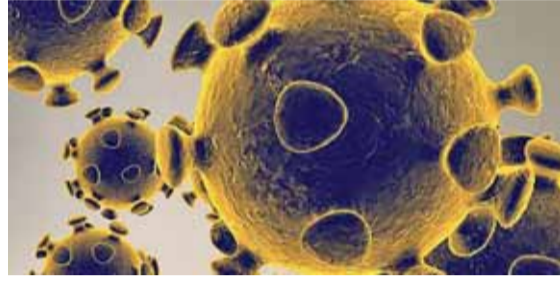




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for the COVID-19 vaccine [See Page 16](#)

MPs call on government to end partial lockdown

Kuwait reports 11 deaths, 1,192 new COVID-19 cases



KUWAIT: People queue as they wait to receive a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the vaccination center at the international fairgrounds in Mishref yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat (See Page 3)

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: A number of lawmakers yesterday called on the government to "immediately" end the partial lockdown that was imposed two weeks ago to curb a spike in the number of coronavirus cases, saying it has hurt the society and the economy. Opposition MP Hasan Jowhar said the partial lockdown has failed to deal with the crisis as it has not helped bring down the number of new cases, as he cast doubt on the "accuracy" of official figures released by the ministry.

The lawmaker said the health minister and the ministry have made "blunders" while dealing with the health crisis, and wondered why the number of coronavirus cases has been dropping worldwide except in Kuwait, where it continues to rise. He also asked how is it logical that the number of cases among Kuwaitis is twice the number of cases among expats, although Kuwaitis make up just 30 percent of the population.

Jowhar said the partial 12-hour lockdown has forced people to carry out their essential needs like shopping in a highly shortened period, which has caused harm to the people and the economy. He said this and other issues will be included in a grilling that Jowhar and another MP plan to file against the health minister.

Another opposition MP Ahmad Al-Azemi yesterday

reiterated that he will file to grill the health minister over the alleged mishandling of the coronavirus issue and other subjects. MP Khalil Al-Saleh called on the ministry to stop sending people who have taken two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to so-called institutional quarantine. He also demanded that the government must pay the cost of the hotel quarantine for citizens, otherwise it should send them home.

The health ministry yesterday reported 1,192 new cases of COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, taking total cases to 219,125, while 11 deaths were recorded, taking the death toll to 1,226. Ministry Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said the number of people receiving treatment in intensive care units has reached 232, with 14,360 others undergoing treatment. Sanad said the number of swabs performed in the past 24 hours reached 7,072, taking total tests to 1,967,210. Earlier, the ministry announced 1,331 cases had recovered in the past 24 hours, taking total recoveries to 203,539.

Meanwhile, Islamist MP Saleh Al-Mutairi yesterday submitted a draft law to amend article 79 of the constitution to make all future legislation in line with Islamic sharia. He called on MPs and Kuwaiti voters to help him in passing the amendment that will require that any law in the future must comply with sharia.

Continued on Page 2

Kuwait launches first Mobile Virtual Network Operator

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority (CITRA) announced yesterday the launching of a Mobile Virtual Network Operator (MVNO). The license for the first virtual operator, aimed at attracting foreign investors, is to be run by Virgin Mobile Middle East and Africa (VMMEA) and Kuwait Telecom Company (STC), the authority said in a statement to KUNA, adding that this step will boost competition in Kuwait's market.

It will also provide multiple new services in Kuwait with competitive prices, as well as provide job opportunities for both citizens and expats, CITRA noted. — KUNA (See Page 9)

Women's rights icon, author Saadawi dies

CAIRO: Famed Egyptian author Nawal El-Saadawi, a champion of women's rights who revolutionized discussions on gender in the Arab world, died yesterday at the age of 89, Al-Ahram newspaper said. Saadawi died in a Cairo hospital after suffering a long illness, her family said. A prolific author who shot to fame with widely translated novel "Women at Point Zero" (1975), Saadawi was a fierce advocate for women's empowerment in Egypt's deeply conservative and patriarchal society.



