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Bicycle thefts on the rise amid pandemic bike boom

Some victims report stolen bikes to police, while others don't

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The coronavirus pandemic has brought about a bicycle boom, with bike sales rising around the world. According to industry reports, this has led to a chronic shortage of bicycles, causing prices to soar. This in turn has led to a rise in bicycle thefts worldwide, and Kuwait is no exception.

Kuwait Times spoke to a few people whose bikes were stolen recently. Some victims reported the thefts to the police, while others didn't. Katarzyna Zadlo-Papadopoulou lost her and her husband's bicycles earlier this month. "The thief stole our bikes during the night from the garage basement of our building. We had locked them with bicycle chains to a pillar, but the thief managed to cut the chains and steal the bikes. Both bikes were almost

new, with each costing around KD 130," she told Kuwait Times.

They reported the theft at the police station. "The day after we reported the case, officers from the criminal investigation department came to our building to check the place, lift fingerprints and take photos. Unfortunately, there are no security cameras in the building. According to our haris, the bikes were stolen between 11 pm and 3 am," added Zadlo-Papadopoulou, who lives in Salwa.

Dr Mariam Al-Sharawi, who lives in the same building as Zadlo-Papadopoulou, said one of her three bicycles was stolen just a day after the theft of her neighbor's bikes. She didn't report the theft to the police, as Katarzyna had already done so. "My neighbor told us their bikes were stolen, but we thought that with a double chain, the thief won't be

able to steal our bikes. Moreover, he wouldn't dare to come again to the same place. But we were wrong," she said.

"The thief stole my husband's bike as it is expensive and new. It cost over KD 120, while the other two bikes were old, so he left them. Our haris said he saw the thief riding the bike when he was going to pray at around 4:00 pm, but couldn't catch him, as he was on the roof of the building," Sharawi added.

Nashwa Mohammed, who also lives in Salwa, said two of her bicycles were stolen in January. "I had my daughter's and my bike locked with a chain inside the yard of our building. They were stolen during the night, as when I left for work at 5 am, the bikes were not there. The value of my bikes together is around KD 350, as they were almost new. I

didn't report the matter to the police as I broke my leg the next day and it was hard for me to move," she explained.

The victims tried to search for their stolen bicycles online, but didn't find them on popular classified ad websites. This reporter visited popular bike stores in Kuwait City, but they all only sell new bicycles and secondhand bikes couldn't be found there. Kuwait Times also visited the Friday Market, but all the stalls selling used bicycles were closed.

There are no statistics of the number of stolen bikes in Kuwait, and many victims don't report the thefts as well. One victim in Salmiya had two of her bicycles stolen in the same way, where the thief cut the security chain and stole the bikes. A week later, she found one of the bikes for sale online, so her husband reported the matter to the police station.

News in brief

Coalition strikes Houthi rebels

RIYADH: The Saudi-led coalition in Yemen said yesterday it had launched air strikes in support of pro-government forces battling a quickening Houthi rebel advance on the northern city of Marib. The move came after a drone strike sparked a fire at a Riyadh oil refinery Friday, in an attack claimed by the Houthis. The official Saudi Press Agency said the campaign was designed to "thwart the Houthi militia's attempt to advance towards Marib in Al-Kasrah". — AFP

Qatar minimum wage for all

DOHA: A minimum wage of \$275 a month came into force for all workers in Qatar yesterday. The minimum became mandatory for all newly signed contracts from Aug 30, and will now also be compulsory for existing employment agreements. It requires that all workers, including domestic staff, be paid at least 1,000 riyals for a month of fulltime work. Employers are also required to either provide bed and board, or an additional 800 riyal a month allowance for food and accommodation. — AFP

Record new COVID cases

MANILA/MUMBAI: New coronavirus infections in the Philippines hit a record high on Friday as pandemic restrictions were tightened in the capital to combat the resurgence in cases. Daily new infections in the country hit 7,103 - the highest since the start of the crisis - with most of the active cases in Manila. Meanwhile, India's wealthiest state Maharashtra and its capital Mumbai recorded on Friday the most daily coronavirus cases since the pandemic began. Maharashtra reported a record 25,833 new cases, with financial capital and megacity Mumbai logging 2,877. — AFP

Biden stumbles on steps

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden on Friday lost his footing and tripped multiple times while walking up the steps to Air Force One. The American leader, 78, had proceeded swiftly about halfway up the airstairs to the presidential jet when he stumbled. Holding on to the railing with his right hand, he attempted a quick recovery but tripped again, this time dropping to his knee. — AFP

Icelandic volcano subsiding

GRINDAVIK, Iceland: A volcano that spewed glowing red lava near Iceland's capital Reykjavik after awaking for the first time in 900 years appeared to be subsiding yesterday, experts said. Officials said the eruption was small and did not represent a danger to people. — AFP

Khan contracts COVID; Modi sends wishes

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan tested positive for COVID-19 yesterday, officials said, just two days after he received his first vaccination against the disease. The 68-year-old former top cricketer received a shot of the Chinese-produced Sinopharm vaccine on Thursday, as the country battles a third wave of the virus.

"At this point, the prime minister's office can only confirm that the honor-

able prime minister has tested positive for COVID-19 and has self-isolated," his office said. Khan was suffering from a mild cough and a mild fever, his spokesman Shahbaz Gill later added, saying the positive test was performed yesterday.

His aides were quick to put distance between the diagnosis and his first jab of the two-dose vaccine. "Please do not link it to the corona vaccine. Immunity develops a few weeks after the vaccine is given. Make sure to vaccinate your elders and loved ones. Be careful," Gill added. Khan was probably infected before he got the vaccine shot, during a series of public engagements this week, information minister Shibli Faraz told the Geo News television channel.

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Interest in Turkish armed drones soars

ANKARA: Whether in Syria, Libya or Azerbaijan, Turkey's combat drones have scored high-profile successes that Ankara hopes to use in its quest to become a premier exporter of the aerial vehicles. Besides their proven ability to take out enemy tanks, analysts said drones also offer Turkey a chance to beef up its spheres of influence through an increasingly assertive foreign policy.

In Syria, Turkey used armed drones

to avenge the deaths of dozens of soldiers and halt the advance of regime forces in the northwestern province of Idlib. In Libya, the unmanned craft flew to the aid of Turkey's allied government in Tripoli, routing the advancing forces of eastern commander Khalifa Haftar at the capital's gates.

And late last year, Turkish drones helped Azerbaijan retake swathes of territory from ethnic Armenian separatists that had been lost in the mountains of Nagorno-Karabakh decades ago. All these conflicts grabbed world headlines and offered Turkey the perfect opportunity to showcase its hardware, analysts Can Kasapoglu in Istanbul and Emre Caliskan in the UK

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Doctors flee crisis-hit Lebanon

BEIRUT: US-trained emergency doctor Nour Al-Jalbout wanted desperately to serve her fellow Lebanese, but less than two years after returning home she says the country's catastrophes are forcing her to leave. "I gave everything I had to Lebanon for these two years, but Lebanon is not giving back," she says, her eyes welling up above three facemasks, inside a top Beirut hospital. "So I applied for immigration to the US," she said, to take up a job offer at Harvard.

As soon as her visa is approved,

she will join hundreds of doctors who are fleeing Lebanon's political and economic crises, even during a pandemic. Doctors warn a country once dubbed "the hospital of the Arab world" is hemorrhaging its best and brightest. Hair tied back into a floral surgeon's cap, the 32-year-old medic rushes around the bustling emergency department at the American University of Beirut Medical Center.

Her white coat streaked with blood from treating one patient's gunshot wounds, she holds up an X-ray to understand the pain of another visiting from a nearby Arab country. In the corridor between the emergency and coronavirus wards under her watch, trainee doctors repeatedly approach her for a second opinion. The decision to leave, she says, "eats you up every day".

Continued on Page 2



ISLAMABAD: Image grab shows Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan receiving a dose of the Chinese-made Sinopharm vaccine against COVID-19 coronavirus at the Prime Minister House on March 18, 2021. — AFP



ANKARA: The Anka drone is manufactured at Turkish Aerospace's huge, ultra-secure facilities on March 5, 2021. — AFP



BEIRUT: US-trained emergency doctor Nour Al-Jalbout (left) is pictured during her shift at the emergency department of American University of Beirut Medical Centre on March 17, 2021. — AFP

Local

Esports in Kuwait discussed in detail in virtual workshop

Hosted by Kuwait Esports Club in partnership with Al-Bayan Bilingual School



Nada Al Gharaballi



Abdulla Al-Ali



Faisal Abul



Dr Al-Baraa Al-Tourah



Hamad Al-Mutawa

KUWAIT: Kuwait Esports Club held a virtual workshop on esports in partnership with Al-Bayan Bilingual School through Zoom. The hour-and-a-half workshop discussed the indicators and standards of esports, club goals, means of coordinating tournaments, role of players and organizers and how to run activities, be they onsite or online, while observing social distancing and health precautions.

The workshop was opened by KEC Treasurer Nada Al Gharaballi. She spoke about the role and social responsibility of the club towards parents, players and students. She said parents must be fully informed with regards to esports, as participation is notably on the rise, particularly during the global pandemic. Most children have been at home for a long time and parents must guide their children towards various positive activities.

KEC Chairman Abdulla Al-Ali said this workshop is within the club's educational programs to make students and players aware of esports and managing activities. He said Kuwait is considered an important destination for esports because of the presence of many professional players.

Ali said the club holds a minimum of three championships every month and seeks to coordinate many activities with schools, colleges and universities, and

club members. It previously organized many local and international championships. "We are pleased to exchange expertise with educational establishments in organizing sports activities online, particularly under the current extraordinary circumstances," Ali said.

Secretary General of KEC Faisal Abul spoke about the importance of such events, organizational procedures and management. He said all rules and standards in use during local tournaments are professional laws used in tournaments worldwide to guarantee the right choice of players in Kuwait and prepare



Boban Totovski

them for international tournaments.

Member of the teaching faculty at Gulf University for Science and Technology Dr Al-Baraa Al-Tourah was invited to the workshop. He said esports are linked to knowledge skills such as focus, memory and problem solving. The games' challenges cannot be overcome without these skills, he said, adding these games polish these skills and build on them.

Manager of the Business Banking Department at the National Bank of Kuwait Hamad Al-Mutawa, who is also a member of the technical committee of KEC, participated as an official

spokesperson in the workshop. He talked about the esports sector in general and spoke in depth on the commercial matters of this sport. He said esports have a promising fanbase worldwide, estimated to be more than 300 million people, adding he is looking forward to developing a special market for esports.

KEC hosted International Esports Federation Secretary Boban Totovski as a guest of honor at the workshop to speak to students about his experience with esports. Totovski spoke about the importance of the international network that links players through international

tournaments throughout the year. "I advise students to concentrate on their school homework and do sports training in general. The true secret for success is when a person balances the management of their time," he said.

Student Shaheen Al-Rabee participated with the speakers at the workshop and was hosted by the club to share his experiences that he gained by organizing three official club tournaments with KEC. "I volunteered for organization and it was a unique experience. I was guided by club officials, and this gave me experience in managing tournaments and activities. I learned the importance of complying with match timings," Rabee said.

The discussion round reflected Al-Bayan Bilingual School's interest in esports, as the school prepared a special club for students interested in this sport under the management of Fatima Al-Bader. The workshop was designed for students and technical players in Kuwait to spread awareness about activities related to esports and its management.

The workshop was attended by representatives from Al-Bayan Bilingual School, its students and hobbyists to gain knowledge. The workshop provided special data about esports, besides involving several experts from various esports fields and supporters.

Doctors flee crisis-hit...

Continued from Page 1

But "you're doing what's best for you and your kids if you want to have a family."

Since starting work in Sept 2019, she has treated wounded protesters, witnessed economic freefall, fought a pandemic, and helped treat hundreds after a massive explosion in Beirut. She was at the hospital on Aug 4 when hundreds of tons of fertilizer exploded at the port, killing more than 200 people and sending shockwaves through the capital. "The ceiling fell on us," she says, pausing between tears.

Up to 500 wounded streamed in, followed by desperate relatives looking for their loved ones. Hours later, her husband told her their flat had been badly hit. "Beirut is like opium," says Jalbout, whose anesthetist sister will also emigrate. "It's so good, but it's so bad for you."

Lebanon's worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war has hit even the top echelons of the population. Doctors have seen their salaries or fees plummet in value, and their dollar savings trapped in the bank, all the while being overwhelmed by a deadly pandemic. Even basic medication has gone out of stock. Many say they are far better off than most, but still see no future for their children.

Meanwhile, a deeply divided political class - accused by many on the street of being useless and corrupt - has for seven months been unable to form a government.

The head of the doctor's syndicate, Charaf Abou Charaf, says 1,000 doctors have left since 2019, while a similar number of nurses have departed as well, according to their representative. "If it continues like this, it'll be catastrophic," Abou Charaf said.

Many of those departing are specialist experts in their fields, and essential for both patient care and training the next generation. They "are mostly aged 35 to 55, and form the backbone of the healthcare sector," he said. Many are going to work in the Gulf, and could one day return. But others are heading to Europe, Australia and the United States, likely for good.

Abou Charaf said it was devastating to watch the brain drain. "We paid to educate our children, and the West is plucking them up to benefit from them, when we are the ones who desperately need them," he said. The head of the parliamentary health committee, Assem Araj, has said the exodus was unprecedented - even worse than during the civil war.

"When I was a doctor training at the AUB (American University of Beirut) in the 1980s, the smell of death hung in the streets... but only very few doctors left," he wrote on Twitter. "The outflow of doctors today is not just due to economic reasons, but also despair at the political class."

Psychiatrist Francois Kazour, 40, said he was moving to France with his wife, a dermatologist, and two young children. The French-Lebanese doctor and university lecturer said his life was rooted in Lebanon. "We have our home, our practices, we work at the hospital," he said. He too had wanted to raise his family in Lebanon, but next month he and his wife will start the long process to convert their Lebanese qualifications to settle in France for good. "We feel like there's no end in sight," he said. — AFP

health workers and people over 65. Soon after the pandemic started, Khan told the nation in an address not to panic, saying "97 percent of patients fully recover", but he chided citizens just months later, warning: "People are not taking it seriously."

Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi wished Khan a "speedy recovery" from COVID-19 yesterday, in a new sign of a thaw between the neighbors. Since agreeing to halt hostilities on their disputed Kashmir border last month, the nuclear-armed rivals have shown signs of wanting to improve relations.

Modi used the announcement that Khan had tested positive for the coronavirus to make his gesture. "Best wishes to Prime Minister Imran Khan for a speedy recovery from COVID-19," the Hindu nationalist leader said on Twitter. Modi regularly uses his rallies to lash out at Pakistan.

The two countries - which fought intense artillery battles on their Kashmir border last year - have had three wars since their angry split after independence in 1947. But the surprise accord reaffirming a 2003 ceasefire came amid reports that officials from the two sides had held secret meetings in recent months.

There have been no reported shellings on the Kashmir Line of Control, as the disputed frontier is known, since the accord came into effect on Feb 24. Khan has since called for increased trade with India, while Pakistan's army chief General Qamar Javed said last week that the neighbors should "bury the past". — AFP

Interest in Turkish armed...

Continued from Page 1

said, as it tries to become a major military exporter - particularly of armed drones.

Ismail Demir, head of Turkey's Defense Industry Presidency (SSB), told AFP Turkish drones offer good value for money. "If a system from any other country had the same capability as ours, its (price) would be double," Demir said in an interview at his office in Ankara, which is filled with models of drones and other military gear.

SSB, which is part of the Turkish presidency, is the umbrella organization that oversees state defense companies. These include Turkish Aerospace Industries, which makes the Anka combat drone. "We were trying to do something we could lead in or could be at the front of in modern technologies, and drones became the perfect area," Demir said.

The first Turkish combat drones were used in 2016 as the army clashed with Kurdish militants in the country's restive southeast. In December, Turkish Aerospace Industries signed the first export contract for the Anka, worth an estimated \$80 million, with Tunisia. But the private Baykar company, run by one of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's son-in-laws, has been exporting its Bayraktar TB2 model to Ukraine, Qatar and Azerbaijan for some years.

"Export is an issue (because) our domestic priorities go first. But, of course, a sustainable defence industry requires export," Demir said. "And there are so many other countries in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, northern Africa and even Europe which are interested in our systems and our drones," he said. "They had some visits to Turkey and some of them are evaluating our offers."

The United States banned SSB from receiving new arms export licenses in December and imposed

sanctions on Demir himself in retaliation for Turkey's purchase of Russia's advanced S-400 missile systems. Demir played down the sanctions' impact and insisted that Turkey will be able to produce components and equipment it can no longer obtain from the United States. "It may take a little time, it may be a little costly, but we can do this," he said.

In a highly competitive global market, Demir said some countries "who are traditionally an exporter" have taken a dim view of Turkey's rise. "And in any market you want to get in, they will do anything to prevent you," he said. "The only way you can overcome this difficulty is by speaking with your quality, price and performance."

Stretching 8.6-m long and featuring a 17.6-m wingspan, the Anka is manufactured at a sprawling, ultra-secure factory in Ankara covering four million square meters and dotted with hangars. Turkish Aerospace Industries employs almost 10,000 people, including 3,000 engineers.

"What makes the Anka special is that most of the parts, important and critical parts, are produced and designed in Turkey," said Serdar Demir, Turkish Aerospace Industries' vice president for corporate marketing and communication. "We can easily say that the Anka is the most indigenous product and that we do not depend on other countries' permits."

Enre Caliskan, an analyst at London-based IHS Markit, an international business information firm, said Turkey's push into drone development was partially prompted by a failed putsch against Erdogan in 2016, which was followed by sweeping purges that decimated air force ranks. "Turkey has had fewer F-16 jet pilots than F-16 jets. Training new F-16 pilots takes up to four years. But drone pilot training is much shorter at nine months," Caliskan explained.

"Turkey has tried to compensate the capability gap in air forces with the drone technology." This strategic shift "has enabled Turkey, even as a middle power, to challenge the interest of top-tier military countries," said Caliskan. He added that Turkish drones proved themselves admirably against Russian defense systems in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, becoming a "game-changer (and) shifting the balance of power". — AFP

Khan contracts COVID; Modi...

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Earlier yesterday, the leader's adviser on health Faisal Sultan said the increase in positive virus cases over the past few days was "alarming". He said there was a "quite visible" burden on the healthcare system, particularly in the country's most populous province of Punjab. Case numbers began to rise again in recent weeks, soon after the UK variant was first reported in Karachi in late December.

More than 620,000 cases and nearly 13,800 deaths have been reported since the pandemic reached the country, but limited testing suggests true figures are probably much higher. Impoverished Pakistan has largely avoided the major lockdowns seen in other countries, instead opting for "smart" lockdown policies which see neighborhoods closed off for short periods, as well as restrictions on indoor dining and large gatherings.

However, many guidelines have been ignored, with Sultan criticizing "a lack of administrative action and a lack of public compliance". Beijing has donated one million vaccine doses to Pakistan, which the country of more than 220 million has begun administering to



ANKARA: The Anka drone, 8.6-m long and with a wingspan of 17.6 m, is manufactured in Turkish Aerospace's huge, ultra-secure facilities. — AFP

Local

Kuwait, India to establish joint commission to boost relations

Sheikh Ahmad holds talks with Jaishankar on energy, trade, economy and labor

Kuwait curfew: What you need to know

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

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

Where to obtain a curfew pass?

