the side of a road. At the time, Bedoya was investigating an arms trafficking network operating out of the La Modelo prison and claimed the state, including an "influential" police chief, was complicit in her abduction. —AFP

Hard-left Podemos chief leaving govt

MADRID: Pablo Iglesias, leader of the hard-left party Podemos and a deputy prime minister in Spain's ruling coalition, said Monday he would resign from the government to run as Madrid's regional chief. The announcement was a political bombshell with analysts agreeing it was a risky gamble for Iglesias: leaving national politics with no guarantee he will succeed in displacing the right in Spain's wealthiest region where it has held sway for 25 years. "I have informed (Prime Minister) Pedro Sanchez about my decision to leave my post in government when the campaign begins," he said in a video message posted on social media referring to elections scheduled for May 4. —AFP

Brazil orders 100m doses of Pfizer jabs

BRASILIA: Brazil has ordered 100 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine and another 38 million of Johnson & Johnson's, the health minister said Monday, seeking to accelerate the hard-hit country's lagging immunization campaign. Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello said Brazil had secured a total of 563 million vaccine doses by the end of the year—some single- and some double-dose vaccines—and defended his handling of the pandemic, even as he confirmed that far-right President Jair Bolsonaro was looking at candidates to replace him amid a surge in new cases and deaths in Brazil. —AFP

Jailed Moroccan editor's paper shuttered

CASABLANCA: Independent Moroccan daily Akhbar Al-Yaoum, a newspaper with a history of run-ins with the kingdom's authorities, is to cease publishing due to financial woes, its management announced Monday. The paper has suffered "persistent harassment through an advertising boycott" and has been "deprived" of emergency state funding available to other media during the coronavirus crisis, its management said on Facebook on Sunday. Its editor-in-chief, Taoufiq Bouachrine, is in prison serving a 15-year jail sentence for human trafficking, abuse of power for sexual purposes, rape and attempted rape. —AFP

US slams Syria election at UN

UNITED NATIONS: The US ambassador to the United Nations urged the international community not to "be fooled" by Syria's forthcoming presidential election during a Security Council meeting Monday on the 10th anniversary of the start of the conflict. "These elections will neither be free nor fair. They will not legitimize the Assad regime," said Linda Thomas-Greenfield, referring to president Bashar al-Assad.

The diplomat told council members the elections set for this summer "do not meet the criteria laid out in Resolution 2254 — including that they be supervised by the UN or conducted pursuant to a new constitution." Thomas-Greenfield said the United States, which has the rotating presidency of the council, had decided to hold the monthly meeting on Syria on March 15 because it coincided with the anniversary of the beginning of the conflict in 2011. The milestone prompted a statement from the United States and its major European allies vowing solidarity with the Syrian people following years of "abuses, mass atrocities and grave violations of international law," as well as widespread corruption and economic mismanagement.

"We, the foreign ministers of France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States, will not abandon the Syrian people," it said. "Our nations commit to reinvestigating the pursuit of a peaceful solution which protects the rights and future prosperity of all Syrians... We cannot allow this tragedy to last another decade." Thomas-Greenfield's Russian counterpart Vassily Nebenzia said the March 2011 unrest had been stirred up "by outside forces," a common refrain used by Moscow. "Their aim was to overthrow the legitimate Syrian authorities and reformat the country in their hands," he said in Russian, calling for all foreign fighters to leave. France, which ran Syria from 1920 to 1946, stopped short of the American position of rejecting the election, calling instead for the vote to be credible. Deputy French Ambassador Nathalie Broadhurst said there would be "no settlement to the conflict" without "free and transparent elections under United Nations supervision." —AFP



In this Nov 15, 1974 file photo, Ronald DeFeo Jr, center, leaves Suffolk County district court after a hearing, on New York's Long Island.

'Amityville Horror' killer dies in US custody at 69

NEW YORK: The American murderer Ronald DeFeo—whose 1974 killings of his parents and four siblings inside their home near New York inspired "The Amityville Horror" movie—has died, prison officials said Monday. DeFeo, who was serving a 25 years-to-life sentence at Sullivan Correctional Facility in northern New York state, died on Friday aged 69, the state prisons department said in a statement. He was pronounced dead around 6:35 pm (2335 GMT) at Albany Medical Center, which is located around 150 kilometers (93 miles) from the jail, the statement added.

The cause of death was not immediately known and is pending a coroner's report. The prison's department did not say whether DeFeo had been ill before he died. He was due for a parole hearing in July, according to prison authorities. DeFeo was convicted of killing his mother, father, two brothers and two sisters on November 13, 1974 at their home in the coastal town of Amityville on Long Island about 40 miles from New York City.

DeFeo, who was only 23 years old at the time shot each of his parents twice and his siblings once. The victims were all found in their beds. During the trial, DeFeo's lawyer unsuccessfully pleaded insanity for his client who claimed to be hearing voices. The family massacre inspired the 1977 novel "The Amityville Horror: A True Story," which was the basis of the 1979 film "The Amityville Horror," which became a cult classic. The movie was remade in 2005. In 2017, "Amityville: The Awakening" became the latest dramatization about the six murders. — AFP



Portuguese teacher Carla Santos (left), 48, talks to the only two pupils who attend class as other four schoolmates stayed at home after having some reaction to the second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, on Corvo Island in Azores. — AFP

International

US, Japan officials warn China on 'coercion, destabilizing behavior'

Austin, Blinken on first overseas visit to bolster Asia alliance

TOKYO: The US and Japan warned Beijing against "coercion and destabilizing behavior" yesterday after top-level diplomatic and defense talks aimed at bolstering their alliance against rising Chinese influence. Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin and top US diplomat Antony Blinken are on their first overseas trip, which began Monday in Japan, looking to shore up regional alliances and send a message to Beijing.

They will continue on to South Korea, and a policy review by the new administration of its approach to Pyongyang is also a key part of the diplomatic outreach. But discussions in Tokyo focused on China, including its increasing presence around islands disputed with Japan, as well as the situation in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

In a joint statement, the US officials and their Japanese counterparts warned that "China's behavior, where inconsistent with the existing international order, presents political, economic, military and technological challenges". "The ministers committed to opposing coercion and destabilizing behavior towards others in the region," they added.

"We're united in a vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region, where countries follow the rules, cooperate wherever they can and resolve their differences peacefully," Blinken said at a joint press conference. "We will push back if necessary, when China uses coercion or aggression to get its way," he added.

No comment on Pyongyang remarks

Issues from the coup in Myanmar to the way forward with North Korea were also on the table. Blinken accused the military in Myanmar of "attempting to overturn the results of a democratic election", saying it was "brutally repressing peaceful protesters".

But he declined to comment on the latest bombastic pronouncement from North Korea, where leader Kim Jong Un's sister earlier yesterday

warned Washington against "struggling to spread the smell of gunpowder on our land from across the ocean". The joint statement called again for Pyongyang's "complete denuclearization" warning North Korea's arsenal "poses a threat to international peace and stability".

Blinken said Washington was still examining "whether various additional pressure measures could be effective, whether there are diplomatic paths that make sense" as it reviews US policy on the issue.

"We reached out to the North Korean government through several channels, starting in mid-February, including in New York. To date we have not received a response from Pyongyang," he added.

"This follows over a year without active dialogue with North Korea, despite multiple attempts by the United States to engage." President Joe Biden's decision to dispatch the two top officials to Asia has been interpreted as evidence of the administration's determination to set the agenda with Beijing.

Even before Blinken and Austin set out, they made clear in a joint opinion piece that countering Beijing's moves in the region would be top of their agenda. "Together, we will hold China accountable," they wrote in the Washington Post. "If we don't act decisively and lead, Beijing will."

'Disruptive developments'

The joint statement issued yesterday specifically references the "importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait," though Austin declined to comment on whether he agreed with a recent US assessment that China could invade the island within six years.

"In terms of the specific timeline of China, I won't get involved in any kind of hypotheticals," he said. "My job is to make sure that we are as ready, as fast as we can possibly be to face any challenge that would face us or the alliance," he added.

of gunpowder on our land".

"If you wish to sleep well for the next four years, it would be better not to create work from the start that will make you lose sleep," she said. Trump's unorthodox approach to foreign policy saw him trade insults and threats of war with Kim Jong Un before an extraordinary diplomatic bromance that saw a series of headline-grabbing meetings.

But ultimately no progress was made towards Washington's declared aim of denuclearizing North Korea, which is under multiple international sanctions for its banned weapons programs.

It has isolated itself further, imposing a strict border closure to protect itself against the coronavirus pandemic that first emerged in neighboring China. Shortly before Biden's January inauguration, leader Kim decried the US as his country's "foremost principal enemy" and Pyongyang unveiled a new submarine-launched ballistic missile at a military parade.

'March of war'

The talks process was brokered by South Korea's President Moon Jae-in but relations between Seoul and Pyongyang have been in deep freeze since Kim and Trump's summit in Hanoi collapsed in February 2019. Kim Yo Jong is a trusted adviser to her brother and was a key voice when inter-Korean tensions mounted last year, culminating in the North blowing up a liaison office on its

movement. "I was stationed really close to North Okkalapa, so it would be my gun that shoots unarmed people," he said. "I couldn't let that happen. That's why I decided to join." On his public Instagram account, the ethnic Chin soldier has posted photos of himself wearing his military uniform since October 2018.

In his most recent post, he shared the image of him flashing the three-fingered salute after joining a nationwide boycott by civil servants who refuse to work under a junta regime. But while there have been isolated reports of police and soldiers' defection, it remains rare for them to publicly announce a change of allegiance while still in Myanmar, for fear of retaliation. For soldiers, the punishment for desertion is the death penalty, under military law. Nearly 200 police officers and their families have fled the country since the coup-part of a growing stream of defectors crossing into the northeastern Indian state of Mizoram, according to Indian security officials.

'I expect the worst'

An orphan from Chin state in western Myanmar, Shing Ling said he joined the military academy as a teenager to be part of an organization that felt like family. "We were like brothers and we were warm to each other-I was happy there, it felt like home," he said. But disillusionment set in after the previous

were infected with the virus. The consulate-and Hong Kong health authorities-have said the pair were headed to a hospital isolation ward as required by the city's anti-coronavirus rules.

But state media outlets and a leading pro-Beijing trade union have accused the employees of invoking diplomatic immunity, which US officials flat out rejected. "The disinformation from PRC state media about these two cases not complying with quarantine is false," a State Department spokesperson told AFP.

"We reject these efforts to spread disinformation about a critical public health issue."

The reports of diplomatic immunity first ran on Monday in Dot Dot News, an online news outlet in Hong Kong. It is part of an opaquely owned media group that answers to Beijing's Liaison Office.