Nawal El-Saadawi

With more than 55 books to her name including the taboo-breaking work "Women and Sex", she was briefly jailed by late president Anwar Sadat and

Continued on Page 2

Morocco oasis farmers mourn date palm loss

FIGUIG, Morocco: Moroccan farmers in an isolated oasis on the Algerian border are bearing the brunt of regional tensions after Algiers expelled them from date groves they have worked for generations. The border between the arch-rivals has been closed since 1994, but Algeria had allowed some residents of the Moroccan frontier town of Figuig to cross into the date groves of Al-Arja, known to Algerians as the

Laaroda oasis.

In recent days, Algeria has withdrawn that right, deploying soldiers to enforce the move. "Everybody feels wronged," said Mohamed Jabbari, an unemployed 36-year-old who joined a protest in Figuig against the move. "Agriculture is the only resource we have. There's no work here, no factories."

On Thursday, some 4,000 people - around half of Figuig's population - attended an angry demonstration against Algeria's decision. Morocco's regional authorities organized a meeting to "examine possible solutions to mitigate the impact" of a decision they said was "temporary".

Continued on Page 2



FIGUIG, Morocco: A woman stands at a viewpoint overlooking this oasis town on the border with Algeria on March 19, 2021. — AFP

Lebanon moms march against ruling class

BEIRUT: Around one hundred women demonstrated in crisis-hit Lebanon on Saturday on the eve of Mother's Day in the country, expressing outrage at the ruling class. The mothers, some with their children, marched from an area once on Beirut's dividing line during the 1975-1990 civil war, to the city's port, which saw a catastrophic explosion last year - blamed on official negligence - that

killed more than 200 people and injured thousands.

Chanting anti-government slogans, they held signs addressing the ruling class. "You have stolen our money and our children's futures," several placards read. "The best gift would be your leaving," read another. Lebanon is battling its worst economic crisis in decades. The national currency has lost almost 90 percent of its value against the dollar on the black market and consumer prices have soared.

Some 55 percent of Lebanese now live below the poverty line, the United Nations says, and unemployment stood at 39.5 percent late last year. The government resigned after the

Continued on Page 2



BEIRUT: Lebanese women hold placards as they protest against the country's political paralysis and deep economic crisis on the eve of Mother's Day on Saturday. — AFP

Large asteroid (safely) zips past Earth

PARIS: The largest asteroid to pass by Earth this year swung closest yesterday, giving astronomers a rare chance for a good look at a space rock that formed at the dawn of our solar system. While in astronomical terms this marks a close encounter with the asteroid - called 2001 FO32 - NASA says

there is no threat of a collision with our planet "now or for centuries to come".

The nearest it gets will be two million kilometers away, according to the US space agency. That is roughly 5.25 times the distance of the Earth from the Moon but still close enough for 2001 FO32 to be classified as a "potentially hazardous asteroid". "We know the orbital path of 2001 FO32 around the Sun very accurately," said Paul Chodas, director of the Center for Near Earth Object Studies.

NASA says 2001 FO32 will pass by at about 124,000 km per hour faster than the speed at which most asteroids encounter Earth. The asteroid is estimated to be about 900 m in diameter and was dis-

covered 20 years ago. Astronomers are hoping to get a better understanding of the asteroid's size and a rough idea of its composition by studying light reflecting off its surface.

"When sunlight hits an asteroid's surface, minerals in the rock absorb some wavelengths while reflecting others," NASA said. "By studying the spectrum of light reflecting off the surface, astronomers can measure the chemical 'fingerprints' of the minerals on the surface of the asteroid." The asteroid was at its closest to Earth at around 1600 GMT yesterday, according to the Paris Observatory, France's largest astronomy research center.

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Local

Deputy Amir receives Speaker, Prime Minister, Deputy Premier



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



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



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

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Amir and Crown Prince His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday at

Seif palace National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem. His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince also received

His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. Moreover, he received Deputy Prime

Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Integrity Enhancement Abdullah Yusef Al-Roumi. — KUNA

Zain Drone assigned to acquire precise industrial data

KUWAIT: Zain Group, a leading mobile telecom innovator in seven markets across the Middle East and Africa, announces that its subsidiary Zain Drone has been awarded a contract to perform a precise data acquisition assignment for Kuwait's Public Authority of Industry. The project will entail conducting an aerial topographical survey using Zain Drone state-of-the-art technology.