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

Co-op delivery during curfew hours

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

Omariya Co-op
WhatsApp 6041-0067

Farwaniya Co-op
WhatsApp 6767-8211

Qairawan Co-op
WhatsApp 9000-3749

Jahra Co-op
WhatsApp 5160-2458

Abdulla Al-Mubarak Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-6338

Nuzha Co-op
WhatsApp 9784-5531

Khaitan Co-op
WhatsApp 6777-9745

Ardhiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6902-0779

Rabiya Co-op
WhatsApp 2438-8316

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

Salmiya Co-op
Tel: 22253225

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

Rawdha & Hawally
WhatsApp 9662-2883

Shaab Co-op
WhatsApp 9090-4455

Wafra Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-0539

Keifan Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-1719

Rehab Co-op
WhatsApp 9222-2358

Mishref Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-9900

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

Rumaithiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-0045

Bayan Co-op
WhatsApp 9004-2500

Fahaheel Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-9951

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

Salam Co-op
WhatsApp 9788-7832



NEW DELHI: Kuwaiti ministerial delegation headed by Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah holds talks with Indian delegation led by India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar in New Delhi on Wednesday.

KUWAIT: Kuwait and India have decided to establish a joint commission co-chaired by the foreign ministers of the two countries in order to strengthen their deep-rooted bilateral relations in various sectors. The decision was part of a joint statement issued at the end of Kuwait's Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah's brief visit to New Delhi on March 17 and 18.

Sheikh Dr Ahmad held talks with India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and reviewed all aspects of bilateral relations. He also discussed regional developments with Jaishankar before leaving for Pakistan.

To be held on a regular basis, the joint commission will be tasked with formulating the required basis to strengthen the relations between the two countries, particularly in the fields of energy, trade, economy, investment, human resources, manpower and labor, finance, skills, culture, science and technology, information technology, health, education, defense and security, the joint statement said. The commission will also review agreements concluded between the two countries and find suitable solutions for any issues in their implementation.

India is among the largest trading partners of Kuwait and bilateral trade was worth \$10.86 billion during 2019-20. India's imports, mainly oil, were worth \$9.6 billion during this period. Kuwait was the 10th largest oil supplier to India during 2019-20 and met 3.8 percent of India's energy needs. Kuwait is also home to nearly one million Indian expatriates.

The joint commission will act as an umbrella for all bilateral institutional engagements such as foreign office consultations and joint working groups. Apart from existing working groups on hydrocarbons, manpower and mobility, and healthcare, new groups will be created on trade and investment, defense and security, and maritime cooperation, the statement said.

The meeting was attended by Kuwait's



Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah with India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar.

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

visit, 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, according to KUNA.

According to media reports, Sheikh Dr Ahmad lauded India for standing by Kuwait in its "darkest moments and in our direst time," including the provision of medical aid at the peak of the pandemic last year. He singled out the "white army of Indian nationals" - or nurses and doctors - who were "combating COVID-19 alongside Kuwaitis." India had deployed a 15-member medical rapid response team to Kuwait last April to help in testing and treating infected people.

Jaishankar, in turn, thanked the Kuwaiti government for taking care of the large Indian community during the pandemic. He hoped that the Indian community will be able to resume travel to Kuwait in large numbers soon.



India thanked for standing with Kuwait

Supplies Dr Abdullah Al-Qanae and Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister for the Foreign Minister's Office Ahmad Al-Shuraim. During his

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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Kuwait strongly condemns Houthis' criminal attack

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Ministry on Friday deplored in the strongest terms the Houthi militias' criminal assault with booby-trapped drones on an oil refinery in the Saudi capital, Riyadh. In a statement, the Ministry said repeating and escalating those "terrorist" acts as well as the targeting of civilians, and civil and vital areas are not only a threat to the security of the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the region's stability, but also a direct threat to energy supplies and the global economy. In addition, these acts are a direct challenge to international and humanitarian laws that require a broader international condemnation and must be halted, it added. The statement stressed that the State of Kuwait supports and stands fully with Saudi Arabia in all measures taken to maintain its security, stability and sovereignty.

Meanwhile, GCC Secretary General Dr Nayef Al-Hajraf condemned the terrorist attack with booby-trapped drones on the Saudi oil refinery. This attack and the previous acts of terrorism and sabotage against key Saudi civilian targets, namely the attack on the oil refinery in Ras Tanura and the residential complex for Aramco in Al-Dhahran, constituted an attack not only on the Saudi security and economic resources, but targeted security of all GCC member states, regional and international stability. He affirmed the GCC support for the kingdom noting that security of the GCC member states is inseparable, also manifesting backing for any measures Riyadh may opt to take to protect its facilities and stop these acts and terrorism and sabotage. —KUNA

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A photo taken from the Subiya desert (road 801) by photographer Vithiyavathi Stalin (Instagram: @vithisphotography). To have your photo considered for Kuwait Times' Photo of the Day, send to local@KuwaitTimes.com or via direct message to Kuwait Times' Instagram account @kuwaittimes. Photos should be high resolution, with no processing or editing.

US Ambassador visits Al-Abdaliya Nature Reserve

KUWAIT: US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina L. Romanowski visited the Kuwait Oil Company's (KOC) Al-Abdaliya Nature Reserve on Thursday, and was welcomed by KOC's Public Relations and Information Group Manager Mohammed Al-Basri. The Ambassador's visit comes as part of the United States' wider efforts to cooperate with countries around the world in addressing various environmental and climate change issues. "The US is engaging with partners around the world to ask: how can we all do more?" Ambassador Romanowski said. "The threats to our environment are real, and I'm looking forward to working with more agencies in Kuwait on joint collaboration activities."

"KOC is making all possible efforts to preserve the environment in Kuwait," said Basri. "These efforts,

which have been ongoing for decades, have been strengthened recently thanks to the many partnerships we have entered into, most notably the Global Partnership with the World Bank."

Located 50 kilometers west of Kuwait City, the protected area aims to preserve Kuwait's native ecosystem and restore life and biodiversity to the desert. During her tour, Ambassador Romanowski learned about the environmental protection efforts at the reserve. "The Al-Abdaliya Nature Reserve is one of several operated by KOC to support environmental sustainability," Ambassador Romanowski said. "The US Embassy will continue to support Kuwait in these endeavors by sharing American expertise and best practices on environmental policy, sustainability, climate change, and more."

"The Abdaliya reserve project is part of KOC's wider objectives to transform the area into one distinguished by its biological diversity and that contributes

to enhancing Kuwait's environment," Basri added. Earlier this year, Ambassador Romanowski joined Kuwait Environment Public Authority Director Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Hamoud Al-Sabah for a visit to the Al-Jahra Nature Reserve. Last September, Ambassador Romanowski also participated in a World Cleanup Day event sponsored by Alnowair at Jahra Sanctuary in Al-Khuwaisat to help raise awareness of environmental protection.

The US Embassy in Kuwait organized several initiatives in the last few years to increase awareness about environmental protection and climate change. Several air quality speakers visited Kuwait through the State Department's US Speakers Program to highlight issues related to air pollution. The embassy also engaged with local schools to organize recycling drives and promoted the large-scale Our Ocean Conference in Kuwait, an initiative spearheaded by former US Secretary of State John Kerry.



KUWAIT: US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski is seen during her visit to Al-Abdaliya Nature Reserve.

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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MiniMed 780G in Kuwait to help diabetes patients

KUWAIT: Under the auspices of the Ministry of Health and the Kuwait Diabetes Society, Medtronic, the global leader in medical technology, announced the launch of the MiniMed 780G system in Kuwait. This next generation advanced hybrid closed loop (AHCL) insulin pump system anticipates the patient's insulin needs and self-adjusts the insulin delivery, while also utilizing smartphone connectivity to allow easier access to information.

Dr Abdullah Al-Badr, Assistant Undersecretary at the Ministry of Health, said: "Diabetes is currently a pressing issue, which the current pandemic has highlighted further given that people with diabetes are more likely to have serious complications from COVID-19." He continued: "It is therefore vital that we continue to raise awareness around the importance of disease management and look at ways we can harness technology to improve the lives of patients. The health and safety of people living with diabetes is amongst one of our priorities, and so we are grateful for the efforts of the Health Sector in Jassim Al-Wazzan Sons and Medtronic to ensuring this."

"The launch of the MiniMed 780G is the latest example of how Medtronic uses smart algorithms to improve patient outcomes and simplify decisions for people living with diabetes, leveraging the company's deep data science and AI capabilities," said Majid Kaddoumi, President, Medtronic Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa. "From smart pump to smart pen, our portfolio offers innovative tech-enabled solutions for people on different stages in their diabetes therapy journey."

Dr Rashed Khazal, General Manager of the Healthcare Sector of Jassim Al-Wazzan Sons General Trading Co, the distributor of Medtronic products in Kuwait and one of the subsidiaries of Mezzan Holding Company, said: "With the pandemic exacerbating the need for new and smarter technologies, we felt it was crucial to work alongside Medtronic to launch the MiniMed 780G so that type 1 diabetic patients can focus more on their lives and less on diabetes. We are already seeing the impact of this and have received positive feedback from physicians across the world who have noted the pump's simplicity, which has enabled patients to adjust very quickly to this system giving them the freedom and control to improve their quality of life."

Dr Waleed Al-Dahi, Consultant Endocrinologist and President of the Kuwait Diabetes Society, said: "Research has shown that the incidence of type 1 diabetes has doubled in Kuwait over the last 20 years highlighting the pressing need to address the burden of this disease. Medical technology is now considered the center for management of diabetes. With the new available technical



breakthrough, diabetic patients can manage their diabetes better and live a better life. Medtronic has always provided cutting-edge technology to help in better management of diabetes."

Despite advances in technology and the growing use of continuous glucose monitoring (CGM), many people with diabetes, especially adolescents, struggle with glycemic control and the daily challenges of managing their condition. The MiniMed 780G system, which is approved for use in people aged 7 to 80 years, anticipates insulin needs and leverages the company's most advanced SmartGuard algorithm to automate the delivery of both basal insulin and correction boluses 24/7, every five minutes as needed, helping more people with diabetes avoid highs and lows with greater ease, and reach their glycemic targets with less effort.

The MiniMed 780G system includes Bluetooth connectivity, allowing users to easily track pump and CGM information with customized options for alerts and real time glucose trends. In addition, information is shared automatically and securely with care givers and health care professionals thanks to the CareLink Connect App.

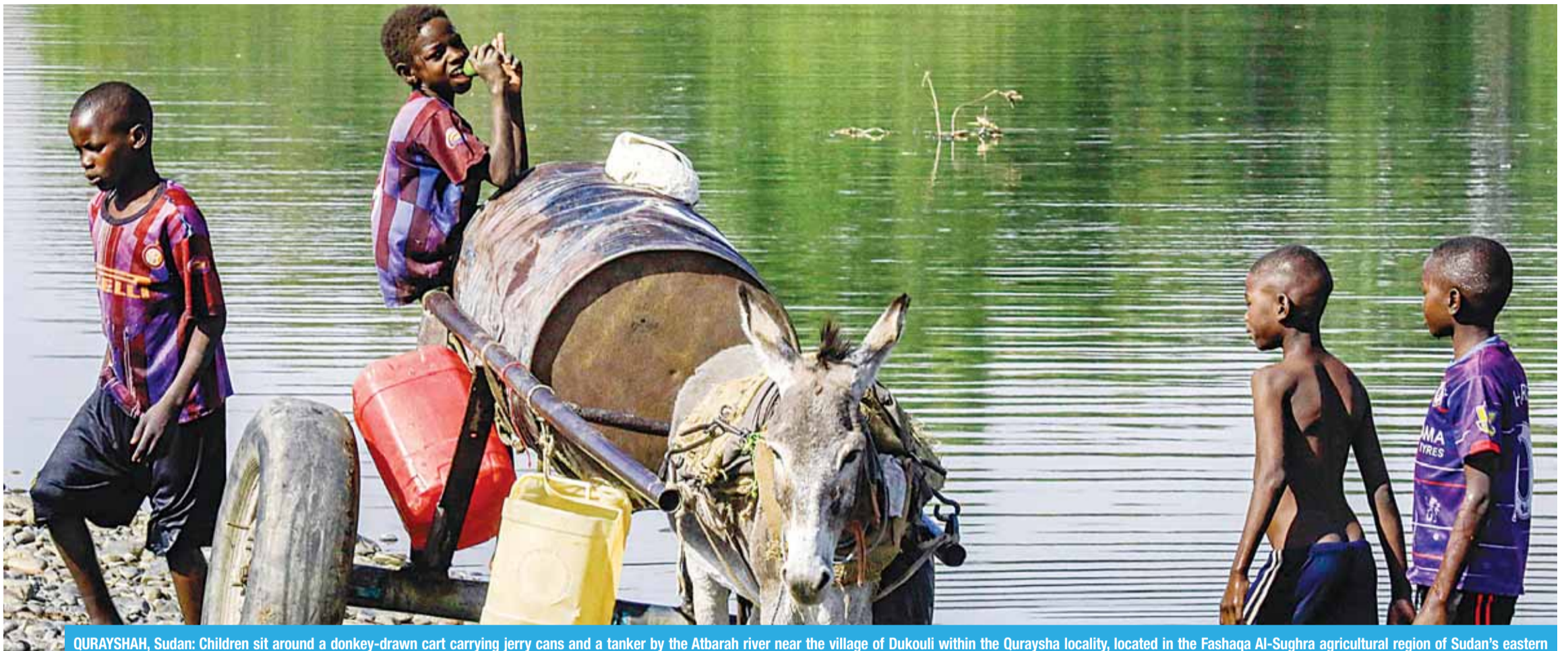


Pentagon chief praises India's ties with 'like-minded partners'

Biden visits Atlanta, condemns violence against Asian-Americans

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QURAYSHAH, Sudan: Children sit around a donkey-drawn cart carrying jerry cans and a tanker by the Atbarah river near the village of Dukouli within the Quraysha locality, located in the Fashaqa Al-Sughra agricultural region of Sudan's eastern Gedaref state. —AFP

Sudanese dream of reclaiming fertile land

In Fashaqa flashpoint, border dispute feeds into wider regional tensions

WAD KAWLI, Sudan: Under a thatched roof, Sudanese dream of returning to farmland at the heart of a decades-old dispute with Ethiopia that has turned violent and threatened to ignite a wider conflict. From the town of Wad Kawli, west of the Atbara river, the farmers used to cross the narrow stream with wooden ploughs to cultivate fertile fields in Fashaqa, a region claimed by Sudan and Ethiopia.

By the mid-1990s, they were no longer able to tend their fields after Ethiopia pushed into the contested borderlands, allowing thousands of its own farmers to take over. "Our last proper harvest of sesame crops from these fields was in 1996," Mohamed Omar, a community leader in Wad Kawli, told AFP. Farmers and traders long ignored the dividing map lines of colonial-era treaties.

But now the local dispute over fields of sesame and sorghum grown by smallholder farmers has put their thatched-hut villages on the front lines between two of Africa's most powerful nations, Sudan, third largest in terms of territory, and Ethiopia, the second biggest in terms of population.

The border dispute feeds into wider tensions in the region, including over Ethiopia's controversial Blue Nile dam. Ethiopia's push into Fashaqa came as its relations with Sudan soured following the attempted assassination of then Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in 1995 while he

was visiting Addis Ababa. At the time, Addis Ababa accused Khartoum of being behind the plot, leading to tensions that saw Sudanese forces under now-ousted president Omar al-Bashir withdraw from the region. "We were simply told that it was no longer safe for us to go to east Atbara," recalled farmer Abdelreheem Mirghani.

'Unrivaled soil'

More than two decades after their withdrawal, the Sudanese army returned to Fashaqa last year to recapture what it considered stolen land. The move, which came two years after Bashir's ouster, angered Ethiopia and triggered deadly clashes. Now, villages have become military restricted areas, and Sudanese farmers have yet to re-enter. Sudanese farmers from Fashaqa have over the years been caught up in the conflict between Khartoum and Addis Ababa.

The two sides held border talks over the decades, but they have yet to mark out clear boundaries.

Sudan regularly invokes colonial-era treaties from 1902 and 1907, which say the Fashaqa lies within its boundaries, a claim Ethiopia refutes. The exact size of the contested land is unclear, but Fashaqa covers some 12,000 square kilometers (4,630 square miles) and the flashpoint border zone measures around 250 square kilometers. Amid all the

uncertainty, farmers left Wad Kawli, bringing its population down to barely 4,000 from 12,000 in the early 1990s, according to Omar.

One farmer, Mohamed Goma, said he fought for years to have access to even a small part of the east Atbara area. "The Ethiopians forced us out by threatening to burn the harvest," he said. "We now cultivate small plots on the western side of the river, but the soil quality in the east is simply unrivaled anywhere in Sudan."

Frequent attacks

Over the years, villagers were forced to adapt, cultivating land west of the river and welcoming Ethiopian traders. Some even learnt Ethiopia's Amharic and Tigrinya languages, and others married into Ethiopian families. But they still face attacks by Ethiopian militias. "My father was kidnapped for a week in 2013 and we paid a hefty ransom equivalent to 700,000 Sudanese pounds (\$1,850) to bring him back," said Zakaria Yehia, a nurse from Wad Kawli.

Other villagers showed scars they said were from bullets or violent encounters with Ethiopians. "We got used to waking up to find our cattle were stolen," said Fatma Khalil, the wife of community leader Omar. She said Sudanese forces began arriving into the border zone, including Wad Kawli, last year. "Nowadays, there is a greater sense of

security," Khalil said. "Now we can have some undisturbed sleep during the night."

'No negotiations'

The Sudanese troop deployment coincided with the outbreak of conflict in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, which borders Fashaqa. The fighting has forced around 60,000 refugees to flee to Sudan. Ethiopia had warned Sudan against the troop deployment, but tensions soared after the alleged killing of four Sudanese soldiers in a December ambush by Ethiopian forces and militias. Sudan responded by sending reinforcements to the border, in an operation it said was "to recapture the stolen lands and take up positions on the international lines."

Ethiopia denounced the move as an "invasion". A string of clashes followed, with both sides began trading accusations of violence and territorial violations. Sudan says it has regained control over large swathes of Fashaqa, and Ethiopia has warned of military action unless Sudanese forces stop their advance. On Wednesday, Sudan's head of state Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan said there will be "no negotiations" unless Ethiopia acknowledges Fashaqa is "Sudanese land". And Wad Kawli villagers support his call. "This is our land, we have always cultivated it," said the nurse Yehia. "And now we want it fully back." —AFP

Libyan women reach high office but activists say long road ahead

TRIPOLI: Libya's new government includes five women, with two in key portfolios—a first for the country nonetheless criticized by activists as insufficient and as not living up to a UN commitment.

Libya descended into conflict after dictator Muammar Gaddafi was toppled and killed in a NATO-backed uprising in 2011, with an array of forces battling to fill the void. The transitional Government of National Unity (GNU), which took office this week, faces daunting challenges, including unifying the country's institutions, ending a decade of fighting marked by international interference and preparing for December elections. The cabinet is comprised of 26 ministers and six ministers of state, with women assigned to five posts, including the key foreign affairs and justice portfolios. The US ambassador to Libya, Richard Norland, has called it a "historic time for Libyan women", while UN Women hailed the appointments as "a major step for advancing women's rights".