TOKYO: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin leave after their joint press conference with Japan's Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi after their 2+2 meeting at Iikura Guest House in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

The ministers also specifically referenced the increasing Chinese presence in the waters around the Senkaku islands, known in Beijing as the Diaoyu islands. The disputed islets are administered by Tokyo but claimed by Beijing, and Japan has voiced repeated protests over Chinese boats around the islands, as well as a new Chinese law involving the area. The statement expressed "serious concerns about recent disruptive developments in the region", including the law, warning that both sides would oppose "any unilateral action that seeks to change the status quo or to

undermine Japan's administration of these islands".

"The (Chinese) Coast Guard activity around the Senkaku islands is a clear violation of international law," added Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi. "The US side reconfirmed their commitment to our country's defense of the Senkaku islands."

Blinken and Austin are in Asia after a key summit between leaders of the Quad alliance, which groups the US, Australia, Japan and India, and Austin will continue to New Delhi after Seoul. Blinken will hold talks with Chinese officials in the United States after his stop in Seoul. —AFP

N Korean leader's sister warns US as envoys visit Asia

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's influential sister warned the United States against actions that could make it "lose sleep", state media reported yesterday, as top Biden administration officials began a visit to key allies Tokyo and Seoul. Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in Japan on Monday on their first overseas trip, aimed at rallying military alliances as a bulwark against China and cementing a united front against the nuclear-armed North.

The statement by Kim Yo Jong, a key adviser to her brother, was Pyongyang's first explicit reference to the new president in Washington, more than four months after Joe Biden was elected to replace Donald Trump-although it still did not mention the Democrat by name. The United States and South Korea began joint military exercises last week and Pyongyang's official Rodong Sinmun newspaper carried a statement from her offering "a word of advice to the new administration of the United States that is struggling to spread the smell

'Ashamed' Myanmar soldier joins anti-coup movement

YANGON: Dressed in his army uniform, Shing Ling flashes a three-finger salute for defiant social media posts after deserting Myanmar's military to join the democracy movement. The 30-year-old soldier posted the image on Facebook last week as security forces were staging increasingly lethal crackdowns against protesters. It racked up more than one thousand shares as commenters praised his bravery, before his profile went private. Since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi from power in a February 1 putsch, more than 180 people have been killed as police and soldiers deployed tear gas, stun grenades, rubber bullets and live rounds during near-daily crackdowns on anti-coup demonstrators.

"I have felt so guilty and ashamed since February 1," Shing Ling told AFP from a hideout in Yangon. Despite feeling "shocked" about Suu Kyi's detention, it was the violence in Yangon's North Okkalapa township in early March that became the catalyst for him to join a nationwide civil disobedience

US denies Hong Kong envoys with virus invoked immunity

HONG KONG: The United States yesterday accused Chinese state media of publishing "disinformation" about its diplomats in Hong Kong as it denied its staff invoked immunity to avoid isolating after positive coronavirus tests. Washington temporarily closed its consulate on Monday to conduct deep cleaning and contact tracing after two employees



In this file photo, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong is seen during the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games at the Kwandong Hockey Centre in Gangneung. —AFP

side of the border.

Shin Beom-chul, a researcher at the Korea Research Institute for National Strategy, pointed out that her announcements have previously represented incremental steps by Pyongyang.

"North Korea has judged that the US will not offer enough concessions and so has released this statement ahead of Blinken and Austin's visit to Seoul," he told AFP. —AFP



YANGON: This screengrab shows Shing Ling, a former Myanmar soldier who deserted the military to join the democracy movement in the aftermath of the military coup, looking at his Facebook profile showing his picture wearing a military uniform. —AFP

junta regime loosened its grip on power in 2011, opening Myanmar up to the world and allowing for a communications and internet revolution. The soldier said he learned about politics from Facebook-the most popular social media platform in Myanmar-where discussions widened his perspective on the military's role in society. —AFP

Following the reports, China's state-run Global Times tabloid repeated the diplomatic immunity accusation and accused US officials of "arrogant outlaw behavior".

Yesterday morning Hong Kong's pro-Beijing leader said the two infected consulate workers were already in hospital and that US officials were complying with regulations. "I'm happy to notice that the US consulate also issued a press release yesterday saying that they will follow our advice and support our work," chief executive Carrie Lam told reporters.

Nonetheless Hong Kong's largest pro-Beijing labor group-the Federation of Trade Unions-went ahead with a small protest outside the US consulate shortly after Lam finished speaking. —AFP

News in brief

US Capitol police officer suspended

WASHINGTON: A US Capitol Police officer was suspended Monday after anti-Semitic reading material was found near where he works, two months after hundreds of extremists stormed the legislative building, a spokesman confirmed to AFP. A copy of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," a fictional book from the early 1900s claiming to document a Jewish plan for global domination that allegedly inspired Hitler, was discovered by a congressional aide at a security gate at one of the congressional buildings, The Washington Post reported. —AFP

UK to increase nuclear stockpile

LONDON: Britain is to announce an increase to its nuclear weapons stockpile as part of a wide-ranging review of security, defense and foreign policy, two newspapers said on Monday. The Guardian and The Sun said in their online editions that the country would look to raise the number of warheads from 180 to 260 by the middle of the decade. Both dailies said details were contained in a leak they had seen of the government's long-awaited Integrated Review, due to be published yesterday. The review is also said to state clearly that Russia under President Vladimir Putin poses an "active threat" but describes China as providing a more "systemic challenge". —AFP

Mauritanian is UN envoy to Mali

UNITED NATIONS: Mauritanian diplomat El-Ghassim Wane was named Monday by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as the new UN envoy to Mali, where he will lead one of the organization's most important peace operations, the world body said. The Mauritanian has held positions in several international organizations, including in the African Union from 2009 to 2015, and again from 2017 to 2019. Between those two postings he worked at the UN's own department for peacekeeping operations, from 2016 to 2017. —AFP

Honduras president duped US agency

NEW YORK: Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez received cocaine shipments from Colombia-and duped the US anti-drugs agency, a Honduran former drug lord told a federal trial in New York on Monday. Leonel Rivera, who led the feared Los Cachiros cartel and now collaborates with the US government, said in the court in Manhattan that he met the defendant, alleged drug trafficker Geovanny Fuentes, in 2020 in the New York Metropolitan Jail. In that meeting, according to Rivera, the defendant told him that "he had evidence, photographs, videos to show how Juan Orlando (Hernandez), the president of Honduras, was receiving cocaine shipments from Colombia at the San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa airports." —AFP

UN calls to fight violence against women

UNITED NATIONS: UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called Monday to combat violence against women, at the start of the annual Commission on the Status of Women, which is expected to call for greater action against sexual harassment. During the pandemic, women have been more exposed than men to harmful consequences, Guterres said, citing loss of jobs, sexual abuse or child marriage. "Women's equal participation is the game-changer we need," he said, calling for gender equality and gender parity in leadership. "Only 22 countries are headed by a woman Head of State or Government. And at current rates parity among Heads of Government will not be achieved until 2150," Guterres said. —AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17, 2021

US stimulus checks could end up in stock markets, bitcoin

Govt begins sending \$1,400 direct payments to nearly everyone in US

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion stimulus will start flooding into the US economy soon, and some analysts say much of that money could end up invested in stocks or even bitcoin.

Over the weekend, the government began sending the \$1,400 direct payments that will go to nearly everyone in the United States. About \$400 billion in payments will flow directly to households, going to individuals earning less than \$75,000 a year or married couples making up to \$150,000, as well as their children.

And that does not count child tax credits or unemployment benefits in the massive package, which also includes funds to contain COVID-19, accelerate vaccinations, help reopen schools and aid businesses and state and local governments. The direct payments amount to \$5,600 — tax free—for a typical family of four, funds officials hope will boost the US economy.

But the majority of Americans say that rather than spend, they will use the money to pay off debts, add to savings or to invest, according to one survey by Bank of America, which interviewed 3,000 people.

The bank found that 30 percent will use the money to repay their debt, 25 percent will save it and nine percent will invest. Those funds will "stay within the financial system and don't create demand for goods and services in the real economy," the report found.

With only 36 percent saying they intend to spend these checks, "it's not clear who will be doing all the sustained, voracious consumption markets now are pricing in."

Major stock indices have hit new records two days in a row after Biden signed the stimulus measure into law last week, as investors are betting the rush of funds will spur a rapid recovery of the world's largest economy.

The bitcoin attraction

Mizuho Securities found that about 10 percent of the stimulus, or about \$40 billion, will be invested in equities or in cryptocurrency such as bitcoin. A survey of 235 people making less than \$150,000 found that 35 to 40 percent of respondents said they would invest part of their stimulus checks in stocks and cryptocurrency. And 61 per-

cent of these investors intend to buy bitcoin, said Dan Dolev, one of the leaders of the Mizuho study.

"We were very surprised" that bitcoin "is a bigger investment vehicle than stocks," he said on CNBC.

The cryptocurrency hit an all-time high on Saturday at \$60,000. Another survey of 430 people by Deutsche Bank found that "survey respondents plan to put a large chunk (37 percent) of any forthcoming stimulus directly into equities," which it called "a sizable inflow" into the stock market.

In two prior rounds of stimulus checks in 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic brought the economy to a screeching halt, only about eight percent of the funds went into stocks, the bank said.

The survey showed that young people, aged 25 to 34, account for the biggest share of people planning to play the markets with their stimulus money, followed by those aged 35 to 44.

Goldman Sachs estimated that with the Biden plan, "households will represent the largest source of demand for US stocks in 2021." Goldman Sachs economist David Kostin said the bank estimates



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris depart after US President Joe Biden signed the American Rescue Plan on March 11, 2021, in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC. —AFP

household demand for equities this year will jump to \$350 billion from \$100 billion, "which reflects faster economic growth and higher interest rates than we had assumed previously, additional stimulus payments to individuals, and increased retail activity in early 2021." —AFP

'Diraya' campaign leverages awareness on personal loans

KUWAIT: In line with the efforts of the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) to enhance financial awareness across all segments of society, the CBK-managed, "Be Aware" (Diraya in Arabic) Campaign continues, in collaboration with Kuwait Banking Association (KBA) and with the participation of all Kuwaiti banks, to leverage public awareness of the banking sector's role, and how customers can use banks' diverse services most advantageously.

In a statement, the CBK highlighted that "Diraya" Campaign sheds the light on the personal consumer and housing loans and financing extended to retail clients by conventional and Islamic financial institutions, respectively. The consumer loans accommodate the household needs, e.g. auto, healthcare, study, etc. up to 25 times the customer's net monthly salary and up to a maximum amount of KD 25,000, to be repaid over a maximum period of 5 years. The other type, ie housing loan, is intended to finance construction or renovation up to KD 70,000, to be repaid over a maximum period of 15 years.

