

Friday Times

ISSUE NO: 18387

SHAABAN 6, 1442 AH | FRIDAY, MARCH 19, 2021



Kuwait Times
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Picture shows Kuwaiti artistes Rahaf (left) and Faisal Marei aka Face during the shoot of their new music video 'My World'.

Rahaf and Face: A strong comeback in 'My World'

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Local

Waiting game for teachers stranded out of Kuwait

By Reem Algharabali

“Stranded! We are marooned!” said Paul Scott, a secondary school biology teacher at New English School. Scott is one of several foreign teachers working for international schools in Kuwait who have been caught out after traveling to visit their families over the winter break.

Many expatriates had not seen their families for over a year, and some decided to take the risk of travelling in the midst of a global pandemic despite the uncertainties involved. Scott travelled light expecting to be back home in Kuwait by early January. Little did he expect the emergence of the Kent variant that resulted in the UK being added to Kuwait's list of banned countries. The new rule meant people travelling from the UK needed to do a two-week quarantine in Dubai.

Scott and his colleagues made the necessary arrangements to fly to the United Arab Emirates to complete the required period and be back in Kuwait before the start of the second school term. “The big problem we had is how quickly the rules changed; no one had time to adapt or make provisions for the new rules,” said Scott.

“By the time we landed in Dubai, it was no longer 14 days but 16 days before we could return to Kuwait. The rumour we heard was the border would reopen within seven days, so we thought we'll hang on in Dubai,” he said.

Five flight changes and one visa extension later, all on their own expense causing financial strain, the teachers were still stranded in Dubai. With budgets, options and their Emirati visas running out, and still no date for the reopening of the Kuwait border, the teachers had to make a call. Some returned to the UK, while Scott decided to base himself in Turkey. Others sought refuge with friends and family around the world.

Jo (not her real name), who works for another international school, was also in the UK when she heard the news of the UK ban and rearranged travel plans. She is a long-term resident of Kuwait and was worried about the repercussions speaking to the media would have on her visa, so she asked to remain anonymous. “We were one day away from completing the 14-day quarantine in Dubai when the restrictions tightened,” she said.

By the time they made new arrangements, the Kuwait border was closed to non-nationals. It was just the beginning of a race to keep up with the rules. Teachers like Scott and Jo have now been in transit for more than two months. With jobs, homes and in some cases pets still in Kuwait and no announcement for the reopening of the border, they have had to deal with financial and emotional stress, while continuing to teach their classes online.

A year of uncertainty

“This has been over a year of heartache for all educators. We all look forward to the day our students are back in the classroom once again,” said Jo. “Emotionally, we have to be strong — the world has changed, and we must be prepared to adapt and be resilient. Everyone has been affected by COVID-19 one way or another. I am not going to pretend and say it has been easy. It has not.”

Pieter Meyer, an 11th and 12th grade business management and world history teacher at another well-established international school in Kuwait, also became stranded when he travelled to South Africa at the end of January to attend his brother's funeral. “I

English School, talked about the challenges of managing staff scattered around the world. “While teaching remains online, it is true you can teach from anywhere, but it is not the best way of running an organization,” she said.

On campus learning in September

The ministry of health has now announced that schools will not reopen for on-campus learning until September 2021. But there still has not been an announcement regarding reopening of borders that would allow stranded teachers to return. “If you want to open schools, we actually need teachers standing up in front of classes,” Doran said. “By their nature, foreign schools have foreign teachers.

two pets that we miss, and we are fortunate enough to have friends and colleagues who are willing to look after them. We have extremely good friends who have been kind enough to let us stay. They certainly did not expect two weeks to turn into two months. Without their support we honestly don't know where we would be.”

Long-term residents like Scott have already experienced historical shifts in Kuwait. He was in Kuwait in August 1990 when Iraqi tanks rolled across the border. He was one of the “samidoun” — roughly translated as “steadfast ones” — as those who stayed in Kuwait throughout the seven-month occupation came to be called. He sees the irony of being unable



thought it was going to be a quick two-week trip,” Meyer said. With the closure of the Kuwait border to non-nationals, he has been staying with friends and family in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

“I have now dealt with grief in the middle of all of this. It is difficult. I am grateful that the school is accommodating teachers that cannot be in Kuwait. That is also a challenge from South Africa because there are a lot of power failures. Yesterday I moved to a new house to stay with a cousin of mine, because if there is a power failure, she has backup power,” Meyer said. “I am moving wherever the Wi-Fi is,” he laughed. “You plan your life around the new reality.”

Siobhan Doran, Deputy Director of New

We still have no idea how they are going to get back to Kuwait.”

New English School alone has 20 teachers stranded abroad. This is not taking into account other schools that have had teachers caught out by the border closure. Ziad Rajab, Director of New English School, said: “The authorities want us to continue the educational process while at the same time put up barriers which prevent us from doing our jobs.”

Kuwait is one of the very few countries in the world that have closed their borders to non-nationals who still have valid residencies and work permits. All the teachers interviewed said they are just waiting for the border to reopen and they will return to Kuwait.

“Our home is Kuwait,” Jo said. “We have

to return to Kuwait now because of the country's COVID-19 health regulations.

“I like Kuwait — it is an interesting country,” he said. “I have lots of friends there from years ago and I do a lot of work with the environmental protection agency. I do a lot of wildlife photography and work linked to the biology I teach. It is definitely a second home.”

Meyer moved to Johannesburg because there are more flights to the Middle East from there than Cape Town, meaning he can return to Kuwait more quickly as soon as the border opens. “It is a waiting game,” he said.

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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Local

Picture shows Kuwaiti artistes Rahaf (right) and Faisal Marei aka Face (left) during the shoot of their new music video 'My World'.

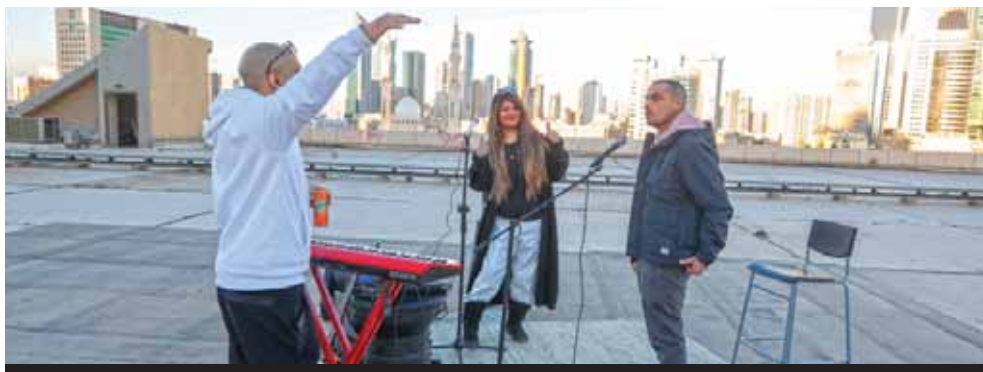


RAHAF AND FACE:

A strong comeback in 'My World'

By Sahar Moussa

Two Kuwaiti artistes were brought together by their love and passion for music to launch a duet after being away from the music scene for a while. Rahaf is a singer, writer, composer, DJ and former member of the Guitara band. She is well-known for her famous song 'Ya Ghali' that was released in 2001 and sung in six different languages. Not to mention her participation in theatrical and dramatic works, in addition to her experience as a presenter of children's radio programs where she participated in releasing educational songs for schools and commercial advertisements. Faisal Marei aka Face is a singer, songwriter and a former band member of Army of One. The vocally-gifted musician is known for his R&B music. Kuwait Times interviewed Rahaf and Face to talk about the launch of their new music video 'My World', their collaboration and upcoming projects in Kuwait. Some excerpts.



Picture shows director/videographer Rashid Alneaimi (left), Kuwaiti artistes Rahaf (second left) and Face (right) during the shoot of their new music video 'My World'.

Kuwait Times: Can you tell us more about your comeback with a new music video collaboration? How did you both meet? Why did you choose to work with each other?

Rahaf: I started my artistic career as a band member, and I was fond of singing collaborations such as a duet or trio. Faisal, also a former band member, made me excited about the project. We met on Instagram and the idea came from him. He offered to collaborate with me and I welcomed the idea as I admire his voice as well as his choices.

Faisal Marei aka Face: During the quar-

antine, I started working on my solo album/mixtape. I saw Rahaf doing a virtual interview with one of the channels, where she spoke highly of the old music days and Army of One as a band. I messaged and thanked her, adding I was a big fan and would love to work with her. Thankfully, she accepted and we started working on 'My World' by bouncing ideas online before we did the final song. When we finished recording, we decided that the song needed a video - a simple one on top of a building showcasing the city behind us. We contacted an old friend - Rashid Visuals - who supported us with making the video.



Picture shows Kuwaiti artist Rahaf during the shoot of her new music video 'My World'.

Face: Producing the song was the easy part with today's technology and the Internet. It helped a lot in virtually making the song. As for the video, everything was planned ahead of time, so on the day of shooting, we knew exactly what we were doing - without forgetting to follow all safety measures.

KT: Is it difficult to reach the Kuwaiti audience since it is mainly an English song?

Rahaf: Kuwaiti people love almost all different artistic cultures with their different languages, as is the case with music genres. Therefore, I imagine we have accomplished a piece of work that has its audience.

Face: The fact that the song is a mixture of Arabic and English made it easier for the Kuwaiti audience to accept it. Besides, Kuwaitis accept all types of music.

KT: Face, do you plan to sing in Arabic?

Face: Yes, and I have two songs lined up in my album. The first one is in the Levantine dialect and the other in Kuwaiti, written and produced by DJ Crow & DJ Peter, who are now based in Lebanon.

KT: What do you think about the music industry in Kuwait? Is it getting adequate support? If not, why?

Rahaf: In my opinion, I do not find enough support. In our world today, music projects are a mix between songs and advertisements. The support is often from people who are looking for what they are going to gain from it. Therefore, artistes started to produce for themselves, but at the same time I can't deny that I'm confused about what people like to hear.

I wonder if the audience is influenced and confined to a certain atmosphere that we call 'the market atmosphere', or is it the many facilities that contributed to the appearance of many new artistes and the repetition of the same work and short songs with a limited period of success.

Face: In general, the music industry is becoming bigger and cluttered because of the ease of making music these days. From our side, we have seen a lot of support. Our mission is to continue what we are doing and give people good music to listen to, re-

KT: You come from two different music genres - how were you able to find middle ground in your new song 'My World'?

Rahaf: I am a fan of Western music in general. I find myself in heavy metal and I have previous experience with rap as well. We lack nontraditional R&B songs in our artistic arena in the GCC and the Arab world, so I did not find myself far from Faisal's taste in music.

Face: Rahaf is a very talented artiste - you can give her any type of genre and she is able to adapt to it musically.

KT: Who wrote the lyrics?

Face: We both wrote our own lyrics. Rahaf wrote the Arabic part and performed a melodic sentence that matches the general atmosphere of the work.

KT: What were the main difficulties in producing this song during the pandemic?

Rahaf: We agreed to work by following the instructions of social distancing. We adhered to this as cast members were limited.



Picture shows Kuwaiti artist Face during the shoot of his new music video 'My World'.

late and enjoy.

KT: What are the topics you like to talk about through your music? What makes your song different?

Rahaf: I do not hesitate to tackle diverse ideas. I sang one day about an expatriate woman who left her children and family to work away from them - the song was titled 'Oh Patience'. I also sang about addiction awareness. Likewise, during the corona pandemic, I sang 'Stay at Home' and other songs. I never hesitate to present music that has humanitarian, national and educational messages.

Face: I do not see any restrictions - whatever we feel and experience in life is what we talk about.

KT: What does it take to be a successful artist nowadays?

Rahaf: I think success today is linked and depends to some extent on being actively present on social media. Direct interaction with the audience is also needed, by appearing from time to time on live broadcasts to sing fans' requests and diversify by presenting work that the audience demands from the artiste.

Face: A successful artiste is one who can deliver the message through their music creatively and keep upgrading themselves, with good marketing and creativity. Posting more videos too, as the public loves to hear and see the artiste.

KT: You are well-known as Rahaf from the Guitara band, especially for your song 'Ya Ghali'. You then kind of disappeared from the music scene or had few appearances. Do you think that if social media existed at the time you started your career, you would have reached a larger audience?

Rahaf: Yes. There is no doubt that if we were as a band when social media existed, our status would be different. But we reached around the world without it and our song was presented in more than six languages. Besides, I enjoyed that era a lot - we felt our success by reaching to the audi-

ence and lovers through cassette tapes. We were asked by fans for our autographs and received postal mail from Arabs around the world, which meant a lot to me. Today's artistes cannot appreciate the value of these experiences.

KT: Which artistes locally and internationally inspire you and why?

Rahaf: I'm a lover of Western electronic music and influenced by Daft Punk, Enigma, Pink Floyd, rock, pop, rap and heavy metal singers. I have not been influenced by any Arab artistes except for the Bahraini Brotherhood band.

Face: There are many young and very talented artistes, not just in Kuwait but also in the region. I am a big fan of Drake and Ty Dolla \$ign. I like R&B and hip hop and am interested in new schools to get inspired.

KT: Your success started with Army of One - is this a shift in your career, coming back with a duet? The members of Army of One are doing other things now - they have gone off and done solo projects. Are there any future prospects to come back together for a new song?



Picture shows director/videographer Rashid Al-neaimi (left), Kuwaiti artistes Rahaf and Face during the shoot of their new music video 'My World'.

Face: Before we get involved with music, we are brothers. We all took a different path musically, but yes, we still talk, meet and share music and ideas. Hopefully we will collaborate again in the near future.

KT: What are your upcoming projects? When can we expect to hear another song from you?

Rahaf: I have four upcoming songs that I have finished recording, but I am waiting to release them due to the preparation of the appropriate video for each song and the right time to launch them.

Face: In the next few months, I will drop a few songs, and hopefully by the end of this year, I will drop my mixtape/album.

KT: Will we witness another collaboration between both of you?

Rahaf: Of course, I expect this without any doubt. Besides, I received beautiful feedback from the public. I found musical harmony between Face and myself that motivates me to repeat the same experience.

Face: Of course, this is just the beginning, and I would always love to work with Rahaf again.



A group photo shows (from left) director/videographer Rashid Alneaimi, makeup artist Hanouf, Kuwaiti artistes Rahaf and Face, BTS photography Rami Hassanya, model Nader Ahmed and assistant director Abeer and co-director drone Khalid Al-Khalaifi (front) during the shoot of the new music video 'My World'.

Goodbye and thank you Kuwait

By Ben Garcia

Mohd Abdur Raouf Mowla, a Bangladeshi expat, has spent 44 years in Kuwait. On March 27, 2021 Mowla and his family will fly back to Dhaka for good. Without any regrets, 65 year-old Mowla is concluding his four-decade stay in Kuwait, where most of his dreams and ambitions came true.

"With all honesty, I am fully satisfied and contented. I am grateful to Kuwait for helping me achieve what I've achieved and what I am now," he said. "I left Dhaka when I was 22 at the invitation of my uncle. I had only completed two years in college at that time, but I needed to help my family." Mowla arrived in Kuwait on Nov 3, 1977, when most of the areas in the country were undeveloped, streets were unpaved and roads were deserted.

"At that time there was no money involved in coming here. It's wasn't too hard, there were no hassles and I immediately got a work visa," he said. "I got a job as an electrician at Al-Nafissi and Farouki General Trading Company in Shuwaikh. I worked there for two years, then transferred to National Industries and became part of their team at the electricity maintenance department, where I stayed for five years. From there I moved to the Ministry of Electricity and Water, where I worked as an electrical supervisor from 1983 till June 2020," he

recounted.

Mowla is also the General Secretary of the Bangladesh Journalist Union-Kuwait, President of the Awami League Kuwait Central Committee, Editor of the Monthly Morulekha-Kuwait, life member of Bangladesh Manobadhikar Council-Dhaka, Chairman of Kuwait Bangladesh Integrated Company Limited and President of International Media Forum.

Mowla said his decision to retire to Bangladesh was triggered by several predicaments he faced during the 2020 pandemic. His children also want him to be with them in Bangladesh - they want their dad to retire and stay at home and enjoy life. But for Mowla, retirement is not in his vocabulary yet, as his new life has just started after he agreed to retire from the ministry of electricity and water in June 2020.

"My plan is to continue my business venture in Bangladesh while I am still capable of doing so and my health is still okay. I am happy that with my job here and my additional income during my stay, I managed to save money and invest in real estate. Now I have passive income flowing to my bank account," Mowla admitted.

"I have two flats, plus a commercial building which I have rented to a bank and supermarket on its first and second floors respectively. I am receiving monthly rent from these two commercial entities. I also have shares in two buildings built together with 40 other



Bangladeshis in a cooperative scheme. I have also bought land for my future use, along with a building I am currently trying to erect in Dhaka, which will be my future home. The first floor will be occupied by my family and the remaining storeys will be for commercial purposes," he said.

From 1983, Bangladeshis began flocking to Kuwait in search of jobs and greener pastures. But as their numbers grew, stories of human trafficking and fraudulent recruitment abounded. "In 2000, I decided to establish the 'Monthly Morulekha-Kuwait' magazine,

and it became the voice of many of our compatriots seeking help from the embassy and our government. It was eventually recognized by the Kuwaiti government as being the first Bengali journal in the country," said Mowla.

"My heart was never complete without helping others, and it served as my vehicle to help. Since I established this magazine, I become popular among my countrymen. I am always called to help and share something with the community. I became the source of news for Bangladeshis. It was a fulfilling job and I will never forget the sense of patriotism of our people and the inspiration they contributed to make me a public servant and a community leader," he added.

According to him, the 'Monthly Morulekha-Kuwait' magazine will serve the Bangladeshi community even as he leaves Kuwait for good. "I transferred the management of my magazine to my trusted man here. I will remain the editor of the magazine since distance is no longer an issue in this era of technology," Mowla said. Himself and rest of his family members will leave Kuwait with a grateful/thankful heart! "Goodbye and Thank you Kuwait! Till God permit us to meet again, thanks Kuwait to all your generosity and love and for embracing me and my family," he concluded.



Farewell party arranged for Raouf Mowla by Bangladesh Awami League Kuwait Central Committee, Bangladesh TV Journalist Association, Monthly Morulekha, Bangladesh Family Forum, International Media Forum, Bangladesh Journalist Union and Janata Group

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Local

Kuwait's Deputy FM meets with GCC ambassadors

Oil Minister meets Saudi Energy Minister



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Majdi Al-Dhafiri meets with the ambassadors of GCC countries to Kuwait. — KUNA photos



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Minister of Oil Mohammad Al-Fares meets with Saudi Minister of Energy Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman.

KUWAIT/RIYADH: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Majdi Al-Dhafiri met yesterday with the ambassadors of GCC countries to Kuwait. Dhafiri met with Saudi Ambassador to Kuwait Prince Sultan bin Saud, Bahrain's Ambassador Salah Al-Maliki, Omani Ambassador Dr Saleh Al-Kharousi, Charge d'Affaires of Qatar to Kuwait Minister Plenipotentiary Muhammad Al-Anzi and Charge d'Affaires of the UAE Third Secretary Khaled Al-Morshoud. The talks dealt with a number of aspects of the historic relations that bind the countries of the GCC and ways to strengthen them, in addition

to the developments of the situation on the regional and international arenas.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's Minister of Oil Mohammad Al-Fares met on Wednesday with Saudi Minister of Energy Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman in Riyadh. During the meeting, both sides discussed ways of bolstering cooperation on the energy level. They also reviewed the positive aspects of the signed agreements to divide the Neutral Zone between both countries and a memo of understanding of resuming joint oil production along the border which embodied the strong brotherly bonds between the two countries.