Some Libyans on social media have welcomed the announcements as "a big step", a "leap for society" and a "promising start". But activists are less enthusiastic, arguing that the new executive had the opportunity to do more. In a statement to the UN Human Rights Council this week, Britain urged the GNU to "work towards the full, equal and meaningful participation of women, including in conflict resolution and decision-making".

"Women remain under-represented in all governance institutions and processes in Libya," it warned.

'Long road ahead'

The five women in cabinet hail from across the country. Activist and lawyer Najla Al-Mangoush, from the main eastern city of Benghazi, is the country's first female foreign minister.

Mangoush rose to prominence in 2011 as part of the National Transitional Council, the political arm of the rebellion that brought an end to Kadhafi's 42-year rule. She will be working alongside jurist Halima Ibrahim Abderrahmane, from the western town of Gharyan, who takes the justice portfolio, and Mabrouka Touki, an academic from the southern Fezzan region, who has a degree in nuclear physics and will head the culture ministry. Wafaa Al-Kilani is in charge of social affairs and Houria al-Tormal the women's ministry.

city, but an attacker would also hit the heart of the capital, close to Michel's office and the headquarters of the EU institutions.

"As we were driving back to the city, near the Metro, we drove over broken glass and I learned that there had been an explosion there too," Michel said. "You really get the feeling that other attacks will follow (...) in a coordinated, synchronized action. In the following days we were living in a state of siege, security had become an obsession," he said. Michel approved the extension of police custody periods and authorized night raids by officers investigating terrorist cases. He also reinforced the presence of uniformed military in the streets, still an occasional sight protecting transport hubs, public buildings and synagogues today.

The troops had been deployed the year previously, after the dismantling of a jihadist cell, and Belgium was on guard after attacks in November 2015 on Paris that left 130 dead and were linked to a cell based in Brussels.

Political storm

One of the three suicide bombers of 22 March had been arrested in Turkey and then deported in the summer of 2015, but he slipped under the radar of the intelligence services on his return to Belgium via the Netherlands. This caused a heated political row two days after the attacks.

Interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, sworn in on Monday, was selected last month alongside a three-member presidency council as part of a UN-sponsored process launched in November.

Activists point to his pledge when a candidate in the UN process to allocate 30 percent of ministerial positions to women.

Under the current lineup, women account for just half that amount. "We are proud to see Libyan women named to key posts, but also unhappy that the prime minister failed to keep his commitment," said Ghaliya Sassi, president of the women's association Maaha (With Her).

She vowed activists would keep up pressure on the government to adjust its course, but said there was "a long road ahead". Activist Laila Ben Khalifa, who began the push for the 30 percent quota, echoed her disappointment over the shortfall. She alleged that ministries had been distributed according to "region rather than competence". —AFP



Najla Al-Mangoush

Turkey pulls out of treaty protecting women from violence

ISTANBUL: Turkey has pulled out of the world's first binding treaty to prevent and combat violence against women by presidential decree, in the latest victory for conservatives in President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling party. The 2011 Istanbul Convention, signed by 45 countries and the European Union, requires governments to adopt legislation prosecuting domestic violence and similar abuse as well as marital rape and female genital mutilation. Conservatives had claimed the charter damages family unity, encourages divorce and that its references to equality were being used by the LGBT community to gain broader acceptance in society.

The publication of the decree in the official gazette early Saturday sparked anger among rights groups and calls for protests in Istanbul. Gokcek Gokcen, deputy chairperson of the main opposition CHP party said abandoning the treaty meant "keeping women second class citizens and letting them be killed."

"Despite you and your evil, we will stay alive and bring back the convention," she said on Twitter. Turkey had been debating a possible departure after an official in Erdogan's party raised dropping the treaty last year. Since then, women have taken to the streets in cities across the country calling on the government to stick to the convention. Labor and social services minister Zehra Zumrut Selcuk told the official Anadolu news agency that Turkey's constitution and domestic regulations would instead be the "guarantee of the women's rights." "We will continue our fight against violence with the principle of zero tolerance," she said Saturday.

'Collective fight'

Domestic violence and femicide remain a serious problem in Turkey. A man was arrested on Sunday in the north of the country after a video on social media purportedly showing him beating his ex-wife on a street sparked outrage. Last year, 300 women were murdered according to the rights group We Will Stop Femicide Platform. The platform called for a "collective fight" against those who dropped the Istanbul convention, in a message on Twitter. "The Istanbul convention was not signed at your command and it will not leave our lives on your command," its secretary general Fidan Ataselim tweeted. —AFP

Ex-PM remembers bombings that changed Belgium

BRUSSELS: It has been five years since Islamist bombers slaughtered 32 people in the Belgian capital Brussels, in an attack then prime minister Charles Michel says changed the country forever. In an AFP interview, Michel—now the president of the European Council and host of EU summits in the city—said he was still marked by the events of March 22, a "terrible shock" that had a lasting impact.

"The country is not the same after those attacks. A threat that until then we'd thought of as theoretical is now very real," said Michel, a liberal leader who was Belgium's prime minister between 2014 and 2019.

"I am still marked by the moment I received the information. When the minister of the interior called to inform me, within minutes of the attack in Zaventem, I left directly for Brussels, heading for the crisis center," he said. The first double suicide bombing targeted travelers at Brussels airport in Zaventem, just outside the



BRUSSELS: In this file photo taken on March 22, 2016 a Belgian soldier stands guard outside the Maalbeek metro station in Brussels after a blast at this station located near the EU institutions. —AFP

The Belgian authorities had been "informed that this individual was a foreign terrorist fighter", according to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In Brussels, interior minister Jan Jambon and justice minister Koen Geens offered their resignation, but Michel refused to let them go. "Officers do not abandon ship in a storm, there was no personal fault on the part of either of them," he told AFP, just ahead of the anniversary. —AFP

International

Biden visits Atlanta, condemns violence against Asian-Americans

‘Nation must not be complicit in the face of racism and xenophobia’

ATLANTA: US President Joe Biden on Friday denounced the upsurge of violence against Asian-Americans, telling a community plunged into grief after this week's Atlanta murders that the nation must not be complicit in the face of racism and xenophobia. After meeting with leaders of Georgia's Asian-American community, Biden delivered a brief speech at Atlanta's Emory University, where he branded hate and racism "the ugly poison that's long haunted our nation." Such bigotry and violence has been "often met with silence" in the United States, he said.

"But that has to change because our silence is complicity. We cannot be complicit," Biden stressed. "We have to speak out, we have to act," he added, as he called on Americans to "combat this resurgence of xenophobia." And he leveled a rebuke of previous president Donald Trump without mentioning his name, saying: "Words have consequences. It's the coronavirus, full stop." Trump faced severe blowback last year for repeatedly calling COVID-19 — which has now killed 540,000 people in the United States—the "China virus" after the country where it was first detected.

Biden noted that attacks on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have been "skyrocketing," a trend confirmed by the group Stop AAPI Hate which says nearly 3,800 cases have been reported since last year, including verbal and physical assaults, discrimination and civil rights abuses. Biden's pre-scheduled trip to the southern metropolis was originally intended to focus on his COVID-19 battle plan.

The president began with a visit to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where he received a briefing, and he also marked a key milestone in the US having administered 100 million vaccine doses. "We did it in about 60 days," Biden said. "We're not stopping now." But this week's carnage around Georgia's largest city prompted Biden, accompanied by Vice President Kamala Harris, to add a meeting with Asian-Americans.

'Heart-wrenching'

Three massage parlors around Atlanta were targeted Tuesday, and a 21-year-old suspect was arrested. Robert Aaron Long faces eight counts of murder and one charge of aggravated assault. Of the eight fatalities, six were women of Asian descent. Biden said it was "heart-wrenching" to listen to the grieving community members. Among them was Stephanie Cho, executive director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Atlanta. "It was very emotional to hear" messages by the victims' families read aloud to the president and vice president, Cho told CNN afterwards.

She said the Asian-American women in the room, including Harris whose mother was an Indian immigrant, "had a very somber moment" considering the issue centered around violence against women of Asian descent. Long has admitted carrying out the attacks, according to law enforcement, but claims he was not motivated by racial hatred. Officers said Long told police he was grappling with a sexual addiction and that he wanted to "eliminate" a temp-



ATLANTA: US President Joe Biden speaks as US Vice President Kamala Harris looks on during a listening session with Georgia Asian American and Pacific Islander community leaders at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. —AFP

that put him in conflict with his strict religious beliefs. Authorities have not confirmed the motive, but the killings were seen as laying bare the intersection of sexism and racism in the United States.

The four women killed in Atlanta itself—at two neighboring spas—were named Friday by the Fulton County medical examiner's office as Hyun J. Grant, 51; Soon C. Park, 74; Yong A. Yue, 63; and Suncha

Kim, 69. Grant, who worked at the Gold Spa, left behind two sons—the eldest of whom, Randy Park, 23, set up a fundraising page which by Friday had attracted more than \$1.9 million in donations. "She was a single mother who dedicated her whole life to providing for my brother and I," Park wrote. "Losing her has put a new lens on my eyes on the amount of hate that exists in our world." —AFP

News in brief

Ecuador health minister quits

QUITO, Ecuador: Ecuador's health minister resigned Friday after just 19 days in the job, the government said, amid a growing scandal over the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to well-connected figures. In his letter of resignation, Rodolfo Fardan stressed that he was stepping down for "strictly personal" reasons. Ecuadorian president Lenin Moreno—whose term ends on May 24 — has named surgeon Mauro Falconi as the new minister. Farfan replaced Juan Carlos Zevallos, currently under investigation for influence peddling, who fled the country for the United States after his resignation. —AFP

5.7 magnitude quake rattles Mexico

MEXICO CITY: An earthquake with a magnitude of 5.7 struck central Mexico on Friday, seismologists said, triggering alarms in the capital where anxious residents poured into the streets. Despite the panic, there were no immediate reports of injuries or significant damage. The quake struck 59 kilometers (37 miles) southeast of San Marcos in Guerrero state at a depth of 19 kilometers, according to the national seismology service. The tremor triggered Mexico City's alarm system, which uses seismic monitors to give residents advance warning of a quake. —AFP

Mar-a-Lago resort partially closed

WASHINGTON: Former president Donald Trump's Florida resort Mar-a-Lago has been partially closed after some members of staff tested positive for the coronavirus, US media reported Friday. "As some of our staff have recently tested positive for COVID-19, we will be temporarily suspending service at the Beach Club and a la carte Dining Room," the club's management said in an email cited by The Washington Post. It did not specify how many members of staff had been infected. Now serving as the former president's official residence since he left the White House in January, the club said banquet and event services would stay open and that "all appropriate response measures in accordance with CDC guidance" had been taken to sanitize the property. —AFP

Mexico boosts border security

TUXTLA GUTIERREZ, Mexico: Mexico will step up security along its southern border with Guatemala to stop child migrants crossing on their way to the United States, the authorities said Friday. The announcement comes after an increase in flows of undocumented migrants heading north following US President Joe Biden's immigration reforms. The operations on the southern border are aimed at protecting child migrants who are "exploited by criminal networks," the National Migration Institute (NMI) said. —AFP

US sentences two in cyber case

WASHINGTON: The United States sentenced a Russian and a North Macedonian on Friday to prison for their roles in a vast cyber crime operation. Sergey Medvedev, 33, of Russia and Marko Leopard, 31, of North Macedonia, were sentenced to ten and five years respectively, according to a Justice Department statement. Both had previously pleaded guilty to criminal conspiracy in federal court in Nevada. Medvedev, arrested in Thailand in 2018, co-founded the "Infraud Organization," a marketplace for "counterfeit documents, stolen bank account and credit account information, and stolen personal identifying information," authorities said. —AFP

Paris enters new lockdown as Europe resumes AZ jabs

PARIS: A third of France's population was under a new partial lockdown yesterday to stop the spread of COVID-19, as some European countries resumed AstraZeneca vaccinations following an all-clear from EU regulators and the WHO. The pandemic is still speeding up worldwide, with the number of new global coronavirus infections rising by 14 percent over the last week compared to the previous week, according to AFP data. Fighting to prevent yet another wave of the virus, several countries in Europe went back into partial lockdown yesterday—with Poland, parts of Ukraine and some French regions all waking up to tight new restrictions.

Parisians packed trains leaving the capital and crammed into shops ahead of the new restrictions coming into force, which will apply to Paris and several other regions for a month. The mayor of Yerres, just outside Paris, told AFP he had told businesses there to remain open, defying the "totally incomprehensible" restrictions. "Why would we catch COVID more in a shoe store than a bookshop?" he asked.

Bookshops are considered essential under the new measures, and later Friday the government added florists, chocolate shops and cobblers to the list. Signs of lockdown weariness abounded in cities across the world, with protests against restrictions popping up in Vienna, Sofia and Montreal. Some 20,000 people were expected at a demonstration in the German city of Kassel yesterday, raising fears it would turn into a superspreader event.

Infection rates are once again rising exponentially in Germany, with the vice president of the Robert Koch Institute for infectious diseases warning of signs of a return to "many severe cases and deaths, and hospitals that are overwhelmed". Belgium and Switzerland, where cases are also soaring, put off lifting restrictions on Friday too.

AstraZeneca jabs resume

Worries that AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine may cause blood clots had seen countries pause its use recently. But after the European Medicines Agency said it was "safe and effective",



FRANCE: Prime Minister Jean Castex, 55-years-old, reacts as he is vaccinated with the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine at the Hospital d'Instruction des Armees Begin, in Saint-Mande, on the outskirts of Paris. —AFP

Germany and Italy announced they were using the jab again as of Friday. France also brought it back into use—but just hours later, the national health regulator recommended its use only for over-55s, given the reported blood clots were only seen in younger people. World Health Organization vaccine safety experts said "available data do not suggest any overall increase in clotting conditions" among vaccinated people.

The Netherlands, Spain, Portugal

and Indonesia are also ending their suspensions, while Ireland's advisory committee is recommending following suit. Seeking to reassure their populations, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his French counterpart Jean Castex received their first AstraZeneca dose on Friday. "I literally did not feel a thing. It was very good, very quick," Johnson said. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi also committed to get the AstraZeneca vaccine soon. —AFP

In Brazil, COVID increasingly hitting the young

SAO PAULO, Brazil: Leading the morning medical meeting at an intensive care unit in Sao Paulo, Jaques Sztajnbock reviews his COVID-19 patients. Two, aged 56 and 53, are on ventilators. A third is breathing on his own, but writhing in agony. He is 26 years old. There are fewer wrinkles and less gray hair among patients in Brazil's intensive care units as the country reels from a surge in COVID-19 that is increasingly hitting people under 60. "We're seeing a high prevalence of younger patients, with no pre-existing conditions, hospitalized with very severe cases," Sztajnbock, head of intensive care at Emilio Ribas Hospital, told AFP. "The same trend is being reported at ICUs across Brazil."

In Brazil, like most of the world, severe cases and deaths from COVID-19 were mainly among the elderly during the first wave of the novel coron-

avirus last year. Now, the country is dealing with a devastating resurgence of the virus, blamed partly on the emergence of a new strain known as "PI" or the "Brazil variant." The recent surge has pushed hospitals across Brazil close to the breaking point, as the country's death toll has soared to 285,000 — second only to the United States. This time, the demographic profile of the victims is increasingly young. Before the trend emerged last December, the 30- to 59-year-old age group represented 20 percent of COVID-19 deaths in Brazil.

In about three months, that figure increased to 27 percent, according to health ministry data. Meanwhile, the share of the death toll for over-60s fell from 78 percent to 71 percent. "Half the (COVID-19) patients hospitalized in our nursing wards are under 60," said Luiz Carlos Pereira Junior, the director of Emilio Ribas. A year ago, at the start



SAO PAULO: A health worker cares for a COVID-19 patient who remains in the Intensive Care Unit of the Emilio Ribas Hospital in Sao Paulo, Brazil. —AFP

of the first wave in Brazil, that figure was 35 percent, he said.

Living dangerously

Health experts say part of the issue is that young people are following social distancing and masking recommendations less than the elderly. In a country whose president, far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro, has railed against stay-at-home measures and face masks, many people have continued

with life as usual despite the pandemic, especially the young. It is common to see packed subways and buses, streets crowded with mask-less pedestrians and police raids to break up illegal parties and clandestine bars. "Last year, I think the fear of an unknown disease had such an impact on people that they listened to experts' recommendations. But they aren't anymore," said Sztajnbock. "Young people have lost their fear." —AFP

Son of Atlanta shooting victim raises \$1.5 million

WASHINGTON: The son of one of six women of Asian descent killed when a white man went on a shooting rampage in a series of Georgia spas had raised \$1.5 million Friday after setting up a GoFundMe page to help provide for himself and his younger brother. Randy Park, 23, had aimed to raise \$20,000 after his mother Hyun Jung Grant was shot dead at the Gold Spa in Atlanta, and he and his brother found themselves abruptly facing an uncertain future. By Friday evening, his GoFundMe page had raised more than \$1.5 million—and counting—for the two young men.

"She was a single mother who dedicated her whole life to providing for my brother and I. It is only my brother and I in the United States," Park said on the website. Saying his mother had been "one of my best friends," Park added he had not had time to mourn because "I have a younger brother to take care of and matters to resolve as a result of this tragedy." "As of now I have been advised to move out of my current home within the end of March to save money and find a new place to live," he said, adding that "legal complications" were preventing him from collecting and burying his mother.

"I don't think I'll be able to figure out this whole situation along with legal matters if given 2 weeks to move out," he said. Grant, 51, was one of four women killed in Atlanta, together with Soon C. Park, 74; Yong A. Yue, 63; and Suncha Kim, 69, according to the Fulton County medical examiner's office. The other four victims—targeted at Young's Asian

Massage in the Atlanta suburb of Acworth—included Xiaojie Tan, the spa's 49-year-old owner who was described as "the sweetest, kindest, most giving person" by a longtime customer, Greg Hynson, speaking to The New York Times.

The attack also claimed the lives of Delaina Yaun, 33 — a mother of two who was at the spa for a couple's massage with her husband-spa employee Daoyou Feng, 44, and Paul Andre Michels, 54, a handyman doing work at the business. Police said the 21-year-old man they arrested for the eight deaths allegedly stated he had been struggling with sex addiction, but the carnage has sent shockwaves through the Asian-American community, which has been frequently targeted in racist attacks since the coronavirus pandemic emerged in China. Park said in his appeal for help that losing his mother "has put a new lens on my eyes on the amount of hate that exists in our world." —AFP

International

Pentagon chief praises India's ties with 'like-minded partners'

China dominates Austi's first India visit

NEW DELHI: Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin praised India's growing ties with "like-minded partners" as he held talks in New Delhi yesterday that were expected to be dominated by shared alarm about China. India is a vital US partner in the Asia-Pacific region and Austin's two-day trip is New Delhi's first face-to-face meeting with President Joe Biden's administration.

It follows talks between top US and Chinese officials in Alaska that wrapped up on Friday and which a senior Washington official described as "tough and direct". Prior to India, Austin and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Japan and South Korea, two other important partners in the region irked by Chinese activities. That followed the first summit of the leaders of the Quad, a four-way alliance of the US, Japan, Australia and India seen as a bulwark against China.

'Shared goals'

Austin arrived in New Delhi late Friday and held talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. Austin "commended India's leadership role in the Indo-Pacific and growing engagement with like-minded partners across the region to promote shared goals," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said. "The two sides reaffirmed their commitment to promote a free and open regional order. Both sides exchanged perspectives on shared challenges confronting the region and committed to further strengthen their broad-ranging and robust defense cooperation," Kirby said.