The statement further explained that all types of loans and financing facilities are financial obligations and, thus, must be used for their designated purposes. For example, spending the housing loan for consumer needs or investment, may adversely affect the customer's financial position.

The CBK added that its instructions regarding loans and household financing laid down specific controls to protect customers' rights and reduce their financial burdens and over borrowing. Such controls include fixing the monthly installment to net income ratio at 40 percent for employees and 30 percent for retirees. Within the same context, the CBK instructions issued to banks and financing companies stipulated that lenders should review the customers' monthly obligations and advise them accordingly on their needs and obligations. They are also to explain the consequences of being overburdened in case of any change to the financial condition, resulting from a change of employment or retirement status.

The content provided by the campaign is published through several channels, most notably on the CBK and Kuwaiti banks social media accounts. More information on the "Diraya" banking awareness campaign and its objectives, as well as campaign content, is available through its official website: www.dirayakw.com

Myanmar unrest driving up food, fuel prices: WFP

ROME: The political unrest in Myanmar is driving up food and fuel prices, risking pushing the country's most vulnerable people further into poverty, the UN's World Food Program warned yesterday.

The price of palm oil is up 20 percent in the areas around the biggest city, Yangon, compared to the start of February, when the military ousted and detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, sparking mass protests. Rice prices in the peri-urban areas of Yangon and the second largest city, Mandalay, were meanwhile up four percent since the last week of February, the WFP said.

Across the whole country, the price of rice—a food staple—rose by three percent between mid-January and mid-February, while in a few

areas prices soared by between 20 and 35 percent.

The price of pulses rose by 15 percent between January and February in northern Rakhine's Maungdaw township. "These initial signs are troubling, especially for the most vulnerable people who were already living meal-to-meal," said WFP Myanmar country director Stephen Anderson.

"Coming on top of the COVID-19 pandemic, if these price trends continue they will severely undermine the ability of the poorest and most vulnerable to put enough food on the family table." The average retail price of cooking oil rose by 27 percent across northern Rakhine between January and February, and by 11 percent in central Rakhine state.

The cost of fuel nationwide has risen by 15 percent since February 1, with even steeper hikes in northern Rakhine, "raising concerns about further food price hikes", the WFP said. The WFP said it was building up a contingency food stock as part



YANGON: People donate watermelons to protesters as they prepare to take part in a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon. —AFP

of its efforts to support more than 360,000 people in Myanmar, mostly those who are internally displaced and living in camps.

"WFP reiterates the call of the United Nations secretary-general

for the will of the Myanmar people expressed in recent elections to be respected," said Anderson. "At WFP we know all too well how hunger can quickly follow when peace and dialogue are sidelined." —AFP

Messaging app Signal no longer working in China

BEIJING: The encrypted messaging app Signal, recommended by Tesla's Elon Musk, appeared to have been blocked in China yesterday, closing off one of the last US social media platforms still freely available in the country. Users of the free app, which has surged in popularity globally after rising privacy concerns, were unable to access it without a virtual private network (VPN).

China has deployed a vast and sophisticated system to scrub the internet of dissent and prevent citizens from accessing international social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, in what is known as the "Great Firewall". Signal's website has been banned since at least March 15, according to the GreatFire.org website which tracks online censorship in China, although the app remains

available on China's App Store.

Signal did not immediately reply to an AFP request for comment. The iOS version of Signal has been installed close to 510,000 times to date in China, said research firm Sensor Tower, which does not track Android downloads in the country. Google Play is unavailable in China.

Globally, the app has crossed 100 million installs across both Apple's App Store and Google Play combined, Sensor Tower told AFP. In January, people around the world flocked to apps such as Telegram and Signal after the Facebook-owned messaging service WhatsApp tweaked its terms of service and sparked privacy concerns. Signal saw a huge surge in demand, helped by a tweeted recommendation by tech entrepreneur Musk.

The WhatsApp policy update—later delayed—concerned how merchants using WhatsApp to chat with customers can share data with Facebook, which could use the information for targeted ads, according to the social network. Signal has stopped working without a VPN occasionally before, although service resumed afterwards. Co-founder of GreatFire.org

now selling for 3,850 pounds, up from 2,700, it added.

Damascus has repeatedly raised fuel prices in recent years to tackle an accelerating economic crisis sparked by a decade-long civil war and compounded by sanctions, the coronavirus pandemic and a financial crunch in neighboring Lebanon. The trade ministry did not provide a reason for the latest hike, but in the past it has blamed Western sanctions.

The oil ministry last week said it had been forced to cut fuel supplies due to "a delay in the arrival of imported fuel derivatives because of the US blockade". Washington has imposed several rounds of economic sanctions on the Syrian government since the war broke out in 2011.

The trade ministry's latest announcement came as the Syrian pound continued to plunge against the dollar on the black market after it hit a record low of 4,000 to the dollar this month. The pound, officially valued at 1,256 to



BEIJING: This photo illustration shows the encrypted messaging app Signal (center) pictured on a smartphone home screen in Beijing yesterday. —AFP

Martin Johnson told AFP that its data showed that the app was briefly unavailable in the App Store in 2019.

Last month China closed down the Clubhouse app in China, an audio platform which boomed briefly in the country for uncensored discussion of taboo topics. —AFP

the greenback, was selling for around 4200 on the black market yesterday, money exchangers said. The economic crunch has seen food prices skyrocket over the past year in a country where the majority of the population lives below the poverty line.

Rani, a 37-year-old food wholesaler, said the hike in fuel prices would hit other goods. "We are going to have to raise the price of our products to make up for steeper fuel prices," he said. Heating fuel, petrol and cooking gas have been in short supply in government-held areas for years, and motorists have grown used to long queues to fill up.

Syria used to produce almost 400,000 barrels of crude per day before the war. But ten years of conflict have ravaged production and seen US-backed Kurdish-led forces seize control of the country's largest oil fields. The oil sector's losses are estimated at \$91.5 billion. —AFP

Business

KAMCO Oil Market Monthly Report

Oil price eases after touching \$70 led by higher supply, stronger dollar

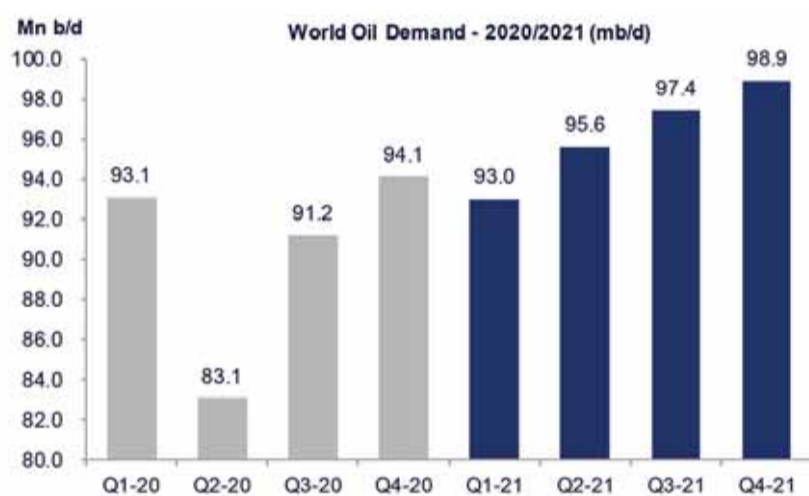
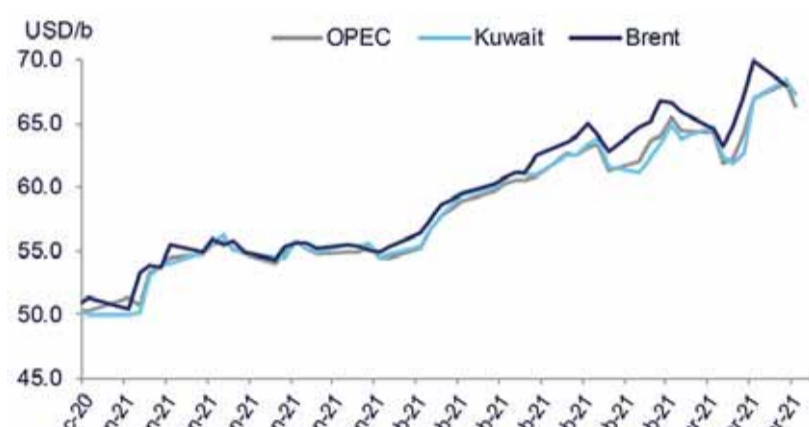
Vaccination pickup across globe gets reflected in growth estimates

KUWAIT: The rally in oil prices continued during early March-2021 with prices touching 14-month high and briefly trading above the \$70/b mark in the spot market for the first time since January-2020. An attack on Saudi oil facilities during the last week also led to a spike in global crude prices. However, prices receded soon after skeptics set in highlighting an overbought market that resulted in higher volatility. A strong USD also affected oil prices as import bills soared for importers led by the impact of higher oil prices, stronger USD as well as increasing demand for crude as COVID-19 restrictions eased in several countries.

On the supply front, crude prices got support from Saudi Arabia's pledge for voluntary cuts in production. OPEC crude production declined by almost 1 mb/d during February-2021 mainly on the back of a steep monthly decline in production by Saudi Arabia further supported by decline in production by Angola and Equatorial Guinea, while most of the other producers reported marginal monthly increase in production. On the other hand, oil production is set to see a growth in the US, especially from shale producers, as a response to the higher oil prices. In its Short Term Energy Outlook, the US EIA raised its forecasted production

inventories reflected a production rate increase in the US by 300 tb/d during the last week of Feb-2021 and 900 tb/d during the week ended 5-Mar-2021 to reach 10.9 mb/d. Rig count data from Baker Hughes showed that the number of oil rigs in the US stayed above the 300 mark after seeing declines for 2 weeks over the last 16 weeks. Nevertheless, prices continue to stay elevated vs. 2H-2020 levels with an increase of more than 33 percent since the start of 2021 reflecting production discipline from the OPEC+ producers and shale producers in the US on the supply side as well as the vaccine led optimism for

portation and the industrial fuels segments was less than expected that was largely offset by lower-than-expected data from weaker-than-expected transportation trend in OECD Americas. For the non-OECD region, demand was revised upwards by 0.1 mb/d led by better-than-expected demand across the region and particularly in the Middle East and in terms of product category, industry fuel witnessed higher-than-expected demand. For 2021, oil demand forecast was raised by 0.22 mb/d and is now expected to average at 96.27 mb/d with an increase of 5.89 mb/d as compared to last year. The revision came after IH-21 demand data was adjusted lower on the back of extended restrictions in many parts of Europe aimed at controlling the spread of COVID-19. This was more than offset by higher demand forecast for 2H-2021 led by stronger economic recovery backed by favorable impact of vaccinations.