Furthermore, the Kuwaiti and Saudi ministers discussed the upcoming stages that target strengthening the relations between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia by executing the agreements which would reflect in moving forward towards achieving common interests. Furthermore, both sides discussed recent market standings, joint cooperation to support the stability of the petroleum market and their active roles in the OPEC+ agreement which led to regaining balance of international oil markets. The two sides stressed on the importance of joint efforts and cooperation to maintain achievements and for more to come. — KUNA



NEW DELHI: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets with Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. — KUNA

Foreign Minister delivers letter to Indian Premier

NEW DELHI: Kuwait's Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah met with Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar while visiting New Delhi yesterday. Sheikh Dr Ahmad handed over a letter from His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on means of boosting strategic partnership, foreign ministry said in a statement. The letter also dealt with historic relations between Kuwait and India, as well as a host of issues of mutual interest, it added. Sheikh Dr Ahmad and Jaishankar, meanwhile, discussed regional and international issues. The meeting was attended by Assistant Foreign Minister for Asian Affairs Ali Al-Saeed, Kuwait Ambassador to India Jassem Al-Najem, Ministry of Health Assistant Undersecretary for Medicines and Medical Supplies Dr Abdallah Al-Qanae and Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister for the Foreign Minister's Office Ahmad Al-Shuraim. — KUNA

Pakistan, Kuwait seek to promote economic relations

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and Kuwait yesterday expressed their desire to promote economic relations with each other during the visit of Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah to Pakistan. Talking to his Pakistani counterpart Shah Mahmood Qureshi at Pakistan Foreign Office here in Islamabad, the visiting Kuwaiti Foreign Minister said his country wants to promote economic relations with Pakistan. He appreciated the positive contribution of more than 100,000 expatriate Pakistanis towards the development of the State of Kuwait. He thanked Pakistan for support and cooperation during the global pandemic, in particular in the health sector and food security of Kuwait.

According to the Pakistan Foreign Office, during the meeting, the Foreign Ministers reviewed the entire gamut of bilateral relations, including cooperation in political, economic, defense, trade and investment sectors, and manpower export, and discussed ways to enhance people-to-people linkages between the two countries. The resolve to continue close collaboration in multilateral forums, in particular the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), was reaffirmed. During the meeting, Qureshi said that Pakistan is desirous to increase the volume of bilateral trade with Kuwait. He further said, "We are looking forward to the early convening of the Fifth Joint Ministerial Commission between Pakistan and Kuwait." He said there are vast opportunities of cooperation between the two countries in the areas energy, technology, health, education and defense.

Qureshi pointed out that more than 100,000 Pakistanis living



ISLAMABAD: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah meets with Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi. — KUNA

in Kuwait are playing a positive role in the development of the country. He said Pakistan has transformed its geopolitical priorities into geo-economic priorities. The Pakistani Foreign Minister said that Pakistan is facilitating the foreign investment in different sectors of economy, adding that Pakistan's ranking in the ease of doing business has improved. He welcomed Kuwaiti investment in the country. The Foreign Minister thanked Kuwait for supporting the Kashmir resolution passed by the OIC foreign ministers at its meeting in Niger. Earlier in the day, the visiting Kuwaiti dignitary reached the Pakistan Foreign Office here in Islamabad where his Pakistani counterpart welcomed him. The visit of the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister comes in the backdrop of the bilateral meeting held with Foreign Minister Qureshi on the sidelines of the 47th Session of OIC Council of Foreign Ministers in Niamey, Niger, in November 2020. — KUNA

Local

Civil aviation says ban on expat entry stays

Assembly panel delays debate on election law amendment

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The Directorate General of Civil Aviation said yesterday that a ban on the entry of expats into Kuwait, which was enforced on February 7, is still valid until further notice. The ban was imposed by the council of ministers as part of measures Kuwait adopted to contain a spike in the number of coronavirus cases which have hit record high levels in recent days.

Kuwait has exempted foreign diplomats and medical staff and their first degree relatives from the ban. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation has also introduced a new program called MUNA (Medical Utility Network Accreditor) which will guarantee the authenticity of PCR coronavirus tests. Around 30 countries have been included under the program, ini-

ated after reports of fake PCR tests issued in some countries.

In the meantime, the National Assembly's interior and defense committee yesterday delayed until its next meeting discussing a number of draft laws proposing sweeping amendments to the election law. MP Mubarak Al-Ajmi said the postponement came because the interior minister and government representatives did not attend.

Ajmi also said that the meeting was supposed to discuss amendments to a law on which the constitutional court based its ruling earlier this week to revoke the membership of leading opposition MP Bader Al-Dahoum. MP Hasan Jowhar said the interior committee should complete studying the amendments to be presented to the national assembly regardless if the government attends or not.



KUWAIT: This March 14, 2021 file photo shows empty counters at Terminal 4 of Kuwait International Airport. — KUNA

Kuwait concerned over growing discrimination

NEW YORK: The State of Kuwait on Wednesday expressed grave concern over the recent intolerance incidents, including those motivated by religious discrimination in the world. This came during a speech delivered by Kuwait Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi at the virtual international meeting on the occasion of the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. He recalled what had been included in the speech of His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, when he served as Foreign Minister in 2019, before the UN General Assembly, during which Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled called for combating terrorism and other acts of violence based on religion or belief.

Otaibi said Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled noted that Islamophobia, hate speech, discrimination and violent acts are of the most dangerous scourges targeting the safety of societies. He pointed out that many countries in the world have repeatedly warned against those growing scourges, stressing the need to confront them in order to achieve peace, security and harmony amongst peoples of the world. Ambassador Otaibi renewed call for taking necessary measures to prevent those heinous acts, urging the international community to work so as to protect individuals from acts of discrimination, violence and crimes based on religious hate. Niger's delegation as head of the Islamic group organized the virtual high-level meeting, in cooperation with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC); the Permanent Observer Mission. —KUNA

Record jump in Kuwaitis' travel spending

KUWAIT: Kuwaitis' expenditure on travel registered a record increase of 465 per cent during the third quarter of 2020 (July - September) compared with the second quarter of the same year, Al-Anbaa Arabic daily reported yesterday. Primary data of the balance of payments issued by Central Bank of Kuwait showed that Kuwaiti travelers spent around KD 458.8 million in the third quarter of 2020, compared with KD 81.2 million spent on travel during the second quarter of the same year, bearing in mind that Kuwaitis' spending on travel reached KD 1.19 billion during the first three months of 2020 according to the adjusted data of the first quarter. The rise in Kuwaitis' spending on travel during the third quarter of last year was attributed to the easing of institutional quarantine procedures and the opening of Kuwait International Airport starting August 1, 2020.

MoH to receive Pfizer-BioNTech 9th batch Sunday

KUWAIT: Kuwait is set to receive Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine's ninth batch on Sunday, the Ministry of Health (MOH) said yesterday. Assistant Undersecretary for Medicines and Medical Supplies at the Ministry Dr Abdullah Al-Bader affirmed that the ministry contracted with the international company Pfizer directly. He stressed that the ministry constantly and carefully monitors the vaccines' safety after their use, in addition to following up information and data on the safety, efficacy and quality of vaccines locally and globally and take the necessary measures to ensure the safety of citizens and residents. Bader called on citizens and residents to register on the vaccination platform while taking all preventive measures and avoiding contact with others and ensuring the implementation of the physical distancing strategy. — KUNA



KUWAIT: A woman passes by the Kuwait Vaccination Center in Mishref in this file photo. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

News in brief

Weather slightly hot

KUWAIT: The weather is expected to be slightly hot and partly cloudy this morning with northwesterly light to moderate winds, Kuwait Meteorological Center said. The highest temperature is predicted between 28 to 31 Celsius. The weather is expected to be slightly cold at night with northwesterly light to moderate winds between eight to 30 km per hour. The lowest temperature is predicted between 15 to 18 Celsius, with light to moderate sea waves between one and four feet. — KUNA

Oil price up

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti crude oil edged up by six cents to reach \$67.27 per barrel yesterday from \$67.21 pb a day prior, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said. Elsewhere, the price of Brent crude dropped by 39 cents to \$68.00 pb as did West Texas Intermediate, which shed 20 cents to settle at \$63.68 pb. — KUNA

USD at KD 0.301

KUWAIT: The exchange rate of the US Dollar remains unchanged at KD 0.301 as the Euro witnessed a slight increase to KD 0.361, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) said yesterday. In its daily bulletin, the CBK added that the British Pound edged up to KD 0.421, while the Swiss Franc and the Japanese Yen remained unchanged at KD 0.326 and KD 0.003 respectively. The currency exchange rates, as declared by the CBK, reflect average rates, not actual trade. —KUNA



Tanzania mourns president's death after mystery illness

Jordan counts on Biden as it asserts itself against Israel

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SEOUL: US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin (right) and South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook (second left) walk during their visit to the National Cemetery in Seoul yesterday. — AFP

No engagement with US for now: N Korea

China warns US of 'no compromise' on sovereignty, security at Alaska talks

SEOUL: North Korea accused the new US administration of adopting "lunatic theory" yesterday, ruling out any engagement with Washington unless it changed course, as President Joe Biden's top envoys held talks in Seoul. The comments from Pyongyang's first vice foreign minister Choe Son Hui came with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin in South Korea on the second leg of an Asian tour to bolster a united front against the nuclear-armed North and an increasingly assertive China.

After Seoul, Blinken heads to Anchorage, Alaska for the new administration's first talks with China's top diplomats, with Beijing and Washington at loggerheads over issues ranging from trade to rights to territorial disputes. The Biden administration has generally backed the tougher approach to Beijing initiated by former president Donald Trump, and is looking to shore up alliances to rein in China's regional rise while co-operating on priorities such as climate change.

Meanwhile, China's foreign ministry said yesterday it would not make concessions to the US on key issues including Xinjiang and Hong Kong, ahead of high-level meetings between the two countries' diplomats in Alaska. It is the highest-level face-to-face diplomatic meeting between the two countries since US President Joe Biden took office. China wants a reset in relations, which were

pitched into turmoil by Donald Trump's presidency, which brought a damaging trade war and spats over everything from defense to tech and rights in Hong Kong.

But as the diplomats landed in Alaska hours ahead of the talks, a foreign ministry spokesman in Beijing issued a warning to Washington. Beijing warned yesterday it would make no concessions to the US on key issues including human rights in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. "China has no room for compromise on issues concerning its sovereignty, security and core interests," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters.

Talks between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un deadlocked after their second summit in Hanoi in early 2019 broke up over sanctions relief and what Pyongyang would be willing to give up in return. The North remains subject to sanctions over its banned weapons programs, but has also voluntarily closed its borders for more than a year to try to protect itself against the coronavirus pandemic that first emerged in neighboring China.

The new US administration is reviewing Washington's policy towards the North, and after the US envoys met their South Korean counterparts Blinken reiterated the US goal of "the denuclearization of North Korea".

He added that in Anchorage he would press Beijing, Pyongyang's key diplomatic ally and main trading partner, to inter-

vene, saying China had a "critical role" to play. "It has tremendous influence. And I think it has a shared interest in making sure we do something about North Korea's nuclear program."

No response

In Seoul the US envoys oversaw the signing of a new agreement on South Korea's payments towards the costs of the 28,500 US troops stationed in the country to defend it from its neighbor and protect Washington's regional interests. They also met with President Moon Jae-in, who brokered the talks process between Kim and Trump. Trump's unorthodox approach to foreign policy saw the two leaders trade insults and threats of war before an extraordinary diplomatic bromance that saw a series of headline-grabbing meetings, beginning in Singapore. But ultimately no progress was made towards Washington's declared aim of denuclearizing North Korea. 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. It had maintained silence during the first weeks of the Biden administration, with state media not even mentioning the new US leadership until this week. Choe said yesterday that for talks to take place, Pyongyang and Washington would have to meet as equals. — AFP

International

Jordan counts on Biden as it asserts itself against Israel

Amman delayed granting Netanyahu permission to cross its airspace to UAE

AMMAN: When Jordan sabotaged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's triumphant pre-election trip to the United Arab Emirates last week, analysts say, it was sending him a message: stop marginalizing us. The Hashemite kingdom—which kept a low profile during the term of former US president Donald Trump, a close Netanyahu ally—now believes the winds have shifted and Joe Biden will show a more balanced approach.

Last Thursday, Jordan delayed granting Netanyahu permission to cross its airspace to the UAE, forcing him to shelve his trip to the rich Gulf state with which Israel normalized relations in a landmark agreement last year. The move dealt a blow to Netanyahu, who is campaigning for re-election on March 23.

Jordan's move "sent an abrupt and firm message to make him understand that it will no longer tolerate his way of behaving towards it," said Ahmad Awad of the Phenix Center for Economics & Informatics Studies in Amman.

Netanyahu had been due to meet the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, to mark the historic agreement between Israel and the UAE on what would have been his first official visit to the Gulf state. "Jordan chose the right moment to scupper what was supposed to be a show of victory and a campaign event for Netanyahu," said Oraib Al-Rantawi, director of Al Quds Center For Political Studies. "This move has turned into a crisis between the two countries."

'More comfortable'

Israel's veteran leader faces his fourth election battle in less than two years. With an ongoing graft trial hanging over his head, he is campaigning both on a world-leading COVID vaccination drive and as a statesman who delivered diplomatic breakthroughs. In the so-called Abraham Accords brokered by the US under Trump, Israel also established relations with Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco—its first such agreements in the Arab world since its peace treaties with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. Palestinians regarded these deals as a betrayal, maintaining that Arab states should isolate Israel until the people living in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip have their own independent state.

Diplomatic contact had ceased between the Palestinians and Washington after Trump had given his approval for Israel to annex the West Bank. Jordan, home to many Palestinian refugees, had strongly opposed that idea. Awad said that, "after years of deliberate marginalization of its role under an American administration further to the right than the Israeli right, Jordan is in the process of restoring the situation with the arrival of Biden". Rantawi also said that, with Trump out of the picture, "Jordan today feels more comfortable".

"The Trump administration was threatening Jordan's vital interests regarding the final solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," he said. He was referring to a vision of making Jordan a substitute state for the Palestinians, an idea which is unacceptable to Amman



This combination of pictures shows (left to right) Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Jordanian King Abdullah II. — AFP

and the Palestinians. Rantawi said while the Trump administration strongly supported Israel's position on the long-running dispute, the Biden administration "supports the two-state solution and considers Jordan a partner". "It has returned to traditional American positions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." —AFP

UN rights chief agrees to joint Tigray probe

UNITED NATIONS: United Nations human rights chief Michelle Bachelet has agreed to Ethiopia's request for a joint investigation into the humanitarian consequences of the conflict in the country's northern Tigray region, a UN spokesman said. Tigray residents have told human rights groups and journalists of massacres, widespread sexual violence and indiscriminate killings of civilians by security forces in the region.

Aid workers, meanwhile, say Tigray's health system has largely collapsed and warn of possible large-scale starvation. "The High Commissioner responded positively to the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) request for joint investigations on Monday," Jonathan Fowler, public information officer at the UN Human Rights Office, told AFP.

The UN office is now preparing a plan in order to launch the mission as soon as possible. Fighting began in Tigray in November, when Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops to the region, blaming the area's once-dominant ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), for attacks on army camps.

Abiy declared victory in Tigray in late November after federal forces took the re-



In this file photo, Ethiopian refugees gather to celebrate the 46th anniversary of the Tigray People's Liberation Front at Um Raquba refugee camp in Gedaref, eastern Sudan. — AFP

gional capital of Mekele, though TPLF leaders remain on the run and fighting has continued.

A communications blackout made it difficult to verify conditions on the ground for weeks, though access has improved recently for humanitarian organizations and the media. US Secretary of State Antony

Blinken last week described the violence as an "ethnic cleansing" and called for an investigation.

Ethiopia has rejected such a characterization as "unfounded and spurious." But UN officials fear for a humanitarian catastrophe and estimate that 4.5 million people need assistance. —AFP

Iran report on downed Ukraine jet absolves armed forces

TEHRAN: Iran on Wednesday released its final report on the Ukrainian passenger jet it shot down last year killing 176 people, devoting two paragraphs to causes and absolving the armed forces.

Ukraine, which lost 11 citizens in the disaster, immediately dismissed the report as "a cynical attempt to hide (the) true causes" of the tragedy, while Canada, which lost 55 citizens and 30 permanent residents, said it is "incomplete and has no hard facts or evidence." On January 8, 2020, Ukraine International Airlines flight PS752 crashed shortly after takeoff from Iran's capital Tehran killing all 176 people aboard.

The Islamic republic admitted three days later that its forces mistakenly shot down the Kiev-bound Boeing 737-800 plane, after firing two missiles. In a final report released in English of over 145 pages, the Iranian Civil Aviation Organization (CAO) devoted two paragraphs to "accident causes and contributing factors". The first paragraph indicates what was already known, namely that Iranian forces fired "two surface-to-air missiles at the flight PS752... (that) led the aircraft to crash into the ground and explode instantly."

The second paragraph examines "other contributing factors", in which it discussed the "alertness" of troops on the ground. "The mitigating measures and defense layers in risk management proved to be ineffective due to the occurrence of an unanticipated error in threat identifications, and ultimately failed to protect the flight safety against the threats caused by the alertness of defense forces," it read. Tensions between Iran and the US were soaring at the time of the downing of the Ukrainian jetliner. Iranian air defenses were on high alert for a US counter-attack after Tehran fired missiles at a military base in Iraq that was used by US forces. — AFP

International

Turkish government moves to ban pro-Kurdish HDP party

Move would 'undermine democracy' in Turkey: US

ANKARA: Turkey's pro-Kurdish party was fighting for its political survival yesterday after a prosecutor asked the country's top court to shut it down for alleged links to militants waging a deadly insurgency against the state.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has long portrayed the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) — parliament's third-largest-as the political front of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The PKK has been waging an insurgency since 1984 that has killed tens of thousands and is recognized as a terrorist organization by Ankara and its Western allies. But the HDP firmly denies formal links to the militants and says it is coming under attack because of its fervent opposition to Erdogan's 18-year rule. Wednesday's request to ban the party came from a Supreme Court prosecutor who is investigating the HDP. Prosecutor Bekir Sahin alleged that the HDP "was acting together with PKK terrorists and affiliated organizations, acting as an extension of such organizations".

He added that such activity threatened "to destroy the indivisibility between the state and the people", the Anadolu state news agency reported. The party condemned the indictment as a "heavy blow to democracy" and called on its supporters to resist. "We call on all the democratic forces, the so-

cial and political opposition, and on our people to join a common fight against this political coup," it said in a statement.

Meanwhile, the United States warned Wednesday that efforts to bar the main pro-Kurdish party in Turkey would undermine the nation's democracy.

"We are... monitoring the initiation of efforts to dissolve the People's Democratic Party, a decision that would unduly subvert the will of Turkish voters, further undermine democracy in Turkey, and deny millions of Turkish citizens their chosen representation," State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a statement.

"We call on the government of Turkey to respect freedom of expression in line with protections in the Turkish constitution and with Turkey's international obligations," he added.

The Constitutional Court could theoretically throw out the prosecutor's petition and not put the HDP on trial. But Western governments question the Turkish justice system's independence and accuse Erdogan of using the courts as a political bludgeon aimed at suppressing dissent. The Turkish lira lost more than 1.5 percent against the dollar immediately after the indictment was issued on apparent worries about a new bout of tensions between Erdogan's government and the West. — AFP



ANKARA: Omer Faruk Gergerlioglu (center front row with a blue mask), a human rights advocate and lawmaker from the People's Democratic Party (HDP) and his colleagues pose after the parliament stripped his parliamentary seat, in Ankara, on Wednesday. —AFP

No ceasefire in Yemen unless blockade lifted, rebels say

DUBAI: The Saudi-led blockade of Yemen must be lifted before a ceasefire agreement can be reached, a Houthi rebel spokesman has said amid UN calls for an immediate halt to fighting. The Iran-backed Houthis and the government have been locked in a power struggle since 2014, when the rebels seized control of the capital Sanaa. A Saudi-led military coalition intervened in 2015, enforcing a naval and air blockade to prevent the smuggling of weapons to the rebels from Iran-allegations Tehran denies.

Both the United Nations and human rights groups have said that the move has restricted the flow of aid and essential goods, putting at risk millions of people who depend on such imports for survival.

"The humanitarian side must be separated from the military one," Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam said in an interview broadcast on Al Jazeera on Wednesday. "We were asked for a comprehensive ceasefire... but the first stage is to open the sea ports and airports, then go towards the process of a strategic ceasefire, which is stopping the strikes, missiles and drones.