Also not mentioning China directly, Modi tweeted that "India and US are committed to our strategic partnership that is a force for global good."

Historically prickly

Austin was set to meet Foreign Minister S Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh yesterday. He may raise the question of human rights in India, with a second senior US official calling the issue "an



NEW DELHI: US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin (Center right) walks with Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh before observing the guard of honor in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP

important part of the Biden administration defense and foreign policy".

US-Indian relations have historically been prickly but shared misgivings about China pushed them closer together under Modi and former US President Donald Trump. This accelerated after 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese troops died last June in a clash on their disputed border high in the Himalayas. The nuclear-armed Asian giants then sent thousands of extra troops to the frontier although tensions have eased somewhat with a pull-back from one area of contention.

Beijing has irked New Delhi with its support for arch-rival Pakistan, as have Chinese investments in Indian Ocean nations that India sees as its backyard.

India and China have also engaged in a tussle of "vaccine diplomacy", competing to supply other countries with coronavirus shots to secure goodwill and influence.

'Major Defense Partner'

In 2016, the United States designated India as a "Major Defense Partner", and they have since signed a string of deals easing the transfer of advanced weaponry and deepening military cooperation. US defense firms have inked billions of dollars in deals to supply military hardware, including helicopters, under India's \$250-billion modernization of its armed forces.

But Russia is India's biggest arms supplier and New Delhi agreed in 2018 a \$5.4-billion purchase of Moscow's S-400 missile defense system, even though this could lead to US sanctions. Austin's visit so soon after Biden took office "shows the priority Washington is assigning to New Delhi," Manoj Joshi from India's Observer Research Foundation said. "Our relationship with the US on the military side has enhanced enormously and the US has been helping us in our confrontation with China," Joshi said. — AFP

Trudeau rebukes China over closed door prosecution

OTTAWA: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau reacted angrily Friday to the closed-door trial of a Canadian man detained in China for more than two years on espionage charges, dismissing it as "completely unacceptable." Businessman Michael Spavor, whose hearing finished after less than three hours on Friday, is one of two Canadians detained, in apparent retaliation for Canada's arrest on a US extradition warrant of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou, and formally charged last June with spying. "Let me be very clear: Their arbitrary detention is completely unacceptable, as is the lack of transparency around these court proceedings," the Canadian leader told a news conference.

Spavor's compatriot, former diplomat Michael Kovrig, is scheduled to go to trial on Monday. Canada has attacked the charges against its citizens as "trumped-up," and the three cases have sent relations between Ottawa and Beijing to their lowest point in decades, although China has denied any link between Meng's arrest and the action taken against the Canadians. Diplomats and media were barred from attending Spavor's trial earlier in Dandong, where Canadian officials were joined by envoys from eight other nations including the United States, France and Australia outside the courthouse. Canadian diplomats waved as a police van with tinted windows believed to be carrying Spavor drove out of the court.

The verdict remains unknown.

A court statement said that the "private hearing" had finished and that the court would "select a date to announce the verdict." Spavor's family have called for his unconditional release, saying that he was innocent of the accusations and had done much as a businessman to "build constructive ties" between Canada, China and North Korea.

Trudeau said his government, along with allies he thanked publicly for showing "global solidarity in this case," would continue to press China to immediately release the "Two Michaels," as they have become known. "China needs to understand that it is not just about two Canadians," he said. — AFP

Congo's Nguesso looks to extend rule in election

BRAZZAVILLE, Congo: The Republic of Congo votes in presidential elections today with incumbent Denis Sassou Nguesso aiming to extend his decades-long hold on power in the Central African state. Sassou Nguesso has accumulated 36 years in office—he was most recently re-elected in 2016, after which the opposition was effectively sidelined and his two main rivals sentenced to 20 years' forced labor. The 77-year-old retired paratrooper appears favored to win a fourth term in today's ballot. The largest opposition group, the Pan-African Union for Social Democracy, is boycotting the vote. Sassou Nguesso hopes for a first-round victory over six challengers, including former minister Guy-Brice Parfait Kolelas, who was runner-up in 2016, and former finance minister Mathias Dzon.

"One shot, KO," proclaimed his campaign posters forecasting a win for the candidate. Sassou Nguesso has placed youth and the development of agriculture at the heart of his campaign, pointing out that the country imports most of what it consumes despite its farming

Anti-coup protesters defy Myanmar junta's campaign of fear

YANGON: Protesters took to the streets across Myanmar again yesterday, defying the junta which has increasingly sought to crush the uprising with a campaign of violence and fear. The country has been in turmoil since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi from power in a February 1 coup, triggering a nationwide uprising as protesters call for a return to democracy. So far, more than 230 people have been killed in anti-coup unrest, according to a local monitoring group, as security forces have deployed tear gas, rubber bullets and live rounds against anti-coup protesters. But the movement has pushed ahead—in smaller numbers.

Local media showed protesters in gas masks gathering in northern Shan state, while in the southern coastal city of Dawei, motorists hoisted posters of Suu Kyi and signs that said "end the dictatorship". The protesters in Shan state hoisted home-made shields that said "protect unarmed civilians".

Outside of protests, crackdowns by security forces continue on the streets and residential areas across Myanmar, said the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group. "Casualties and unprovoked shootings are increasing day by day," it said. In the central ruby-producing city of Mogoke, local media Myanmar Now reported that a small quarter's night guards were shot overnight. "One died on the spot last night while two others are in critical condition in the hospital," a rescue team member confirmed to AFP, declining to give more details. Commercial hub Yangon has emerged as a hotspot for unrest, as security forces armed with guns continue to root out protesters wielding homemade protection gear.

But the resistance movement remains defiant. "Who says we have to give up because of unequal weapons? We are born for victory," tweeted prominent activist Ei Thinzar Maung, with the hashtag #SpringRevolution. Tom Andrews, UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar, said the junta could not defeat a population "united in peaceful opposition" against its rule.

"Desperate, it launches ruthless attacks to provoke a violent response to try and justify even more vio-



BRAZZAVILLE: Republic of Congo incumbent president Denis Sassou-Nguesso (left), candidate for the presidential election speaks to his wife during his last campaign rally in Brazzaville, on Friday. — AFP

lence," he tweeted yesterday. "It's not working. The world must respond by cutting their access to money & weapons. Now."

Makeshift barricades of bamboo, brick and burning rubber tyres have lent the streets of Myanmar's largest city the look of an urban warzone, and now the military are forcing civilians to dismantle them, piece by piece... at gunpoint. Constructed using any material to hand, the barriers that have sprung up across Yangon offer scant protection against the live rounds the security forces have resorted to with increasing frequency and lethal effect to crush mass opposition to the February 1 coup that ousted elected civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi.



YANGON: A protester jumps over a makeshift barricade during a crackdown by security forces on a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon's Thaketa township yesterday. — AFP

lence," he tweeted yesterday. "It's not working. The world must respond by cutting their access to money & weapons. Now."

The protesters have the numbers, but no real means of fighting the tear gas, rubber bullets and rifle fire of the army and police. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group suggests around 230 people have been killed in the unrest, and the actual toll across the country is believed to be far higher. The barricades have become something of a protester trademark, blocking main roads and employing everything from sand-filled cement bags and bamboo screens to large, wheeled garbage bins and housing bricks. They have been partially successful in slowing down the movement of the security forces, who are now intent on forcing local residents—including those not involved in the protests—to dismantle and remove them. Tun Hla, 60, was at home when armed personnel banged on his door and demanded he work on clearing a barrier erected in his neighborhood. "I have experienced this kind of situation before and it shouldn't happen again," Tun Hla, not his real name, told AFP. — AFP

here, there's no war like in other countries. Better to stay with Sassou who brings us peace, at least that is good," said Mariela, a 19-year-old high-school student in the coastal city of Pointe-Noire. "There's no point voting," said Francesc, a 25-year-old law student in the capital Brazzaville. "The dice are loaded in advance." Congo's Catholic Church episcopal conference has already expressed "serious reservations" about the transparency of the ballot and fears a possible internet shutdown on Sunday, as in the 2016 election.

Sitting between Gabon and its giant neighbor the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo has significant oil reserves and 80 percent of its budget comes from petroleum. But the former French colony, also known as Congo-Brazzaville, has been hit hard by cycles of falling world crude prices and is also hobbled by debt, corruption and poor infrastructure.

Per-capita GDP in 2012, at the height of an oil boom, peaked at \$3,922, but tumbled to \$2,279 in 2019, according to World Bank figures. Last year, the economy contracted by 6.8 percent, according to the African Development Bank (AfDB). In the 2020 UN Human Development Index, a benchmark of poverty, the country ranked 175 out of 189 countries. Transparency International classed Congo 165th out of 179 countries in its 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index. Members of the Sassou Nguesso family were placed under investigation in Paris in 2017 in a case involving alleged "ill-gotten gains". — AFP

News in brief

25 killed in DR Congo road accident

GOMA: At least 25 people were killed when a large truck smashed into three vehicles on the road to the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo city of Goma on Friday, the local mayor said. "Due to a braking system failure, a large goods transport vehicle hit three other vehicles at high speed, including two buses," Goma mayor Timothee Mwissa Kiense told AFP. "The provisional death toll is 25 people killed at the scene." The accident occurred in the early evening on a section of steep road, he said, adding those injured had been taken to hospital. — AFP

Rio closes beaches to curb virus

RIO DE JANEIRO: Rio de Janeiro closed its famed beaches Friday in a bid to contain a surge of COVID-19, a move criticized by anti-lockdown President Jair Bolsonaro, who said sun-deprived citizens risked a lack of vitamin D. Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes said the situation in the iconic beach city was "very critical," and urged residents to stay home to slow the spread of the virus. COVID-19 is raging in Brazil, where intensive care units are more than 80 percent full in 25 out of 27 states. In Rio, the rate is 95 percent.

Germany curbs travel from Poland

BERLIN: Germany said on Friday it was classifying neighboring Poland as a high-risk COVID-19 zone, meaning that people crossing the border from Poland will need a negative coronavirus test. From Sunday people entering Germany from Poland will have to show a negative PCR or antigen test, according to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), which has also placed Cyprus and Bulgaria in the same high risk category. The three countries represent a "very high risk of infection" particularly because of the rate at which the virus is spreading there, namely beyond 200 new cases per 100,000 of the population in a week, the institute said. — AFP

Guido allocates \$30m for vaccines

CARACAS: Opposition leader Juan Guaido will allocate \$30 million in Venezuelan state funds that are frozen in the United States towards vaccinations in his country. Although he has had no formal role in Venezuela's branches of power since last year's legislative elections, Guaido is recognized as the country's acting president by more than 50 nations, including the US. Washington has frozen millions of dollars of Venezuelan money kept in US bank accounts as part of international sanctions against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and many top figures in his government, handing control of the funds to Guaido. — AFP



PASAY CITY: A policeman (left) stands guard at the entrance to a neighborhood under strict quarantine measures in Pasay City, suburban Manila as the number of new daily cases of Covid-19 coronavirus has surged to the highest level in seven months. — AFP

Philippines logs record new virus infections

MANILA: New coronavirus infections in the Philippines hit a record high on Friday, health officials said, as pandemic restrictions were tightened in the capital to combat the resurgence in cases. Museums, game arcades and driving schools have been ordered to shut, while church and restaurant capacity has been reduced to 30 percent as authorities struggle to contain the fast-spreading virus.

The temporary measures come as the number of daily new infections in the country hit 7,103 — the highest since the start of the crisis-taking its caseload to more than 648,000, with most of the active cases in the capital. Experts have warned the figure could reach 11,000 a day by the end of the month, while the COVID-19 task force has called for available vaccines to be deployed to virus hot spots. On Friday, the Philippines' drug regulator approved Russia's Sputnik V vaccine for emergency use—the fourth jab to get the green light. Moscow registered the vaccine in August before large-scale clinical trials, but leading medical journal The Lancet has since said it is safe and over 90 percent effective. The Philippines has received more than a million doses of vaccines developed by China's Sinovac and British-Swedish drug maker AstraZeneca this month. — AFP

Business

SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 2021

Rising prices can't cool the hot housing market in US

Real estate remains one of the few bright spots in 2020

WASHINGTON: Mortgage rates are finally ticking up in the United States, one year after the Federal Reserve cut its lending rate to boost the economy as the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, but that's not expected to cool the hot housing market. While the wider US economy has struggled after states restricted business to stop COVID-19, real estate was one of the few bright spots in 2020, boosted both by low mortgage rates and the shift towards remote work caused by the pandemic.

"We've seen mortgage rates move higher in the past month or so," Joel Kan of the Mortgage Bankers Association told AFP. The housing market is a key part

of the world's largest economy, and mortgage rates are closely watched to gauge the ease with which Americans can buy property.

They are tied into the wider US Treasury bond market, where yields have been rising in recent weeks as traders fear that the economy's improving health could bring inflation with it.

Rates on 30-year mortgages are now ticking up and expected to hit 3.5 percent by the end of the year, after dropping in July below three percent, a low not reached before. "In that sense, it is bad news for buyers, because now they are facing higher interest rates, higher monthly payments," said Lawrence Yun, chief

economist at the National Association of Realtors.

'Incredibly low' rates

Mortgage rates have hovered around four percent for the past decade, but US homebuyers have seen much higher borrowing costs in the past. Rates were around eight percent in the early 2000s, and hit their record high of more than 18 percent in the early 1980s, according to government-sponsored lender Freddie Mac. Despite the recent uptick in rates, Yun says they remain "incredibly low," and predicts better economic growth that puts more money into Americans' pockets will help them overcome the increased borrowing costs and push real estate sales up 15 percent this year.

Even with the expectation that offices will reopen as COVID-19 vaccinations become widespread, some employees could continue working remotely and look for new houses that accommodate that—a dynamic viewed as already boosting sales last year. Kan said the market is "still looking pretty strong," and noted mortgage costs are only once component of the decisions that go into home buying, along with finding a property the buyer likes.

Supply squeeze

Yet as more buyers have closed on homes across the United States, supply has grown short, pushing prices up and sending developers scrambling. Sales of existing homes were up 5.6 percent last year from 2019, their highest level since the booming housing market of 2006, just before the housing bubble burst and 2008-2010 global financial crisis began. New homes have also seen brisk sales, pushing prices up from an average of \$384,000 in January 2020 to \$408,800 in January of this year, a gain of 6.5 percent, according to the Commerce Department. Rubela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics predicted "record-low inventories are likely to support to building activity, especially in the single-family sector." However Chuck Fowke, president of the National Association of Home Builders, warned that increases in both interest rates and costs of lumber and other materials have already caused builders to slow some construction of single-family homes. —AFP

Endgame

Many gamers are calling on manufacturers to address the issue. But neither Sony nor Microsoft have spoken out, and declined requests for comment from AFP. Others say that responsibility lies with the outlets selling consoles in the first place, such as CeX, Currys, PC World and Argos. Argos said that it has "stringent processes in place" to prevent its stocks of PS5 rapidly selling out.

"As part of this, PlayStation 5's are limited to one per customer and any duplicate orders are cancelled," said a spokeswoman. But it is far cry from measures demanded by gamers, who want websites to use a "Captcha" test, which asks users to complete a task that robots cannot perform.



In this file photo taken on November 21, 2020 a house is for sale in Arlington, Virginia. - AFP

BA mulls HQ sale amid telecommuting boom

LONDON: British Airways is mulling the sale of its headquarters near Heathrow Airport to raise funds, as many employees embrace telecommuting during the coronavirus pandemic.

"The global pandemic has shown us that many of our colleagues enjoy working remotely and want to continue, and this has accelerated our approach to offering more agile and flexible ways of working," BA said in a statement emailed to AFP on Friday. "Our aim is to find a hybrid working model that suits our business, blending the best of office and remote working for our people."

"We've also re-structured our business to emerge from the crisis and are considering whether we still have the need for such a large headquarters building." The company's sprawling Waterside office complex employs around 2,000 people and is situated on the outskirts of Heathrow in Harmondsworth, west of the British capital. The Financial Times reported that BA has already hired property consultants to evaluate a sale, citing an internal staff email.

The group is in the early stages of reviewing different options and no final decisions have yet been made, however. IAG, the British carrier's parent company, has axed 10,000 jobs at BA, or one quarter of its workforce, as it responds to nosediving demand in the global health emergency. Friday's news comes after IAG last month posted a record annual net loss of 6.9 billion euros (\$8.4 billion) as Covid-19 paralyzed air travel. IAG, which also owns Spanish airline Iberia and Ireland's Aer Lingus, revealed that revenues dived by 70 percent to 7.8 billion euros in 2020 as government travel restrictions slashed passenger numbers. —AFP



UK gamers and politicians take aim at console 'scalpers'

LONDON: Furious British gamers and lawmakers are training their sights on "scalpers" who are buying up coveted PS5 and Xbox consoles and selling them online at vastly inflated prices.

The popular consoles have also been hard to come by in other parts of the world, but in Britain anger has boiled over to the point where some lawmakers want to ban the practice of reselling them online at higher prices. "I've been trying to get a PS5 for four months now, but I can't get one at a normal price," said Tracey Ford, a student in Manchester, northwest England.

The 24-year-old gamer has made frequent visits to the store, and registered for alerts when new stocks arrive—but nothing has worked. "It's so frustrating", she said. The cause of her anger is console "scalping", in which people use "bots" to snap up huge quantities of stock online faster than regular consumers can, and resell them at sky-high prices. The practice, which is legal in the UK, is usually associated with concert tickets and limited edition footwear. But it has taken on a new dimension with the release of two highly-anticipated consoles at the end of 2020: the Sony PlayStation 5 and the Microsoft Xbox.

While a PS5 normally costs between £360 and £450 (\$500/\$627, 420/525 euros) depending on the model, its median resale price on sites like eBay is £650-750, according to US researcher Michael Driscoll. Faced with an in-store shortage, many gamers pay full price, which only feeds the market further.

Juicy profits

Driscoll estimates that around 52,000 copies of both consoles have been resold in Britain on eBay and StockX for a total of £42 million, generating £10 million in profit. That figure is likely to hugely underestimate the problem as it only takes into account the "grey market" and not the black market, "which is definitely larger", said Driscoll, who is from Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta.

The sudden surge in console scalping is being driven by much stronger demand than usual, with gamers having "extra money due to be not be able to travel" because of coronavirus restrictions, he added. "Plus there is a global shortage of high-end silicon used for making good computer chips," he said. The Nvidia RTX30 graphic card and processors from US chip manufacturer AMD are also being sold at inflated prices online, but consoles are the worst hit, according to Driscoll.

Driscoll believes the situation will "eventually stabilise" as more gamers get hold of stock and push down demand. But if the same marketplace conditions exist in five years when the PlayStation 6 is due to come out, he warned: "It's going to happen again."



Former finance minister Naci Agbal

Turkey sacks central bank governor after interest rate hike

ISTANBUL: Turkey fired the governor of its central bank and replaced him with economist and former ruling party lawmaker Sahap Kavcioglu, according to a presidential decree published late on Friday, in a move likely to raise concerns over the bank's independence.

Former finance minister Naci Agbal, seen as a market-friendly figure, had only been in the position since November, when he was appointed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as part of an overhaul of his economic team. No official reason was given for his sacking, but his dismissal comes after the central bank sharply hiked its main interest rate by a greater-than-expected 200 basis points on Thursday, from 17 to 19 percent.