Price gains during early March-2021 came mainly on the back of expectations of higher demand in the near term as COVID-19 vaccinations picked up across the globe and gets reflected in economic growth estimates for the year. The rally was also supported by OPEC's surprise decision to keep production cuts unchanged for another month. Favorable demand outlook was also reflected in higher demand for end products in the US, including that of gasoline, that resulted in a higher-than-expected decline in refined product inventories, although crude oil inventories increased during the week. The approval of the \$1.9 trillion financial package for the US economy also added to the optimism around oil demand.

for this year and for 2022. The agency expects 2021 production to reach 11.15 mb/d as compared to its previous forecast of 11.02 mb/d, while 2022 production is expected to increase to 12.02 mb/d as compared to last month's forecast of 11.53 mb/d. OPEC, in its monthly report, also raised its estimates for non-OPEC crude production by 0.47 mb/d for 2021 mainly led by higher supply from Canada, the US, Norway and Brazil.

growth in demand in the near term. The optimism was also reflected in oil price forecast from the EIA that now expects Brent spot prices to average at \$60.67/b in 2021 as compared to last month's forecast of \$53.20/b.

For the next year, the agency expects average Brent crude price to decline slightly to \$58.51/b but higher as compared to its previous forecast of \$55.19/b. Meanwhile, crude oil prices witnessed gains across grades during February-2021. OPEC reference basket increased by 12.3 percent m-o-m during February-2021 and averaged at \$61.05/b during the month, the highest since January-2020.

Kuwait crude grade also witnessed a similar growth of 11.8 percent to average at \$61.31/b whereas Brent crude grade witnessed a bigger increase of 13.7 percent to average at \$62.23/b during February-2021.

World oil demand

World oil demand estimates for 2020 was raised higher by 0.03 mb/d by the OPEC in its latest monthly report. Demand last year is estimated to have averaged at 90.4 mb/d with a contraction of 9.6 mb/d. The upward revision mainly reflected better-than-expected demand data for OECD Europe and Asia Pacific during 2H-2020 as the decline in demand from trans-

World oil supply

World liquids production showed a steep decline during February-2021 after showing consistent growth for the previous four months. Total production witnessed a monthly decline of 1.31 mb/d to reach an average of 92.28 mb/d. The decline reflected a fall in production by both OPEC and non-OPEC producers. OPEC producers lowered output by 0.65 mb/d, according to OPEC secondary sources during February-2021 mainly led by a steep decline in production by Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, non-OPEC producers also lowered production during the month by 0.67 mb/d to an average of 67.43 mb/d led by a fall in US production by 0.6 mb/d led by the freezing temperatures in the region. The steeper decline in production by OPEC producers resulted in a 0.3 percent decline in the group's market share to 26.9 percent.

OPEC oil production & spare capacity

OPEC crude oil production witnessed a steep decline during February-2021 mainly led by the voluntary cuts undertaken by Saudi Arabia. Monthly production rate reached 24.87 mb/d for the group, a four month low, with a m-o-m decline of 0.92 mb/d, according to data from Bloomberg. OPEC's secondary sources showed a similar production level of 24.85 mb/d but a much smaller monthly decline of 0.65 mb/d. During the month, Saudi Arabia lowered production by almost 1 mb/d to 8.15 mb/d, the lowest production rate since June-2020.

The higher production in Nigeria at an average of 1.5 mb/d was led by the lifting of the month-long force majeure by ExxonMobil on the Qua Iboe export terminal. Meanwhile, Libya gradually raised production to 1.2 mb/d by February-2021 and expects to keep production steady led by the formation of the new unity government.

Canadian telecoms giant Rogers buys up rival Shaw

MONTREAL: Canadian telecoms giant Rogers said Monday it had reached an amicable agreement to buy rival Shaw in a deal valued at Can\$26 billion (\$21 billion), creating a new heavyweight rival for Bell and Telus. The announcement of the merger raised concerns about the future of competition in the Canadian telecoms sector, where a very small number of players share a very lucrative market.

Internet and mobile telephone services in Canada are among the most expensive in the industrialized world, according to the OECD, in part because of the size of the country, the largest in the world after Russia. Toronto-based Rogers, the third largest player in the sector in Canada by turnover, is number one for the number of mobile telephone subscribers, leading its main competitors, the Bell and Telus groups.

Minister of Innovation Francois-Philippe Champagne responded by noting that "greater affordability, competition and innovation in the Canadian telecommunications sector are as important to us as a government as they are to Canadians concerned about their cell phone bills."

"These goals will be front and center in analyzing the implications of today's news," he added. "We won't presuppose the outcome of these processes." In addition to his ministry, the regulator of the sector in Canada, the CRTC, as well as the Competition Bureau, will scrutinize the proposed merger.

"Should the Bureau determine that the proposed transaction is likely to substantially lessen or prevent competition, we will not hesitate to take appropriate action," the Competition Bureau said in a statement. Rogers Communications will pay Can\$40.50 in cash per share to its competitor, for a total of Can\$20 billion.

That is 70 percent higher than the recent share price, Rogers said in a joint statement with its rival.

Rogers said it will also take on its rival's debt of Can\$6 billion, bringing the total deal to around Can\$26 billion. — AFP



Al-Zamel (right), Al-Faris and Al-Hamad (left)

KFH inks agreement with Mustashar Albenaa Co

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) has signed a partnership agreement with Mustashar Albenaa Co, as part of its ongoing endeavor to meet needs and aspirations of customers while supporting Kuwait's development plans and real estate development projects in the country.

The agreement that was signed at KFH's headquarters in the presence of Senior Manager Media and Government Relations at KFH, Mohammed Al-Faris, and Abdulrahman Al-Zamel and Abdullah Al-Hamad from Mustashar Albenaa Co, aims to provide interested customers with advisory services on the building and construction market, in particular in the new residential cities.

The agreement supports the "Financing your house in Al-Mutlaa from KFH" campaign KFH launched a few months earlier for construction materials and works for citizens holding residential plots in Al-Mutlaa Residential City and other areas. The campaign provides all customers' needs to build a lifetime home in Al-Mutlaa city and "South Abdullah Al-Mubarak" and all private housing plots, starting from the preliminary design stage until delivery.

KFH's campaign offers variety of financing solu-

tions compatible with Islamic Sharia and in cooperation with a group of the best and largest companies specialized in the field of construction and real estate development. In the interests of customers comfort, the first installment payment will be due 12 months after the contract, with a maximum financing limit of KD 70,000 and the credit period being up to 15 years with the possibility of delaying the installments and re-arranging the debt in the future.

Meanwhile, Mustashar Albenaa Co praised the cooperation with KFH and the vital role the bank plays as a leading Islamic financial institution, in supporting Kuwait's development plans through its ongoing pursuit to provide unique solutions and developed products and services that meet the needs of customers in the construction and building market.

It also indicated that the agreement reflected KFH's endeavor to keep pace with all new developments in the buildings construction market and serve primarily customers as well as meet their needs and aspirations to the fullest. In an effort to create additional value for customers, KFH hosted Abdulrahman Al-Zamel and Abdullah Al-Hamad from Mustashar Albenaa Co on its social media channels, to deliver online seminars via Instagram Live, including information on the common mistakes in construction and advisory on most important steps that must be taken before building a house for life, particularly in the new residential cities. Attracting great interaction from audience, the seminars covered several topics related to building, finishing, methods and steps for obtaining licenses and following up on implementation, means and conditions of contracting as well as cooperation with contractors.

Toys 'R' Us sold again to firm expansion

NEW YORK: Iconic American toy store Toys "R" Us is changing hands once again, this time going to an investment firm that promises to expand the chain that once dominated the market. Leading brand acquisition and management company WHP Global announced on Monday it had taken control of the troubled business known for its Geoffrey the Giraffe mascot and backwards "R" in the name. The deal comes two years after the retailer along with the Babies "R" Us toy and clothing store was acquired in a liquidation sale by Tru Kids Inc, which New York-based WHP said it had taken a controlling interest in. "Our investment in Toys 'R' Us reflects our belief and passion for the brand," WHP Chairman and CEO Yehuda Shmidman said. "This is a natural fit for WHP, as we can leverage our global network and digital platform to help grow Toys 'R' Us and Babies 'R' Us around the world." He noted that the category is up 16 percent and "consumer demand for toys is at an all-time high."

In an interview with CNBC, he said he wanted to reopen Toys "R" Us stores in the United States, ideally by the next holiday season. Shmidman is familiar with the brand as he has served as vice president of Tru Brands since 2019. His company also manages the clothing brands Anne Klein and Joseph Abboud. Tru Brands had tried to reopen Toys "R" Us stores but was thwarted by low mall traffic and shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Toys "R" Us and Babies "R" Us generate over \$2 billion in global retail sales annually through nearly 900 branded stores and ecommerce sites in over 25 countries across North America, Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia, the statement said. — AFP



ATLANTA: In this file photo taken on October 25, 2019 shows general view at Toys "R" Us Adventure Atlanta Opening in Atlanta, Georgia. — AFP.

Business



Mohamed Naser Al-Sayer & Sons unveils all-new Corolla Cross HEV

Toyota reinvents the everyday • No plugin, self-charging Hybrid

KUWAIT: Toyota has combined its leadership in HEV development and extensive experience in the SUV arena with its legendary Quality, Durability, and Reliability (QDR) to create the all-new Toyota Corolla Cross HEV. The innovative vehicle builds on a legacy of more than 23 years at the forefront of eco-friendly technology, over 16-million satisfied HEV customers, and the most extensive HEV line-up in the region.

Building on the incredible legacy of its best-selling vehicle, Mohamed Naser Al-Sayer & Toyota yesterday launched a brand-new addition to the Corolla family. Designed to move occupants in comfort and style, the all-new Corolla Cross delivers outstanding performance and a smooth ride for drivers and passengers alike that makes it the ideal choice for those seeking adventure, doing business, or simply spending time with friends or loved ones.

than 150 countries and regions around the world. The model has continued to evolve in line with the needs of the times; this latest version caters to the strong demand for SUVs in the region, enabling customers to select the vehicle that best suits their diverse lifestyles.

According to Scott McNicol "As we know, the automotive industry is witnessing a profound transformation. During the past few years Toyota has been making significant progress in the fields of Connected, Autonomous, Shared and Electrification. With the launch of all new Corolla Cross, World's best-selling and favorite vehicle since 1966 - Corolla is evolving".

The all-new Corolla Cross has been designed as a new type of SUV that combines a tough urban-style exterior with a comfortable and convenient interior to exceed customer expectations. The TNGA platform (GA-C) has enabled

adding a RAV4 Hybrid then a Camry Hybrid followed by a Corolla sedan Hybrid. Last year we introduced the all-new Highlander SUV and the C-HR cross-over", added Bader Faisal Al-Sayer.