"When the sea port and the airport open, we're ready to negotiate." Earlier this month, the UN renewed its call for a nationwide ceasefire and a political solution to the conflict. However, Abdulsalam underlined that for the Houthis the only path towards that would be for the blockade to be lifted followed by a ceasefire and then "preparation for discussions and then (ultimately) have dialogue". The United States is mounting a renewed push to end the conflict, and has withdrawn support for the Saudi-led coalition's offensive in Yemen. — AFP

Egyptian activist Sanaa Seif jailed for 18 months

CAIRO: Egyptian political activist Sanaa Seif was sentenced to 18 months in prison on Wednesday for spreading "false information" relating to COVID-19, her sister and lawyers said. Seif's brother is jailed activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, a prominent figure in the Arab Spring uprising that unseated longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

The 27-year-old, a film editor who worked on the Oscar-nominated documentary *The Square*, which covered the political crisis in Egypt from 2011, was arrested in June 2020. Seif and members of her family were arrested outside the public prosecutor's office, where they had gone to lodge a complaint after they were allegedly assaulted outside a Cairo prison complex seeking news of Fattah the day before.

Prosecutors in June had accused Seif of disseminating "false news on the deterioration of the country's health situation, and the spread of the coronavirus in prisons." Human rights lawyer Nabih al-Ganadi said Wednesday Seif had been handed 18 months in jail, including "one year for 'spreading false information' and 'using an account on social networks to commit a crime', and six months for 'defaming a public official'."

Seif's sister, Mona Seif, said she had been charged for spreading false information "about coronavirus". "This dreadful country is determined to steal the lives of my brother and sister in their rotten prisons," Mona Seif added. Fattah was arrested in September 2019 following rare



In this file photo, Egyptian rights activist Sanaa Seif stands in a street after being released from Sayeda Zeinab police station in Cairo at the end of a prison sentence on November 15, 2016. — AFP

demonstrations against President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who toppled president Mohamed Morsi in 2013. The arrest of Sanaa Seif came after she stood outside the prison where Fattah was held hoping for news of him, amid fear of the spread of COVID-19 inside jails.

Rights groups estimate about 60,000 political prisoners are being held in Egyptian jails, in a crackdown on dissent under way since Sisi took power in 2014. The sentencing sparked a strong reaction from rights group Amnesty International. "Today's verdict is yet another crushing blow for the right to freedom of expression in Egypt," Amnesty's Anna Guellali said. "The Egyptian authorities have yet again demonstrated their unrelenting intent to punish any criticism of their dismal human rights record." — AFP

International

Images of 'cosmic web' reveal billions of dwarf galaxies

Scientists peer into the early Universe some 12 billion years ago

PARIS: Peering into the early Universe some 12 billion years ago, scientists in France have for the first time seen the incandescent filaments of hydrogen gas known as the "cosmic web," they said yesterday. Cosmological models have long predicted its existence, but until now the cosmic web had never been directly observed and captured in images.

Eight months of observation with the European Southern Observatory's Very Large Telescope and a year of data crunching revealed the filaments as they existed only one to two billion years after the Big Bang. But the biggest surprise, scientists said, was simulations showing that the light came from billions of previously invisible—and unsuspected—dwarf galaxies spawning trillions of stars.

The findings were reported in the journal *Astronomy & Astrophysics*. "After an initial period of darkness, the Universe erupted with light and produced a huge number of stars," senior author Roland Bacon, a scientist at the Centre for Astrophysics Research in Lyon, told AFP. "One of the big questions is what ended that period of darkness," leading to a phase in the early Universe known as re-ionisation, he said.

Until now, astronomers had only caught partial and indirect glimpses of the cosmic web via quasars, whose powerful radiation,

like car headlights, reveals gas clouds along the line of sight.

But these regions do not represent the whole network of filaments where most galaxies—including our own—were born.

Plumbing new depths

"These findings are fundamental," commented Emanuele Daddi, a researcher at Atomic Energy Commission who did not take part in the study.

"We have never seen a discharge of gases on this scale, which is essential for understanding how galaxies form." The team trained the ESO's Very Large Telescope—equipped with a 3D spectrograph called MUSE—at a single region of the sky for over 140 hours.

Together, the two instruments form one of the most powerful observation systems in the world.

The region selected forms part of the Hubble Ultra-Deep Field, which includes the deepest image of the cosmos ever obtained. But the new images plumb new depths of the early Universe — 40 percent of the newly discovered galaxies were beyond Hubble's reach.

Although these galaxies — 10 to 12 billion light years away—are too faint to be detected individually with current instruments,



their existence will likely enhance and challenge existing models of galaxy formation. Scientists are only now beginning to explore their implications, the researchers said.

Astronomers at the Lagrange Laboratory for the University Cote d'Azur has contributed to the research. — AFP

Dutch PM claims win in virus dominated vote

THE HAGUE: Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte claimed an "overwhelming" victory in elections on Wednesday, vowing to use his fourth term in office to rebuild the country after the coronavirus pandemic.

Already one of Europe's longest serving leaders after ten years in office, exit polls showed Rutte's liberal party clearly winning the most seats in parliament after the socially distanced three-day vote.

The pro-EU D66 party, which has challenged Rutte's European policy as part of his current government, is set to surge into second place, while anti-Islam leader Geert Wilders lost ground to move into third, public broadcaster NOS predicted. Populist leader Thierry Baudet's party did unexpectedly well on the back of Covid-sceptic votes in a country that recently suffered its worst riots in decades after the imposition of a coronavirus curfew.

"The voters of the Netherlands have given my party an overwhelming vote of confidence," a smiling Rutte told reporters in parliament. Rutte said that "not everything has gone well in the last 10 years", including his resignation in January over a scandal in which people were racially profiled and then falsely accused of scamming child benefits. "But of course the main issue also on the table for the next years is how to rebuild the country going forward after corona."

He added that "I have the energy for another ten years."

'Traitor' Rutte

The Netherlands has recorded more than 1.1 million infections and 16,000 deaths, and is currently under its most stringent health measures yet including the curfew and closure of bars and restaurants. Millions of masked voters cast their ballots in pandemic conditions at museums, churches and bike-through polling stations on the third and final day of the elections, which have been dominated by the government's response to the pandemic.

A limited number of voting centres had been open on Monday and Tuesday for the elderly and vulnerable, with voters also allowed out after the curfew, before polls opened for everyone on Wednesday. The Dutch



THE HAGUE: Outgoing Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte reacts to the exit polls of the House of Representatives' elections in The Hague, on Wednesday. — AFP

parliament is now set to have a record-equalling 17 parties in parliament, two more than the current number, and a sign that coalition talks could be as difficult as in 2017 when they took seven months.

The exit polls showed Rutte's liberal VVD (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) gaining three seats to win 35 in total, up from the 33 it won four years ago. Bleached blonde far-right leader Wilders looked set to lose his PVV's (Freedom Party) status as the second-biggest party, with exit polls predicting he would win 18 seats, down two. Congratulating Rutte despite a campaign in which he called him a "traitor", Wilders said he had "hoped for a little more", but that "we are still the third party in the Netherlands."

The main surprise was the strong showing of D66, led by Dutch foreign trade minister Sigrid Kaag, predicted to increase its parliamentary share by seven to 26 seats. Kaag — who tweeted a picture of herself dancing on a table in celebration — said the result was "a great responsibility." It overtook its fellow coalition partner the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), led by hawkish finance minister Wopke Hoekstra, now set to be in fourth place with 14 seats, down five. — AFP

Indian train 'rolls backwards for 35 km'

NEW DELHI: An Indian passenger train rolled backwards for 35 kilometers (20 miles), reports said yesterday, in an alarming but injury-free incident caught in a video that went viral on social media.

The "mechanical failure" hit service from New Delhi to Tanakpur, Uttarakhand state, after the driver slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting an animal on the tracks, the NDTV channel reported. The rail company later said the animal in question was a cow. Reports said the out-of-control train reversed almost 35 kilometers, but the railways ministry did not immediately confirm the distance. Fatal accidents are common on India's vast but often dilapidated railway network, although in Wednesday's incident there were no injuries or deaths.

A tight-lipped statement from North Eastern Railway said only that an "incident" on Wednesday occurred "due to cattle run over". It did not elaborate on how the train was brought under control. "Train stopped just short of Khatima yard safely. There was no derailment and all passengers were transported to Tanakpur safely," it said, adding that the driver and the guard had been suspended. — AFP

International

Tanzania mourns president's death after mystery illness

Opposition leader Lissu claims Magufuli's death is due to COVID-19

DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania: Tanzania was plunged into mourning yesterday over the death of President John Magufuli following weeks of uncertainty over his health, with his swing to authoritarianism leaving a divided legacy.

Flags flew at half-mast as the country began a 14-day mourning period after Vice-President Samia Suluhu Hassan—who is set to become the country's first female leader—announced Magufuli's death shortly before midnight. Hassan said Magufuli had died on Wednesday of a "heart condition" relating to an abnormal heartbeat that he had long suffered from, in a hospital in Dar es Salaam.

The announcement came after government denials the president was ill as pressure mounted to explain his almost three-week absence from public view, which sparked panic and rumors he was seeking treatment abroad for COVID-19. Several people were arrested this week for spreading rumors over his ill-health on social media.

As condolences poured in from abroad, main opposition leader Tundu Lissu, shot 16 times in a 2017 assassination attempt and exiled in Belgium, described Magufuli's death as "poetic justice", insisting his sources said he had succumbed to COVID-19. "Magufuli died of corona. That is one. Number two, Magufuli did not die this evening. I have information from basically the same sources which told me he was gravely ill, I have information that Magufuli has been dead since Wednesday of last week," he told Kenya's KTN News, using local slang for the virus. "What should I say? It is poetic justice. President Magufuli defied the world on the



DAR ES SALAAM: A resident of Kariakoo reads the Nipashe newspaper with a headline "MAJONZI" -grief, announcing the death of Tanzanian President John Pombe Magufuli, in Dar Es Salaam, yesterday. — AFP

struggle against corona... He defied science... And what has happened, happened. He went down with corona." Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, current head of the East African Community bloc, said Africa had lost an "illustrious" leader and ordered a seven-day period of mourning in Kenya and for flags to fly at half-mast in the region. Ethiopia, Britain and the United States also sent condolences, with Washington saying "we hope that Tanzania can move forward on a democratic and prosperous path."

'I am shocked'

Magufuli was first elected in 2015 as a corruption-busting man of the people, endearing him to a

nandez Santos, a senior forestry engineer, describing it as "an environmental disaster." Worst-hit was Casa de Campo, a vast 1,500-hectare (3,800-acre) forest park west of the city, where 500,000 out of its 700,000 trees were damaged and one in five completely destroyed. Even now, most of the park remains off-limits as the clean-up continues. Evergreens—such as pines, holm oaks and cedars—bore the brunt, as their needles and leaves caught the snow. By contrast, deciduous trees suffered far less, says Mariano Sanchez, a tree expert from Madrid's Botanical Gardens.



MADRID: A couple walk past fallen tree branches in Madrid after Storm Filomena brought the heaviest snowfall in the region for 50 years. — AFP

population weary of graft scandals, who loved his no-nonsense attitude. His expansion of free education, rural electrification and infrastructure investments also won him support, as did his efforts to increase Tanzania's stake in mineral resources, demanding millions in back taxes from foreign mining companies. "The poor had started making progress, business was flourishing, if you had a problem, the president would hear you out," said 71-year-old newspaper vendor Kondo Nyumba, crying, as he sold the day's papers, one of which had 'Sorrow' headlining the front page. Another city resident Omar Jongo, 42, was still in shock. "As any other Tanzanian, I am shocked, and we still haven't come to terms with the news," he told AFP.

"For the short time he served, he has done major visible reforms, as a nation we will remember him for the many good things he has done. However, Magufuli's slide into authoritarianism, which saw a crackdown on the media, civil society and opposition, raised alarm among foreign allies and rights groups. His re-election last October was dismissed by the opposition and some diplomats as a sham, over alleged rigging, the blocking of foreign media and observer teams and an oppressive military presence. "He will be remembered far more for what he destroyed (civic space, media freedom, democratic institutions, good governance) than for anything he started building (roads, modern railway, bridges, power plants, new planes and more)," said Dr Thabit Jacob, a researcher at the Roskilde University in Denmark and expert on Tanzania, in a text message. —AFP

"Although the trees have adapted to cope with the wind and rain in Madrid, they weren't ready for this snowfall. They were overloaded, the wood couldn't support the weight and the branches broke." Trees with very wide crowns may have supported up to "five or six tons" of snow, says Antonio Morcillo, deputy head of green conservation at City Hall. In Madrid's historic Retiro park, 70 percent of its 17,400 trees were damaged, 1,000 of them beyond repair. By comparison, the last major incident recorded in Madrid in 1885 was a typhoon that toppled 1,600 trees in the Retiro, Sanchez says.—AFP

For Madrid's trees, record snowfall leaves deep wounds

MADRID: High among the treetops the sound of a chainsaw rings out and a huge branch comes crashing down as Madrid's forestry engineers move from tree to tree, repairing the damage from the record snowfall seen in January. It has been over two months since Storm Filomena hit the Spanish capital, blanketing the city in the heaviest snowfall in 50 years. But while delighted residents revelled in the winter wonderland, the weather event spelled disaster for Madrid's 1.7 million city-owned trees, with hundreds of thousands of branches collapsing under the weight of the snow. "Some 800,000 trees were affected in one way or another. Of that number, 120,000 won't survive because they were totally uprooted or had to be felled," Borja Carabante, head of environmental issues at City Hall in Madrid, said. "The damage to our green heritage has been very significant." Across the city, the devastation was shockingly evident, with streets and pavements blocked and the parks closed for six weeks.

'Environmental disaster'

"Everyone was very excited, but I felt huge sadness when I saw all the fallen trees," said Pablo Fer-

New embryo models offer hope on miscarriages

TOKYO: Scientists have generated early-stage human embryo models that could help shed light on the "black box" of initial human development stages and improve research on pregnancy loss and birth defects.

Two separate teams found different ways to produce versions of a blastocyst—the pre-embryonic mass of cells at the stage of development around five days after a sperm fertilizes an egg—potentially opening the door for a huge expansion of research. The scientists make clear that the models differ from human blastocysts and are not capable of developing into embryos. But their work comes as new ethical guidelines on such research are being drafted and could spark fresh debate. The teams, whose research was published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*, believe the models dubbed "blastoids" will aid research on everything from miscarriages to the effects of toxins and drugs on early-stage embryos.

"We're very excited," said Jun Wu of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Centre, who led one of the teams. "Studying human development is really difficult, especially at this stage of development, it's essentially a black box," he told a press briefing ahead of the research's publication.

At the moment, research on the earliest days of embryonic development relies on donated blastocysts from IVF treatment. But supply is limited, subject to restrictions, and available only to certain research facilities.

So being able to generate unlimited models could be a game changer, said Jose Polo, a professor at Australia's Monash University, who led the second research team. "This capacity to work at scale, we think, will revolutionize our understanding of early stages of human development," he told reporters.

Generating models of blastocysts has so far only been done in animals, with researchers in 2018 successfully generating them in mice using stem cells. The two teams approached the development of a human model in slightly different ways. Wu's team used two different types of stem cells, some derived from human embryos, and other so-called induced pluripotent stem cells, which have the potential to become any cell and are produced from adult tissue. Polo's team instead started with adult skin cells, but both teams ended up with effectively the same result: the cells began to organize themselves into blastoids, featuring the three key components seen in a human blastocyst.—AFP

International

Russia recalls envoy after Biden says 'killer' Putin will 'pay a price'

First major diplomatic crisis for new US president

WASHINGTON: Russia called its US ambassador back to Moscow for consultations on Wednesday after Joe Biden described Vladimir Putin as a "killer" who would "pay a price" for election meddling, prompting the first major diplomatic crisis for the new American president. In an interview with ABC News, Biden was asked about a US intelligence report that the Russian leader tried to harm his candidacy in the November 2020 election and promote that of Donald Trump. "He will pay a price," the 78-year-old Biden said. Asked if he thought Putin, who has been accused of ordering the poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and other rivals, is a "killer," Biden said: "I do." The comments were aired as the US Commerce Department announced it was toughening export restrictions imposed on Russia as punishment for Navalny's poisoning.

Russia responded by summoning its envoy home, though the State Department did not reciprocate by recalling its own ambassador to Moscow. "The Russian ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Antonov, has been invited to come to Moscow for consultations conducted with the aim of analyzing what should be done and where to go in the context of ties with the United States," the Russian foreign ministry said. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told RIA Novosti that "responsibility for further deterioration of Russian-American ties fully rests with the United States."

In Washington, the State Department noted the Russian move and said the United States will "remain clear-eyed about the challenges that Russia poses." A State Department spokeswoman told AFP the US envoy would remain in Moscow in the hopes of maintaining "open channels of communication" and in order to "reduce the risk of miscalculation between our countries."

White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki was asked



This combination of pictures shows Russian President Vladimir Putin (left) and US President Joe Biden. — AFP

by reporters whether the president considers Putin literally or just metaphorically a killer. "He does not hold back on his concerns about what we see as malign and problematic actions," Psaki said, citing election interference, Navalny's poisoning, cyberattacks and bounties on US troops in Afghanistan.

"He's not going to hold back in his direct communications, nor is he going to hold back publicly," she said. "We are not going to look the other way as we saw a little bit over the last four years."

Biden told ABC News he had a "long talk" with Putin after taking office in January. "The conversation started off, I said, 'I know you and you know me. If I establish this occurred, then be prepared,'" Biden said. Biden's assessment that Putin is a "killer" marked a stark contrast with Trump's steadfast refusal to say anything negative about the Russian president. In a 2017 interview with Fox News, Trump was asked about Putin being a "killer." "There are a lot of killers," he replied. "You think our country's so innocent?"

other northern cities such as Bologna and Ferrara.

Many of the bodies that remained in Bergamo were buried in haste, often without headstones but with signs bearing photos and names of the deceased. Almost everyone here lost a member of their family, a friend, colleague, or neighbour.

ICU full again

In March 2020 alone, 670 people died in this city of 120,000 inhabitants and almost 6,000 in the province of the same name—five or six times the normal toll for that time of year. "People saw their loved ones leave in an ambulance with a fever, and they were returned as ashes in an urn, without ever being able to say goodbye," said Bergamelli, 66. "It was like wartime." Prime Minister Mario Draghi will visit Bergamo to pay tribute to the victims of the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed more than 100,000 people in Italy, according to official statistics. But a grim sense of déjà vu pervades the area, as the city is once again locked down along with most of the country amid a fresh wave of infections. At the Seriate hospital east of the city, the intensive care unit is once again at capacity, its eight beds occupied by coronavirus patients, even if numbers are lower than last year.—AFP

'Know the other guy'

Despite his thoughts about the Russian leader, Biden said "there are places where it's in our mutual interest to work together." "That's why I renewed the START agreement with him," he said of the nuclear treaty. "That occurred while he's doing this, but that's overwhelmingly in the interest of humanity, that we diminish the prospect of a nuclear exchange." Biden said he had learned from dealing with "an awful lot" of leaders during a political career spanning almost five decades—including eight years as vice president—that the most important thing was to "just know the other guy." Vyacheslav Volodin, speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament, denounced Biden for agreeing with the description of Putin as a "killer."

"Biden insulted the citizens of our country," Volodin said. "Attacks on (Putin) are attacks on our country." Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed the US determination that Russia had targeted election infrastructure during the 2020 presidential election as "absolutely groundless and unsubstantiated" and an excuse for new sanctions.

According to US intelligence, Putin and other senior officials "were aware of and probably directed" Russia's influence operation to sway the vote in Trump's favor. It concluded, however, that the election results were not compromised. Russia faced allegations of US election meddling in 2016 for launching a social media campaign to boost Trump's candidacy and discredit his opponent Hillary Clinton.

After Biden's victory over Trump, Putin was among the last world leaders to congratulate the newly elected Democratic president. Tensions between the former Cold War rivals have soared in recent months over hacking allegations and US demands that Russia free Navalny.—AFP

Widespread ageism worsened by pandemic: UN

GENEVA: Ageism is widespread worldwide and stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination based on age have only been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations said yesterday. The coronavirus crisis has wreaked a devastating toll on older people and solidarity between the generations will be crucial to the global recovery, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said.