Erdogan is a strong opponent of high interest rates and once called them the "mother and father of all evil". Economists blame his unorthodox belief that high interest rates cause inflation—instead of slowing it down—for many of Turkey's current economic problems. Erdogan wants to bring the annual inflation rate down to under 10 percent by the end of next year, and to five percent by the time he is next scheduled to face an election in 2023. Kavcioglu, who writes an economy column in the pro-government Yeni Safak daily, suggested in a February column that the central bank should not insist on a high interest rate policy, because it would lead to high inflation. He is the fourth central bank head appointed since July 2019.

'Against high interest rates'

News of Agbal's replacement came after the markets closed on Friday. The Turkish lira has clawed back roughly 15 percent of its value against the dollar since Erdogan's November reshuffle, which included the resignation of his son-in-law Berat Albayrak as finance minister.

Past central bank managers before Agbal have burned through most of Turkey's reserves trying to support the currency while rates remained well below that of inflation. A modest recovery in the lira's value since Agbal's appointment had given the impression he had won Erdogan's blessing to keep the rate high for some time to ward off inflation and help the lira recover.

But Erdogan's dislike of high interest rates has remained consistent, with him saying as recently as January that he was "absolutely against" them. "I know our friends get angry but with all due respect, if I am president of this country I will keep saying this because I believe that high interest rates will not help develop this country," he said. —AFP

US bankers plead for maximum 80 hour work week

NEW YORK: Overworked and stressed-out new hires at the Goldman Sachs investment bank are asking that their work week be limited to 80 hours. They made their case in an 11-page, official looking presentation of the kind the bank would prepare for a client, complete with statistics and graphs.

It stems from a poll of 13 first-year Goldman Sachs employees who said they have worked an average of 98 hours a week since the beginning of the year and generally go to bed around 3 am. They said their physical and mental health are suffering: 77 percent said they are "victims of workplace abuse."

"I can't sleep anymore because my anxiety levels are through the roof," one worker says in the presentation. "I didn't come into this job expecting... 9am-5pm, but I also didn't expect consistent 9am-5am either," another complained. In order to "rectify the situation," the proposal said an 80-hour work week should be considered "max capacity." The presentation began to circulate on social media Wednesday before becoming available on Twitter Thursday. "We recognize that our people are very busy, because business is strong and volumes are at historic levels," the investment bank said. "A year into COVID, people are understandably quite stretched, and that's why we are listening to their concerns and taking multiple steps to address them." —AFP

Business

Best Al-Yousifi Electronics receives Service Hero Excellence Award 2020

Company ranked first among best customer service providers for Electronics showrooms in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Service Hero, the Arab World's 100 percent consumer powered customer satisfaction index, announced its list of the best service providers in Kuwait at the 2020 annual awards ceremony held virtually. Service Hero, the only entity in the region that awards winners based solely on consumers' ratings, announced the best service providers ranked on the Customer Satisfaction Index for 2020. Best Al-Yousifi Electronics ranked first among the best customer service providers for the category of Electronics showrooms in Kuwait.

Each category has been assessed through 11 service aspects, namely reliability, speed, product quality, staff efficiency, value-for-price, location, smart application, delivery, call center, website quality, as well as resolution of complaints received.

During Best's honoring, Wael Deeb, General Manager of the Electronics Division at Al-Yousifi Company, received the Award for Excellence from Faten Abu Ghazala, President of Service Hero, at The Easa Hussein Al-Yousifi Company's headquarters in Al-Ardiya.

In the first comment by Wael Deeb after receiving the award, he said: "We are currently experiencing a difficult economic period: customers have become more familiar with the latest products in the world of electronics, which requires more effort to satisfy them. They require more options and also a bigger and more comprehensive after-sales service. This is what makes us always strive vigorously to provide what is best for them through a compre-



KUWAIT: Wael Deeb, General Manager of the Electronics Division at Al-Yousifi Company, receives the Award for Excellence from Faten Abu Ghazala.

hensive and integrated team to serve them and meet their expectations." Also Deeb added that we don't consider the client as just a number in our computer, but we care of his personal suggestions and needs in order we can serve him in the best way possible.

For her part, The President of Service Hero, Faten Abu Ghazala, referred to the role of "Service Hero"

as one of the biggest advocates of excellence in service, and the Index in general and its value and what it means for consumers, businesses, the private sector, government and the economy as a whole.

Based in Kuwait, Service Hero is the only indicator of customer satisfaction in the Middle East that follows the research protocols of ESOMAR, the for-

mer European Society for Opinion and Market Research, and complies with the principles and guidelines of the World Organization for Self-Regulation and Ethical Practice. An independent advisory board that oversees the Service Hero Index to ensure impartial and objective results that accurately reflects consumer preferences.

Ten days left to enter Gulf Bank's Al-Danah draw for a chance to win KD 1,000,000

KUWAIT: With only ten days remaining, Gulf Bank is reminding everyone that the last chance to participate in this year's semi-annual Al-Danah account draw for the millionaire prize of KD 1,000,000 is Wednesday, March 31. The Al-Danah account's semi-annual prize winner will be announced through a draw scheduled to be held on July 15, 2021 in the presence of representatives from the Ministry of Commerce and from Ernst & Young.

Gulf Bank's General Manager of Consumer Banking, Mohammed Al-Qattan, encouraged both Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti residents of the country to take advantage of this opportunity, saying: "With only a few days left to enter the Al-Danah account's semiannual draw, we're encouraging everyone to participate for a chance to win KD 1 million. As we have previously announced, and as part of our new draw scheme, we are excited to be announcing two new millionaires per year with the Al-Danah account, and will be giving away a grand prize of KD 1.5 mil-

lion to one winner, and a semiannual prize of KD 1 million to the other. Today, I would like to remind all Gulf Bank customers of this opportunity, and to encourage everyone to participate by opening and depositing into an Al-Danah account online through the Gulf Bank app, or by visiting one of our branches. We are wishing everyone the best of luck!"

The Al-Danah account is one of the most rewarding savings accounts in Kuwait, with its periodic draws that award valuable prizes and its many advantages for account holders. Gulf Bank's Al-Danah account offers monthly opportunities to win KD 1,000 to ten lucky winners, in addition to two quarterly draws with KD 100,000 prizes each, a semi-annual draw prize of KD 1,000,000 and a grand draw prize of KD 1,500,000.

Numerous benefits

The Al-Danah account is the only account that rewards customers for their loyalty by providing loyalty chances. Loyalty chances are the total chances gained in the previous year, which are then transferred to the current year to reward customers for their loyalty to the Bank. Accordingly, all chances gained by existing Al-Danah customers in 2020 have been transferred to the 2021 draws, and this will be repeated in 2022 onwards. Terms and conditions apply. It is also worth noting that all account draws are attended by a representative from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, with

the quarterly and annual draws also reviewed by Ernst & Young.



Mohammed Al-Qattan

Annual grand prize
To increase their chances of winning, account holders must either maintain the minimum deposit amount of KD 200, or increase their Al-Danah savings - the higher the

balances in an account, the more chances accumulated over time. Gulf Bank's Al-Danah account holders also have the opportunity to enter and win cash prizes all year long through monthly, quarterly and annual draws.

Opening an Al-Danah Account

To enter the upcoming draws, Gulf Bank customers can open an Al-Danah account today with only KD 200. To open an Al-Danah account, existing Gulf Bank customers can apply through Gulf Bank's online and mobile banking services, or book an appointment at their nearest branch by using the new "Visit Gulf Bank" app for a faster and more convenient branch visit. New customers can also open an Al-Danah account by visiting their nearest Gulf Bank branch or by scheduling an appointment through the app.

AVEVA, ADNOC and ARC hold forum on digital transformation

DUBAI: AVEVA, a global leader in engineering and industrial software, has underscored how digital transformation will help to maximize business returns while also optimizing sustainability in a post-pandemic world.

Speaking at the 25th Annual ARC Industry Forum recently, AVEVA CEO Craig Hayman and Alan Nelson, CTO Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), joined a keynote panel hosted by Andy Chatha, President of leading research and advisory firm ARC Advisory Group, to share how Cloud and artificial intelligence (AI) are rapidly unlocking value across the industrial sector.

Alan Nelson, ADNOC CTO, explained that the acceleration of digital and AI is at the forefront of technology discussions in every organization. "We have deployed a myriad of digital solutions to effectively manage our business, including AI-enhanced blueprints for faster reservoir development, predictive maintenance and real-time centralized monitoring for



Alan Nelson

Craig Hayman

critical plant equipment, managing our shipping business virtually, and real-time logistics monitoring," he continued. "What we have learned from going through digital transformation in the global pandemic is that this is a business transformation. Digital and AI strategies are not standalone approaches, they are an extension of the business needs."

As a strategic partner to companies like ADNOC, Craig Hayman, AVEVA CEO, explained the criticality of high-fidelity data to business outcomes. "Industrial data flow through AI algorithms in combination with human insight, which deliver transformational benefits. Predictive solutions and operational data reduce cost and improve processes in real time."

"At AVEVA we are investing approximately

£150 million per year on R&D to enable 150 scrum teams of eight to 12 people each to develop meaningful insights and solutions that will address business-critical issues such as supply chain management. While our business has tripled in the last three years, digitalization is only now beginning to truly accelerate."

"Digital innovation can realize the added benefit of reducing organizational carbon footprint," Hayman added. "AVEVA's view of sustainability is twofold. Over time, our goal is to develop initiatives that minimize our entire environmental footprint, including applying circular economy principles to our global offices and operational practices. Our biggest opportunity, however, is what we think of as our handprint - how our software can enable and drive sustainability for industries. Digitalization will be critical to providing shareholder value, as sustainability is a metric that is in high demand from the boardroom to the customer."

"The pandemic has represented a steep learning curve for all kinds of enterprises," said Andy Chatha, President of ARC. "Over the past year, we learned that disruption happens faster than we anticipate. But while our priorities can change quickly, resets are possible and we can rebound quickly too," he said.

EU launches legal action against UK over Gibraltar tax

BRUSSELS: Brussels launched legal action Friday to force Britain to recover 100 million euros in tax exemptions for multinational firms operating in Gibraltar. European Commission vice-president Margrethe Vestager said the UK had failed to claw back the sum despite the EU deeming the tax breaks "illegal state aid".

The sum, equivalent to \$119 million, is small relative to many EU state subsidy cases, but the case is the latest in a string of spats between the EU and post-Brexit Britain. "The aid granted by Gibraltar in the form of corporate

tax exemption for passive interest and royalties gave an unfair advantage to some multinational companies," Vestager said.

"More than two years after the Commission adopted this decision, the aid has still not been recovered in full and sufficient progress has not been made in restoring competition," she said. "That is why we have decided to refer the United Kingdom to the Court of Justice for failing to implement this decision."

The United Kingdom left the European Union last year, but the case dates back to a period before Brexit over which Brussels says the European Court of Justice still has jurisdiction. Gibraltar's Chief Minister Fabian Picardo said in a statement that he had "no doubt that we will recover the aid" and that the territory's government is "pursuing all options for recovery... with all due alacrity".

Gibraltar is a British overseas territory that shares a border with



southern Spain and European member states have long had concerns over its competitive tax regime. In December 2018, the European Commission decided that some corporate tax exemptions granted to multinationals in Gibraltar between

2011 and 2013 broke EU rules against state subsidies.

They ordered the UK to recover sums granted to four companies, but this has only been fully completed for two, with the remaining pair challenging the order. —AFP

ABK supports 'Let's Be Aware' campaign

KUWAIT: In support of the 'Let's be Aware' campaign initiated by Central Bank of Kuwait and Kuwait Banking Association, in cooperation with local banks, Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait stressed on the understanding of bank loans and the borrowing process to help enhance the level of financial literacy amongst the general public.

Ali Al-Sammak, AGM Retail Banking at ABK, commented, "The 'Let's Be Aware' campaign is a much-needed initiative that ABK is proud to be a part of. It aims to enlighten consumers to better understand financial products and services available to them, as well as their responsibilities when they avail these products and the bank's responsibilities towards them when applying for the loans."

Speaking on the importance of understanding the types of loans, Al-Sammak added: "It is important that customers fully understand the two main types of loans available to them, namely consumer loans and housing loans. It is as important to know how much they are eligible to borrow; the repayment terms of a loan and the repayment periods. A consumer loan is a medium-term personal loan available over five years, up to a maximum of KD 25,000 and the loan amount may not exceed 25 times the borrower's salary. This type of loan is for financing goods and services such as buying cars, furniture, education or health services. A housing loan is a long term loan up to a maximum of KD 70,000, valid only for the purchase, building or renovation of a private house, payable over a 15 year period. Monthly instalments should not exceed 40% of their income for working individuals and 30% for retired individuals."

Central Bank of Kuwait has set specific policies and instructions for the borrowing process. Banks and financing companies must provide customers with loan details including the number of instalments, payment dates, the value of the number of instalments, the ratio of the instalment to the net salary, as well as the consequences of non-payment. Customers are entitled to obtain a deadline of at least two days to review the contract before signing it. Customers can also obtain a draft signed contract which includes details such as the type of loan, the repayment period, the amount of the instalment and the interest. Al-Sammak added: "These are extremely important steps that ensure customers are aware of their rights and obligations before signing a contract."

Central Bank of Kuwait's instructions also include the importance for Banks and financial institutions to provide financial advice for customers before and during financing and clarifying the risks of increasing financial obligations especially in the event of a change in career or retirement.

The 'Let's Be Aware' campaign is scheduled to run throughout 2021, and will continue to spearhead the dissemination of key information on topics including but not limited to, filing of complaints, ensuring availability of special needs services, fraud management, as well as investments and savings information.



Ali Al-Sammak

Special Interview

MITSUBISHI POWER: LEADING THE WAY IN ENERGY TRANSITION

Mitsubishi Power's cutting-edge technologies help overhaul power plants in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Since its expansion into Kuwait in 1970, Mitsubishi Power has formed a long-standing alliance and partnership with the Ministry of Electricity and Water (MEW) and Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) in the country. As an instrumental power supplier for the country's energy sector, Mitsubishi Power provides 43 percent of Kuwait's power supply. In an interview, Ahmed Monir, General Manager, Mitsubishi Power Kuwait, speaks in detail how the brand is leading the way in the energy transition going beyond power generation and leading the decarbonization, digitization and delivery of reliable power globally. He also talks about the fast-changing demands of today's power generation industry and explains how Mitsubishi Power has provided cutting-edge technologies and services to upgrade major plant rehabilitation and overhaul power plants in Kuwait. Excerpts from the interview:

Kuwait Times: What is Mitsubishi Power? Tell us about the company.

Monir: Mitsubishi Power is an industry leader in power generation and large-scale energy storage solutions - effectively designing, manufacturing, building, servicing, and optimizing power systems worldwide. With a 100+ year track record in the energy industry, Mitsubishi Power is committed to addressing the various needs of customers, by designing equipment to handle various types of fuel, maintaining output flexibility as more renewables enter the market, and optimizing operations and maintenance through deep technologies such as AI and IoT.

Mitsubishi Power is one of the core subsidiaries of the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI) Group and is creating a future that works for people and the planet by developing innovative power generation technology and solutions to enable the decarbonization of energy and deliver reliable power everywhere.

KT: What is Mitsubishi Power's history in the region?

Monir: Mitsubishi Power began operations in the MENA region with its first supply of boilers to Saudi Arabia at Aramco in Abqaiq in 1965, and has since been active in utility and industrial power projects with major power players in the Kingdom.

The brand's expansion to Kuwait was synonymous with the establishment of the state in 1970. Since then, Mitsubishi Power has formed a long-standing alliance and partnership with the Ministry of Electricity and Water (MEW) and Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) in the country. As an instrumental power supplier for the country's energy sector, Mitsubishi Power provides 43 percent of Kuwait's power supply.

To meet the fast-changing demands of today's power generation industry, Mitsubishi Power has provided cutting-edge technologies and services to upgrade major plant rehabilitation and overhaul power plants in Kuwait. The company engaged in commissioning the Doha West Power Station and continuing through to maintain the plant's life extension to this day. Mitsubishi Power constantly optimize the performance of power-generating facilities such as the Sabiya Power Plant and the Az-Zour South power plant which has paved the way to provide an impeccable and seamless operation in the country.

Mitsubishi Power has also partnered with key entities in the UAE to develop innovative solutions that will protect and sustain the environment, aligning closely to the nation's Vision 2021 and its goal to increase the contribution of clean energy.

KT: Developing power plants is part of your solution being offered, explain to us.

Monir: Mitsubishi Power has a proven track record as a major equipment supplier and digital solutions provider in the MENA region. Today, the company has over 100 projects in the region ranging from utility, IPP and industrial services.

With its industry-leading power technology, Mitsubishi Power is well prepared to facilitate the region's power infrastructure expansion, and its evolution towards smarter and cleaner power.

In 2020, Mitsubishi Power launched the world's first standard packages for green hydrogen integration in the path toward 100 percent carbon-free power generation. Intermittent renewable capacity and power shortages around the world have elevated industry concerns that power balancing and energy storage are essential components to successfully operate a low-carbon power grid. Mitsubishi Power's standard packages cut through the complexity power generators and grid operators encounter when integrating renewable power, gas turbines, green hydrogen and other energy storage technologies.

Mitsubishi Power is targeting commercializing of the first ammonia-fired class gas turbine system in around 4 years. Until now, Mitsubishi Power has pursued technological developments enabling a transition from natural gas fuel used in gas turbine combined cycle (GTCC) systems, which currently emit the lowest amount of CO₂ among thermal power generation systems, to hydrogen, which emits no CO₂. In tandem with pursuing active use of ammonia, Mitsubishi Power has also been developing a system in which the waste heat from a gas turbine reconverts ammonia into hydrogen and nitrogen for use in hydrogen gas turbines. Developing a method for direct-

ly combusting ammonia will further expand Mitsubishi Power's lineup of carbon-free power generation systems.

KT: What triggered the change of the company logo/name?

Monir: The new brand name reflects the company's commitment to a decarbonized future where Mitsubishi Power is not just a technology company, but a partner in building the right energy solutions for the countries where it operates. Mitsubishi Power's new brand name also provides the company greater freedom and flexibility to make decisions around product portfolio expansion, market penetration and industry penetration. This also supports Mitsubishi Power in achieving its mission: to enable the decarbonization of energy and deliver reliable, sustainable power everywhere.

KT: Can you tell us about the projects being spearheaded in MENA region?

Monir: The MENA region is witnessing a concerted drive to accelerate the share of renewables in the energy mix through the adoption of innovative, low-carbon technologies and solutions.

In Kuwait, Mitsubishi Power focuses on the rehabilitation and improvement of power units across the country. For Doha West Power Station, Mitsubishi Power rehabilitated eight steam turbine generators throughout 2015 to 2019, and the Sabiya Power Station is currently undergoing steam turbine overhaul and control systems upgrade.

In 2018, Mitsubishi Power received an order for the construction of a 1,026.3 MW gas turbine combined-cycle (GTCC) power plant for the Emirate of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The plant, to be fired by natural gas, will centre on two M701F gas turbines in a project underway by the Sharjah Electricity & Water Authority (SEWA) in the coastal suburb of Layyah. Plans call for completion and start-up of the plant in mid-2021. The project will be the first in Sharjah to be financed as export loan with support from a Japanese export credit agency (ECA).