Daizo Kameyama, Chief Engineer in charge of development, commented on the unveiling of the new model: "Now that the Corolla Cross has newly joined the Corolla family, we sincerely hope that our customers will warmly welcome the vehicle to become part of their families; just like their partners, siblings or even friends. We wish that the Corolla Cross could assist customers in creating a new story by loading on their vehicle the people who are important to them, their luggage, and their dreams for the future."

Kei Fujita, Chief Representative, Middle East and Central Asia Representative Office, Toyota Motor Corporation, commented: "We are very happy to bring the all-new Corolla Cross to our customers in the Middle East, which offers a spacious and comfortable ride that turns both daily commutes or weekend leisure journeys into a fun driving experience. As a versatile and stylish crossover vehicle, this latest addition to our HEV range will help to further increase the appeal of eco-friendly vehicles in the region and contribute to our long-term goals for the promotion of sustainable mobility. I would like to thank all of our customers around the world for taking the Toyota Corolla to their hearts and continuously inspiring us on our journey to make ever-better cars."

The all-new Corolla Cross immediately captures the attention with its blend of SUV toughness and urban refinement. The vehicle's bold yet sophisticated style and unmistakable presence are guaranteed to turn heads. Its elevated height and wide stance are emphasized by a front grille that gets wider towards the bottom, producing a sense of strength and stability. Another striking feature is the LED headlamps, which incorporate a curtain-effect - a first for Toyota.

The design of the fender and front bumper create a fun-to-drive impression, while the powerful wheel arches house newly developed 17" alloy wheels that add to the vehicle's dynamic appearance. The aerodynamic cabin sits on top of the wide, muscular rear fenders and is sleek and stylish, while also offering a sense of spacious utility.

The 2021 Corolla Cross's distinctive look and feel is completed by its comfortable interior, which displays exceptional quality and finishing throughout. The cabin is accentuated with an extensive range of features such as an auto-

matic air conditioning system with Smart-flow (S-FLOW) control, which achieves greater comfort and enhanced fuel efficiency by providing air conditioning to occupied seats only. Passengers also benefit from AC vents for the rear seat, a one-touch moonroof, a 7-inch color Multi-Information Display (MID) in the cluster gauge, 8-inch multimedia display integrated with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto™, six-speaker audio system, 60:40 split-folding rear seats, and smart entry and start systems.

The vehicle's thrilling drive personality is brought to life by a new electrified hybrid system that combines two power sources. Its 1.8-liter Atkinson-cycle petrol engine produces 97 hp and a peak torque of 142 Nm, working in tandem with two electric motors that gen-

erate 71 hp and 163 Nm of torque, with a combined power of 121 hp. The system is mated to an Electrically Controlled Continuously Variable Transmission (E-CVT) that contributes to an outstanding fuel consumption value of 23.7km/L. Drivers can also choose between ECO, Power, and Normal driving modes to suit their driving styles. In addition, a separately-switchable EV Mode can be combined with any of these three driving modes, for a silent and emission-free driving at low speeds and for short distances.

the company's business since 1997. Since then, Toyota has successfully launched a variety of HEVs, leading the way to a steady growth in the adoption of its environmentally friendly vehicles and pushing cumulative sales to over 16 million. Combined, this enormous sales record represents a reduction of around 139 million tons of CO2 compared to the sales of equivalent conventional vehicles and underscores the tremendous support of Toyota's customers for this eco-friendly approach.

As with any other Toyota model, safety remains a top priority for the all-new Corolla Cross. The vehicle's advanced safety system is complemented by Toyota Safety Sense, an advanced safety technology package that includes Pre-Collision System

HIGHLIGHTS

- Available exclusively with a hybrid electric powertrain with class-leading fuel consumption of 23.7 km/L
- Stylish exterior expresses a distinctive personality, while comfortable interior creates an enjoyable ride.
- Designed for an active lifestyle, the Corolla Cross offers an expansive luggage capacity of 407 liters.
- Wealth of advanced safety features including Toyota Safety Sense provide greater peace of mind.
- Hybrid Engine 1800cc - 4 Cylinder - 97hp for engine and 72 hp for motor.
- Electrically Controlled Continuously Variable Transmission (ECVT) - FWD.
- ABS (Anti-lock brake system) - EBD (Electronic Brake Distribution) - (VSC) Vehicle Stability Control.
- Hill Start Assist Control (HAC).
- Rear Sensors.
- Alloy Wheels 17-inch.
- Rear Spoiler.
- Sunroof.
- Fog Lamps.
- Auto Air-condition.
- Audio System with CD + 6 Speakers + USB + Bluetooth.
- Power Foldable Outer Mirrors.
- Smart Entry + Start/Stop button.
- Cruise Control.
- Drive Mode Select (Eco, Power, EV).

In view of the current circumstances and in adherence to Ministry guidelines, Al-Sayer held a digital premier of event in Toyota Kuwait Youtube for valued partners of Toyota as well as distinguished members of the press and media. The event was presented by Scott McNicol General Manager Toyota Retail and Bader Faisal Al-Sayer Toyota Marketing Manager representing Mohamed Naser Al-Sayer.

Since its launch in Japan in 1966, the Corolla series has achieved a cumulative total of over 48 million sales in more

than 150 countries and regions around the world. The model has continued to evolve in line with the needs of the times; this latest version caters to the strong demand for SUVs in the region, enabling customers to select the vehicle that best suits their diverse lifestyles.

"We started our Hybrid journey with the Prius in 2016. We tested this car then tested it again to make sure the technology was suitable for our customers in Kuwait. We then grew the range by



erate 71 hp and 163 Nm of torque, with a combined power of 121 hp. The system is mated to an Electrically Controlled Continuously Variable Transmission (E-CVT) that contributes to an outstanding fuel consumption value of 23.7km/L. Drivers can also choose between ECO, Power, and Normal driving modes to suit their driving styles. In addition, a separately-switchable EV Mode can be combined with any of these three driving modes, for a silent and emission-free driving at low speeds and for short distances.

The all-new model offers exceptional cabin quietness and smooth acceleration, especially when accelerating from a stand-still. The vehicle can be driven entirely on electrical power with zero-fuel consumption and tailpipe emissions, or by combining the power generated from the petrol engine and two electric motors, depending on its speed and driver behavior. The hybrid-electric batteries are continuously charged by the petrol engine or when decelerating and braking, eliminating the need to plug in a power cord. The HEV features a host of advanced technologies, yet drives like any conventional vehicle and does not require special fuel.

The all-new Corolla Cross draws on Toyota's strong heritage of advanced hybrid-electric technology. Electrification of vehicles has been a cornerstone of

(PCS), Dynamic Radar Cruise Control (DRCC), Lane Departure Alert (LDA), Lane Tracing Assist (LTA), and Automatic High Beam (AHB). In addition, the car features a comprehensive array of safety features to protect its occupants such as seven SRS airbags (including side-curtain airbags and driver's knee airbag), Vehicle Stability Control (VSC), Blind Spot Monitor (BSM), Rear Cross Traffic Alert (RCTA), and Tire Pressure Warning System (TPWS), among many others.

A choice of seven exciting exterior hues add to the all-new Corolla Cross's striking visual appeal, including Celestite Gray Metallic, Super White 2, White Pearl CS, Silver ME, Gray ME, Black MC, and Red M.M. Meanwhile, the interior is available in earthy Terra Rossa, with optional leather or fabric materials. The vehicle's eye-catching exterior is accentuated by 17-inch alloy wheels.



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Employees of Rechapados Ferrer make chessboards in La Garriga near Barcelona. — AFP



An employee of Rechapados Ferrer looks at finished chessboards in La Garriga near Barcelona.



An employee of Rechapados Ferrer makes chessboards in La Garriga near Barcelona.

SPAIN CHESSBOARD MAKER'S SALES SOAR ON 'QUEEN'S GAMBIT' SUCCESS

At David Ferrer's factory, workers are busy cutting, trimming and stitching together fine sheets of wood to make chessboards to meet a surge in orders in the wake of the runaway success of the Netflix series, "The Queen's Gambit". Rechapados Ferrer, a small family-run business, is struggling to keep up with demand since its boards appeared in the award-winning miniseries about an orphaned chess prodigy. "We have never experienced such a strong boom in demand for chessboards," says David Ferrer, 30, who runs Rechapados Ferrer in La Garriga, the industrial belt that surrounds Barcelona.

The company usually makes around 20,000 chessboards annually, but has already received orders for more than 40,000 so far this year, thanks both to the Netflix series and renewed interest in board games during lockdown. "And there are still many months left until the

end of the year," he told AFP. Rechapados Ferrer, which has just 14 employees, was founded in the 1950s to supply veneer or slender pieces of wood for furniture, but a decade later it also expanded into making chessboards. "If my parents could only see this," smiles Joan Ferrer, David's father and the son of the firm's founder. Although retired, he often visits the factory and can still remember how his parents made the first chessboards in "a small room, stitching and trimming the strips of wood".

'Demand is crazy'

They initially only worked with a nearby maker of chess pieces, but eventually expanded to sell their products across Spain and then the world. Today, 98 percent of their chessboards are exported, some of which are used in tournaments, so they were not surprised when they learned their products had been used in "The Queen's Gambit".

Miquel Berbel, who heads the company's chessboard division, spotted one of their sets in the final episode of the show.

In the nail-biting finale, chess prodigy Beth Harmon goes to Moscow to take on Russian world champion Vasily Borgov in a match played on an elegant black-framed board with a decorative red-and-yellow border. "There are very particular boards that only we make and that board was 100 percent one of ours," said Berbel. The board was custom-made for the company's first international customer, a board games distributor in Berlin where the series was partially filmed.

When Ferrer heard about it, he was excited, but it wasn't the first time that their boards had featured in films or TV series. "I was excited... but I didn't expect this sort of response at all," he said. "Demand is crazy. We're getting a huge amount of emails and we can't answer them all."



A picture shows chessboards made by Rechapados Ferrer in La Garriga near Barcelona.

'Seek perfection'

Orders began to increase early last year when the pandemic first hit and the lockdowns began, but they really took off after "The Queen's Gambit" premiered in October 2020, prompting the firm to hire three new workers. "To meet demand, we ought to be doubling or tripling the workforce. And we don't want to go down that route because we

don't know how long it's going to last," says Ferrer. Making chessboards is a slow process. A worker first selects high-quality wood that is trimmed into long thin sheets of light and dark colors.