In a joint report, four UN agencies warned that discrimination linked to age was pervasive throughout society, and stressed that it is a problem that does not just impact older people. In workplaces especially, both younger and older people can face disadvantages due to their age, the report said, adding that the problem was also found in health and social care, the media and in legal systems, with far-reaching consequences.

"Ageism is widespread in institutions, laws and policies across the world. It damages individual health and dignity as well as economies and societies writ large," Guterres said in the report. "It denies people their human rights and their ability to reach their full potential."

The 203-page report, produced by the World Health Organization, the UN rights office, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the UN Population Fund, said ageism could manifest itself in stereotypical and prejudicial attitudes, as well as in fully-fledged discrimination. This can be felt at an institutional or interpersonal level, or be self-directed, the report said.

Frail and vulnerable stereotype

The issue, which was already a major problem before COVID-19 reared its head, has been amplified by the pandemic, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet, UN DESA's Liu Zhenmin and Population Fund chief Natalia Kanem said in a joint statement. "Older people have been often seen as uniformly frail and vulnerable, while younger people have been portrayed as invincible, or as reckless and irresponsible," they said. "As countries seek to recover from the pandemic, people of all ages will continue to face different forms of ageism. Younger workers may be even less likely to get jobs. Older workers may become a target for workforce reduction.—AFP

In Bergamo, memory of coffin-filled trucks still haunts

BERGAMO, Italy: Images of army trucks transporting piled-up coffins out of the Italian town of Bergamo last year provided a shocking testament to the horrors of coronavirus. One year on, the memories are still raw. At the height of the pandemic last year, Father Marco Bergamelli was blessing coffins every ten minutes in this city in Italy's north. "This place was full of coffins, there were 132 lined up at the foot of the altar," he said, opening the doors of the church at the Monumental cemetery to AFP.

"At the beginning, the trucks came at night, nobody was supposed to know the coffins were being taken elsewhere." The camouflaged vehicles took away up to 70 coffins a day from the church, where they were collected after the local mortuaries filled up. The coffins were transported to cemeteries in



Italian army trucks transporting coffins of victims of the coronavirus cross the city of Bergamo, Lombardy on March 26, 2020. — AFP

International

Suspect charged with eight murders in Atlanta shootings

Crime motive unclear; hate crimes against Asian-Americans jump

ATLANTA: A 21-year-old suspect described as a sex addict was charged Wednesday with murdering eight people in spas around the US city of Atlanta, in triple attacks that have deeply shaken the Asian-American community. Police said Robert Aaron Long has denied a racist motive to Tuesday's attacks—in which six of the victims were women of Asian origin—but that they had yet to determine the shooter's reason for opening fire.

"The suspect did take responsibility for the shootings," Captain Jay Baker of the Cherokee County Office told a news conference.

Long, who is white, "does claim it was not racially motivated," Baker added, but stressed that it was "still early" in the investigation. The suspect "apparently has an issue, what he considers a sex addiction," Baker said. Long told police he had frequented massage parlors in the past and launched the attacks as a form of vengeance against "a temptation for him that he wanted to eliminate."

While a probe is ongoing into the motive, the attacks thrust the spotlight onto a spike in violence targeting Asian-Americans-fueled during the COVID-19 pandemic, activists believe, by talk of the "Chinese virus" by former president Donald



ATLANTA: Justin Kuo and his son Zion Kuo gather with community members for a candlelight vigil in Garden Grove, California to unite against the recent spate of violence targeting Asians and to express grief and outrage after Tuesday's shooting that left eight people dead in Atlanta.—AFP

Trump and others. "Racially motivated violence must be called out for exactly what it is," Congresswoman Marilyn Strickland—who is half-Korean-

warrant during a stopover in Vancouver in December 2018, just nine days before the two Canadians were detained.

'A bargaining chip'

The United States wants Meng—the daughter of Huawei founder Ren Zhengfei—extradited to face trial on charges related to the Chinese telecom equipment maker's alleged violations of US sanctions against Iran. Meng, 49, is accused of having lied to the HSBC investment bank about Huawei's relationship with subsidiary Skycom, putting the bank at risk of violating the sanctions as it continued to clear US dollar transactions for Huawei.

Both Meng and Huawei—the world's largest telecommunications equipment manufacturer—deny the charges. US and Chinese top foreign officials are also scheduled to hold high-level meetings in Alaska yesterday. US President Joe Biden has publicly called for the Canadian pair's release, saying after a bilateral meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau last month that "human beings are not bartering chips."

Trudeau has accused Beijing of concocting "trumped up charges" against Kovrig and Spavor in an effort to put pressure on Canada to release Meng, while affirming the independence of Canada's judicial system in dealing with the US extradition request.

On Wednesday, Kovrig's wife, Vina Nadjibulla, told the CBC that the trial date means time is running out for her husband to be freed through diplomacy. "It has been incredibly difficult... we live with so much unknown and anxiety about what may happen each day," she said. "We've got to bring Michael and Michael Spavor home." The arrests of Meng, Kovrig and Spavor have roiled diplomatic relations between China and Canada, which has enlisted the help of allies to apply pressure on China—its second largest trading partner.—AFP

said Wednesday. "We must stop making excuses or rebranding it as economic anxiety or sexual addiction." The spotlight has also been thrust on the police leading the investigation—particularly on Captain Baker's remarks that the alleged shooter had had a "bad day". Scrutiny has also focused on a post purported to be from Baker's private Facebook account and shared by BuzzFeed showing him promoting T-shirts describing COVID-19 as an "imported virus" from China.

"We have lost so many lives this past year. We have seen racism and discrimination and a surge of violence against Asian-Americans who are scapegoated because of the pandemic," Sam Park, a local representative of the Asian-American community, told AFP in Atlanta. "It shocks the conscience," he said of the attacks. President Joe Biden, who spoke out last week against the spike in anti-Asian violence, once again called it "very troublesome"—while stressing that motivation in the Atlanta shootings had yet to be determined.

Eight counts of murder

Tuesday's rampage began with an attack at Young's Asian Massage in Acworth, an Atlanta sub-

urb, where four of the victims were killed and a man was wounded. Police said four women were subsequently killed in attacks on two neighboring spas in the northeast of Atlanta. In the initial attack, the county sheriff's department has charged Long with four counts of murder and one count of aggravated assault.

He was also charged with four counts of murder relating to the double Atlanta attack, the city's police department announced. Authorities arrested Long after tracking his phone following a brief pursuit about 150 miles (240 kilometers) from Atlanta, officials said. After he was detained, "he made a comment... that he was headed to Florida and that he was going to do similar acts in that state," Baker said, adding that Long wanted to target "some type of porn industry."

Cherokee County Sheriff Frank Reynolds said Acworth, a normally quiet commuter community, had experienced few murders and Tuesday's violence was "a shock to all of us."

"This is the hardest thing I've ever, ever in my whole life, had to deal with," Margaret Rushing, mother of Delaina Ashley Yaun, one of the victims of the shootings, told AFP.—AFP

Asian community angry, stunned after spa killings

ATLANTA: Sadness, anger and fear were coursing on Wednesday through Stephanie Cho, a day after a gunman's attack on spas in the Atlanta area killed eight people—most of whom were Asian women. Police have said suspect Robert Aaron Long, a 21-year-old white man, has so far denied a racist motive for the three shootings in the southern US state of Georgia.

But Cho, the executive director of advocacy group Asian Americans Advancing Justice—Atlanta, fiercely disagreed. "White supremacy is literally killing us," she said amid a spike in violence

targeting Asian-Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Violence against Asian communities has been under the radar... for many years," she said adding that despite her pain over the shootings, she also feels "resilience."

Bouquets of flowers were laid Wednesday in front of the doors of two of the targeted spas, located across the street from each other in northeast Atlanta, where four of the victims were killed and one man wounded. At Aromatherapy Spa, where one woman was killed, the "Open" and "Welcome" signs were still lit.

And at Gold Spa, in a brick building across the street where three women were killed, a scrolling marquee still advertised jacuzzi and sauna services—available seven days a week.

It was at another spa, Young's Asian Massage, in an Atlanta suburb, that four other people were killed and two wounded in a shooting only hours earlier.—AFP



WASHINGTON: Activists participate in a vigil in response to the Atlanta spa shootings Wednesday in the Chinatown area of Washington, DC.—AFP

China to put two Canadians on trial in coming days

OTTAWA: China will put two Canadians on trial within days following their arrests more than two years ago in apparent retaliation for the detention of a top Huawei executive, the Canadian government said Wednesday. Relations between Beijing and Ottawa have plunged since China detained former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor in 2018 — days after the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver on fraud charges. Charges against the two Canadians—who have been accused of espionage—are widely perceived in the West as retaliation for Meng's arrest, although China has denied this.

Spavor and Kovrig are scheduled to go on trial today and Monday respectively, Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said in a statement, saying Ottawa's Beijing embassy had been notified.

Garneau expressed concern about them going to trial now, renewing objections to their "arbitrary detentions" and saying Ottawa "remains deeply troubled by the lack of transparency surrounding these proceedings." Canadian officials, he added, have demanded immediate consular access to the two men and asked to attend the trials.

Spavor is being held in Dandong while Kovrig was jailed in Beijing. China's judicial system convicts most people who stand trial and the two men face up to life in prison if found guilty of "espionage" and "providing state secrets". Their court dates come as an extradition hearing for Meng enters its final months. It is scheduled to wrap up in May, barring appeals. Meng was arrested on a US

International

Biden warns US likely to miss deadline to exit Afghanistan

Taliban warn of consequences if US does not stick to timetable

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden has said that it would be “tough” to meet the deadline to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan by May 1, as agreed with the Taliban in a deal secured under Donald Trump. The Taliban insurgents have largely stuck to a promise not to attack US or other foreign troops since the agreement was struck in February last year, but they say the date to end America’s longest war is inflexible.

“Could happen, but it is tough,” Biden said when asked about the May 1 deadline in a TV interview broadcast on Wednesday. “I’m in the process of making that decision now.” The Taliban quickly reacted to Biden’s comments, with a spokesman telling AFP there would be “consequences” if the United States did not stick to the agreed timetable—further raising pressure on the fragile peace process.

Biden also took a direct swipe at Trump’s Afghanistan policy, saying it “was not a very solidly negotiated deal” that the then-president oversaw. “The failure to have an orderly transition from the Trump presidency to my presidency... has cost me time and consequences. That’s one of the issues we’re talking about now, in terms of Afghanistan,” he added.

The United States is supposed to pull out all its troops by May 1 in an agreement that saw the Tale-

ban agree to peace talks with the Afghan administration of President Ashraf Ghani. Taliban power-sharing? The insurgents also vowed not to allow territory to be used by “terrorists”—the original goal of the US invasion following the September 11, 2001 attacks. But the supposed peace talks held in Qatar since September have made little progress. Washington wants to jump-start the process and get the Taliban and Afghan government to agree to some form of power-sharing.

Major urban centers in Afghanistan are in the grip of a worsening terror campaign in the form of deadly attacks targeting politicians, civil servants, academics, rights activists and journalists.

The Taliban deny all responsibility but the government says they are to blame—either directly, or by using proxies. As the May deadline looms closer, Russia yesterday is to host a conference featuring high-level delegations from the Taliban and Afghan government—as well from the United States, Pakistan and China. At the talks, the insurgents will be led by the Taliban’s co-founder and deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, while the Afghan government side is headed by former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah.

Pakistan, which holds the most outside influence over the Taliban, is represented by veteran diplomat

Mohammed Sadiq, while the US sent long-time Afghan envoy Zalmay Khalilzad.

The United Nations, which is not participating in the Moscow talks, meanwhile announced that Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had nomination a new personal envoy, Jean Arnault, to work for peace in Afghanistan. Analysts suggest a face-saving compromise on the US withdrawal could be hashed out, with Washington saying it has met its obligations while leaving some US experts attached to Afghan forces in advisory roles.

A complete exit of US troops—given the vital air cover provided to Afghan ground forces—would further loosen Kabul’s tenuous grip on the countryside. Trump, who dubbed the conflict America’s “endless war,” cut troop numbers during his final days in office to 2,500 — their lowest figure since the start of operations 20 years ago. Afghanistan has been engulfed by a two-decade insurgency by the Taliban since the Islamist militants were ousted by a US-led invasion in 2001 for harboring the Al-Qaeda terror network. — AFP



YANGON: Protesters test out a large slingshot in Yangon as security forces continued a crackdown on demonstrations against the military coup. — AFP

Australia sees first population drop since World War I

SYDNEY: Australia’s population has declined for the first time in more than a century as pandemic-induced border closures stemmed the flow of overseas migrants, according to figures released yesterday. The Australian Bureau of Statistics said the population grew by less than one percent in the year to September 2020, and actually declined in the last recorded quarter.

“The last time we saw population decline was the year to December 1916, during World War I,” said the bureau’s demography director, Phil Browning. For centuries, Australia’s economic growth has been built on mining and agriculture and fuelled by several waves of mass migration from Europe, Asia and beyond.

But the country, the world’s largest island with only 25.7 million people, effectively sealed itself off from the rest of the world at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The measures—coupled with aggressive coronavirus testing, tracing and snap lockdowns—have limited Covid-19 infections and allowed the economy to open up with limited restrictions. “Decreases to overseas migration have been observed over the last two quarters,” Browning said. “For this most recent quarter, the decrease was not outweighed by natural increase causing a small decline in population.” Net overseas migration stood at 85,100 in the year to September, far fewer than the number of tourists who typically arrive to Australia each week.—AFP

Suu Kyi faces new corruption charges from junta

YANGON: Myanmar’s ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi will be hit with fresh corruption charges from the country’s military junta, a decision slammed by her lawyer as “groundless and illogical” yesterday.

The new military regime has already issued several criminal charges against the Nobel laureate since she was detained alongside top political allies last month, including owning unlicensed walkie-talkies and violating coronavirus restrictions. On Wednesday night, military broadcaster Myawady aired a video of a Myanmar businessman confessing to giving her a total of \$550,000 over several years.

Maung Weik said he had donated money to senior government figures for the good of his business. “Aung San Suu Kyi committed corruption and (authorities) are preparing to charge her according to anti-corruption law,” an announcer said during the broadcast. This is not the first time corruption allegations have been lodged against her. Last week a junta spokesman said a now-detained chief minister had admitted to giving her \$600,000 and more than 10 kilograms (22 pounds) of gold bars.

“Those accusations are groundless and illogical,” Suu Kyi’s lawyer Khin Maung Zaw told AFP. “Aung San Suu Kyi may have her defects... but bribery and corruption are not her traits,” he said, adding that most people in Myanmar will not believe the allegations. —AFP



KABUL: Onlookers are seen near a damaged vehicle after a blast in Kabul yesterday. — AFP

Helicopter crash kills 9 in central Afghanistan

KABUL: At least nine people were killed when a military helicopter crashed in central Afghanistan, the defense ministry said yesterday. The crash happened on Wednesday night in a volatile district in Wardak province, where Afghan forces and local militias have bitterly fought.

“As a result of the incident, four crew members and five security forces” were killed, the MoD said in a statement. “The ministry of defense is investi-

gating the cause of the crash.” Mohibullah Sharifi, the spokesman for the Wardak provincial governor, confirmed the helicopter crash, but did not provide further details. Helicopter crashes are common in Afghanistan either due to technical problems or militant attacks.

In October last year, nine members of the Afghan military were killed when two army helicopters collided while transporting wounded soldiers in southern Helmand province. The Afghan government has been battling a surge in violence across the country blamed on the Taliban, despite supposed peace talks launched between the two sides last year. In the Afghan capital, four people were killed and nine others were wounded in a blast targeting a bus in east Kabul yesterday, police said. — AFP

International

Hong Kong defends practice of restraining some virus babies

Criticism grows over treatment of families under HK's strict anti-virus measures

HONG KONG: Hong Kong health authorities have defended the practice of physically restraining some babies and children in coronavirus isolation wards after criticism built over the treatment of families under the city's strict anti-virus measures.

Despite being one of the most densely packed cities in the world, Hong Kong has kept infections low thanks to some of the most stringent quarantine measures in the world, recording some 11,000 infections and 200 deaths since the pandemic began. Anyone who tests positive for the coronavirus is taken to isolation wards while those deemed "close contacts" are sent to mandatory government quarantine camps.

The measures have helped curb infections and have been in place for much of the past year, largely without complaint when cases were concentrated in low-income districts. But there has been growing pushback in recent weeks after an outbreak hit neighborhoods favored by wealthier and more politically connected-white-collar locals and foreigners. Complaints include parents being separated from their children, mothers ordered not to breastfeed babies and some infants tied to beds to stop them moving around.

The pressure has led to a series of statements this week from health authorities defending their policies, including the use of restraints. "Generally speaking, the hospital will only consider the application of physical restraint on paediatric patients for the safety and well-being of the patient," the Hospital Authority said in a statement late Wednesday. "Appropriate and prior consent will be sought from the parents or guardians," it added.

The Hospital Authority added parents who test negative would usually be allowed to accompany



HONG KONG: A worker wearing PPE guards the entrance of HSBC bank main Hong Kong office after it was closed until further notice after three people tested positive for COVID-19 amid a recent wave of infections among the city's business and expatriate community in Hong Kong.— AFP

infected children on isolation wards if there is space.

'Tyranny of the urgent'

In recent days, the consulates of Switzerland, Britain and the United States have expressed concerns over how Hong Kong's tough anti-virus measures were impacting families, including worries that parents had about being separated from children. The US consulate temporarily closed ear-

lier this week after two staff tested positive and were sent to an isolation ward.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam confirmed special permission had been granted to allow their children to join them instead of being sent into quarantine. Hong Kong's treatment of mothers during the pandemic has previously come under scrutiny. Last year, a group of expecting parents fought a successful campaign to allow partners into the delivery room after they were banned during a spike in coronavirus cases.

World Health Organization guidelines recommend birth partners be present and that infected mothers continue breastfeeding their babies. While authorities relented on birth partners, Hong Kong continues to tell mothers not to breastfeed on isolation wards.

"This is what we call the tyranny of the urgent—there is so much pressure to act quickly and aggressively in the context of public health events that other factors tend to get sidelined," Karen Grepin, a health policy expert at the University of Hong Kong who is currently studying how the pandemic impacts different genders, said. "Responding to a pandemic is more of a marathon than a sprint and thus we need to find ways of balancing the very important public health rationale of interventions with their gendered, economic, and social effects," she added.

Authorities have defended the use of quarantine camps arguing Hong Kong's notoriously cramped apartments are too small for families to self-isolate safely. They add that parents or guardians are usually allowed to accompany minors in camps and that officials try to meet the requirements of families on site.— AFP

Indonesian women pressed to wear headscarves

JAKARTA: Siti Rohani remembers the day her teenaged daughter came home in tears after being bullied for not wearing a hair-covering hijab at her Indonesian school. The world's biggest Muslim majority country recognizes six official religions and has pockets of Christians, Hindus and other minorities living around the nation.

But the growing strength of religious conservatism in recent years has fuelled fears of rising intolerance—a force also directed against Muslims like Rohani and her family. Students at her daughter's school taunted her with Koranic verses and said her parents would go to hell unless she wore Islamic garments.

"She was begging to drop out of school and move to another one because she was picked on by her peers and older students," Rohani, a mother of four, said. Schoolgirls, female teachers and civil servants across Indonesia are often forced or pressured to wear Islamic head cover-



SURABAYA: This picture taken on March 17, 2021 shows women wearing hijabs shopping at a market in Surabaya.— AFP

ings, according to a report published yesterday by Human Rights Watch (HRW). The pressure extends to Christians and other non-Muslim minorities and has "increased substantially in recent years", the study said.

'Tip of the iceberg'

Many of the nearly 300,000 state schools around Indonesia require Muslim girls to wear hijab starting in primary school, backed by dozens of ordinances issued at the local or provincial level, according to the report. The issue made

headlines earlier this year after a young Christian pupil in Sumatra was pressured to cover up, triggering a backlash.