In 2020, Abu Dhabi National Energy (TAQA) completed financial closure on the 2.4GW gas-fired Fujairah F3 power project to be built in the UAE. The plant will be powered by three JAC-class gas turbines supplied by Mitsubishi Power and once constructed, it will use an efficient and flexible combined cycle technology to support intermittent renewable energy in the region.

In 2020, Mitsubishi Power was awarded a contract from Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) to rehabilitate and upgrade six boilers in unit 29 of Mina Al-Ahmadi refinery in Kuwait. The restoration includes improving the combustion system (implementing low-NOx burners), extending the lifetime (by upgrading pressure parts), enhancing auxiliary systems to enable a higher availability and operational flexibility of the unit.

KT: What's the role of Mitsubishi Power in power generation and reducing environmental impact?

Monir: While Mitsubishi Power provides a strong portfolio of solutions for renewables, and renewables integration systems, the company also offers the world's leading gas turbines in efficiency, reliability and flexibility, ramping up quickly, hence providing the best solution for balancing power grids against the intermittency of renewables while also significantly reducing fuel consumption and the consequent fuel combustion emissions.

As the leader in hydrogen-fueled gas turbine technology for over 50 years, Mitsubishi Power is leading the way towards a cleaner future. The company has invested heavily in technology and manufacturing processes that increase efficiency and currently has projects in the US and EU already underway.

KT: The company has been in the hydrogen-fueled gas turbines, can you tell us about this?

Monir: Mitsubishi Power is on the course of commissioning three new projects, with investments totaling more than \$3 billion. These projects each include JAC gas turbine power islands that are initially capable of operating on 30 percent green hydrogen, with future capability of operating on 100 percent green hydrogen.

The three projects, totaling nearly 3,300 MW, are Tiger Partners LP's Danskammer Energy Center (Repowering) in Orange County, N.Y., Ember Partners LP's Cadiz Combined Cycle Plant (Harrison County Industrial Park) in Harrison County, Ohio, and Balico LLC's Chickahominy Power project in Charles City County, Va.

While the plants will initially run-on natural gas alone, they will eventually shift to burning green hydrogen produced and stored on-site. They are designed to make it easier to ramp up hydrogen use as production increases. Green hydrogen is seen as key to eliminating carbon emissions from the industrial sector that now relies on natural gas as both a fuel source and a feedstock.

KT: What is the cost to build a hydrogen power plant? Why we consider this important?

Monir: Power producers are now under strong pressure for reducing power from fossil fuel while adopting intermittent renewable power to their



Ahmed Monir, General Manager, Mitsubishi Power Kuwait, speaks during the interview

power grid. While the cost of hydrogen production technologies poses a primary challenge for making hydrogen cost competitive, the fact is that hydrogen optimizes the power system for renewables, facilitating further increases in renewable shares. It has the potential to improve the economics of renewable energy investments, enhance security of power supply and serve as a carbon-free seasonal fuel when stored, supplying energy when renewable energy production is low and energy demand is high.

KT: Your company has renewable storage project in Utah, why do you consider this project in the US why not in low income/budget countries?

Monir: It was discovered that that the Delta dome in Utah was a viable candidate for hydrogen storage which inspired Mitsubishi Power to partner with the Magnum Development, devise the hydrogen strategy and co-develop the Delta salt dome for hydrogen storage. The project, known as Advanced Clean Energy Storage is the first utility-scale renewable hydrogen creation, storage and transmission project.

Besides, Central Utah proved to be the ideal location for this project as Magnum's site, adjacent to the Intermountain Power Project is positioned to take full advantage of existing regional electricity grid connections, fully developed transportation infrastructure, ample solar and wind development capacity, and a skilled workforce currently transitioning away from coal.

The project will enable utility-scale hydrogen production from renewable energy sources and store the hydrogen in underground salt dome caverns to provide a huge reservoir of renewable fuel for power generation when wind and solar power generation fall short of demand. A single cavern can contain enough pressurized hydrogen to produce 150,000 megawatt hours of energy.

Salt domes are unique geological features into which caverns are solution mined to provide economical bulk storage. In turn, the Advanced Clean Energy Storage project will use this salt dome located in Delta, Utah to accomplish the same large-scale hydrogen storage that has been used for decades to supply hydrogen to the refineries of the US Gulf Coast. This bold vision is a testament Mitsubishi Power's commitment in developing and introducing creative solutions to the global decarbonization challenge with the aim to reduce the carbon footprint in power generation.

KT: You have three projects totalling 3 billion US dollars and others in the pipeline, tell us about the projects and where will the projects be?

Monir: Mitsubishi Power is on the course of commissioning three new projects, with investments totaling more than \$3 billion. These projects each include JAC gas turbine power islands that are initially capable of operating on 30 percent green hydrogen, with future capability of operating on 100 percent green hydrogen.

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KT: What are the ideas behind hydaptive and hystore packages?

Monir: Mitsubishi Power launched standard packages for green hydrogen integration, which is the world's first of its kind. Known as the Hydaptive(tm) package and the Hystore(tm) package, these standard packages tackle complexity issues that power generators and grid operators

encounter, when looking to integrate renewable power, gas turbines, green hydrogen, and other energy storage technologies. The green hydrogen energy storage systems include three key elements. First, electrolysis plants convert excess renewable energy into hydrogen. Next, storage mediums such as salt caverns, pipelines or above ground vessels store this "green hydrogen" for hours to season, depending on the grid's needs. Finally, hydrogen-enabled simple cycle or combined cycle gas turbine power plants convert the green hydrogen into centralized dispatchable electricity. Together, this storage system enables further balancing of renewable energy and better equips states and utilities to reliably and cost effectively meet their climate goals.

The Hydaptive(tm) package seamlessly enables the integration of hydrogen and a natural gas-fueled gas turbine power plant with electrolysis, to produce green hydrogen using 100 percent renewable power and onsite storage of green hydrogen.

The Hystore(tm) package is another innovative solution from Mitsubishi Power that combines the Hydaptive(tm) package with access to large-scale off-site hydrogen production and storage infrastructure. This allows for large-scale renewable energy storage, that shifts variable renewable energy over time from hours to seasons and provides reliable and cost-effective carbon-free energy when the grid needs it the most.

KT: Tell us about the next generation plant using advance tech and AI?

Monir: Technology is at the heart of the required energy transformation. Digital transformation has shown the potential to providing businesses with unparalleled opportunities to unlock and improve business value propositions and optimize operating models.

Digitalization and automation are at the core of our solutions and offerings TOMONITM. From retrofitting turbines and the balance of plant with sensors for data collection, to powerful computing and data analytics, to automation, power plant owners today can tap into our extensive suite of solutions to improve plant performance and ensure asset integrity.

Last year, Mitsubishi Power unveiled its next-generation power plant in Takasago, Japan. Named T-Point 2, the plant is a validation platform for the most efficient gas turbines in the world, and the initial building blocks of the world's first autonomous power plant. It leverages Machine Learning (ML), Artificial Intelligence (AI), smart sensors, data management systems, pattern recognition software, analytics and AI-assisted maintenance through its TOMONI suite of intelligent solutions, including Remote Operation, and over 20 digital applications that improve the availability and performance of the whole plant. With these solutions, valuable volumes of data from the power plants can be harnessed and leveraged to provide insights, solve complex problems, maximize overall power plant performance, and emerge as the world's first autonomous power plant.

KT: Why do you have this autonomous power plant?

Monir: The energy sector today stands at the intersection of many disruptions. It is tasked to integrate increasing volumes of renewable energy into grids designed for thermal energy. There is a need to respond flexibly to daylong demand fluctuations. More recently, utility executives who have witnessed big data's transformative impact across other industries are now asking for similar digital-powered insights about operating and maintaining plants.

Creating an increasingly smart power plant capable of various levels of autonomous operation provides operation and maintenance optimization, performance improvement, and flexible operation. The plant uses Mitsubishi Power's TOMONI(tm) platform, an innovative suite of digital power plant solutions and takes the massive amount of data created by sensors and other plant instrumentation and transforms it from unmanageable noise into powerful information and provide actionable insights. New digital solutions offer existing power plants the chance to get smarter and help current operators.

Basic needs of today's power plant operators include flexible operations, improved efficiency, reliability, and autonomous performance. With the launch of the new T-Point 2 plan in Takasago, Japan, Mitsubishi Power is in an exciting phase in the development of autonomous power plant technology, with many TOMONI digital solutions previously validated at the original T-Point 1 power plant.

KT: What's the plan for the next five years or so?

Monir: Mitsubishi Power is leading the way in the energy transition going beyond power generation and leading the decarbonization, digitization and delivery of reliable power globally. Throughout the years, we have provided innovative energy solutions and services as well new carbon capture technologies to enable major plant rehabilitation, and overhaul power plants across the region. With our strong heritage and industry-leading power technology, Mitsubishi Power is well prepared to facilitate the region's power infrastructure expansion, and its evolution towards smarter and cleaner power.

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Lifestyle | Features

Clubhouse a sandbox for talking 'influencers'

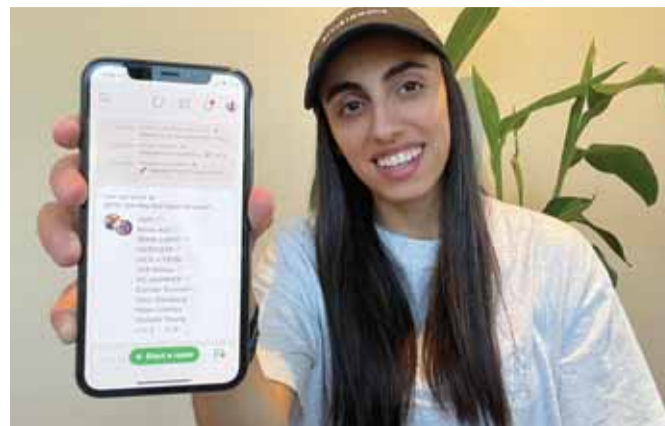
An internet spin on talk radio, the new social network Clubhouse has become a sandbox for people tinkering with ways to win fans and make money with audio. Clubhouse, still invite-only and accessible just through apps on Apple mobile devices, lets users drop into virtual rooms to join hosted conversations on any of a gamut of topics. Taz Zammit recounted being in a Clubhouse "room" while a beloved DJ made millions of dollars auctioning off musical creations tuned to the hot trend of authentication with "non fungible token" technology.

"It was super exciting for me to get to experience such an amazing moment with him and his family and friends," said the 26-year-old Australian, who is also a DJ. "Those are the rooms that you just cannot get out of. You've got to stay there because it's just too good." Launched nearly a year ago, Clubhouse—which has already encountered a censorship hiccup in China—is looking to establish itself as the standard-bearer for audio-only social media. The concept is simple: once you're invited to join, you can start or listen to conversations in digital "rooms," ranging from a talk by someone famous to a chat within a small group.

Clubhouse is already valued at \$1 billion and boasts some 10 million users a week. Its popularity has been boosted by the pandemic and appearances by attention-getting figures such as Tesla founder Elon Musk and Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg. "You get a lot of different perspectives, different insights and inputs, that are so real, and timely," said former television and radio personality Judyth Jernudd, now a leadership coach. "While it's still in beta, some of



This image courtesy of Toni Thai shows the American filmmaker looking at Clubhouse in New York. — AFP photos



This image shows the Australian influencer posing as she looks at the invite-only social network Clubhouse where she hopes to launch her own club soon.

us are using it as a beta, too, for programs and shows we might want to launch."

Feeling intimate

Unlike most major social media, Clubhouse lets people rest screen-weary eyes or tend to other tasks while feeling engaged in intimate conversations. Fans are dabbling with ways to weave Clubhouse into their lives with uses like group study or work sessions that are mostly silence. Facebook is rumored to be working on an audio offering, tentatively called Fireside. Meanwhile, Twitter has been testing "Spaces" live audio conversations as alternatives to text tweets.

Twitter head of research Nikkia Reveillac said such a move could broaden the appeal of the platform because "some people want to engage in conversations, but have found it difficult to find these spaces, no pun intend-

ed, where you can have more nuanced empathetic conversations that are off-timeline."

Time to tip?

Those able to draw followings or stage online events hope to make money. DigitalMarketing.org founder Gary Henderson advocates using "creator coins," digital currency personalized with an influencer's moniker. "For example, we're doing some private Clubhouse events," Henderson said. Clubhouse planned to test enabling gratuities, ticket sales, or paid memberships. "They definitely need to start thinking about ways for us to monetize quickly," said filmmaker Toni Thai, a founder of an Audio Collective creators' group at Clubhouse.

"I've had some really amazing rooms so far and I don't want to burn out all my great ideas." Thai sees Clubhouse one day adding a sophisticated content rec-

ommendation system, like Netflix does for television shows or Spotify does for music, and perhaps adding podcasts. Clubhouse is preparing to welcome all comers, which will ramp up challenges when it comes to keeping exchanges civil in rooms. People running rooms can find themselves faced with tough decisions regarding what should or shouldn't be allowed.

Zammit recalled a Clubhouse conversation with an LGBT theme during which a moderator cut someone off because of what was being said. "The room had a really great discussion afterward, about how we can't just silence people just because they have different beliefs to us," Zammit said. "But I also felt for the moderator who had to make that call because it was his room. And he wanted to protect that space." — AFP



In this file photo US actor Johnny Depp (center) gestures as he leaves the High Court after the final day of his libel trial against News Group Newspapers (NGN), in London. — AFP photos



Supporters of US actor Johnny Depp, one dressed as the character Edward Scissorhands (left), pose for a photograph outside the Royal Courts of Justice in central London.

Depp lawyers cast doubt on Heard testimony at UK hearing

Lawyers hoping to overturn a high-profile libel ruling against Jonny Depp looked to cast doubt on testimony given by his ex-wife Amber Heard, as they sought permission to appeal against last year's UK court decision. At the center of the arguments made by lawyers for the "Pirates of the Caribbean" star was the possibility that Heard, a 34-year-old actor, had not donated her \$7 million divorce settlement to charity and this had prejudiced the case against Depp.

Court of Appeal judges said they would present a written ruling on the actor's appeal in the coming days. Neither Depp nor Heard were at the court. Depp, 57, lost his battle in November for damages over a 2018 article in the Sun newspaper that branded him a "wife-beater" and was ordered to pay News Group Newspapers (NGN), which owns the paper, £628,000 (\$873,000, 733,000 euros) in legal costs from the trial. Depp's barrister Andrew Caldecot said on Thursday the court had been misled during the previous case by submissions that Heard had donated the full sum of her divorce settlement from the

actor to a Los Angeles hospital and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Subpoenas in the US have shown only a fraction of the \$7 million had been paid. Caldecot said, explaining the claims of full payment had "tipped the scales against Mr Depp from the very beginning". NGN lawyer Adam Wolanski dismissed the issue saying Heard said she had "donated the money, not that she had paid it" and that the two charities had understood the fee would be paid in instalments. Depp's legal team also argued that the previous judge had placed too much emphasis on witness testimony and not given weight to contemporary documents, but they were dismissed by NGN barrister Sasha Wass. "It is not only that there was ample evidence but there was ample supporting evidence," she said.

Severed fingertip

After the November ruling, Depp said he had been asked to step down from his role in the "Fantastic Beasts" film franchise based on the book by Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling. The case, which laid bare the actor's battle with drink and drugs, was dubbed "the biggest English

libel trial of the 21st century". NGN relied on the defence of truth, arguing it had a valid basis for the 2018 story by detailing 14 alleged instances of Depp abusing Heard. But Depp brought the action because he said The Sun's allegations had done a "diservice" to the #MeToo movement it was trying to support, his lawyer David Sherborne said.

His client was "cited in the same breath as disgraced film mogul Harvey Weinstein", he added. "That is why he has come here to clear his name." The 16 days of proceedings in July, which both Depp and Heard attended, exposed the couple's troubled and volatile relationship in excruciating detail. Depp released a graphic photo showing a severed fingertip that he claimed Heard caused by throwing a vodka bottle at him during a violent row. Heard claimed Depp injured his fingertip by smashing a telephone into the wall during the argument. Another episode involved faeces found in the couple's marital bed, which Depp said was left there as a sick joke by either Heard or one of her friends. — AFP

and we feel the virtual thing will diminish those efforts," wrote the producers.

Urging nominees to attend "an intimate, in-person event" at Union Station, the producers assured stars that there will be "specially designed testing cadences to ensure up-to-the-minute results, including an on-site COVID safety team with PCR testing capability." "Additional show elements" will come from the Dolby Theatre, just a few miles away in Hollywood. And in a seeming nod to some of the relaxed dress choices seen at the virtual Globes, Oscars producers added that "formal is totally cool if you want to go there, but casual is really not."

The details follow a largely in-person Grammys that took place in Los Angeles last weekend, which was praised by many watchers even as viewing figures continued to fall. This year's Oscars were delayed by eight weeks to April 25 after COVID-19 shuttered movie theaters, upended Hollywood's release calendar and placed live events on indefinite hold last spring. — AFP



In this file photo the Oscar statue watches over the 91st Oscars Nominees Luncheon at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills. — AFP

the brain trust." Academy President David Rubin this week confirmed the show would be held at downtown Los Angeles' cavernous Union Station, as well as its traditional base at Hollywood's Dolby Theatre. A letter sent to nominees, and confirmed to AFP Friday by a source familiar with the contents, informed those up for awards that there would be no option to dial in remotely if they win—a feature used at last month's poorly reviewed Golden Globes. "We are going to great lengths to provide a safe and enjoyable evening for all of you in person, as well as for all the millions of film fans around the world,

'Formal' in-person Oscars in hands of veteran director

No Zoom speeches, no jeans, and a returning veteran director: this year's pandemic-hit Oscars ceremony started to take shape Friday. The show on April 25, which will conclude a much-delayed Hollywood awards season, is taking place in Los Angeles with extensive COVID-19 testing precautions for nominees and their guests. The Oscars will be directed for a sixth time by Glenn Weiss, the Emmy-winning live-show expert, and produced by a team including "Contagion" director Steven Soderbergh, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences said Friday. "Our plan is that this year's Oscars will look like a movie, not a television show, and Glenn has embraced this approach and come up with ideas of his own on how to achieve this," Soderbergh and his fellow producers said in a statement. "We're thrilled to have him as part of

Last call for 'Keeping Up With The Kardashians'

It's a cultural abyss for some, an addictive melodrama for others, but no matter your view "Keeping Up With The Kardashians", which premiered its 20th and final season on Thursday, succeeded in syncing reality television with social media—and making the clan a fortune. Savvy businesswoman that she is, Kim Kardashian, who is among the show's central figures, and her mother Kris last year decided to get on the streaming train. Post-"KUWTK" the family has announced a partnership with Disney, for a new show on Hulu and the nascent platform Star.

But first they're wrapping the show that made their name, which remains on the cable channel E! — though audiences have dropped off dramatically since peaking during season 4, in 2010. Since it launched in 2007, sometimes airing more than one season per year, the wildly successful reality television followed the Kardashians in their daily life, always punctuated with family mini-dramas, and salacious tensions between couples. And its final season promises emotions on high-scripted or not-what with the possible marriage of Kourtney and Scott, the second child of Khloe and Tristan, and allusions to the separation of Kim and Kanye West.



ARTIST JR SHOWS OFF ITALY 'MUSEUM OPENING' IN LATEST WORK

With Italy's museums once again closed, French street artist JR has provided an art-starved public in Florence with a museum opening-literally. "La Ferita" (The Wound), the artist's latest work, is a black and white mural depicting a gaping hole cut into the side of Florence's Palazzo Strozzi, known for its contemporary art exhibits. Beyond the rubble, the viewer glimpses some of the Renaissance city's best-known works inside the exposed galleries-Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" and the twisting marble bodies of Giambologna's "Rape of the Sabine Women".