Aerial surveys will be performed using autonomous unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) capable of capturing

corrected georeferenced imagery that will be handed over to the Public Authority of Industry for further data processing.

Zain Drone recently signed a contract with Openware for Zain Drone's UAV services to be utilized to monitor industrial areas in Kuwait on behalf of the Public Authority of Industry and detect and report on any changes to business activity. The Authority's aim is to develop, promote and supervise industrial activity in Kuwait as well as the development of the industrial base as it works to achieve national economic goals.

Zain Drone CEO, AbdulAziz Jawad commented, "The Public Authority of Industry has an important mission to supervise economic activity in industrial areas in Kuwait. We believe our services and technology are amongst the most precise and sophisticated available anywhere in the region, allowing our indus-



trial and commercial clients to undertake tasks with greater efficiency and lower cost than when utilizing traditional methods."

Zain Drone became operational in Kuwait in October 2018 to focus on the delivery of drone-powered solutions. This development built on Zain Group's leading position in digital innovation across the markets in which it operates.

Since that time, Zain Drone has managed to offer a diversified fleet of world-class drones and applications, provide bespoke solutions and educate the market on the magnitude of benefits the usage of drones can drive, particularly with respect to asset digitization, operational efficiency, inspection, maintenance, data accuracy and cost cutting while using advanced analytics to help governments and private businesses.



KUWAIT: Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Ali Al-Jarrah Al-Sabah met separately with Vietnamese Ambassador to Kuwait Ngo Toan Thang (left) and Greek Ambassador to Kuwait Konstantinos Piperigos in his office at Seif palace yesterday. — Amiri Diwan photos

Large asteroid (safely) zips...

Continued from Page 1

Amateur astronomers in some parts of the globe should be able to conduct their own observations. The asteroid will be brightest while it moves through southern skies, Chodas said.

"Amateur astronomers in the southern hemisphere and at low northern latitudes should be

able to see this asteroid using moderate-size telescopes with apertures of at least eight inches in the nights leading up to closest approach, but they will probably need star charts to find it," he added.

NASA said more than 95 percent of near-Earth asteroids the size of 2001 FO32 or larger have been catalogued and none of them has any chance of impacting our planet over the next century. NASA says the next time 2001 FO32 will be close to Earth will be 2052. Sixty-six million years ago an asteroid roughly twice the diameter as Paris crashed into Earth and wiped out 75 percent of life on the planet. — AFP

Lebanon moms march against...

Continued from Page 1

port explosion, but endless haggling between the main ruling parties has delayed the process of forming

a new cabinet.

"They are all war criminals, warlords," protester Nada Agha told AFP, referring to the fact that several politicians were militia leaders during the civil war. "They have been dividing up the pie among themselves (for 30 years)... and have blown us up and stolen our money. We want them to leave!" she said. Another demonstrator, Petra Saliba, in her fifties, said "no solution is possible while they are in power". "We want to destroy them as they have destroyed us." — AFP

Women's rights icon, author...

Continued from Page 1

also condemned by Al-Azhar, the highest Sunni Muslim authority in Egypt. Saadawi's outspoken brand of feminism - including campaigning against women wearing the veil, inequality in Muslim inheritance rights between men and women, polygamy and female circumcision - gained her as many critics as admirers in the Middle East.

In 1993, after constant deaths threats from fire-brand Islamist preachers, Saadawi moved to Duke University in the US state of North Carolina, where she was a writer-in-residence at the Asian and African languages department for three years. She returned to Egypt and in 2005 ran for president but abandoned her bid after accusing security forces of not allowing her to hold rallies.

She fell out of favor with many secular progressives later in life for her wholehearted embrace of general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi's military overthrow of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013. Her path-breaking, critical books published in dozens of languages also took aim at Western feminists including her friend Gloria Steinem and policies espoused by heads of state such as former US president George W Bush's invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. Saadawi's death coincides with Mother's Day celebrations in Egypt and across the Arab world. She divorced three times and had two children.

"I don't care about academic critics, or people who write critical reviews. I was never much recognized by them or by the government," the radical feminist told AFP in 2015. "Young men and women across Egypt and outside have showered immense love and recognition on me," said Saadawi, whose books were translated into more than 30 languages. Saadawi, a trained physician, was renowned for her fiery denunciation of FGM, which she was subjected to when only six years old. — AFP

MPs call on government...