The student refused and her parents later secretly recorded a meeting with an official who insisted that school rules required all girls to wear hijab, regardless of their religion. That prompted the education ministry last month to ban state schools from forcing any female student—Muslim or non-Muslim—to wear headscarves, and threaten to pull government funding for non-compliance.—AFP

PNG ramps up virus curbs as hospitals overwhelmed

PORT MORESBY, Papua New Guinea: Papua New Guinea will shut schools, limit non-essential movement and make mask-wearing mandatory, the country's pandemic controller told AFP yesterday, to stem a surge in COVID-19 cases overwhelming local hospitals.

"All the schools in the country will shut down at the end of this week following a sharp increase" in cases, Pandemic Controller David Manning said. In the capital Port Moresby, people will be asked not to leave home except for "medical, employment and business purposes" and shops will have to close by 8pm.

The government is expected to announce the measures to the public later yesterday and a series of local lockdowns could also be introduced. Papua New Guinea shut its borders last year and dodged the worst of the pandemic, but has reported well over 1,000 cases in the last month alone.

On Tuesday the country reported a record 128 new cases but experts fear transmission is now widespread, as testing levels remain extraordinarily low. All the provinces of the impoverished South Pacific nation of nine million are "currently experiencing COVID-19 surges," Manning said.

There are ominous signs the surge is overwhelming the country's perennially strained health sector, which is already contending with polio, drug-resistant tuberculosis and HIV/Aids. Doctors told AFP yesterday that several major facilities had been forced to close or reduce capacity because staff had tested positive for the virus.


Port Moresby General Hospital CEO Paki Molumi said around 70 percent of staff had tested positive while Gerehu Hospital, the capital's second referral hospital, has been closed. Health minister Jelta Wong told AFP on Wednesday the wave will "spike" further in coming weeks, calling on drug-maker AstraZeneca to urgently divert one million vaccine doses bought by Australia to staunch the looming crisis.

The first deliveries of 8,000 vaccines for frontline workers are expected to arrive from Australia on Monday. "The community transmission is out there, and I'm pretty sure that we haven't detected a lot of it," Wong admitted. "But we're running at full capacity just to ensure that we do get to all places."—AFP

Friday Times Lifestyle

FRIDAY, MARCH 19, 2021

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A picture taken on Tuesday shows a view of Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest tower, during a light show in Dubai. — AFP

**Luxury oasis draws elite
Saudis locked in by pandemic**

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Visitors relax in a lounge area beneath palm trees at the "Riyadh Oasis", a luxury retreat in the Thumamah desert on the outskirts of the Saudi capital. —AFP photos



Visitors walk by a water canal amid rolling dunes at the "Riyadh Oasis".

Luxury oasis draws elite Saudis locked in by pandemic



A picture shows a lounge area amid rolling dunes at the "Riyadh Oasis".



Women walk amid dunes at the "Riyadh Oasis".

Well-heeled Saudis frolic in an artificial oasis built on salmon-coloured dunes, splashing the cash after a year-long pandemic lock-in that dovetails with efforts to discourage citizens from splurging overseas. Coronavirus hobbled Saudi Arabia's plans to boost tourism and entertainment, new sectors central to a strategy to diversify the oil-reliant economy. But cushioning the blow is a lucrative market of Saudis forced to spend their money at home. The Riyadh Oasis—a high-end desert retreat with palm-fringed pools, pop-up restaurants and luxury tents—seeks to lure Saudi high-rollers barred since the start of the pandemic from their usual overseas escapades, amid some of the world's most stringent coronavirus measures.

The sprawling retreat, billed as a "five-star winter sanctuary", marks the latest government attempt to reverse a decades-old trend of Saudis spending billions of dollars abroad annually. "Water, palms, sand," said a Saudi guide, ushering in guests arriving at the retreat on the outskirts of Riyadh, in a fleet of luxury cars, from Bentleys to Maseratis. "The oasis has everything." Unveiled in mid-January for a three-month season, the oasis—whose pricey tickets have spurred resentment among the less affluent—is the first in a series of entertainment offerings since the pandemic. "The oasis caters to Saudi HNWs (high net worth individuals), targeting those who could not visit the US or Europe for their annual jaunts," a Riyadh-based banker told AFP.

Travel ban

For decades, citizens of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf petro-states were seen as top-spending clientele in Europe, largely because of a dearth of entertainment options at home. Saudi Arabia's annual outbound tourism market is expected to soar to more than \$43 billion by 2025, according to the Dublin-based group Research and Markets. Some \$18.7 billion was spent on tourism overseas in 2019, according to a central bank report. The government, battling a pandemic-triggered economic contraction, seeks a slice of that revenue. Saudi Arabia recently announced it was extending a ban on overseas travel for its citizens from March 31 to May 17.

The government attributed the decision to a delay in the arrival of coronavirus vaccines in the kingdom, which has reported over 383,000 infections and more than 6,500 deaths. But the move intensified public speculation the ban was aimed at shoring up the economy by boosting domestic spending. Official data in recent months has shown a spike in domestic tourism and hotel reservations. But the bonanza may be short-lived.

A customer survey this month, by the tourism company Almosafer, said over 80 percent of Saudis plan to travel abroad within six months of the lifting of travel restrictions. Still, the top crude exporter, which has identified leisure and tourism as the main engines of economic reform, is pushing a long-term strategy. Alongside music festivals and sporting events, hundreds of movie the-

Lifestyle | Feature

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A woman checks her phone at the “Riyadh Oasis”.



Visitors walk beneath palm trees at the “Riyadh Oasis”.



Visitors take in the views from a walkway at the “Riyadh Oasis”.



A picture shows a lounge area amid rolling dunes at the “Riyadh Oasis”.



Light reflects on rolling dunes surrounding the “Riyadh Oasis”.

atres are planned after a decades-old ban on cinemas was lifted in 2018.

‘Targets the top cream’

The kingdom is also building a Walt Disney-style entertainment city known as Qiddiya, and a luxury resort destination along the Red Sea—both worth hundreds of billions of dollars. “These developments should encourage more local spending,” said a 2019 report by the global consulting firm McKinsey. “Currently, more than 50 percent of Saudi spending on leisure and entertainment is outside the kingdom, with categories such as luxury nearing 70 percent.” But the steep cost of entertainment offerings has stirred public resentment, especially after a tripling of value-added tax last year dented household savings. The daily rent of the tented “glamps” at the oasis cost upwards of 13,000 riyals (\$3,500). “The glamps cost nearly a month’s salary for me,” one Saudi media worker told AFP, declining to be named.

“The joke in my office is; this caters to a class of people who won’t use toilet paper unless it’s made from real silk. It targets the top cream, the top one percent.” Adel Alrajab, chief executive of Seven Experience, one of the companies that helped set up the Riyadh Oasis, acknowledged it was “not targeting everyone”. “You don’t expect the masses to go to five- or six-star hotels,” he told AFP. In 2019, Turki al-Sheikh, the head of the kingdom’s General Entertainment Authority courted criticism after he suggested Saudis struggling financially could take on credit card debt to pay for entertainment activities. “This ‘only for the rich’ approach could backfire,” a Gulf-based Western official told AFP. “(The kingdom) will have to find a balance between pricing and ensuring wider Saudi participation.”—FP



Men take in views from a walkway at the “Riyadh Oasis”.



Visitors walk by a water canal beneath palm trees at the “Riyadh Oasis”.



Picture shows a lit tent-shaped unit nestled among the surrounding dunes at night at the “Riyadh Oasis”.



A picture shows a lounge area amid rolling dunes at the “Riyadh Oasis”.

France's Bayeux Tapestry faces first restoration in 150 years

It has stood for over nine centuries as the most celebrated record of the 1066 Norman Conquest of England, its famous images cemented into the mind of every British school child. But for all its enduring power, the 70-metre (230 feet) long Bayeux Tapestry—held at a museum in the northern French town of the same name—is a fragile object suffering from wear-and-tear, including thousands of holes. It will now be restored for the first since 1870, two years after an agreement between Paris and London for the tapestry to be loaned to Britain.

“The tapestry is an old lady who is nearly 1,000 years old, a very, very fine linen canvas embroidered with wool which now shows multiple signs of damage,” Antoine Verney, the chief curator of the museum, told AFP. “Any handling of the work in its current state can lead to new alterations. This is the main reason for this intervention.”

10,000 holes

The Bayeux Tapestry depicts the events leading up to the Norman Conquest, a pivotal event in English history that transformed the country's language, culture and administration. Believed to have been made a few years after the conquest, it culminates with the defeat by William the Conqueror of Anglo-Saxon monarch Harold at the 1066 Battle of Hastings after the Norman ruler crossed the Channel with an invasion force. Generations of schoolchildren in Britain have learned about the battle through the tapestry and its legendary image of Harold being shot in the eye with a Norman arrow.



In these file photos visitors look at the “Bayeux tapestry” or “Queen Mathilde tapestry” which relates Britain's conquest by William the Conqueror (Guillaume le Conquerant) in 1066, in Bayeux, western France. — AFP



In January 2020, eight textiles experts inspected the tapestry, listed as a “memory of the world” artefact by UNESCO, recording nearly 24,200 stains and 10,000 holes. Repairs carried out over the centuries and “the exceptional dimensions of this work give the illusion of a good general state of conservation” but “the structural state of the canvas and support of the embroidery is very fragile and worrying”, they said in a report. Whether it will

ever make the journey across the Channel to be shown in England largely depends on the tapestry's state of preservation. “It cannot travel until it is restored. But one question remains: Can it travel when it is restored,” asked Verney. For the deputy mayor of Bayeux in charge of tourism, Loic Jamin, after its restoration, it will not be allowed to leave. “The only justification for possibly moving it is to restore it,” he said. —AFP



The enthusiasm came as a restaurant offered an all-you-can-eat sushi meal for customers named “Gui Yu” or “salmon”. — The China Post/Asia News Network

Taiwan pleads with citizens not to change name to ‘Salmon’

A top Taiwanese official issued a plea yesterday for people to stop changing their name to “salmon” after dozens made the unusual move to take advantage of a restaurant promotion. In a phenomenon that has been dubbed “Salmon Chaos” by local media, around 150 mostly young people flocked to government offices in recent days to officially register a change in their name. The cause of this sudden enthusiasm was a chain of sushi restaurants.

Under the two day promotion which ended Thursday, any customer whose ID card contained “Gui Yu”—the Chinese characters for salmon—would be entitled to an all-you-can-eat sushi meal along with five friends. Taiwan allows people to officially change their name up to three times. But Taiwanese officials were not amused. “This kind

of name-change not only wastes time but causes unnecessary paperwork,” deputy interior minister Chen Tsung-yen told reporters as he urged the public to “cherish administrative resources”.

“I hope everyone can be more rational about it,” he added. Local media ran interviews with people who took advantage of the promotion. “I just changed my name this morning to add the characters ‘Bao Cheng Gui Yu’ and we already ate more than Tw\$7,000 (\$235),” a college student surnamed Ma told TVBS news channel in southern Kaohsiung city. Roughly translated, Ma's new moniker means: “Explosive Good Looking Salmon”. “I've changed my first name to salmon and two of my friends also did,” a woman surnamed Tung told SET TV. “We'll just change our names back afterwards.” — AFP

Fat and content: Why plump elephant seals take fewer risks

Fat elephant seals prioritize hiding themselves from predators during their vast, months-long foraging expeditions in the open ocean, while skinny seals need to take more risks until they're nice and plump, a study showed Wednesday. The paper, published in the journal *Science Advances*, is the first to continuously measure changes in behavior relative to body fat, proving decades-old ecological theories about how wild animals balance perils against payoffs.

First author Roxanne Beltran, an assistant professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at UC Santa Cruz, told AFP she had long been fascinated by elephant seals, which assemble on California's beaches in winter to breed, give birth, nurse their young and molt before embarking on their summer journey across the North Pacific Ocean. “It's difficult for us to wrap our minds around what these animals endure during the seven months, 10,000-kilometer (6,000-mile) migrations because it's so fundamentally different from what we do,” said Beltran. Despite appearances, the sea mammals are tremendous athletes.

During their journey, they dive to depths of 700 meters (2,300 feet) in search of fish and squid, averaging 23 minutes per dive with just two minutes at the surface to breathe. If needed, they can hold their breath for up to two hours. To learn more about what drives the seals' decision making, the researchers outfit-



In this file photo a bull elephant seal rests on the sand at Drakes Beach in Inverness, California. — AFP

ted 71 adult female northern elephant seals with satellite tags and time-depth recorders, logging vast amounts of data between 2004-2012. The team was particularly interested in knowing how the seals split their time between day and night, because they are caught between competing priorities, a dynamic the authors dubbed “lightscapes of fear.”

The sharks and killer whales that hunt them are visual predators, so elephant seals are safer resting at night and in depths where light doesn't penetrate, rather than during the day. At the same time, the night time is a more productive feeding period for elephant seals, when their own prey is closer to the surface. Resting at night therefore means sacrificing prime foraging time. — AFP



In this file photo US director and Marvel Studios President of Production Kevin Feige arrives for the "Spider-Man: Far From Home" World premiere at the TCL Chinese theatre in Hollywood. — AFP photos



In this file photo US-Romanian actor Sebastian Stan (left) and US actor Anthony Mackie speak on stage during the Marvel panel in Hall H of the Convention Center during Comic Con in San Diego, California.

Big-screen Marvel action shifts to Disney+ with 'Falcon and Winter Soldier'

Avengers: Endgame just lost its crown as the biggest box office hit of all time, but the Marvel superhero spectacular still looms large over parent company Disney's plans for the small screen as well as re-opening theaters. The 2019 smash hit-whose \$2.798 billion haul was surpassed by last weekend's Chinese re-release of "Avatar"—was a unique theatrical "event" which concluded the plots of 21 previous, inter-connected films.

Those eagerly anticipated storylines continue today not in theaters but on Disney+ — the streaming platform seen as central to the Mouse House's future—with six-episode series "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier." Marvel Studios chief Kevin Feige is adamant that fans of his studio's explosive superhero antics will not miss out during the pandemic-accelerated shift to the small screen. "We kept saying 'if

we're going to do a series with Falcon and Winter Soldier in it, we need to at least start off with the best action that we've ever seen,'" Feige told a virtual press conference. "And we've seen a lot of cool action with both of them before."

The two characters-known to comic book fans as Sam Wilson and Bucky Barnes—were relatively minor roles in the Marvel films. But as his superhero name suggests, Falcon can fly—thanks to a hi-tech winged jetpack—and the opening sequence of "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier" is a special effects-laden aerial spectacular. "Just because it's on TV, doesn't mean it's not going to be as big as it could possibly be as a movie," added Feige.

'Evolved'

"The Falcon and the Winter Soldier" is in fact the second Marvel show to hit Disney+. It fol-

lows the oddball and quirky yet critically adored "WandaVision," whose place within the franchise's overarching story was cryptic to say the least. But "Falcon"—which was intended to arrive first, before production was derailed by the pandemic and earthquakes in Puerto Rico—follows on more directly from "Endgame," and is overall much more familiar territory for fans of the movies. "It was pretty on par with the films, I felt—actually, even more evolved and intense," said co-star Sebastian Stan of the action sequences, which also used the same stuntmen as the movies. While plot details are under wraps, the pilot sees Wilson (Anthony Mackie) still struggling with the loss of Captain America—who appeared to pass the superhero mantle to him in "Avengers: Endgame," in the form of his iconic shield. — AFP

Amazon to make first Bollywood film

Amazon is diving into Bollywood with its first Hindi-language movie, starring India's highest-paid actor, as it fights for viewers in the huge but crowded market. Bollywood superstar Akshay Kumar will be the lead in the action-adventure flick "Ram Setu", which will be released in cinemas before its streaming debut on Amazon Prime Video, the American tech giant said in a statement Wednesday.

Global streaming platforms, including Netflix, Amazon and Disney's Hotstar, have expanded their presence in the country of 1.3 billion in recent years, including by commissioning local productions featuring Bollywood stars. Streaming services have surged in popularity due to the coronavirus pandemic as locked-down, cinema-loving Indians turned to them for entertainment, with theatres shut for more than six months. Amazon, which has already bet big on India with its core e-commerce business, recently ruffled feathers when it was forced to issue an apology for "Tandav", a drama streamed on Prime.

Politicians from India's ruling party called for the show to be banned for "deliberately mocking Hindu gods" and disrespecting religious sentiments. Streaming TV services are not subject to the country's notoriously fussy censor boards, which regularly cut scenes from movies shown in cinemas and on television. But under contentious new guidelines announced last month, streaming platforms will soon be forced to withdraw content deemed objectionable 36 hours after a complaint.



In this file photo a person poses with a smartphone showing an Amazon logo, in front of a computer screen displaying the home page of Amazon France sales website. — AFP

The furor over "Tandav" and the new rules are already prompting production firms to tone down programs they are making, or even drop them, according to media reports. During his visit to India last year, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos told an audience of Bollywood filmmakers that while Prime Video was doing well in all geographies, "there's nowhere it's doing better than in India". Amazon has not announced a release date for "Ram Setu", which refers to Adam's Bridge, a chain of shoals off southeastern India that was built by an army of monkey warriors, according to Hindu mythology. "I look forward to telling the story of a significant part of Indian heritage, especially for the youth," said Kumar, the highest-paid Indian actor in the world according to Forbes' 2020 rankings. "I am happy that, with Amazon Prime Video, the story will cut across geographies and strike a chord with viewers across the world." — AFP

Longtime Met Opera maestro James Levine dead at 77

James Levine, the influential conductor of New York's Metropolitan Opera who was ousted in disgrace over sexual abuse accusations, has died, his doctor said Wednesday. He was 77 years old. Levine's doctor Len Horovitz told AFP the one-time classical music world luminary "died March 9 in Palm Springs of natural causes," confirming news first reported in The New York Times. The Met Opera sacked its maestro of four decades in March 2018 after finding "credible evidence" that he sexually abused younger musicians.

Levine was one of the most prominent artists to see his career ended in the #MeToo era, a moment of reckoning especially in the world of media and entertainment, which was first triggered by furor over alleged abuse by Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. The conductor was accused of preying on a string of vulnerable music students when he was a charismatic visiting in-



In this file photo US conductor James Levine and the Boston Symphony Orchestra perform Hector Berlioz's "Damnation of Faust", during a rehearsal at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. — AFP

structor, with most cases dating back decades ago. It marked a spectacular fall from grace for Levine, who became the Met's principal conductor in 1973 and music director in 1976, guiding it for more than 40 years.

Born in Cincinnati on June 23, 1943, Levine took up the piano at age four. As an accomplished teenager he enrolled in the prestigious Juilliard School's graduate division, studying conducting under Jean Morel and receiving piano tutelage from Rosina Lhevinne. He spent six years with the Cleveland Orchestra, first as an apprentice and later as an assistant conductor, developing a strong understanding of the inner workings of orchestration. A legend in the opera world as the Met sought a wider public audience, Levine notably conducted some of the "Three Tenors" concerts that brought together Placido Domingo, Jose Carreras and Luciano Pavarotti. But in his later years a string of health issues hamstrung Levine. In 2006 he fell off the Boston Symphony Orchestra stage, necessitating rotator cuff surgery. — AFP



In this picture fans of Universal Studio Japan pose at the entrance of the Super Nintendo World, during a media preview of the theme park in Osaka. — AFP photos

Long-awaited 'SUPER MARIO' theme park opens in Japan

Here we go! After months of pandemic delays, Nintendo's first ever theme park, featuring a "Mario Kart" ride in a real-life Bowser's Castle, opened in Japan yesterday to delighted fans. The attraction, whose bright, block-like surroundings are straight out of the classic "Super Mario" games, is part of the existing Universal Studios Japan amusement

park in the western city of Osaka. "We perfectly recreated the world of the game.... You'll find life-sized piranha plants and Bowser, and you'll see what it is like to be Mario," said Ayumu Yamamoto, USJ's marketing communication manager.



This picture shows Super Mario Bros products during a media preview of the Super Nintendo World.



A restaurant staff member holds a sign reminding visitors of preventative measures in place against the COVID-19 coronavirus during a media preview.



This picture shows Peach's Castle.



A staff member stands by at a souvenir shop in Super Nintendo World.

A fan looks on at “Koopa Troopa POWER Punch”.