French artist JR jumps as he poses during the unveiling of his visual installation "La Ferita" (The Wound) on the facade of the Renaissance Palazzo Strozzi in Florence. — AFP

"It's a message that's coming at a moment when we need an opening to the museums," JR told AFP on Friday as the work was unveiled, adding that the public art might bring some relief "before the real museums open." The artist is known for plastering huge, black-and-white photographs—usually faces of unknown people in close-up—on the sides of buildings and walls in locales as diverse as the West Bank, the favelas of Rio de Janeiro or the border between Mexico and the United States. The strict restrictions imposed across much of the world one year ago to deal with coronavirus did not sap JR's creativity, although he acknowledged that "no one can be inspired by the quarantine, that's for sure." "Every constraint for an artist is good in that it pushes us to think, to invent and rethink, and if that's not the role of the artist than what is?" he said, adding that he views the pandemic as "an extra challenge".

With his latest work, which is free of people, he hoped to "involve people in the creative process". The best position for viewing the work, which was commissioned by the Palazzo Strozzi Foundation and takes up half of one side of the 15th-16th century palace, is not straight on but from across the street, JR said, inviting viewers to find it spontaneously by meandering around the plaza. — AFP

Moral decline?

The daughter of the late Robert Kardashian—the prominent lawyer who defended O.J. Simpson during his murder trial—Kim's spotlight on the show lent her power on social media, which was taking off as the show launched. The 40-year-old has 210 million Instagram followers, and per Kowalczyk "was very innovative and transformative" in her use of online networks. "Her use of social media is not random," the marketing professor said. "She uses the different platforms to create and maintain her brand image."

The family lends another "unique" element that attracts viewers, she said, who are eager for the next set of endless twists and turns. Kardashian has turned the brand she's cultivated into a vast fortune: according to Forbes, she's worth \$780 million. Along with the distribution contract with E!, which sits at \$30 million per year, she launched a number of product lines, notably her cosmetics brand KKW Beauty. Last year she sold 20 percent of its capital to the makeup giant Coty for \$200 million. Add in the fortune of her half-sister Kylie Jenner—estimated at \$700 million—and the clan's worth, which started from little, is approaching \$2 billion.

There's still the controversial legacy of the show to consider. "The Kardashians capture the unease of a society that is in many ways affluent... but might be decaying morally," Cashmore said. "And what I meant by that is that we have become fascinated with other people's private lives." — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



Neels Havenga, a commercial diver, bodysurfs in Noordhoek.— AFP photos



At one with the waves: Bodysurfing in Cape Town

At just after 6 am the light over the South African seaside town of Noordhoek near Cape Town has a pink hue as dawn emerges over the mountains and beach. In a car park, half-donned wetsuits dangle from the hips of sun-tanned, long-haired men. Before heading to the sea, some grab boards—the ones who don't are bodysurfers. "Howzit, bru?" shouts Anthony Pearse, greeting fellow surfers in local slang as he hurries to the water, keen to fit in a few waves before work.

Neels Havenga, whose day job is as a diver on offshore platforms, scans the foam for an area with ideal conditions to hit the waters far from the crowds of surfers. The lean 45-year-old feels he has passed the age to fight for the best spot. "Sometimes I head for less good waves, as long as I don't end up in a heap," he says, "Maybe I am becoming old and cranky, but I definitely avoid the crowds."

Bodies as boards
Groupies watch from the rocks as board surfers pull themselves to standing, sometimes riding elegantly, sometimes falling after clumsy stunts. A short

distance away the "boardless" crowd is harder to see as they ride deep within the waves. For these surfers the body is the board as they swim and stiffen, turning into a vessel to be carried towards



shore. "Your ribcage becomes the bow of the boat," explains Cobus Joubert, a youthful 50-year-old former wine seller.

Some of the bodysurfers use paddles attached to their hands to improve glide and stability. Others stick to outstretched arms and fingers. They seem to fall diagonally into the barrels of the surf, their frames arched to limit contact with the breaking water. "It's called a curl," says Havenga.

'Flying through the water'

Joubert says there is something organic about bodysurfing. "You do it as a kid, intuitively, before you even know it has a name," he says. "We've all done it. It's fun and you can't really hurt yourself," agrees Liam Kilbride, 19, who grew up just 20 minutes from the beach. Joubert, who owns a surf shop close by, concedes he is "more relaxed" without a

board that clings to the water's surface and is leashed to the ankle. But, he notes, you have to be a good swimmer ready to kick energetically "like in your mother's womb".

"It takes you back to childhood, there's nothing serious about bodysurfing, it's just fun," he adds. "You're either thinking good thoughts or your head is empty." Havenga says the feeling of "flying through the water" makes him joyful, even if he shyly notes that women seem to be more interested in surfers with boards. Finished with his before-work dip, Pearse dries himself vigorously on the beach. "Absolute freedom!" he beams, "Catch the waves, embrace the movement... you just position yourself and enjoy it." — AFP

Mystery buyer of \$69 million digital artwork reveals identity

An Indian-born blockchain entrepreneur has revealed himself as the mystery buyer who paid a record \$69.3 million for a digital artwork last week, describing his purchase as a shot fired for racial equality. Programmer Vignesh Sundaresan, who is based in Singapore, said in a blog post Thursday that he had purchased the most expensive digital artwork ever sold to "show Indians and people of color that they too could be patrons" of the arts.



This image courtesy of Scott Winkelmann shows artist Mike Winkelmann in Charleston, South Carolina.— AFP

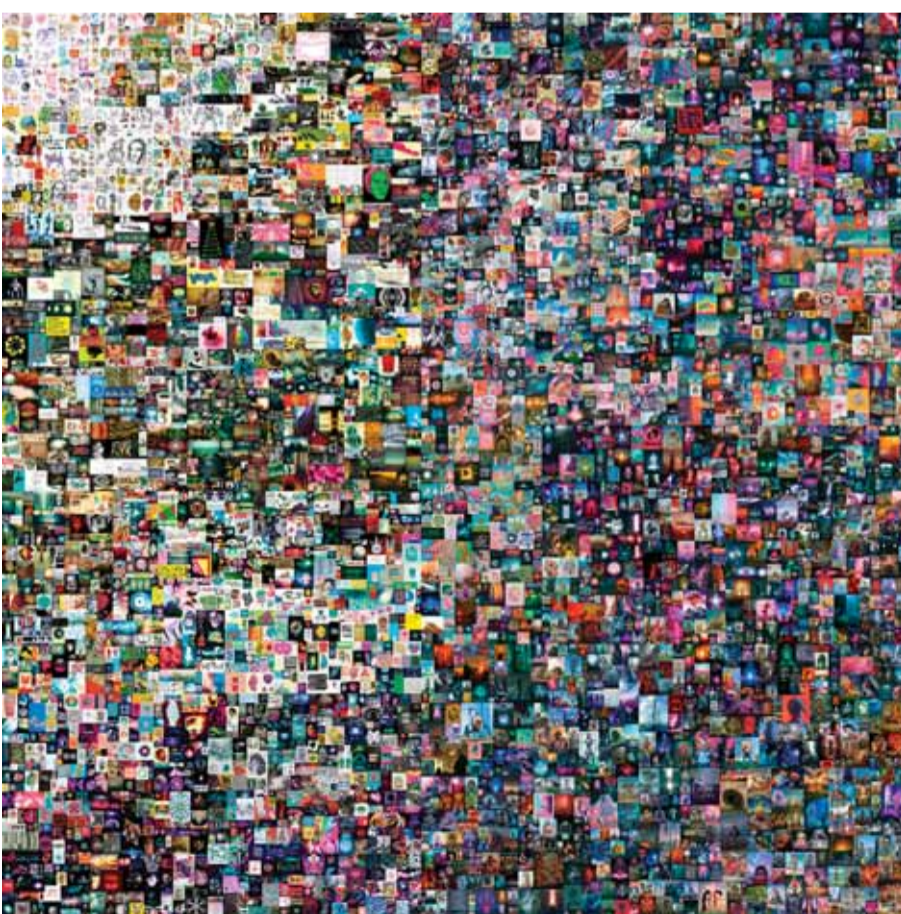
Around 22 million viewers tuned in to Christies.com on March 11 for the final moments of a bidding process that saw Sundaresan—under the pseudonym Metakovan—win the rights to digital artist Beeple's "Everydays: The First 5000 Days". Bidding for the virtual collage of 5,000 images—the first purely digital NFT-based artwork ever sold by a major auc-

tion house—had started at \$100 before the price skyrocketed. An NFT, or a non-fungible token, uses the same blockchain technology behind cryptocurrencies to turn anything from art to sports trading cards into virtual collector's items that cannot be duplicated.

They have recently taken the art world by storm with many seeing them as an opportunity to monetize digital art of all kinds. These strings of virtual code offer wealthy collectors the bragging rights to ultimate ownership, even if the work can be endlessly shared and viewed online. Investors meanwhile see digital art as a new commodity to be traded. "When you think of high-valued NFTs, this one is going to be pretty hard to beat,"

Sundaresan said anonymously via Christie's, shortly after winning the bid.

In the detailed blog post Thursday, he credited his rise from an engineering student with "no money" to a millionaire serial entrepreneur to his discovery of cryptocurrencies in 2013. "This is the crown jewel, the most valuable piece of art for this generation," Sundaresan said of the piece, that now ranks third among the most valuable artworks ever sold by a living artist, following works by Jeff Koons and David Hockney. — AFP



This undated handout image, courtesy of Christie's shows a digital art collage by Beeple, for sale in New York.— AFP

Chef's 'cry of despair' goes viral in lockdown Italy

A young Italian chef who has become a symbol of frustration with the never-ending coronavirus crisis said Thursday she wants Prime Minister Mario Draghi to listen to her "despair". A photo of Camilla Moccia crouching on the floor of the kitchen of her family's restaurant, her head in her knees, has gone viral in Italy and made the front pages of several newspapers. "My mother took it last Thursday, it was one of those days ... we didn't have any reservations, the weather was not so good and we were waiting for [lockdown] news," the 22-year-old told AFP.

The next day, Draghi announced a three-week "red zone" shutdown for the Rome region and most of Italy, forcing the closure of Moccia's restaurant in Ostia, a suburb of the capital by the sea. Her mother posted the photo on Facebook, later adding an angry message—all in capital letters—about the lack of government help for businesses affected by virus shutdowns. The picture spread quickly on the web, turning Moccia into an unlikely star. "I don't like being in the limelight, but I am happy that it struck a chord, it means that the message, our cries of despair, are getting through," she said.

Moccia said her family-run restaurant—which she described as offering "grandma-style" fresh pasta—has received only 4,000 euros (\$4,770) in state support over the past 12 months. "If I could meet Draghi, I'd be very happy to look at him in the eye and say... you only talk about vac-



This photo shows Camilla Moccia crouching on the floor of the kitchen of her restaurant "Il Bistrot della Pasticciona" in Ostia, west of Rome, her head bowed over her knees, on the eve of the government's announcement of a three-week "red zone" shutdown for the Rome region and most of Italy.— AFP

inations, please also spare a thought for all those who are going out of business." Fiipe, a trade group for bars, restaurants, night clubs and beach clubs, said on March 1 that turnover for the catering sector shrank by 44.3 per cent year-on-year in October-December 2020.

Draghi's new government, which took over last month, was set Friday to announce a new package of relief measures for virus-stricken business and workers, including a moratorium on tax bills. More than 103,000 people with Covid-19 have died in Italy since it became the first European country to face the full force of the pandemic just over one year ago. A third wave of infections is now putting hospitals under severe strain, but the government is hoping plans to ramp-up the sluggish vaccination program will soon provide some relief. — AFP

Louis XIV has not become Louis 14, insists Paris museum

A museum dedicated to the history of Paris denied Friday that it is dropping the use of Roman numerals for the names of kings and emperors, which had caused uproar in Italy. Amid concern that Louis XIV had suddenly been renamed Louis 14, the

Carnavalet Museum took to social media to calm nerves. "Roman numerals have not been abandoned. They are used for the names of kings and emperors on nearly 3,000 signs," tweeted Paris-Musees, which runs the Carnavalet in the Marais district of the city. Parts of the

Italian press had worked themselves up over the perceived "cultural catastrophe" of the decision to eschew their beloved numerals at the museum.

But Paris-Musees explained that this was only for around 170 monarch-related signposts aimed at simplifying things for

certain visitors, including for those with disabilities. However, it is now using modern-day numbers for all years and centuries, it said, in keeping with changes at other museums around the world, including the Louvre which made the change several years ago. One of

the city's oldest museums, dating back to the 19th century, Carnavalet is set to reopen this year if pandemic conditions allow, with some 3,800 artworks charting the history of Paris from prehistoric times through to the present day. — AFP

Sports

Jazz back in tune, Magic shock Nets despite Irving's 43 points

McCollum, Lillard lead Blazers over Mavs

LOS ANGELES: Utah guard Donovan Mitchell scored 12 of his 31 points in the fourth quarter on Friday as the NBA-leading Jazz eked out a 115-112 victory over the Toronto Raptors. The Jazz, stung by a 131-122 loss to the Washington Wizards on Thursday, bounced back by the skin of their teeth as Raptors center Pascal Siakam's potential game-tying shot dipped in then out at the buzzer.

It wasn't the kind of dominance the Jazz displayed in winning 11 straight games in January and another nine in a row in February. But they gradually heated up offensively, out-rebounded the Raptors 48-31 and made 35 of 41 attempts from the free-throw line to prevail.

In a fourth quarter that featured eight lead changes, Donovan made the difference, scoring eight straight points in the final minute and a half. "Finding guys and also seeing where I can fit in and do my thing," Donovan said of finding the right balance between facilitating his teammates and taking over. "I forced a shot early in the game, but in the second half I was pleased with all the decisions I made."

Jazz coach Quin Snyder thought Donovan, who added five rebounds and six assists, got it right as the Jazz became the first team this season to reach 30 victories. "Toronto's one of the best defenses in the league, particularly on the ball, and I thought Donovan showed a lot of resolve," Snyder said. "There was a toughness that he had. Not only was he aggressive and forceful, he was also precise, and made really good reads."

In the East, the Brooklyn Nets slipped half a game behind conference leaders Philadelphia with a 121-113 loss to the Orlando Magic. Orlando's Aaron Gordon scored 38 points and

Evan Fournier chipped in 31 as the Magic fended off a late rally by Brooklyn.

Orlando withstood a 43-point performance from Nets star Kyrie Irving, snapping Brooklyn's six-game winning streak while ending their own nine-game skid. The Nets trailed by 19 going into the fourth quarter, but opened the final period on a 16-1 scoring run.

A tip-in and a three-pointer by Gordon, however, helped the Magic turn back the challenge. Irving scored just seven points in the fourth quarter and star guard James Harden scored just 19 points on four-of-15 shooting — his streak of 14 straight games of at least 20 points ending.

Nuggets top Bulls

Nikola Jokic and Jamal Murray keyed Denver's stunning rally for a 131-127 overtime victory over the Chicago Bulls. Serbia's Jokic and Canada's Murray scored 34 points apiece against a Bulls team that dominated most of the way thanks to point guard Zach Lavine, who put up 32 points.

The Bulls led by 14 early in the fourth quarter, but Jokic and Murray combined for 24 points in the final frame. Murray drilled a three-pointer with four-tenths of a second left in regulation and added seven points in the extra session. Jokic added six in overtime as the Nuggets pulled away for the win.

Zach LaVine scored nine of his 32 for the Bulls in overtime, but the Nuggets notched their third straight win to remain tied for fifth place in the Western Conference with the Portland Trail Blazers, who beat the Dallas Mavericks 125-119.

CJ McCollum led the Blazers with 32 points and Damian Lillard shook off a second-half injury scare — staying in the game after taking a painful



TAMPA: Rudy Gobert of the Utah Jazz dunks against the Toronto Raptors on Friday at Amalie Arena in Tampa, Florida. —AFP

knock to his left knee — to score 31. Luka Doncic led the Mavs with 38 points, nine rebounds and nine assists.

In Memphis, Golden State forward Andrew Wiggins stepped up in the absence of star Stephen Curry, scoring 40 points in the Warriors' 116-103 victory over the Grizzlies. Curry was

sidelined by a bruised tailbone suffered in a sideline fall on Wednesday.

But with a dominant offensive display from Wiggins and 25 points from second-year guard Jordan Poole — who got the start in place of Curry — the Warriors won for the first time in three games without Curry this season. —AFP

Buoyant West Indies out to deepen Sri Lanka's woes

ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA: Sri Lankan cricket's woes of the past 12 months could be extended for at least another fortnight unless the visitors can rise to the challenge of a buoyant West Indies team in the two-Test series starting today at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in Antigua. Swept 3-0 in the One-Day International contest after being edged 2-1 in the tour-opening T20 International duel, Dimuth Karunaratne's team have offered little by way of confidence-building performances in the lead-up to the encounters with a Caribbean squad brimming with confidence after their unexpected successes in a similar two-match series in Bangladesh last month.

Having replaced Jason Holder as full-time Test captain on the strength of his handling of the underdog West Indies for the Tests in Chattogram and Dhaka, Kraigg Brathwaite leads a home team strengthened by the return of the former skipper and experienced batsman Darren Bravo.

Both were among a dozen first-choice players who opted out of the Bangladesh captain due to COVID-19 concerns. In their absence, debutants Kyle Mayers and Nkrumah Bonner took their opportunities with both hands and are predictably retained for this first series of an extended season of international cricket in the West Indies. South Africa, Australia and Pakistan are also scheduled to visit the region in the coming months. West Indies' main concern going into the first Test appears to be finding the ideal balance to the team as Holder's return to duty as one of the premier all-rounders in the international game gives the selectors the option of playing an additional spinner depending on the condition of the pitch before the start of play today. While the slow bowler-friendly conditions in Bangladesh made the deployment of off-spinner Rakheem Cornwall and left-arm orthodox Jomel Warrican in tandem almost inevitable, the situation is not so straightforward at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium where the home fast bowlers dominated Bangladesh and England in Test matches there in 2018 and 2019. —AFP

NCAA under fire for unequal amenities at basketball tournaments

LOS ANGELES: Organizers of the hugely popular, and lucrative, March Madness US collegiate basketball tournament were under fire Friday for disparities in the facilities offered at the men's and women's events. University of Oregon sophomore Sedona Prince launched the debate with a social media video of the "weight room" offered at the women's tournament in San Antonio — showing a small rack of free weights with no benches or other amenities. "Lemme show y'all the men's weight room," Prince said as her video cut to a well-equipped gym at the men's tournament in Indiana.

Prince scoffed at the NCAA's initial response that the difference was due to space constraints — offering video of the roomy, empty space available in San Antonio. "If you aren't upset about this problem, then you are a part of it," added Prince, whose tweet garnered reaction around the basketball world, including from NBA star Stephen Curry of the Golden State Warriors who re-tweeted the video with the caption "wow come on now!"

Brooklyn Nets star Kyrie Irving also called out

the disparities on Instagram. "Sooooo @ncaa This is how y'all are doing our Queens???!!!" Irving posted. "We can't tolerate this! They deserve more!" NCAA vice president for basketball Dan Gavitt apologized Friday in a video conference with media, ESPN reported.