With the help of a machine, another craftsman sews the sheets tightly together with a sticky thread, checking constantly to make sure there is not the slightest gap between them. The board is then varnished before being packaged. "We check the finishings a lot, we try to seek perfection," says Oscar Martinez, a 40-year-old craftsman. Even if he wanted to, Ferrer says it would be hard to find more workers to help given the shortage of skilled craftsmen, whose training lasts "four or five years". "We want to grow naturally. It is very skilled work and everything takes time," he says. "It's real craftsmanship." — AFP

Yaphet Kotto, first Black Bond villain and 'Alien' actor, dies at 81

Actor Yaphet Kotto, who rose to fame in the 1970s fighting James Bond in "Live and Let Die" and an extraterrestrial stowaway in "Alien", has died, his agent told AFP. He was 81. In a statement Monday on Facebook, wife Sinahon Thessa described her late husband as a "legend". "You played a villain on some of your movies but for me you're a real hero and to a lot of people also," she said. Agent Ryan Goldhar confirmed his passing in an email to AFP. He did not share the cause of death. "I am still processing his passing, and I know he will be missed," he said.



Actor Yaphet Kotto

Born in New York to a Cameroonian immigrant father and a US Army nurse, Kotto's debut as a professional actor was in an all-Black stage performance of Shakespeare's "Othello" in Harlem in 1960. Kotto drew plaudits for roles as the first Black Bond villain-dictator Dr. Kananga in 1973's "Live and Let Die", and an Emmy nomination for playing real-life Ugandan strongman Idi Amin in the TV movie "Raid on Entebbe". He then took on a villainous xenomorph as ship engineer Dennis Parker in Ridley Scott's claustrophobic sci-fi horror film "Alien" in 1979, and fought alongside Arnold Schwarzenegger in 1987's dystopian thriller "Running Man".

At the height of his fame, he turned down the role of Captain Picard in "Star Trek: The Next Generation"—a decision he later said he regretted. Kotto's later years saw him play Lieutenant Al Giardello in the gritty TV police procedural "Homicide: Life on the Street". He returned to the "Alien" franchise in 2014, voicing his character Parker in the survival horror video game "Alien: Isolation". Married three times and father to six children, Kotto claimed to be related to Queen Elizabeth II—naming his 1997 biography "The Royalty" as a tribute to his royal pedigree. — AFP



People walk on a new public art installation at Domino Park in Brooklyn on Monday in New York City. — AFP

Online sales save art market

A surprisingly rapid shift online helped cushion the art market from the worst ravages of the coronavirus pandemic although sales still fell by a fifth last year, an Artprice report said Monday. Artprice, the France-based leader in art market data, said the digital transformation of auctions amounted to a "revolution" in the way fine art is sold after lockdowns forced change on a slow-moving industry. "It's been a spectacular shift that has gone beyond expectations and despite the reluctance of certain auction houses," said its president Thierry Ehrmann. Digitization has opened up auctions to a huge new customer base, particularly 30- and 40-year-olds, who rarely dabbled in the market previously.

They are mostly after contemporary art, Ehrmann told AFP, which accounts for some 16 percent of sales. Online also means more global, with auction houses in Belgium or Sweden now able to easily tap clients in Singapore or Indonesia. "The market was 30 years behind the times. It has made up the gap in just one year, when even the most optimistic projections had predicted it would take until 2025," said Ehrmann.

Chinese growth

China's success in containing the

COVID-19 outbreak propelled it back to the top of the sales charts, dominating the market with 39 percent of global fine art sales by value. The United States, which topped the chart for the previous four years, was on 27 percent, with Britain in third on 16 percent. That speaks not just to wealthy Chinese collectors, but a booming domestic art scene—a previous Artprice report from late 2020 showed that 395 of the top 1,000 highest-selling artists are Chinese, compared with just 165 for the US. Despite Hong Kong coming under stricter Chinese control in recent months, it has remained a major base for global art sales, with Sotheby's doing a quarter of its business there, Artprice said.

Meanwhile, sales in Europe dropped precipitously, with Britain, France and Italy all down by around a third. The exception was Germany, relatively untouched in the first wave of the pandemic, where sales were up 11 percent for the year. As for individual sales, the highest price was a Francis Bacon triptych sold by Sotheby's for \$84.5 million, while graffiti artist Banksy sold the most works—nearly 900. Tastes tended towards contemporary figurative paintings, Artprice added, especially from Africans such as Ghana's Amoako Bofo. In the gloom of the pandemic, "the top-level market remains keen on lively, joyous and audacious figurative paintings" from artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, David Hockney and French-Chinese painter San Yu. — AFP

MUSIC WORLD TAPS 'NFT' DIGITAL GOLDRUSH

"NFT" is quickly becoming the acronym of 2021, offering a new way to sell digital art online, and music stars including Kings of Leon and Grimes have been quick to jump on the bandwagon. For many, it remains a baffling concept, but a NFT ("non-fungible token"—pronounced "nifty") essentially offers collectors proof that they "own" a digital artwork by logging that ownership on the blockchain, the online database that underpins cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin. In no time, it has taken the art world by storm. Just last week, a collage by digital artist Beeple was sold at auction for \$69.3 million, reportedly the third highest-ever sale for a living artist in any medium.

Many see an opportunity to monetize digital art of all kinds, offering wealthy collectors the bragging rights to ultimate ownership, even if the work can be endlessly copied. For investors, it's also a new commodity to be traded. In the music world—an industry which has seen its value shredded by digitization over the past 20 years—NFTs offer hope of a valuable new revenue stream. Earlier this month, US rockers Kings of Leon raised more than \$2 million by auctioning off NFT versions of their new album "When you see yourself", according to Rolling Stone magazine, of which a quarter went to a solidarity fund for live event workers. Their NFTs offered more than just the abstract notion of owning something rare. They came with tangible benefits: access to photos by band member Matthew Followill, collector's editions of the vinyl, and at the top end, a lifetime "golden ticket" to front-row seats at their live shows.

Gold rush

Josh Katz, CEO of YellowHeart, the NFT auction platform used by Kings of

Leon, claimed it was "ushering in the new music era". "Through the use of NFTs and blockchain technology, we'll begin to see the industry start to move toward a more decentralized model that fosters symbiotic relationships between music lovers and artists," he told AFP. "Artists will monetize their content again and fans will have transparency when buying both content and concert tickets." Several stars are already tapping the opportunity. Mike Shinoda, of US rap-metal group Linkin Park, recently sold an NFT version of a single which came with an animated visual created by artist Cain Caser.



This undated handout image shows a digital collage by Beeple, for sale in New York. — AFP

Canadian singer Grimes, who has always had a strongly visual component to match the futuristic, dystopian vibes of her music, recently sold an audiovisual collection as NFTs for some \$6 million. Not everyone is entirely convinced, however. "If this technology is put to the service of artists, that's great. But if we aren't very careful, they risk being stripped of their copyright," said Emily Gonneau, French author of a book on music in the digital age. "Anyone can sample anything off the internet and claim to be the creator of an NFT... Then we're on a gold rush where anything is possible," she said.—AFP

Venice, Florence look ahead to tourist returns

The mayors of Venice and Florence, Italy's world-famous cradles of art and history, published plans Monday to help them rebuild after the coronavirus crisis on a "new model" of tourism. They want more police to ensure safety and more funds for public transport, but also better regulation for guides and for short-term accommodation rentals, which they said provide "unfair competition". The two cities urged the government to give them more powers to regulate the tourist industry when travellers eventually return.

Even as most of Italy entered a new lockdown Monday, Mayor of Florence Dario Nardella spoke of the need to look

ahead to "a new model of tourism also linked to enhancing, promoting and protecting cities of art". Their ideas could be adopted by other parts of Italy, he said, adding: "As soon as the borders reopen after the coronavirus emergency, the country must be ready." Venice Mayor Luigi Brugnaro emphasized that as "ambassadors of Italy in the world", their two cities must lead the way. Before the pandemic, the centers of both Venice and Florence were swamped by tourists so much so that Venice moved to introduce a tourist tax to limit numbers.—AFP



Sports

Photo of the Day



Nicola Abadjiev is seen South Africa. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com



Zinedine Zidane

Ronaldo return to Real Madrid possible: Zidane

MADRID: Zinedine Zidane opened the door to Cristiano Ronaldo returning to Real Madrid on Monday, admitting a comeback is "possible" for the striker. Asked by Sky Italia if there is any truth to rumors that Ronaldo could rejoin Madrid, Zidane said: "It's possible, it's possible."

"We know Cristiano," Zidane added. "We know the person he is and everything he's done at Real Madrid. But now he's a Juventus player and you have to have respect both him and the club." Asked if he would like to coach Ronaldo again, Zidane said: "I did what I had to do with Cristiano. Let's see what will happen in the future."

Reports in Spain have suggested Ronaldo is keen on returning to Real Madrid, where he enjoyed a hugely successful nine years before leaving in 2018 for 100 million euros. The 36-year-old increased speculation last week with a cryptic post on social media, in which he wrote: "It's true the past belongs in museums (I should say!) but fortunately, football has memory... and so do I!"

Ronaldo's time at Juventus has not been as successful as was hoped. The team sit third in Serie A while defeat by Porto last week meant they went out in the Champions League last 16 for a second consecutive year. — AFP

Joshua and Fury sign two-fight deal to unify heavyweight titles

Saudi Arabia frontrunner to host mega-fights

LONDON: Anthony Joshua and Tyson Fury will clash for the title of undisputed world heavyweight champion after signing a two-fight deal, Joshua's promoter Eddie Hearn said on Monday. The locations and dates for the much-anticipated all-British showdowns are yet to be announced.

Confirming the agreement, Hearn told ESPN: "The hard part is always getting everybody to put pen to paper. But this was a major effort from all parties to get this over the line. You had rival promoters, rival networks and rival fighters."

Hearn said a venue for the fights, in which Joshua's WBA, IBF and WBO titles and Fury's WBC belt will be on the line, is set to be confirmed "within the next month". According to reports, Saudi Arabia, where Joshua won a rematch against Andy Ruiz Jr in December 2019, is the frontrunner. But Hearn told ESPN he "already had approaches from eight or nine sites" across the Middle East, Asia, eastern Europe and America. "We'd like to get a site deal confirmed in the next month," he said.

Both Joshua, 31, and Fury, 32, are expected to earn £100 million (\$139 million) each, with the purse split 50-50 for the first fight and 60-40 for the rematch in favor of the defending champion. Since avenging a shock defeat to Ruiz, Joshua has defended his titles against Kubrat Pulev in London in December.

Fury has not fought for more than a year since defeating Deontay Wilder in February 2020 to claim the WBC title. Joshua previously stated he hoped the fight could take place as early as June. "(The coronavirus pandemic) is getting close to things being normal. We're working on a date for around June," the former Olympic champion told Sky News. "I'm ready, I'm really looking forward to competition — all I want to do is fight, fight, fight."