“It took almost a year longer than we had expected to open this place, and we are really glad,” he told reporters at a preview on Wednesday. The new zone called “Super Nintendo World” had originally been expected to draw big crowds last year ahead of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, which was also postponed by the coronavirus. But its launch was pushed back to February, and then delayed again as Japan’s government declared a state of emergency in early 2021 to curb spiking cases. Music from the popular Mario games plays throughout the park and a smartphone-linked wristband allows visitors to collect virtual coins by punching blocks, just like the Italian plumber.

Augmented reality goggles attached to a plastic red visor are used in the “Mario

Kart” ride, one of the park’s main draws that promises to bring the racing game to life. The ride follows a track around the foreboding castle of Mario’s enemy Bowser, an evil turtle, but each seat has a steering wheel and players can collect and shoot items at opponents. The zone also boasts a ride based on the cute green dinosaur Yoshi, a Peach’s castle, Mario-themed restaurants and lifesize characters from the Mushroom Kingdom. Fans told AFP they were thrilled about the much-anticipated opening of the park, which cost more than 60 billion yen (\$550 million), according to USJ. “I’ve been playing Mario since I was a boy. I didn’t expect that I could enter the world of Mario, so I’m very excited,” said Hiroki Kono, a 19-year-old university student in Osaka.



Fans of Universal Studios Japan wear themed augmented reality goggles for the “Mario Kart” ride during a media preview.



A general view of the Super Nintendo World.



Fans of Universal Studio Japan visit Super Nintendo World.

Lifestyle | Feature



A picture shows a signage at a souvenir shop in Super Nintendo World.



A picture shows "Power Up Band", the interactive device for visitors to play with at Super Nintendo World.

'Waited for this day'

Office worker Rei Higashimoto, 25, was also delighted about the launch. "I have an annual pass, so I knew this Mario world was being created, and I have waited from one year ago for this day to come," she said. Similar areas are planned at Universal Studios parks in Orlando and Hollywood. The first "Super Mario Bros" game came out in 1985 for Nintendo's NES console. The platform game, in which Mario runs and jumps past obstacles to collect coins and save Princess Peach from the evil Koopa turtles, was based on the "Mario Bros" arcade game released earlier. Since then, Mario has appeared in myriad formats including games featuring racing, football and golf.

Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator of "Super Mario Bros", took a tour of the park in a promotional video released in December. "At last, it's complete! It makes a big impression, seeing the park in real life," said Miyamoto, describing himself as Mario's "Dad" as he popped out of a giant green pipe. "There are smaller activities like the



coin block, as well as bigger ones... If you manage to get three keys from various activities, you can take on the final activity—a battle with Bowser Jr." "I'm very excited for all of you to experience the park on your own," he added. — AFP

A fan interacts with items at "Piranha Plant Nap Mishap".



A general view of the Super Nintendo World.

Disneyland in California to reopen April 30

Disneyland will reopen April 30 after more than a year of closure as the COVID-19 pandemic eases its grip on California, the company announced Wednesday. Disneyland Park—the world’s second-most visited theme park—and neighboring Disney California Adventure Park will allow visitors at “significantly limited” capacity. “The day all of us have long been waiting for is almost here,” said Disneyland Resort president Ken Potrock in a statement.

“We’re excited to have more than 10,000 cast members returning to work as we get ready to welcome our guests back to this happy place.” Members of the local community will be the first guests allowed back to Disneyland, before opening to all California residents with advance reservations, and face coverings will be mandatory, the statement added. California suffered a severe winter COVID-19 outbreak, but case numbers have plummeted in recent weeks, as a vaccination roll-out gathers pace.

The mega-attraction near Los Angeles was unable to reopen last summer even while other Disney resorts did so worldwide—the result of a highly public row with California officials and unions. Disney partly blamed California restrictions for 32,000 job losses last year, and has ramped up pressure on Governor Gavin Newsom, who is facing a recall campaign over his handling of the pandemic. Earlier this month California relaxed reopening rules to permit theme parks to reopen April 1, but CEO Bob Chapek said it would take a few extra weeks to prepare staff to reopen with pandemic safety measures. At least one on-site hotel plans to reopen a day earlier, on April 29. Last week, Disneyland Paris said it will not be able to reopen as planned on April 2 because of France’s COVID-19 crisis.— AFP



In this file photo visitors and staff wearing protective face masks, walk down the Main Street of Disneyland Paris in Marne-la-Vallée, near Paris.— AFP



People stand by a giant replica of the Razor Crest.

STAR WARS FANS BUILD MANDALORIAN SPACESHIP IN SIBERIA



People stand by a giant replica of the Razor Crest, a gunship from the Star Wars spinoff series “The Mandalorian” used by the hit TV show’s mysterious bounty hunter to roam the galaxy’s outer reaches, in a park of the eastern Siberian city of Yakutsk.



A man wearing a costume of the Star Wars protagonist Din Djarin poses in front of a giant replica of the Razor Crest.— AFP photos

Star Wars fans in Russia have built a giant replica of a spaceship from the spinoff series “The Mandalorian” and installed it in a park in one of the world’s coldest cities. The model of the Razor Crest—a gunship used by the hit TV show’s mysterious bounty hunter to roam the galaxy’s outer reaches—now sits on a snow-covered hill in a park in the eastern Siberian city of Yakutsk. “The ship weighs more than a ton,” Ayaal Fyodorov, 28, told AFP, adding that it had taken him and his cosplayer friends around three months to build it. The sci-fi vessel, which stands four meters (13 feet) tall, has been made from fibreboard, metal and plastic foam.

The makers sought to meticulously recreate the spacecraft’s interior and the vessel even has a lowering ramp and a seat for Baby Yoda, a small creature with whom the protagonist, Din Djarin, forms an unlikely bond. Fyodorov said he and his friends were “shocked” to see the ship getting destroyed in the series’ second season. “We were very much motivated to make it. As if we were inside the TV series and rebuilding the ship,” Fyodorov said. He estimated the project cost more than 750,000 rubles (\$10,200). Fyodorov first used his savings, then sold his car, then asked ordinary Russians and companies to pitch in. He is proud of the result. “This is the only such cosplay ship in the world,” he said, standing next to his creation.

The space vessel has become a major point of attraction for locals and tourists alike and has won praise from experts in a region known for its booming film industry. “Honestly, I did not expect this to turn out so well,” said Semyon Shishigin, head of Taragai Cinema, a local film studio, who recently brought his family to the park to look at the ship. “I see that there are lots of locals here, and most of them came to see the ship. That’s just fantastic!”— AFP

Kids Page

Word Search

DIRECTIONS:
Find and circle the vocabulary words in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.

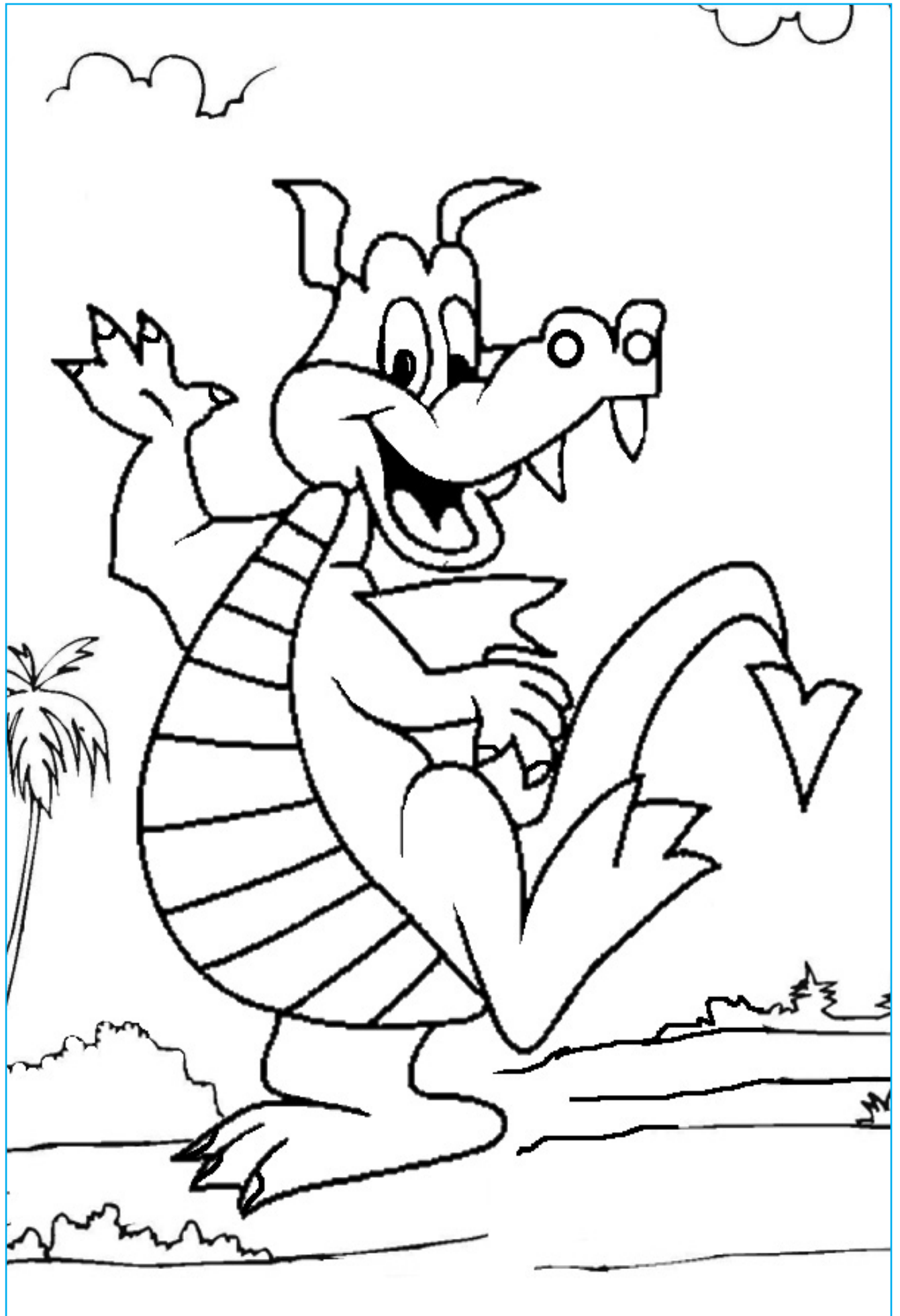
My Favorite Hobby
Word Search



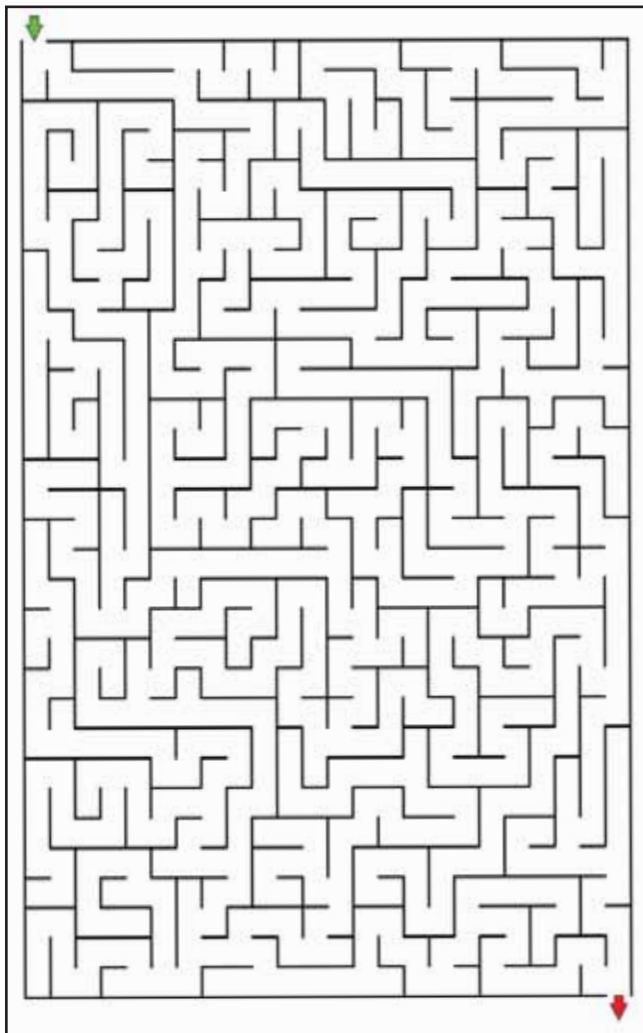
- BICYCLING
- BOATING
- BOWLING
- CAMPING
- COOKING
- CRAFTS
- DANCING
- ENTERTAINING
- FISHING
- GARDENING
- GOLF
- HIKING
- HORSEBACK RIDING
- HUNTING
- MOVIES
- MUSIC
- PAINTING
- PLAYING CARDS
- READING
- RUNNING
- SEWING
- SHOPPING
- SKIING
- SPORTS
- SWIMMING
- TENNIS
- THEATER
- TRAVELING
- WALKING
- WRITING



Color It



Kids Mazes



Find the way



Word Scramble

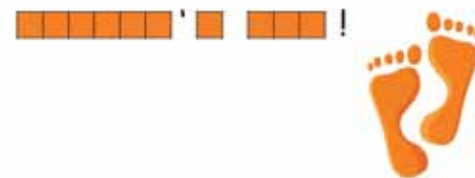


Summer Days Word Scramble

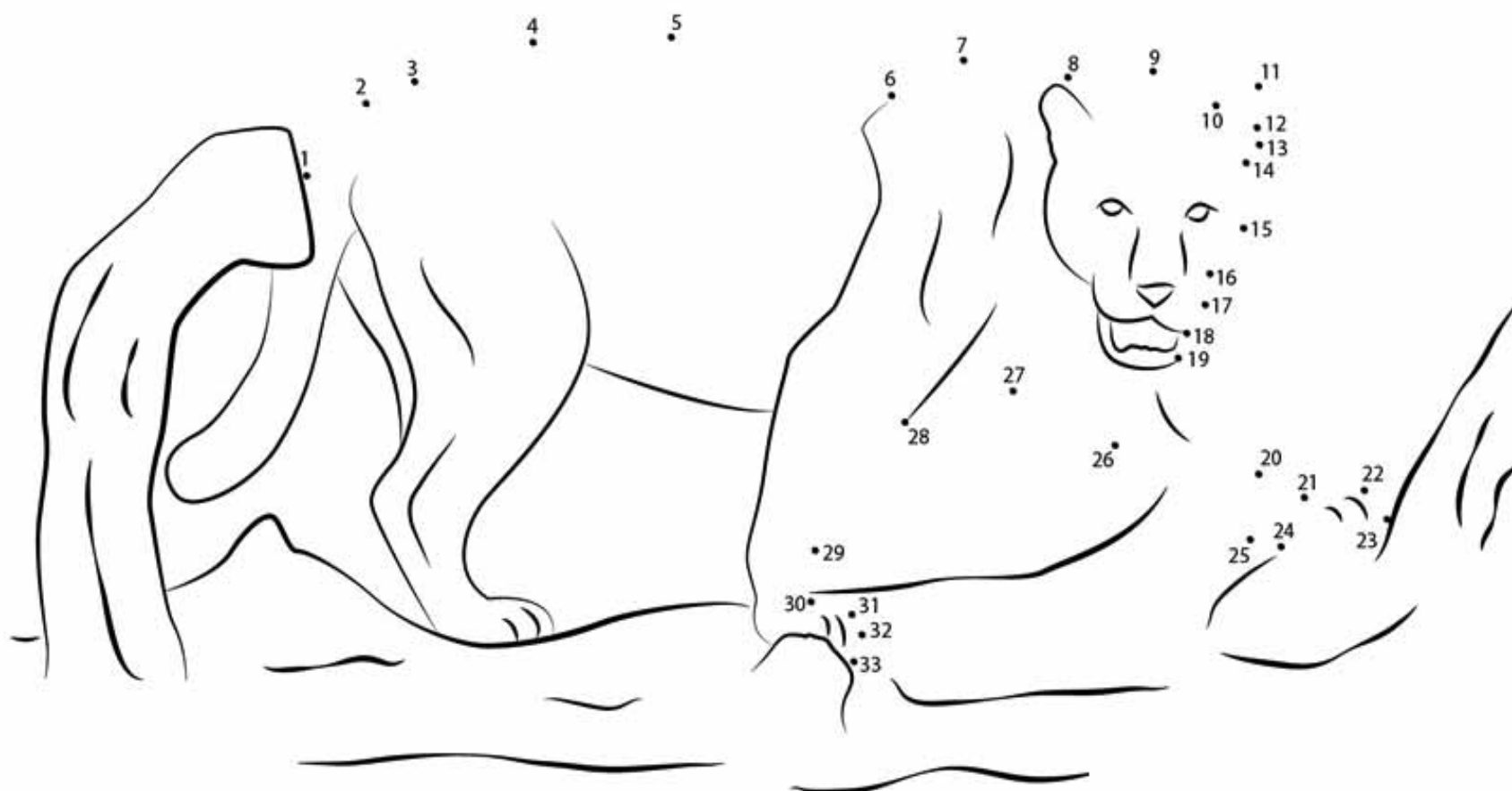
Unscramble the words, then use the highlighted letters to figure out the secret message.

Hint: The secret message is scrambled too.

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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Rather hot with light to moderate freshening later on variable wind to north westerly wind with speed of 12 - 40 km/h with a chance for rising dust over open areas later on and some scattered clouds will appear.

BY NIGHT: Rather cold with light to moderate freshening at times north westerly wind with speed of 15 - 45 km/h with a chance for rising dust and some scattered clouds will appear.

WEATHER WARNING	No Current Warnings	
STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.
KUWAIT CITY	30 °C	20 °C
KUWAIT AIRPORT	33 °C	18 °C
ABDALY	35 °C	17 °C
BUBYAN	- °C	- °C
JAHRA	36 °C	19 °C
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C
SALMIYAH	25 °C	19 °C
AHMADI	26 °C	20 °C
NUWAISIB	36 °C	18 °C
WAFRA	37 °C	16 °C
SALMY	37 °C	20 °C

SFC. CHART	18/03/2021 0000 UTC
MSL Analysis (hPa) Valid 0000 UTC 18 MAR 2021	

4 DAYS FORECAST

DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Friday	03/19	Warm with a chance for rising dust and some scattered clouds will appear	28 °C	19 °C	NW	10 - 42 km/h
Saturday	03/20	Warm with a chance for rising dust over open areas	28 °C	18 °C	NW	12 - 42 km/h
Sunday	03/21	Rather hot	30 °C	17 °C	NW-VRB	08 - 28 km/h
Monday	03/22	Rather hot and some scattered clouds will appear	30 °C	19 °C	VRB-SE	08 - 28 km/h

PRAYER TIMES

Fajr	04:36
Sunrise	05:55
Zuhr	11:56
Asr	15:23
Sunset	17:58
Isha	19:15

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

MAX. Temp.	31 °C
MIN. Temp.	20 °C
MAX. RH	66 %
MIN. RH	22 %
MAX. Wind	SE 39 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

Business

FRIDAY, MARCH 19, 2021

34 Yemeni women use solar to light up homes, one village at a time



35 Britain unveils shake-up of its scandal-hit accounting sector



36 From poaching to avocados, Kenya elephants face threat



BEIJING: Chinese authorities yesterday said they had summoned 11 tech companies including Tencent, Alibaba and TikTok owner ByteDance for talks on “deep fakes” and internet security, as regulators try to reel in the country’s runaway digital sector.

China summons 11 technology giants

Regulators to question firms over ‘deep fakes’ and Internet security

BEIJING: Chinese authorities yesterday said they had summoned 11 tech companies including Tencent, Alibaba and TikTok owner ByteDance for talks on “deep fakes” and internet security, as regulators try to reel in the country’s runaway digital sector.

The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) said talks concerned “voice software that has yet to undergo safety assessment procedures”, as well as the application of “deep fake” technology. It also said companies should report to the government plans to add new functions that “have the ability to mobilize society”. China has in recent months taken a tough line on the country’s fast-growing tech firms, with 12 companies hit with fines last week for allegedly flouting monopoly rules. Authorities last year halted a record \$34 billion initial public offering by Alibaba fintech subsidiary Ant Group.