"We have intentionally organized basketball under one umbrella, with the goal of consistency and collaboration. When we fall short of these expectations, that's on me," Gavitt said. "I apologize to women's basketball student-athletes, to the coaches, to the women's basketball committee for dropping the ball, frankly, on the weight room issue in San Antonio. We'll get it fixed as soon as possible."

But Dawn Staley, a three-time Olympic basketball gold medalist who now coaches the University of South Carolina women's team, said the weight-room differences pointed out by Price are just the tip of the iceberg. And she said the mindset "is not just contained to our championship. It's on our campuses. So this is nothing new."

Staley noted other disparities, such as in the gifts tournament participants received and even in the COVID-19 tests being administered. Geno Auriemma, coach of perennial women's basketball powerhouse University of Connecticut, said this week that his players are being given daily rapid antigen tests, which are fast but less accurate than the PCR tests that are being administered to the men's team. On



SALT LAKE CITY: In this file photo taken on March 20, 2019 a detailed view of a March Madness branded basketball is seen during a practice session before the First Round of the NCAA Basketball Tournament at Vivint Smart Home Arena in Salt Lake City, Utah. —AFP

Twitter, Staley urged NCAA chief Mark Emmert and his team "to own this mistake."

"It is sad that the NCAA is not willing to recognize and invest in our growth despite its claims of togetherness and equality," Staley said in her post. "We all came to San Antonio with one goal: it's time for us to turn our attention to preparing our teams for that. But it is also time for the NCAA leadership to reevaluate the value they place on women." —AFP

Boult, Guptill power New Zealand to ODI win

DUNEDIN: New Zealand captain Tom Latham called it "awesome" as star performers Trent Boult and Martin Guptill powered the Black Caps to an emphatic eight wicket win over Bangladesh in the opening one-day international in Dunedin yesterday.

With swing king Boult moving the ball both ways, New Zealand dismissed Bangladesh for a mediocre 131 and a blistering cameo with the bat by Guptill saw them cut down the target with more than 28 overs to spare. In New Zealand's first ODI in 12 months, Boult took four for 27 while Guptill blazed away for 38 off 19 deliveries.

"We haven't played for a while and it was about set-

ting the tone, winning the toss and bowling and I thought Trent and Matt Henry did that great, and for us to chase 130 in 20-odd overs was awesome," captain Tom Latham said. "And we know how destructive he (Guptill) can be when he plays like that, and to break the back of the chase was awesome and for the guys to finish it off then was a pretty clinical performance all round."

All but two of Guptill's 38 runs came from boundaries with four sixes and three fours before Taskin Ahmed found a faint edge and wicketkeeper Mushfiqur Rahim completed the dismissal. Devon Conway in his maiden ODI was the other wicket to fall for 27 while opener Henry Nicholls was left 49 not out. Nicholls was denied his 12th half century when another debutant Will Young (11 not out) brought up the winning runs with a boundary.

Tourists in trouble

When Bangladesh lost the toss and were sent into bat opener and skipper Tamim Iqbal immediately looked to dominate with a six off Boult's third ball and a four off the second over from Matt Henry. But on a



DUNEDIN: New Zealand's Trent Boult bowls past Bangladesh's Taskin Ahmed (back) during the 1st cricket ODI match between New Zealand and Bangladesh at University Oval in Dunedin yesterday. —AFP

ground where the average winning score is in excess of 300, the tourists were soon in trouble when Boult took two wickets in his third over. —AFP

Kuwait's Jaffar fully motivated for 2022 Dakar Rally

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti motocross athlete, Mohammed Jaffar, does not show any intention of resting. Instead, he has been taking on challenge after challenge since entering the racing world in 2007. After his recent participation in the world's toughest and most famous rally, Dakar Rally, which was hosted by Saudi Arabia last January for the second time in a row, Jaffar is already preparing for the third edition of this race.

"I had an accident on the fifth day of the Dakar Rally and had to withdraw. It was frustrating, but it could have happened to any biker in a similar rally," said Jaffar, who is a professional Red Bull athlete. "It was my first experience in the Dakar Rally, and I benefited a lot from it in terms of experience and competing internationally."

"And I benefited a lot from it in terms of building contacts and gaining international exposure," Jaffar added. Mohammed Jaffar wants to build on his past achievements. His first victory dates back to 2011 in the

Emirates Motorplex Championship in the "MX2" category, where he established himself as one of the best motocross riders in the Middle East. He previously won one of the rounds of the Emirates Desert Championship and placed in the top ten in his first international rally, the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge, in addition to winning 13 titles in other motocross tournaments.

There is no doubt that the Coronavirus affected Jaffar's plans for 2021. "I was affected like everyone else by the pandemic, as travel procedures have become very complicated, not to mention the fact that the quarantine for a week or two after each trip (upon returning to Kuwait) would negatively affect my preparations," He said.

"My goal is to participate annually in the Dakar Rally with the support of Red Bull. I was supposed to compete in several tournaments in Dubai, Bahrain, and Kuwait, but the Coronavirus put everything on hold. And, in the event of the pandemic coming to an end, I will make sure to participate in any of the races which are being held in the Middle East. I believe in my abilities and have the desire to raise my country's flag on the podium."

In response to a question about how he prepares for upcoming challenges, specifically the Dakar Rally 2022, Jaffar said "My training usually takes place in Kuwait but, my experience with the race in Saudi Arabia



Mohammed Jaffar

revealed that the nature of the rally was very different. So, if the coronavirus outbreak recedes, I will make sure to be in Saudi Arabia." Jaffar added "In the meantime, I take every opportunity I have to prepare myself for the third edition of the Dakar race. Saudi Arabia is close to Kuwait, so it will be easy to train there. During the current year, every time I have the opportunity, to prepare myself on the ground for the third edition held in KSA."

It is worth mentioning that the Dakar Rally was launched in 1979 in Paris, reaching the Senegalese capi-



Kuwaiti motocross athlete Mohammed Jaffar in action.

tal, Dakar, and is being held on the most rugged roads. In 2009, the rally was moved to South America, where it was held between Argentina and Chile until 2019. The rally then moved to Saudi Arabia in 2020, in a partnership with the organizers that should last until 2030.

Jaffar is always keen to thank his supporters who took him from a hobbyist to a professional, including Red Bull, the General Authority for Sports and the Kuwait International Automobile Club, especially KTM, who insured his motorcycle with which he participated in the recent Dakar Rally.

Sports

Bayern draw PSG in Champions League quarters as Real Madrid face Liverpool

Man City pitted against Borussia Dortmund, Chelsea vs Porto

PARIS: Holders Bayern Munich will face last year's beaten finalists Paris Saint-Germain in the quarter-finals of this season's Champions League, while Friday's draw for the last eight also threw up a clash between Liverpool and Real Madrid. The draw also pitted Premier League leaders Manchester City against Borussia Dortmund, with Chelsea playing Porto in the other tie.

Hansi Flick's Bayern side defeated PSG 1-0 behind closed doors in Lisbon last August to win their sixth European Cup and remain the team to beat, having won 18 and drawn one of their 19 games in the Champions League since the beginning of last season. The first leg is set to be played in Germany on April 7, with the return in Paris on April 13.

"The draw is of course a difficult one, and surprises exist, but we're going to play against the team that is the best on the continent at the moment," said PSG coach Mauricio Pochettino, who was appointed in January and oversaw a 5-2 aggregate win over Barcelona in the last 16. "We're optimistic," the Argentine told PSG's official website.

Travel headaches?

The meeting of Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool and Zinedine Zidane's Real is another re-run of a recent final, with the Spaniards beating the Reds 3-1 in Kiev in 2018 to win the last of their record 13 titles to date. Liverpool then won the trophy for the sixth time in Madrid in 2019 but their Premier League title defense this season has unraveled, with the Anfield club sixth in the table having lost nine times in 17 games in 2021. Klopp's side are due to be away in the first leg on April 6, but it remains to be seen where that match will be played.

Atletico Madrid's home leg against Chelsea in the last 16 was moved to Bucharest due to restrictions imposed on travel to Spain by British authorities in the pandemic. The winner between Liverpool and Real will go onto a semi-final against either Chelsea or Porto, throwing up the possibility of an all-English last-four tie. Liverpool beat Chelsea in the semi-finals in 2005 and in 2007.

Real have often struggled this season too but they may be optimistic about their prospects in the wake of the draw. "I think they would have signed for that, in fact with two hands," ex-Madrid player, coach and sporting director Jorge Valdano told Spanish TV channel Movistar Plus. "Liverpool are not what they were last year." Real coach Zinedine Zidane said of Liverpool: "We know them, physically they demand a lot from you."

Unbeaten in 13 games since the appointment of Thomas Tuchel as coach, Chelsea will be expected to get the better of Portuguese champions Porto, who ousted Juventus and Cristiano Ronaldo in the last 16. However, that tie could also be relocated given travel restrictions between the UK and Portugal which prompted both legs of the recent Europa League clash between Arsenal and Benfica to be played at neutral venues.

"I'm happy we play an international game, not against an English team, because the Champions League is about that and I always prefer to play teams from other countries," said Tuchel. "Clearly many people will maybe now make us favourites but you can ask in Turin their opinion about whether it helps you to be favourites," referring to the Juventus defeat.

Meanwhile City will be strong favorites



NYON: This handout picture taken and made available on Friday by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) shows the quarter-final draw results following the UEFA Champions League quarter-finals and semi-finals draw at the UEFA headquarters in Nyon. —AFP

against Dortmund, with the winner of that tie going through to a semi-final against Bayern or PSG. The prolific Erling Braut Haaland will be Dortmund's main threat, with City boss Pep Guardiola saying: "The numbers speak for themselves, he's one of the best strikers in the world right now, at his age."

Travel restrictions between the UK and Germany could also have an impact on that tie. Both legs of City's last-16 tie against Borussia Muenchengladbach were played in Budapest, as was Liverpool's tie against RB Leipzig. This season's semi-finals are due to be played in late April and early May, with the final on May 29 in Istanbul. —AFP

Five years on, Brussels attack survivor rebuilds life

TERVUREN, Belgium: Four months in hospital, 13 operations, a dead leg but still alive: For Sebastien Bellin, seriously injured in the jihadist attacks of 2016 in Brussels, "rebuilding" is still an ordeal. "I will be disabled for life, it is not easy but I have accepted it. It's a gift to have a second chance," said the 42-year-old Belgian, a former professional basketball player, at his home in Tervuren, near Brussels.

The suicide bombings, which Belgium will commemorate tomorrow, killed 32 people and injured more than 340 on March 22, 2016 at the national airport and a metro station near the European Union headquarters. Perpetrated by the French-Belgian jihadist cell that had already struck in Paris the previous November, killing 130, the Brussels blasts were claimed by the Islamic State group.

That morning, Bellin, who had turned to technical design after his sports career, was supposed to catch a flight to New York for a meeting with the US investors who had just bought his company. They were eager to meet him, he told AFP, and he brought his trip forward by 24 hours, from Wednesday to that

fateful Tuesday. At Zaventem airport, in the crowded check-in hall, the first suicide bomber detonated his explosive charge at 7.58am, then a second one went off about ten seconds later. Sixteen people were killed in the airport and another sixteen died shortly afterwards in the Maelbeek metro station, in central Brussels' European quarter.

'Rings on her fingers'

Bellin found himself on the ground, his legs bleeding, in the middle of debris and dust. He has kept in mind the image of a dead woman next to him. "I can still see the rings on her fingers, and very clearly her face, the blanket she was covered with," he said. From that moment, the former captain of the Belgian national basketball team (2003-2008) realized how lucky he was to still be alive. Surprisingly, he said, he felt "a kind of tranquility in the minutes following the second explosion". "Of course my two daughters came to mind — I didn't want my life to end," he said, but "I remained calm, instead of panicking and losing the energy I needed to survive." He waited an hour and a half before being taken away in an ambulance, and does not like to dwell on his suffering as those minutes ticked by. As he waited, he managed to pull his 2.05-metre (six foot, seven inch) frame up onto a trolley, carrying the dead weight of his immobile legs. He compressed the bleeding as much as possible with makeshift tourniquets. Today, his right femur and left tibia are



TERVUREN, Belgium: Former Brazilian-Belgian basketball player Sebastien Bellin runs on March 15, 2021 in Tervuren. —AFP

replaced by metal pins. He can no longer feel his left leg and, to move, has to compensate with his right leg, whose muscles are suffering in consequence.

'No tangible solution'

Five years on, Bellin's life is still punctuated by physiotherapy sessions and legal limbo over the medical expenses incurred for part of the treatment. "The state could have made a much greater effort, but after five years we still don't have a tangible solution," he said.

Though the attackers died in the blasts, a dozen of their alleged accomplices will go on trial, perhaps at the end of 2022. More than 700 civil plaintiffs have already been

identified for the case, and many complain of the administrative ping-pong between the Belgian state and private insurers for compensation and damages. For the time being Bellin, a professional sportsman for fifteen years, spends a lot of time "running to rebuild his life".

In the forest of Tervuren, he trains intensively to prepare for the next challenge on his agenda: participating in this year's edition of the "IronMan" triathlon in Hawaii, one of the most famous in the world, scheduled for October. "Being disabled is not an end in itself — a handicap can be improved, just like in golf!" he joked. "The handicap will not beat me. I am going to win." —AFP

Man Utd to face Granada in Europa League quarter-finals

PARIS: Manchester United were paired with Spanish side Granada in Friday's draw for the quarter-finals of the Europa League, while Arsenal will take on Slavia Prague. Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's United, who beat AC Milan in the last 16, are due to play away in the first leg on April 8 but it remains to be seen where that match will take place.

The Old Trafford club faced Spanish opponents in Real Sociedad in the last 32 but the first leg of that tie was moved to Turin in Italy because of restrictions on travel from the UK to Spain as a result of the pandemic. Granada are in Europe for the first time after finishing seventh in La Liga last season. The team from southern Spain notably beat PSV Eindhoven away in the group stage and eliminated Napoli in the last 32 before defeating Solskjaer's old club Molde of Norway in the round of 16. Granada coach Diego Martinez has won the Europa League before, during his time as an assistant coach at Sevilla.

Meanwhile, Ajax will face Roma with the winners of that quarter-final playing either United or Granada in the last four. United beat Ajax in the 2017 Europa League final. Arsenal are set to host Slavia in the first leg of their quarter-final and will be wary of the runaway Czech league leaders who have eliminated Leicester City and Scottish champions Rangers in the last two rounds.

However if the Gunners get through they could face their former coach Unai Emery in the semi-finals. Emery's Villarreal will take on Dinamo Zagreb, last-16 conquerors of Tottenham Hotspur, in the other quarter-final. Emery took Arsenal to the final of the Europa League in 2019, when they lost to Chelsea in Baku. The final of this season's competition is set to be played in the Polish city of Gdansk on May 26. —AFP



NYON: This handout picture taken and made available on Friday by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) shows the quarter-final draw results as shown on a big screen following the UEFA Europa League quarter-finals and semi-finals draw at the UEFA headquarters in Nyon. —AFP

Classifieds

HOSPITALS

| | |
|---------------------------|------------|
| Sabah Hospital | 24812000 |
| Amiri Hospital | 22450005 |
| Maternity Hospital | 24843100 |
| Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital | 25312700 |
| Chest Hospital | 24849400 |
| Farwaniya Hospital | 24892010 |
| Adan Hospital | 23940620 |
| Ibn Sina Hospital | 24840300 |
| Al-Razi Hospital | 24846000 |
| Physiotherapy Hospital | 24874330/9 |

Clinics

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|---------------------|----------|
| Kaizen center | 25716707 |
| Rawda | 22517733 |
| Adaliya | 22517144 |
| Khaldiya | 24848075 |
| Kaifan | 24849807 |
| Shamiya | 24848913 |
| Shuwaikh | 24814507 |
| Abdullah Salem | 22549134 |
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Overseas fans barred from Tokyo Olympics

First ever Games held without spectators from abroad

TOKYO: Overseas fans will be banned from this summer's pandemic-delayed Tokyo Olympics, organizers said yesterday, in a bid to reduce virus risks and convince a skeptical Japanese public the Games will be safe.

The unprecedented decision will make the Tokyo Games the first ever held without overseas spectators, as organizers scale back their ambitions for the pandemic event. When the decision to postpone the Games was taken last year, officials said the delay would allow them to hold the event as "proof of humanity's triumph over the virus."

But instead, the Games are shaping up to be a largely television event for most of the world, with little of the international party atmosphere that usually characterizes an Olympics. In a statement issued after talks between local organizers, Japanese officials and Olympic and Paralympic chiefs, Games officials said the virus situation in Japan and abroad remained "very challenging".

"Based on the present situation of the pandemic, it is highly unlikely that entry into Japan will be guaranteed this summer for people from overseas," they added. As a result, "the parties on the Japanese side have come to the conclusion that they (overseas fans) will not be able to enter into Japan at the time of the Olympic and Paralympic Games."

The International Olympic Committee and International Paralympic Committee "fully respect and accept this conclusion," the statement added, saying refund details would be released soon. IOC chief Thomas Bach set the stage for the decision at the start of talks between the parties earlier Saturday evening, warning "difficult decisions" would be

necessary to ensure safety.

The move had been widely anticipated in recent weeks, with leaks suggesting organizers believe a ban on overseas fans is the only option as they work to make the Games safe despite the pandemic. The IOC has reportedly sought limited exemptions for some overseas guests, but the rules are likely to be strict.

Tokyo 2020 chief Seiko Hashimoto has admitted it will be "difficult" for even the families of foreign athletes to attend. Just how many domestic spectators will be in venues this summer has yet to be decided. Organizers originally suggested they would rule on that by April, but Bach has said the decision could be pushed closer to the July 23 opening ceremony.

'Never happened'

Whatever they decide, there's no doubt that barring overseas fans will help make the Games a very different event from years past. "It has never happened that foreign spectators were banned from entering the host country at the time of the Games, even during the Spanish flu at the time of the Antwerp 1920 Olympic Games," said Jean-Loup Chappelet, a Lausanne-based professor who specialises in the Olympics. "Even for Athens 1896, the Cook agency organized 'packages' for those who wanted to attend the first modern Games."

When the Games were postponed last year, organizers and Japanese officials had hoped that the pandemic would be receding by spring 2021. They proclaimed the event would mark the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel, and a



TOKYO: A man takes pictures in front of the Olympic Rings outside the Japan Olympic Museum in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

celebration of the end of a global crisis. But even with vaccines rolling out in much of the world, the virus continues to cause havoc, and the narrative from Olympic officials looks to be changing.

The torch relay kicks off next week, with spectators barred from the launch ceremony and those lining the route asked to avoid cheering. In an interview last week, Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto acknowledged that the virus situation in the Japanese capital remained

"extremely serious" and said the Games offered "solidarity" during a difficult time.

Japan's public remains skeptical about the safety of the event, with a majority opposed to holding it this year and favoring either cancellation or further postponement. But organizers and Olympic officials have said neither of those are options, and they have put together virus rulebooks they say will ensure the Games are safe regardless of

the pandemic.

The IOC is also encouraging athletes to get vaccinated, even securing a supply of doses from China to offer to those in countries without advanced inoculation programs. The year-long delay and virus safety countermeasures have helped balloon Tokyo 2020's already mammoth budget to an eye-watering 1.64 trillion yen (\$15 billion), making the Games potentially the most expensive summer Olympics in history. — AFP



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