Fury has consistently made jibes at Joshua's



Anthony Joshua (left) and Tyson Fury.

expense, claiming in January that he would knock out his fellow Brit within two rounds. However, last week the self-styled "Gypsy King" said he had stopped training after becoming tired of waiting for the fight to be agreed.

"I'm not training anymore," Fury told ESPN. "I'm taking some time away from the game at the moment, because, like I said, I've been ready to fight since I beat Deontay Wilder last year. I've had no success in getting another fight."

Four belts

All four belts will be contested in a heavyweight bout for the first time. The last undisputed heavyweight champion was Britain's Lennox Lewis, from 1999 to 2000. A boxer is now

required to hold the WBO belt to be recognized as undisputed champion.

Joshua has 24 wins and one defeat from 25 professional bouts. He lost his three world titles in a stunning defeat to Ruiz Jr in June 2019. Fury is unbeaten in his 31 professional fights. He was controversially denied victory in a draw with Wilder in 2018 before winning their rematch in February 2020.

He beat Wladimir Klitschko in 2015 to win the WBA, IBF and WBO belts before nearly three years out of the sport, during which he battled depression, drink and drug problems. Fury was cleared to fight again in December 2017 by UK Anti-Doping after accepting a backdated two-year ban for testing positive for steroid nandrolone. — AFP

Platini gives evidence in corruption case

BERN: Former UEFA president Michel Platini spent six hours in front of a Swiss prosecutor as a suspect in a corruption case on Monday, before he testifies as a witness today in a separate case against FIFA president Gianni Infantino.

The 65-year-old was questioned in Bern by prosecutor Thomas Hildbrand, who is suing him over the corruption case that shattered his dream of taking over world football's governing body FIFA after the fall of Sepp Blatter.

The accusation against Platini revolves around a payment of two million Swiss francs (\$2.2 million) from FIFA authorized by Blatter in 2011. Platini and Blatter face accusations of "disloyal management", "breach of trust" and "fraud" with the thin possibility of a five-year jail sentence if found guilty.

"Michel Platini was attentive to the presentation of the elements of the case and to the interpretations presented by the prosecutor Hildbrand," Platini's entourage told AFP. "He remains very confident that this procedure will allow him to prove his integrity in this case."

According to the prosecution, it was the former Saint Etienne and Juventus midfielder's "final hearing" before the end of the investigation. Platini, who was also summoned on Tuesday but will not need to be heard again, will either be exonerated or face trial.

Blatter, who turned 85 last week, is also due to face the prosecutor but according to his staff, he is still convalescing after being hospitalised in



BERN: Former head of European football's governing body UEFA, Michel Platini arrives to the building of the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland for a hearing over the corruption case that shattered his dream of taking over the FIFA on Monday in Bern. — AFP

December and January. 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. — AFP

Gronkowski re-signs with Buccaneers

LOS ANGELES: Tampa Bay Buccaneers tight end Rob Gronkowski has re-signed with the Super Bowl champions on a one-year deal worth up to \$10 million, reports said Monday. Gronkowski, a long-time New England Patriots teammate and close friend of Buccaneers quarterback Tom Brady, will receive \$8 million for the 2021 campaign with bonuses worth an additional \$2 million, NFL.com reported.

The 31-year-old future Hall-of-Famer came out of retirement last year to reunite with Brady in Tampa Bay, and scored two touchdowns in the Bucs' 31-9 Super Bowl win over the Kansas City Chiefs last month. News of Gronkowski's return to Tampa Bay next season comes after Brady on Friday agreed a contract extension that will keep him in Florida for the next two seasons at least.

Brady's restructured deal allows Tampa Bay to make payroll savings aimed at ensuring that the core of the team that won the Super Bowl is available to return next season. As the NFL's free agency negotiating period opened on Monday, the Buccaneers also moved to lock up star pass-rusher Shaquil Barrett.

Barrett has inked a four-year deal worth up to \$72 million, with \$36 million in salary guaranteed. He confirmed the new deal in a post on Instagram. "If it's meant to be, it will be," Barrett wrote. "Something special about this whole organization and am so excited to be a part of it for four more years."

Barrett was a key member of the Buccaneers' dominant defense last season, sacking Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers three times in the NFC Championship game before sacking Chiefs star Patrick Mahomes in the Super Bowl. In other notable free agency deals on Monday, the Chiefs strengthened their offensive line after snapping up New England's Joe Thuney in a five-year deal worth \$80 million, according to ESPN.

The 28-year-old Thuney played five seasons for the Patriots after being drafted in 2016, and appeared in three straight Super Bowls in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The move should give Chiefs quarterback Mahomes better protection after he was run ragged by Tampa Bay in the Super Bowl. — AFP



Rob Gronkowski

Sports

Precocious Musiala on the rise at European champions Bayern

Teenager could make fifth Champions League appearance

BERLIN: His decision to opt to play for Germany over England is said to have disappointed Gareth Southgate, yet teenager Jamal Musiala still relies on his mum to drive him to Bayern Munich training sessions. Musiala this month signed a five-year contract with Bayern, a week after his 18th birthday, which reportedly earns him around five million euros (\$6 million) per year.

The baby-faced attacking midfielder could make his fifth Champions League appearance at home to Lazio tonight, having scored his first European goal in the 4-1 first-leg rout in Rome. Musiala was born in Stuttgart, but moved to London as a child and came through Chelsea's academy before joining Bayern in 2019.

"He was always much better than the other kids and mostly played with children two years older," Branko Milenkovski, his first coach at TSV Lehnerz in Hessen, told HR-sport. Musiala went on to play for both Germany and England at Under-16 level.

On Friday, FIFA approved his decision to play senior football for Germany after Musiala had played twice for England's Under-21s last November. Before announcing his decision, which was revealed the day after becoming Bayern's

youngest Champions League scorer, Musiala broke the news to Southgate.

"I wanted to explain the reasons for my decision to John McDermott (FA Technical Director) and Gareth Southgate," Musiala told magazine Sport Bild. "They were a bit disappointed, but understood my decision and wished me all the best." The decision to reject England for Germany came down to gut feeling.

'Two hearts'

"I just have two hearts in me and I'm really proud to play for Germany now. So for the country in which I was born," he added. As German magazine Kicker put it, Musiala's rise at Bayern has been nothing short of "meteoric".

He became the youngest player in Bayern's history when he made his Bundesliga debut last June, aged 17 years and 115 days. He then became the club's youngest goalscorer in Germany's top-flight when he scored a goal after coming off the bench in the 8-0 thrashing of Schalke in September.

"He's an exceptional talent," said Germany coach Joachim Loew after watching Musiala in January. Loew reportedly plans to give the teenager his first call-up to the senior squad for Germany's World Cup qualifiers against

Iceland, Romania and North Macedonia at the end of March.

Musiala, however, still feels compelled to refer to the national coach as "Mr Loew". "Now I'm looking forward to getting to know the team better in March. Mr Loew showed me a very clear path in the national team during our conversations," added Musiala.

He might already be on the radar of Germany's World Cup-winning coach, who steps down after the Euros, but Musiala is still chuffed to be in Bayern training by his mother. "I'm currently working towards getting my driving licence and I'm really looking forward to driving myself soon."

His goal is to win a place in the national squad for the European Championship, where Germany face France, Portugal and Hungary in their group. "I will definitely give everything in (Bayern's) remaining games to get selected for the European Championship."

Despite his dramatic rise, Musiala is still learning his trade and has started just seven games this season in all competitions. He had to be content with an 11-minute cameo on the wing as a replacement for Kingsley Coman in Bayern's 3-1 win at Bremen on Saturday. However,



MUNICH: In this file photo taken on December 5, 2020 Bayern Munich's German midfielder Jamal Musiala plays the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match FC Bayern Munich v RB Leipzig in Munich, southern Germany. — AFP

Bayern coach Hansi Flick clearly sees a bright future for the teenager. "He's good on the ball, has a good feeling for where he needs to be on the pitch and we are very pleased with him," said Flick after Musiala's goal in Rome. — AFP

Atletico look to Suarez for inspiration in Chelsea rescue mission

MADRID: Atletico Madrid's hopes of coming back against Chelsea in the Champions League tonight may depend on Luis Suarez returning to form on his return to the country where he became one of the best in the world. Atletico trail 1-0 after Olivier Giroud's bicycle kick lit up an uneventful first game at the Wanda Metropolitano last month and handed Chelsea a crucial advantage heading into this week's second leg.

And if they are to reach the quarter-finals with another upset like the one that knocked out Liverpool last year, Atletico are likely to need Suarez back to his best at Stamford Bridge. The Uruguayan's form has matched his team's, with a slight downturn in recent weeks perhaps inevitable after such an impressive first half of the season.

Suarez scored 16 goals in his first 21 games while Atletico lost only one of their first 20 in the league, when a first La Liga title since 2014 seemed firmly within their grasp. Yet they have won only three of their last eight and Suarez has scored only twice in that time, even if those two goals have come in the last three, against

Real Madrid and Athletic Bilbao.

'Natural-born striker'

Certainly, there can be no room for complacency for Chelsea, who know only too well the damage Suarez can do after his hugely successful four seasons for Liverpool, when he scored 82 goals in 133 appearances.

"He is a natural-born striker," said Chelsea coach Thomas Tuchel before the first leg. "He has that certain mentality that only strikers have. This mentality to show his will, intensity and anger to score and score and score and is never satisfied. What a mentality, what a player." Tuchel is such a fan he even tried to sign the 34-year-old for Paris Saint-Germain when it became clear he was on his way out of Barcelona last summer.

"There was a possibility," Tuchel said. "We heard the rumors he was about to leave Barcelona and who cannot be interested to sign one of the best strikers in world football, in history and the present? We tried our luck. We did not make it, he chose to stay in Spain with Atletico and again he proves his quality."