They called in its billionaire founder Jack Ma and then opened an investigation into Alibaba business practices deemed anti-competitive. The latest summoning of big tech also involves companies such as smartphone maker Xiaomi, TikTok rival Kuaishou, and music streaming service NetEase

Cloud Music, the CAC said.

The aim is to ensure they comply with regulations, carry out safety assessments, and take “effective rectification measures” if potential hazards are found. In 2019, China issued rules banning on-line video and audio providers from using artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality technologies to produce “fake news”.

“Fake news” has been generalized to mean anything from a mistake to a parody or a deliberate misinterpretation of facts. Regulations stress the dangers of “deep fakes”, meaning technology that manipulates videos to appear genuine but depict events or speech that never happened.

The CAC notice comes shortly after China blocked the US invite-only audio app Clubhouse. The app briefly flickered in the mainland before vanishing but has since sparked a number of copycats.

President Xi Jinping on Monday warned about risks surrounding “platform” companies—a term that could refer to mobile and internet firms—and called for greater oversight of the sector. —AFP

UK energy giants pivot towards cleaner fuels

LONDON: Britain’s energy sector pivoted further towards cleaner fuels yesterday, as the nation targets net zero carbon emissions to help tackle climate change. National Grid, which distributes energy to British homes and businesses, announced a multi-billion-pound overhaul to focus more on electricity.

And oil giant BP revealed plans to build the nation’s largest clean hydrogen plant as it also seeks to curb carbon intensive activities. National Grid has agreed to buy Britain’s largest electricity distribution business — Western Power Distribution — from US energy giant PPL Corporation for £7.8 billion (\$10.9 bil-

lion, 9.1 billion euros).

In a separate transaction, National Grid will sell its Rhode Island utility business — The Narragansett Electric Company — to PPL for \$3.8 billion (3.2 billion euros). The group also plans to sell a majority stake in National Grid Gas. “Together these transactions will strategically pivot National Grid’s UK portfolio towards electricity,” it said in a statement. The proportion of the group’s assets in electricity will increase to around 70 percent from 60 percent.

“Our vision for National Grid remains unchanged, to be at the heart of a clean, fair and affordable energy future,” the company’s chief executive John Pettigrew said in the statement. “With increased exposure to the UK’s electricity sector, these transactions enhance our role in the progress towards net zero, underpinning our core ambition which is to enable the energy transition for all.” —AFP

Business

Yemeni women use solar to light up homes, one village at a time

Overcoming ridicule, women illuminate lives with micro-grid solar business

SANAA, Yemen: Ten trailblazing Yemeni women have overcome skepticism and ridicule to bring electricity to their villages, illuminating lives with a micro-grid solar business that they hope to expand across their war-torn region. In a conservative country wracked by hunger and poverty amid a devastating war that has destroyed most infrastructure, 36-year-old Iman Hadi and her burqa-clad colleagues are achieving what many would have thought unthinkable. Hadi has been managing the all-female Friends of the Environment Station in the rebel-held area of Abs, northwest of the capital Sanaa, since 2019. Equipped with six solar power grids, the station is the only source of electricity for dozens of houses in several villages.

Hadi said the idea started when the women imagined what they could do to help ease the impact of war on the poorest country in the Arabian Peninsula. "We were able to make many people happy by connecting their houses to electricity," said Hadi, wearing the all-covering robe and well-worn gloves as she sat behind her desk in a makeshift structure at the station. The station, one of three in the country but the only run by an all-female crew, started with 20 houses. Today, it powers twice that number.

Easy-to-pay loans

Tens of thousands have been killed since 2014 in the conflict, which pits the Iran-backed Houthi rebels against an internationally recognized government supported by a Saudi-led military coalition.

Hospitals, businesses and electricity plants have been destroyed or shuttered, amid severe fuel shortages that force many to work by candlelight. Before the conflict, only around two thirds of Yemenis had access to the public electricity grid.

But amid the despair engulfing the country, one silver lining is emerging: solar power grids that started appearing on the roofs of



SANAA: A team of Yemeni women managed by Iman Hadi work at the Friends of the Environment Station, a solar panel station working since 2019 with UNDP funding and training, in Yemen's war torn region of Abs, northwest of the capital Sanaa. —AFP



houses in cities and villages. "In Yemen, where people cannot afford to purchase food, access healthcare or other fundamental needs, providing the option of solar energy for remote areas empowers communities and builds hope and resilience in an otherwise often hopeless situation", says Auke Lootsma, the UN Development Programme Resident Representative to Yemen.

Projects like Hadi's station, which received UN and European Union funding and training, have helped Yemenis regain a semblance of normal life. "Praise be to God, from morning and until evening, fans and washing machines and refrigerators and sewing machines are working in our house," Faeiqa Najjar, one of Hadi's customers, told AFP.

The power grid is helping others to earn money as well. Hadi gives micro-loans from the monthly net profits of around \$2,000, allowing people to open small businesses like grocery stores and bakeries.

From mockery to respect

However, the Yemeni entrepreneur's journey was anything but easy. The small station surrounded by drab concrete walls is in a frontline region that often witnesses fighting between the rebels and government forces. On top of that, rural society rejects the idea of women working outside the home.

"We have faced many difficulties, including ridicule and rejection from our families and society who believed that this sort of project is only for men," Hadi said. —AFP

US moves toward banning more Chinese telecoms

NEW YORK: Regulators have begun legal proceedings that could strip three Chinese state-owned telecommunications companies of their right to operate in the United States, officials said Wednesday, citing national security concerns. The three firms — China Unicom America, Pacific Networks, and ComNet — had failed to adequately prove their Americas operations were not subject to "undue influence" from Beijing, the Federal Communications Commission said.

Commission officials voted 4-0 at a hearing to begin an investigation, which could see the firms stripped of their right to operate within the US. "The threat to our networks from entities aligned with Communist China is one that we must address head on, and I am pleased that the FCC continues to show the strength and resolve necessary to meet this menace," FCC commissioner Brendan Carr said in a statement.

"When it comes to Communist China, we have set a high bar for action over the last few years," he added.

The move spells more bad news for the embattled firms' US operations, following a January decision by the New York Stock Exchange to bar them from trading. —AFP

Pacific's virus-free Palau to open travel bubble with Taiwan

KOROR, Palau: The tiny Pacific nation of Palau has announced plans to open a travel bubble with Taiwan in a move it hopes will boost the tourism-reliant economy.

"The date has finally arrived, it's time to open up," President Surangel Whipps told reporters late Wednesday, almost exactly a year after the nation closed its borders. Whipps said he would take a charter flight to Taipei later this month and return on April 1 with a group of 110 Taiwanese tourists.

From there, the plan is to gradually have 16 flights a week on the route, a major lifeline for an economy that before the pandemic relied on tourism for more than half its gross domestic product.

Palau, which lies about 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) east of the Philippines, is one of the few places on Earth never to have recorded a case of COVID-19. The travel bubble is partly due to Palau's special relationship with Taiwan. It is one of only 15 nations worldwide to offer Taipei diplomatic recognition in the face of China's long-standing claim that Taiwan is part of its territory.

Whipps said strict measures would be enforced to protect Palau's population of 18,000. He also pointed to Taiwan's success in containing the virus, with just 990 confirmed cases and 10 deaths in a population of 23.6 million.



"Palau is COVID-free and Taiwan is COVID-safe," he said. Taiwanese visitors must undergo preflight coronavirus checks, they can travel only in tour groups and are barred from making individual excursions. Contact with Palau locals will be kept to a minimum, with tourists staying at designated hotels, eating in separate restaurant areas and being allowed to shop only at set times.

Whipps acknowledged no system was foolproof but said Taiwanese health authorities had calculated but the chance of COVID-19 reaching Palau via the travel bubble was one-in-four million.

"We've built all kinds of barriers and shields to protect our people," he said. "We understand, yes we're taking a risk because there's nothing that's 100 percent guaranteed." — AFP

Business

Britain unveils shake-up of its scandal-hit accounting sector

BoE charts path between COVID and inflation

LONDON: Britain unveiled yesterday a drastic overhaul of its troubled accounting sector, with plans to break the dominance of the so-called Big Four accountancy giants. The long-awaited shake-up comes amid mounting outcry over the Big Four-comprising Deloitte, EY, KPMG and PwC-following a series of scandals in recent years.

“Major new reforms to the UK’s audit regime will aim to safeguard British jobs, avoid company failures and reinforce the UK’s reputation as a world-leading destination for investment,” the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) said as it launched an industry-wide consultation on its proposals. The government wants to replace accounting regulator the Financial Reporting Council with a tough new body that has legal powers to raise quality and standards at both listed and large unlisted companies.

The Audit, Reporting and Governance Authority (ARGA) watchdog will also have the power to split the audit and non-audit functions of accountancy firms, in order to avoid conflicts of interest. Large companies would be required to use a smaller “challenger” accountancy firm to conduct a “meaningful portion” of their annual audit, the statement added.

And the Big Four could also face a cap on their share of audits of Britain’s top 350 listed compa-

nies if competition does not improve. The overhaul follows a string of headline-grabbing company bankruptcies that sparked huge job losses and left the taxpayer dealing with the fallout.

Notable corporate insolvencies included department store BHS in 2016, construction firm Carillion in 2018, and tour operator Thomas Cook in 2019. “When big companies go bust, the effects are felt far and wide with job losses and the British taxpayer picking up the tab,” said business minister Kwasi Kwarteng.

“It’s clear from large-scale collapses like Thomas Cook, Carillion and BHS that Britain’s audit regime needs to be modernized with a package of sensible, proportionate reforms.” The sector has been blighted in recent years by a series of scandals, including EY-linked activities at disgraced German electronic payments group Wirecard. EY faced fierce criticism for its role in the 2020 downfall of Wirecard-whose books it had been checking since 2009.

Former fintech darling Wirecard collapsed in June 2020 after it was forced to admit that 1.9 billion euros (\$2.2 billion) missing from its accounts did not exist. Deloitte was meanwhile fined £15 million last year for serious misconduct after UK regulators probed its audit of British software firm Autonomy ahead of a disastrous takeover by US tech giant Hewlett-Packard in 2011.



BACKPOOL, UK: Volunteers sort food at Blackpool Food Bank in Blackpool, north west England. In Britain’s most deprived areas, such as seaside resort Blackpool in northwest England, the coronavirus pandemic has worsened the financial plight of its most vulnerable resident. —AFP

BoE move

The Bank of England was expected to maintain the status quo on monetary policy as it mulls Britain’s post-pandemic recovery alongside rising inflation fears that have rattled the bond market.

Economists predict the British central bank will again hold its key interest rate, which was slashed to just 0.1 percent one year ago following the erup-

tion of the deadly COVID-19 crisis. The bank is also set to keep its quantitative easing (QE) stimulus, which aims to boost lending, at £895 billion (\$1.2 billion, 1.0 billion euros). Bond markets have been shaken in recent weeks by fears that the global stimulus-fuelled recovery will fan inflation and force interest rates hikes sooner than otherwise expected. —AFP

Vietnamese street vendors cycle door to door for deliveries

HANOI: From juicy mangoes and fresh lemons to tropical guava and plums: Hanoi’s fruit comes piled high on the back of bicycles, peddled by street vendors who roam every nook and cranny of the Vietnamese capital. The fruit sellers, who are mostly women, start their day at 3 am and cycle up to 15 kilometres into the city from the countryside to drop off fruit, vegetables and flowers at their customers’ doors.

Donning conical hats known as “Non La” to shield from the sun, the women can earn up to \$8 a day as they weave through Hanoi’s alleys until late afternoon. The exhausting work is worth it for many, with wages in Vietnam’s cities at least double those of the countryside in a nation where the World Bank says the average annual income is around \$2,600. But fruit vendors have been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, despite Vietnam’s low case numbers.

It has recorded just over 2,500 cases and only 35 deaths. There have been fewer people on the streets and vendors were not allowed to peddle their wares for a short period after the virus first hit. Last April, the government announced a \$2.6 billion support package to help around 20 million poor people and small businesses affected by the pandemic. —AFP

NBK Academy welcomes the first batch of trainees for 2021

KUWAIT: NBK Academy recently welcomed the 24th batch of its annual program and the first in 2021 of newly hired employees who have successfully met the admission criteria of this intensive program specifically designed for Kuwaiti fresh university graduates. The NBK Academy Program, launched 12 years ago, has been supporting NBK’s strategy to solicit and recruit national cadres, by developing and qualifying Kuwaiti fresh graduates to start their career in the banking sector.

The new trainees welcome ceremony was attended by Salah Al-Fulajj, CEO of National Bank of Kuwait - Kuwait, Sulaiman Al-Marzouq, Deputy CEO of National Bank of Kuwait - Kuwait, Emad Al-Ablani, GM - Group Human Resources and Mohamed Al-Othman, GM- Consumer Banking Group, Ahmed Bourisly, GM - Corporate

Banking Group, Mohammed Al-Kharafi, GM - Head of Group Operations, in addition to several officials from talent management and training and development division at the bank.

During the ceremony, the bank followed all precautionary measures including social distancing to protect public safety during these exceptional circumstances. The program that will be delivered to 12 participants, will last for 4 months, and covers various areas of the banking business including: banking principles, risk management, financial accounting, marketing, negotiation, consumer and commercial lending, in addition to creativity, innovation and design thinking training. It is worth noting that the program’s content undergoes continuous enhancements to keep pace with the latest research and studies in the global banking sector and management science.

NBK Academy reflects NBK’s vision to support sustainable human capital development as one of its top strategic priorities and a shared responsibility between different governmental institutions and the private sector. NBK Academy was inaugurated in 2008 with the aim of paving the way for Kuwaiti fresh university graduates to join the banking sector. The Academy provides graduates with the best training programs developed in cooperation with leading international institutions and universities to meet the demands of the labor market.



Business

From poaching to avocados, Kenya elephants face threat

Turf war erupts over a 73-hectare avocado farm near Amboseli

KIMANA, Kenya: Just after dawn, Tolstoy lumbers into view. A wandering giant, with tusks almost scraping the earth, this great elephant has roamed beneath Mount Kilimanjaro for nearly 50 years.

He has survived ivory poachers, spear attacks and terrible drought, but the mighty bull could be confronting a new threat to his natural realm: surging demand for avocados.

A turf war has erupted over a 180-acre (73-hectare) avocado farm near Amboseli, one of Kenya's premier national parks, where elephants and other wildlife graze against the striking backdrop of Africa's highest peak. Opponents of the farm say it obstructs the free movement of iconic tuskers like Tolstoy—putting their very existence at risk—and clashes with traditional ways of using the land.

The farm's backers refute this, saying their development poses no threat to wildlife and generates much-needed jobs on idle land. The rift underscores a broader struggle for dwindling resources that echoes beyond Kenya, as wilderness is constricted by expanding farmland to feed a growing population. Kenya is a major avocado grower and exports have soared as the green superfood has become a hipster staple on cafe menus around the globe.

Already the sixth-largest supplier to Europe, Kenya's avocado exports rose 33 percent to \$127 million (107 million euros) in the year to October

2020, according to the Fresh Produce Exporters Association of Kenya.

Green gold

In the middle of that bumper year, Kenyan agribusiness KiliAvo Fresh Ltd received approval from the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) to start its own avocado farm on land it purchased from local Masai owners. The acreage was razed of shrubbery and fenced off, alarming neighboring title holders and conservation groups.

They argued that large-scale agriculture was prohibited in that location under management plans governing land use in the area. In September, under pressure to revoke KiliAvo's license, NEMA ordered them to stop work while it reviewed the case. The company challenged that decision in Kenya's environmental tribunal, where a case is ongoing. KiliAvo's lawyers, CM Advocates LLP, did not reply to request for comment in time for publication.

But work at the farm has progressed at a clip. On a recent morning, beneath a snow-capped Kilimanjaro, farmhands laid irrigation lines to water rows of avocado saplings. The property has water tanks, a shaded nursery, and boreholes. Jeremiah Shuaka Saalash, a KiliAvo shareholder and farm manager, said the farm had "rescued" many tourist workers left jobless when nearby safari lodges closed during the coronavirus pandemic.



A general view of elephants grazing at Kimana Sanctuary in Kimana, Kenya. A turf war has erupted over a 180-acre avocado farm near one of Kenya's premier national parks, where elephants and other wildlife graze against the striking backdrop of Africa's highest peak. - AFP

He said there was room for both industries to thrive, pointing out that a bigger farm was already harvesting vegetables nearby. "I am championing for the co-existence of wildlife, and for us to have another source of income," Saalash said as tractors tilled the red soil.

Avocados or elephants?

Adjacent landowners and wildlife experts are adamant the two cannot exist side by side. They say elephants have already collided with KiliAvo's

electric fence—proof that it impedes migratory routes used by an estimated 2,000 tuskers as they depart Amboseli into surrounding lands to breed and find water and pasture.

"Can you imagine if elephants in Amboseli died of starvation so that people in Europe can eat avocados?" Kenyan conservationist Paula Kahumbu, who heads the campaign group Wildlife Direct, told AFP. The revenue from Kenya's booming avocado business is a blip compared to tourism, which reaped \$1.6 billion in 2019. —AFP

Vodafone floats phone towers unit in Frankfurt

FRANKFURT: The phone masts unit of British telecoms giant Vodafone made its debut on the Frankfurt Stock Exchange yesterday, in a flotation that values the business at around 12 billion euros (\$14.3 billion).

Ahead of the 09:15 am (0815 GMT) opening bell, shares in Vodafone's Vantage Towers arm were priced at 24 euros each, at the lower end of the 22.50 to 29 euro range initially announced.

The initial public offering is Europe's largest of the year so far and is set to raise between 2.1 and nearly 3.0 billion euros for parent company Vodafone. It comes amid increasing demand for mobile telecommunications connectivity across Europe, driven by data growth, 5G rollout and regulatory coverage obligations. Mobile phone giants are also floating or selling off their tower businesses in order to slash debt.

Duesseldorf-headquartered Vantage Towers, which was spun off from Vodafone in 2020, has a portfolio that includes 82,000 macro sites—towers, masts and rooftops—across 10 European countries. Vodafone plans to use the proceeds of the listing to reduce its debt pile, estimated at around 44 billion euros by Interactive Investor analyst Richard Hunter. —AFP

Brazil hikes interest rate, eyeing inflation

BRASILIA: Brazil's central bank raised its benchmark interest rate Wednesday by a larger-than-expected 0.75 point to 2.75 percent, as rising inflation forced it to reverse its pandemic stimulus stance. Brushing off criticism that the hike came too soon for an economy still being battered by COVID-19, the bank's monetary policy committee indicated another hike of the same magnitude could be coming at its next meeting in May.

It was the first rate hike in six years for Latin America's biggest economy, which weathered last year's Covid-19 meltdown relatively well thanks in part to a record-low interest rate of two percent.

Now, the economy is showing signs of another slowdown, just as a surge in virus cases and deaths wreaks new havoc—arguably not a good time to raise interest rates, putting the brakes on even more.

But policymakers are nervous about rising inflation and the Brazilian real's slide against the dollar.

"Barring a significant change in inflation projections or the balance of risks facing the economy, the committee foresees continuing the process of partially winding down its monetary stimulus with another adjustment of the same magnitude" in May, the bank said in a statement. Brazil's annual inflation rate came in at 5.2 percent in February, above the bank's target of 3.75 percent and nearly scraping the top of its tolerance range of plus or minus 1.5 percentage points.

The Brazilian real has meanwhile skidded, closing at 5.59 to the dollar Wednesday. That is down nearly 16 percent from a year ago, making it one of the worst-performing emerging-market currencies.

'Hasty move'

With Brazil's economic growth outlook flagging, some analysts and voices in the business sector complained the rate hike came too soon. "This is a hasty move," said the Industrial Federation of Sao Paulo State (FIESP), Brazil's industrial hub. "There is still much uncertainty hovering on the economic horizon in the medium term. We believe increasing the Selic rate is not the best solution at this time."

Brazil's economy contracted by 4.1 percent in 2020 — less than feared at the height of the pandemic implosion. It is forecast to rebound partially with growth of 3.23 percent this year. But that outlook has been getting worse. It is down from 3.43 percent four weeks ago. Highlighting the tricky mix of factors facing Brazilian policymakers, the rate hike came on the same day the US Federal Reserve left its own benchmark interest rate untouched at near-zero.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell vowed to keep the stimulus stance in place "for as long as it takes."