MAJADAHONDA: Atletico Madrid's Uruguayan forward Luis Suarez takes part in a training session at the club's training ground in Majadahonda yesterday, on the eve of the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second leg football match between Atletico Madrid and Chelsea. — AFP

Suarez has history with Chelsea too, after one of his three biting incidents happened while playing against them for Liverpool in 2013, with Branislav Ivanovic that time the victim. But without fans in the stadium and with a fresh crop of players, Chelsea will be focused completely on thwarting Suarez's threat to their goal while the striker will be hoping to end his own

six-year wait for a Champions League goal away from home. "For all the competitions, not just the Champions League, his presence gives us experience and leadership," said Atletico coach Diego Simeone last month. "He brings confidence to our team and a lot of tension for our opponents because history shows this is a player who has a gift around the goal." — AFP

Messi celebrates leveling Xavi record with double

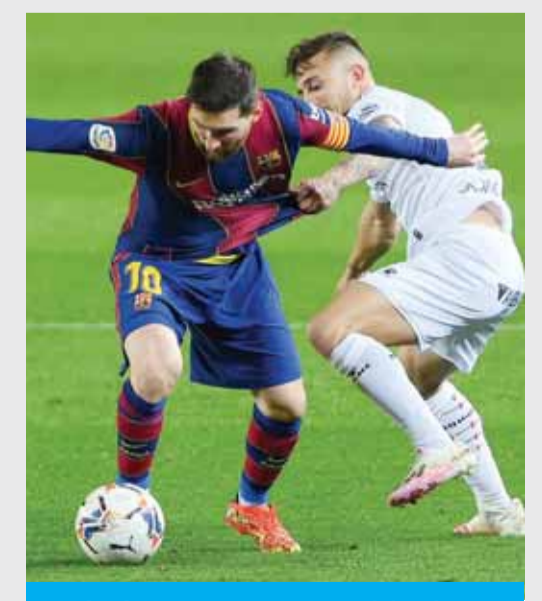
MADRID: Lionel Messi scored a spectacular double the same night he equaled Xavi Hernandez's appearance record for Barcelona, the Argentinian inspiring his team to a 4-1 win over Huesca on Monday. Messi tied Xavi's 767 games in all competitions for Barca and marked yet another milestone with a brilliant brace, a curling effort in the first half flying in off the crossbar at Camp Nou before a late shot nestled in the corner. "He's the most important man in the history of Barca," said coach Ronald Koeman. "Even better that he's still with us."

Antoine Griezmann had earlier followed suit with another impressive shot into the top corner before Huesca pulled one back, Rafa Mir converting a doubtful penalty on the stroke of half-time. But Messi helped Barca pull away, sending in a cross for Oscar Mingueza to head in and then scoring his second as the Catalans moved to within four points of league leaders Atletico Madrid.

Messi's performance had all the key elements of the 33-year-old's genius. In a game that celebrated his longevity, he showed his class with perhaps his best goal of the season, his creativity with an assist and his consistency, by making it 13 consecutive campaigns that he has reached 20 La Liga goals. "He's so decisive," said Huesca's Mir. "They play with one man extra."

Huesca stay bottom, four points adrift of safety, while Barcelona continue their own excellent form. They have now managed 11 wins and a draw from their last 12 matches, putting them within sight of Atletico, who they still have to play at home in May.

Messi should break Xavi's record on Sunday against Real Sociedad and the club toasted his achievement with a video that included tributes from numerous current and former team-mates including Gerard Pique, Sergio Busquets, Luis Suarez, Neymar, Andres Iniesta, Carlos Puyol and Xavi himself. "You're still breaking records," said Suarez. "I think this one says a lot about you as a player and what you represent for Barcelona." — AFP



BARCELONA: Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi challenges Huesca's Spanish defender Pablo Maffeo during the Spanish League football match between Barcelona and SD Huesca at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona on Monday. — AFP

Klopp happy to win 'dirty' as Jota returns to haunt Wolves

WOLVERHAMPTON: Jurgen Klopp said he had no problem with winning "three dirty points" as Diogo Jota returned to haunt Wolves with the only goal in a 1-0 win at Molineux on Monday. A wretched run of six successive home league defeats has left Liverpool with an uphill task to qualify for the Champions League next season.

But Klopp's men have now won six of their last seven games away from Anfield. Victory moved the English champions back up to sixth and within five points of fourth-placed Chelsea. "It's all about the result," said Klopp. "It was a big fight. We won three dirty points. I am completely fine with that. We need that to get back on track."

A disappointing night for Wolves ended with a bigger concern than just the result as goalkeeper Rui Patricio had to be stretchered off after 15 minutes of treatment for a head injury following a collision with his own player Connor Coady in the closing stages.

However, Wolves boss Nuno Espirito Santo allayed fears over the Portuguese international's health. "He's OK. He's conscious, he remembers what happens, he's aware, so they tell me he's OK," said Nuno. "He's going to recover, so it's OK."

Wolves have already been badly affected by a serious head injury this season. Their top scorer for the past two seasons, Raul Jimenez, has been out since fracturing his skull against Arsenal in November. The absence of Jimenez means Nuno's men have missed Jota even more since he joined the English champions for an initial £41 million (\$57 million) in September.

Jota has also been missed by Liverpool for much of the past three months due to a knee injury that halted his flying start to life at Anfield. But the winger is hopeful his return can inspire a strong end to the season to secure Champions League football either via the Premier League or winning Liverpool's seventh European Cup. "Hopefully this can be a great start of a run towards the end of the season," said Jota.



WOLVERHAMPTON: Liverpool's German manager Jurgen Klopp congratulates Liverpool's English defender Trent Alexander-Arnold after the English Premier League football match between Wolverhampton Wanderers and Liverpool at the Molineux stadium in Wolverhampton, central England on Monday. — AFP

Alisson escapes

Klopp named the same side that bounced back to form with a 2-0 win over RB Leipzig last midweek to reach the quarter-finals of the Champions League. However, the visitors should have been punished for a slow start as goalkeeper Alisson Becker somehow escaped without conceding a penalty when he crashed into Nelson Semedo after just two minutes.

Sadio Mane missed two big chances at the other end to open the scoring for the visitors, but the Senegalese did have a part to play in the only goal of the game in first-half stoppage time as he exchanged passes with Mohamed Salah before teeing up Jota for a low shot that should have been kept out by Patricio low to his right.

Liverpool's lack of fluency compared to the side that romped to the title last season was even more clear after the break as they were happy to sit on their lead and would have been punished by a more clinical opponent. Coady headed wide a great chance to score against his former club, while Adama Traore stung the palms of Alisson and Fabio Silva's weak header floated into the grateful Liverpool 'keeper's arms. — AFP

Wales 'must stay focused' despite Giggs absence

LONDON: Caretaker boss Robert Page said Wales must focus on "the job in hand" despite the continuing absence of manager Ryan Giggs as he prepares his team for World Cup qualifiers. Giggs was arrested on suspicion of assaulting girlfriend Kate Greville in November and missed Wales's Nations League games later that month.

The 47-year-old former Manchester United winger, who denies the allegations, has had his bail extended until May 1. Giggs will again be missing from the camp as Wales open their 2022 World Cup qualifying campaign next week in Belgium before hosting the Czech Republic in Cardiff.

The Football Association of Wales (FAW) said last week that he would not be involved in the upcoming international camp. But Page confirmed that Giggs was part of the selection process for the 31-man squad for the two qualifiers plus a Cardiff friendly with Mexico sandwiched in between the games.

Asked if Giggs had played a part in selection and would continue to do so, Page said: "Absolutely, of course. Like he does every other camp. All the staff will have input, gather and have conversations about the opposition and the analysis.... It's the same as November. Business as usual."

Wales are just three months away from their opening game at the delayed Euro 2020 tournament, against Switzerland in Baku. But Page said he had had no dialogue with the FAW over who was likely to be in charge for the delayed championships. "My main focus is on these three games and I'd rather not think about long-term yet," he said.

"Get these games out of the way and after that we'll assess the situation again no doubt, and whoever makes those decisions will make those decisions," he said. "It's difficult for Ryan but we've got to make sure the focus is on the players. We've got to stay focused on the job in hand." — AFP

LeBron leads Lakers' rout of Warriors

Triple-double for Giannis • Tempers flare in NY showdown

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James bagged his fourth triple-double of the season as the Los Angeles Lakers thrashed the Golden State Warriors 128-97 on Monday. James finished with 22 points, 10 rebounds and 11 assists as the Lakers dominated almost from start to finish for an impressive win on the road at the Chase Center.

Stephen Curry led the Golden State scoring with 27 points but the much hoped-for duel with All-Star game team-mate James never materialized as the Dubs struggled to contain the Lakers' offense. Montrezl Harrell had 27 points off the bench to lead the Lakers scoring while Kyle Kuzma finished with 17 points. The Lakers improved to 26-13 to remain in third place in the Western Conference while the Warriors fell to ninth place with 20-20.

Elsewhere Monday, Giannis Antetokounmpo reeled off his third straight triple-double as the Milwaukee Bucks extended their winning streak to four games with a 133-122 victory over the Washington Wizards. Antetokounmpo finished with 31 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists in another MVP-caliber performance that came two days after his 33-point triple double against the Wizards on Saturday.

"We feel like we've said it a lot after games for a good stretch of time now - he's been in a good place mentally for a while," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said of Antetokounmpo's performance at Washington's Capital One Arena.

"The way he's playing, creating for others, creating for himself. He's just playing great basketball," Budenholzer

added. Khris Middleton added 23 points for Milwaukee while center Brook Lopez finished with 22 as seven Bucks players cracked double figures.

Bradley Beal led Washington's scoring with 37 points after going 13-of-19 from the field with four three-pointers. Russell Westbrook finished with 23 points and 17 assists while Japan's Rui Hachimura added 22 points for Washington. Milwaukee improved to 25-14 with the win and remain third in the Eastern Conference behind Brooklyn and leaders Philadelphia.

Tempers flare

In other games Monday, James Harden bagged a triple double and Kyrie Irving added 34 points as the Brooklyn Nets rolled to a fifth consecutive victory with a 117-112 win over the New York Knicks. Harden finished with 21 points, 15 rebounds and 15 assists in a superb individual display at Brooklyn's Barclays Center.

Irving's 34-point display was backed by Jeff Green (20 points) and Joe Harris with 13 points. The Knicks meanwhile fell just short of a fourth quarter comeback after coming within three points of Brooklyn with 10 seconds remaining having trailed by 18 points earlier in the half.

Knicks forward Julius Randle needed to be restrained by team-mates at the buzzer after a controversial travelling call effectively handed Brooklyn the win. Randle, who finished with 33 points, 12 rebounds and six assists, angrily slammed over a chair as he headed to the locker room following the loss.

"I was frustrated. We fought so hard



NEW YORK: Julius Randle #30 of the New York Knicks is restrained by teammates after their 117-112 loss against the Brooklyn Nets during their game at Barclays Center on Monday in New York City. — AFP

to come back and win the game. I was just frustrated," Randle said afterwards, declining to dwell on the incident. "It's best I don't comment on the situation. There was a lot of frustration behind it for both sides. I'll let it be in the past."

Knicks coach Tom Thibodeau also played down Randle's outburst. "It's an

emotional game, he calmed down right away," Thibodeau said. "Sometimes it goes your way with the whistles, sometimes it doesn't. I thought Julius played a terrific game."

Elsewhere Monday, the Los Angeles Clippers overpowered the Dallas Mavericks 109-99 on the road with

Kawhi Leonard leading an all-round offensive effort. Leonard finished with 22 points on a night when no fewer than seven players reached double figures for the Clippers. Luka Doncic led the Mavs scoring with 25 points, 10 rebounds and 16 assists while Kristaps Porzingis added 22 points. — AFP



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