Brazil's rate had been at two percent since August 2020. Analysts had forecast a hike of just half a percentage point. The decision came as Brazil's health system—and economy—reeled from the latest surge in COVID-19, which far-right President Jair Bolsonaro has drawn criticism for trying to downplay.

The country's seven-day average death toll hit a new high of 2,017 Wednesday. Nearly 285,000 people have died of COVID-19 in Brazil, second only to the United States. —AFP

Sports

Athletes anticipate duller Olympics but still with a glint of gold

LAUSANNE: An Olympics under the dark cloud of COVID-19 may not be the experience athletes had hoped for, but they are still eager to grab their chance to shine, be there fans or not. With the postponed Olympics set to start on July 22, the organizers are still wrestling with the issue of how many spectators they can safely allow in venues.

A decision on whether any foreign visitors will be allowed into the country to see the spectacle is expected before the torch relay begins, without any spectators because of coronavirus restrictions, on March 25. AFP asked athletes what they thought of the prospect of a Games in front of small crowds or even without any spectators at all. American middle-distance runner Craig Engels could have expected to race in front of 68,000 spectators in the rebuilt National Stadium in Tokyo.

"It kind of sucks not having friends and family there because any time I've ever imagined finishing my final race at an Olympics, I imagine running up to the stands and hugging my parents," said Engels, who beat Olympic champion Matthew Centrowitz Jr to win the US title in 2019. "I think I'll still be running in 2024 so at least my whole dream of the Olympic experience isn't shot," said the 26-year-old. "But it sucks for those athletes who are retiring this year."

'Weird dichotomy'

One of those is 38-year-old Indian boxer Mary Kom, who is a six-time world champion but whose best Olympic performance was a bronze in London in 2012. "We are in a situation that is beyond our control and against our

wishes. Therefore we have to accept the reality," said the mother-of-three. "The empty or full stadium wouldn't affect my bout and my performance though crowds and supporters make it interesting and thrilling. To me, the only thing that will be in my mind is to win the game and realize the long-cherished dream. The environment outside the ring is secondary."

American sprinter Brittany Brown, the 200m silver medalist at the World Championships in Doha, said no fans would be "disappointing because this is every four years". "The Olympics is also a celebration. So knowing that your family and friends can't be there is disheartening," she said.

"At the same time it's encouraging because you know that the organizers are taking proper precautions. It's a weird dichotomy — you're happy because they are prioritizing safety, but also disappointed because you're like 'Gosh, I really wanted to share this moment'."

Other track and field athletes agree they will miss the crowds. "It won't be as euphoric, but we'll deal with it," said French world record holder Kevin Mayer, who won the decathlon in Rio in 2016. French pole vaulter Renaud Lavillenie, who won the gold medal in London and silver in Rio — where he infamously broke down in tears at what he called the crowd's biased support for eventual gold medalist and home favorite Thiago Braz, said he had learned to compete without fans.

"We've had a whole season behind closed doors," he said. "It won't have the same flavor but... when you put 10 people on the start line, everyone wants to win, whether there is an au-



MIRAMAS: In this file photo taken on February 21, 2021, France's Renaud Lavillenie looks on as he competes in the men's pole vault final during the Athletics French Indoor Championships at the Stadium Miramas Metro-pole, in Miramas. —AFP

dience or not." Germany's brightest medal hope in swimming, 1,500m freestyle and 10km open water world champion Florian Wellbrock said he is "definitely in favor" of the Games going ahead, albeit in front of empty seats.

'It kinds of sucks'

"The fact that athletes can show in races what they have fought and worked for all their lives is and, remains for me, the most important meaning of the Olympic Games," the 23-year-

old swimmer told the German swimming federation's magazine.

Some competitors in less popular sports see stadiums half full rather than half empty. "Most of us don't compete in front of crowds," Bronwen Knox, an Australian water polo legend who won bronzes at the 2008 Beijing and London Olympics, told the Sydney Daily Telegraph. Both Engels and Brown lamented the impact of likely health rules on the experience of the 11,000 competitors. —AFP

Old bikes, wooden stools: Gabon Paralympic athletes 'make do'

OWENDO: With a personal record of 100 meters in 11.76 seconds, Gabon's Davy Moukagni has every reason to dream of mounting the podium at the Paralympic Games in Tokyo in August. But lacking funding from the government and sponsors, the 28-year-old sprinter has to train on a neglected, grassy high-school track riddled with sharp stones.

The lane lines on the track have been all but erased by the passage of time and other feet. But these are problems that the young athlete and his two team mates are sadly used to. "The first time I used starting blocks was in an official competition," Moukagni says. "I was all disoriented."

At the Owendo stadium, some 10 kilometers (six miles) from the capital Libreville, the runner takes off like a bullet, throwing everything he has into training for the 100 and 200m under the watchful eye of his coach. "I make do with what I have. We have no equipment — I'm getting by like a real Gabonese," Moukagni quips, cracking a smile.

'Fighters'

Five years ago Moukagni lost his right arm to Buruli ulcers, a

gruesome infectious disease that attacks the skin and bones leaving large open sores. The management student receives no sponsorships or stipends. "Everything I'm wearing I paid for myself," he says. "Our paralympic athletes are fighters, they train with very few means," says Luc Nguemba Mba who heads the Gabonese Paralympic Federation, FEGOPH.

The paralympic team representing the oil-rich central African nation of two million people competed in the Games for the first time in 2008 in Beijing and also went to London, and Rio but have never brought home a medal.

Until 2014 the federation had an annual budget of 50 million CFA francs — about \$100,000 or 75,000 euros. But the state, though rich with oil money despite falling demand, has since stopped its support. "Our coaches are volunteers because we have no money to pay them," admits Mba. "Most of them are sports teachers the rest of the time."

Defective gear

Coach Landry Lignabou watches his protegee take off for a 100-metre dash. "Push, push, push!" he cries as Moukagni reaches peak speed, telling him afterwards, "You got up too fast." Lignabou has been a coach for the federation since 2003 and deplors the lack of means that he says minimizes his athletes' chances at medalling.

Veteran para-cyclist Edmond Ngombi, whose lower limbs are weakened by polio, reached the para-cycling semi-finals in Rio in 2016 despite a frustrating technical problem. "My equipment was defective — a problem with the handlebars," Ngombi, 44, who struggles around on crutches, recalls sadly.



LIBREVILLE: Gabonese paralympic athlete Davy Moukagni trains for the 100m at the Owendo Technical High School in Libreville on February 5, 2021, in preparation for the Tokyo Paralympic Games scheduled for late August 2021. —AFP

He has been using the same competition machine for a decade — a gift from the Sylvia Bongo Ondimba foundation, named after Gabon's first lady — and feels at a disadvantage. "Paralympic sports are not sufficiently developed in our country," Sports Minister Franck Nguema acknowledged in an interview with AFP. —AFP

Sports

Bucks rally to beat Sixers in OT, Harden propels Nets

LOS ANGELES: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 10 of his 32 points in overtime to power the Milwaukee Bucks to a 109-105 victory over Philadelphia in an NBA Eastern Conference heavyweight clash Wednesday.

Reigning two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Antetokounmpo, ably defended by Philadelphia's Ben Simmons, struggled early, scoring just four points in the first half as the East-leading 76ers built a 45-31 lead. Philadelphia, again without injured star Joel Embiid, led by as many as 19. But Milwaukee seized a 78-76 lead with 8:18 remaining in regulation.

From there it was a back-and-forth battle until Antetokounmpo scored 10 straight Bucks points in overtime, a run that included a left-handed drive past Simmons and a step-back jump shot over Dwight Howard that put the Bucks up 105-98 with 1:11 left in the extra period. "We didn't stop playing, we played great defense," Antetokounmpo said. "We trusted one another, we didn't put our head down, we kept our composure."

"We believed in ourselves, and that's why we were able to come back in the game," added Antetokounmpo, who added 15 rebounds and five assists, his run of three straight triple-doubles coming to an end.

Tobias Harris led Philadelphia with 19 points and Danny Green added 18 for the Sixers. Simmons had a triple-double of 13 points, 10 rebounds and 12 assists, but the 76ers saw their six-game winning streak end and lost Seth Curry in the fourth quarter with a sprained ankle.

They finished the night tied atop the East with the Brooklyn Nets, who were propelled by James Harden's 40-point triple-double in a 124-115 vic-

tory over the Indiana Pacers. Nets All-Star Kyrie Irving sat out with a sore groin as the Nets continued to await the return of star Kevin Durant from a hamstring strain.

Former NBA MVP Harden filled the void, making 13 of 27 shots from the field and 12 of 14 free throws. His putback layup knotted the score at 96-92 early in the fourth quarter and ignited a 13-4 Nets scoring run.

Harden added 10 rebounds and 14 assists and Joe Harris scored 19 for Brooklyn, who trailed by as many as 16. "It's not even about the triple-double, it's about our effort," Harden said. "Especially that second half we did an unbelievable job defensively, just getting after it. That's it."

Malcolm Brogdon scored 24 points for the Pacers, who had a triple-double from Domantas Sabonis with 18 points, 11 rebounds and 11 assists. It was good news for the Nets, after coach Steve Nash said before the game that Durant, while showing "improvement," remained at least two weeks away from a return.

Curry hurt in Warriors win

"We're monitoring it and expect him to make a full recovery," Nash said of Durant, who has been sidelined since February 13. "But he's probably got a couple weeks of ramp-up left." Golden State guard Stephen Curry departed early in the Warriors 108-94 victory over the Rockets in Houston, suffering what the team called a tailbone contusion in a hard sideline fall in the third quarter.

Curry had missed a three-pointer as time ticked down in the third when he stumbled backwards, falling in a seated position. Clearly in pain, Curry was able to rise and walk gingerly to the



PHILADELPHIA: Giannis Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks reacts during a game against the Philadelphia 76ers on Wednesday at Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. —AFP

locker room. He finished the night with 18 points and eight assists. Jordan Poole led the Warriors with 23 points off the bench. Kelly Oubre added 19 points.

Sacramento's De'Aaron Fox drilled the game-winner for the Kings in Washington, his pull-up jumper over Bradley Beal with seven-tenths of a second remaining delivering a 121-119 victory over the Wizards.

Fox finished with 28 points for the Kings, who withstood 29 points from Beal and a triple-dou-

ble of 26 points, 14 rebounds and 10 assists from Russell Westbrook. Ja Morant was the star in Memphis, driving the length of the court for a go-ahead layup with 1.2 seconds remaining in the Grizzlies' 89-85 victory over the Miami Heat.

Memphis' Kyle Anderson came up with a steal and two free throws to seal a victory that ended Miami's five-game win streak. There was no such drama in Dallas, where Mavericks star Luka Doncic scored 42 points in the hosts' 105-89 victory over the Los Angeles Clippers. —AFP

LeBron saddened, Lin heartbroken over shootings

LOS ANGELES: Basketball stars LeBron James and Jeremy Lin were among those Wednesday condemning acts of hatred directed at the Asian community after a series of shootings in the Atlanta area left six Asian women dead.

Robert Aaron Long, a 21-year-old white man, took responsibility for killing eight people on Tuesday in spas in the southern state of Georgia, including the women. Authorities stressed the motive of the shooter had not been determined, yet the incident shook the Asian-American community, whose members have faced a surge in violence targeting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

James, a four-time NBA champion and star guard for the Los Angeles Lakers, tweeted, "My condolences goes out to the families of all the victims and the entire Asian community tonight on what transpired in Atlanta at the Aromatherapy Spa... Just senseless and tragic!!"

"Last night's tragic events in Atlanta are part of a disturbing rise in violence and discrimination towards Asian Americans," the NBA said in a statement. "Today and every day, we stand with the Asian community and condemn all acts of hate and racism."

Lin, the first American of Chinese or Taiwanese descent to play in the NBA, was upset about the shooting, tweeting his pain and hope. "This is sooo heartbreaking... praying for our world," Lin tweeted. "To my Asian American family, please take time to grieve but know you're loved, seen and IMPORTANT. We have to keep standing up, speaking out, rallying together and fighting for change. We cannot lose hope!!"

'Idiotic & devastating'

Lin became a surprise star off the bench for the New York Knicks in 2012 and won an NBA title with the Toronto Raptors in 2019. He spent last season with the Beijing Ducks and played earlier this year for a developmental team of the Golden State Warriors.

Atlanta Hawks star Trae Young tweeted he was "SICK about what happened here in ATL yesterday, my Condolences go out to the family's & loved ones who were affected by this tragedy Nothing else needs to be said... I'm with you! STOP ASIAN HATE!!!!!!" The Lakers said in a statement that "Anti-Asian racism and violence is deplorable and we do not stand for it," adding, "We stand in solidarity with the Asian American and Pacific Islander community. We see you."

Warriors coach Steve Kerr, whose father was killed by gunmen in Lebanon in 1984, sent a series of tweets condemning all hate-based violence. "My heart goes out to the victims and surviving family members of the shootings in Atlanta," he said. "Once again our country faces the trauma of hate inspired mass murders. It is on all of us to speak up & snuff out hate based violence. The cur-



GARDEN GROVE: Julie Tran holds her phone during a candlelight vigil in Garden Grove, California, on Wednesday to unite against the recent spate of violence targeting Asians and to express grief and outrage after a shooting that left eight people dead in Atlanta, Georgia, including at least six Asian women. —AFP

rent climate of animosity toward Asian Americans is idiotic and devastating. We must value all human life and denounce anyone who displays racial/ethnic hatred in any form. We have to be better than this. Ignorant remarks connecting Asian Americans to COVID-19 are leading to widespread racism, which turns into violence and even murder in our communities. We all have to do our part to stop this from happening again." —AFP

Sports

Bayern down Lazio to stroll into Champions League quarter-finals

MUNICH: Holders Bayern Munich cruised into the Champions League quarter-finals as a 2-1 win over Lazio in Wednesday's last-16 second leg sealed a 6-2 aggregate victory. Robert Lewandowski converted a penalty before a deft chip from his second-half replacement Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting doubled the advantage on the night.

Lazio grabbed a consolation when Marco Parolo was left unmarked to head in a late free-kick from close range. "The win is very important to us. It's in our DNA that we want to win every game," Bayern midfielder Joshua Kimmich told Sky. "We played confidently, even if it wasn't a brilliant performance and it was annoying to concede a goal."

Their passage into the last eight takes Bayern past Barcelona's tally of 18 Champions League quarter-final appearances since the competition was rebranded from the European Cup. Snow fell during the game at the Allianz Arena, but Bayern made light work of the wintry conditions.

They extended their unbeaten run in the Champions League to 19 games over two years. "We needed a good performance and we bow out of the competition with a positive game," Lazio coach Simone Inzaghi told Sky. "Some teams are unplayable: Bayern are one of them."

With his side trailing 4-1 from the first leg, In-

zaghi opted to rest top-scorer Ciro Immobile, with the 1.94m-tall Vedat Muriqi starting up front. Bayern had captain and Germany goalkeeper Manuel Neuer sidelined by a cold as understudy Alexander Nuebel made only his third start of the season.

Bayern were awarded a penalty on 31 minutes when Muriqi brought Leon Goretzka down in the area. After a VAR review, Lewandowski smashed in the resulting spot-kick. It was the Poland star's 39th goal in all competitions this season and fifth in the Champions League.

Lewandowski hit the post with Lazio goalkeeper Pepe Reina beaten on 67 minutes. It was one of his last involvements as he and Thomas Mueller made way for Choupo-Moting and 18-year-old Jamal Musiala.

Less than two minutes later, David Alaba slid a pass through for Choupo-Moting to sprint onto and flick a shot over Reina. Bayern were guilty of sloppy defending eight minutes from the final whistle when Andreas Pereira's free-kick was headed home by Muriqi's replacement Parolo.

Serge Gnabry fired wide late on as Bayern kept Lazio under pressure. Lazio defender Francesco Acerbi said the Italians played better than in their heavy first-leg defeat, but admitted that "Bayern are probably the best in the world". —AFP



MUNICH: Bayern Munich's German midfielder Serge Gnabry (center) gets past Lazio's Argentine midfielder Gonzalo Escalante (left) and Lazio's Serbian midfielder Sergej Milinkovic-Savic during the UEFA Champions League Last-16, second leg football match FC Bayern Munich v Lazio in Munich, southern Germany on Wednesday. —AFP

Chelsea cruise into Champions League quarters

LONDON: Thomas Tuchel said "super hungry" Chelsea have their sights set on reaching the Champions League final after Hakim Ziyech ended his goal drought to inspire a 2-0 win against Atletico Madrid in the last-16 second leg on Wednesday. Morocco forward Ziyech grabbed his first goal since October to put the hosts ahead in the first half at Stamford Bridge.

Emerson came off the bench to score the late goal that sealed a comfortable 3-0 aggregate victory over the lacklustre La Liga leaders. Adding to Atletico's misery, Stefan Savic was sent off in the closing stages for elbowing Antonio Rudiger in the stomach.

While Chelsea were the superior side for long periods, Atletico could justifiably claim they should have had penalty for Cesar Azpilicueta's challenge on Yannick Carrasco when the score was still 0-0. Tuchel admitted it could have been a penalty, saying: "Azpi got a bit frightened because his ball was short, I was a bit frightened as well."

But Atletico boss Diego Simeone added: "We are not looking for excuses. We were beaten by a better team. We tried to press them up the field, but couldn't attack the way we like." That was the only major scare for Chelsea as they extended their unbeaten run to 13 matches since Tuchel replaced the sacked Frank Lampard in January.

Tuchel boasts the longest ever unbeaten start by a Chelsea boss after moving past Luiz Felipe Scolari. Revi-

talised by Tuchel, Chelsea have conceded just two goals in his brief reign and are on a run of six consecutive clean sheets in all competitions. "A very good performance, unbelievable effort. I could feel we totally wanted it," Tuchel said. "We enjoyed the battle. The guys were totally on and sharp. We were super hungry to go through."

Leading Chelsea into the last eight for the first time since 2014 is another feather in Tuchel's cap as the German eyes a return to the Champions League final following his defeat with Paris Saint-Germain against Bayern Munich last season.

"They play with a special bond. Fixtures and results like this give you a certain edge to achieve special things. I'm pretty sure no-one wants to play against us," Tuchel said. "Quarter-final means there's only four games (until the final). It's a big step and feels excellent."

Chelsea, Champions League winners for the only time in 2012, had been eliminated in the first knockout stage in their last four appearances. But they never looked in danger of losing the 1-0 lead given to them by Olivier Giroud's overhead kick in the first leg in Bucharest.

Azpilicueta escape

Crucially, Azpilicueta escaped without punishment when the defender's under-hit back-pass allowed Carrasco to nip ahead of him in the penalty area. Azpilicueta responded with a panicked tug that sent Carrasco tumbling but Atletico's penalty appeal was controversially rejected by referee Daniele Orsato, with VAR bizarrely opting not to intervene.

Simeone's anger only increased as Chelsea made the most of their good fortune to take the lead in the 34th minute. Timo Werner now has just two goals in his last 27 appearances for Chelsea. But Tuchel backed Werner to come good this week and the Germany forward repaid his manager's faith with a strong performance capped by the key contribution to Ziyech's opener.



LONDON: Chelsea's Spanish defender Marcos Alonso (left) vies with Atletico Madrid's Uruguayan defender Jose Gimenez during the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second leg football match between Chelsea and Atletico Madrid at Stamford Bridge in London on Wednesday. —AFP

Breaking at pace after Werner blocked Kieran Trippier's cross, Kai Havertz fed his team-mate on the left flank. Werner accelerated away from the out-of-position Atletico defence before clipping a perfectly-weighted pass into Ziyech's path.

Unmarked 10 yards from goal, Ziyech finished Chelsea's thrust with a clinical strike. Savic's frustration boiled over in the 81st minute as he was dismissed for a needless elbow that drew a theatrical fall from Rudiger.

With Chelsea's injured defender Thiago Silva roaring on Emerson from the stands, the left-back blasted home from Christian Pulisic's pass in stoppage-time, sparking a wild celebration that encapsulated the feel-good factor fuelling the Blues at present. —AFP



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