Continued from Page 1

Islamist MPs have tried repeatedly in the past to amend the constitution to make all laws Islamic, but failed. Constitutional amendments in Kuwait are extremely difficult to pass because they require the approval of two-thirds of the Assembly and HH the

Amir. The leftist Kuwait Progressive Movement immediately criticized the move, saying this will transfer Kuwait from a civil state into a religious state.

Five opposition lawmakers yesterday submitted a draft law to amend the election law in such a way to exactly define crimes that deprive people from voting and contesting elections. In their bill, the lawmakers said any conviction should stipulate at least three years in jail for crimes such as issuing a dud check, cheating, rape, abduction and bribery among others. Currently, such crimes are not defined as those which result in barring people from voting or running for public office, unlike political offenses.

Morocco oasis farmers mourn...

Continued from Page 1

The Figuig oasis, sitting on a caravan route on the edge of the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara desert, was settled in ancient times. Trade began to decline after the border was drawn in 1845, and diplomatic disputes between Algiers and Rabat soon turned Figuig into a dead end. Before the border was drawn, the tight-knit Berber community had moved freely in the area. Now, to reach relatives just a short distance over the sealed border, residents say they have to first take a plane to Algiers.

Algeria has justified the latest move by claiming farmers have failed to comply with regulations and that drug-trafficking gangs were operating in the area. Figuig residents have strongly rejected those allegations. "The expulsions are a political decision," said Mohamed El-Jilali, head of a local association.

The expulsions coincide with a rise in tensions between the two countries in recent months over the disputed Western Sahara. Rabat considers the territory to its south a sovereign part of the kingdom - a position given Washington's seal of approval in the final days of the Trump administration. Algeria has backed the Polisario Front which seeks independence for the territory.

Hundreds of kilometers away in Figuig, residents have more immediate concerns: Their livelihoods. The oasis, a three-hour drive to the nearest towns of Oujda and Errachidia, struggles to attract tourists. That is despite its beautiful architecture and landscapes, which residents hope will eventually earn it a UNESCO World

Heritage listing.

That leaves many residents reliant on date palms for a living. Over the years, farmers have planted dates in areas beyond the wadi, or valley, that marks the border, taking advantage of the area's groundwater. The more recently planted areas produce a better harvest than traditional gardens surrounded by adobe walls and irrigated by a complex network of hand-built canals, farmers say. The area evacuated this week covers around 1,500 hectares and includes sought-after Aziza date palms.

Abdelmalik Boubekri, a Figuig farmer with chiseled features, said his date orchard had been his family's livelihood for three generations. "Algeria and Morocco have let us farm with no problems and now we don't know who to turn to," the 71-year-old said. He said he'd had to abandon 30,000 trees, some planted by his grandfather.

The years of work represented more than five million dirhams in value - more than half a million dollars - he said, with dates that sell for up to 150 dirhams a kilogram. Like others expelled from the Arja area, he claims a "historic right" to his land, brandishing a copy of a document dating to 1939. Farmers from Figuig had already been forced to leave lands on the other side of the wadi.

The latest evictions by the Algerian authorities took place in 1975, coinciding with the so-called Green March that saw thousands of Moroccans cross into Western Sahara to lay claim to the mineral-rich former Spanish colony. Since then, Figuig has seen a wave of migration towards larger cities or Europe, emptying the oasis of half its inhabitants, their houses and gardens left empty and crumbling. Farmer Abdelmajid Boudi, 62, is mourning the latest loss. "Lots of palm trees have been abandoned and become too tall to harvest dates from," he said. — AFP

Local

Kuwait curfew: What you need to know

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

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

Where to obtain a curfew pass?

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

Co-op delivery during curfew hours

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

Omariya Co-op
WhatsApp 6041-0067

Farwaniya Co-op
WhatsApp 6767-8211

Qairawan Co-op
WhatsApp 9000-3749

Jahra Co-op
WhatsApp 5160-2458

Abdulla Al-Mubarak Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-6338

Nuzha Co-op
WhatsApp 9784-5531

Khaitan Co-op
WhatsApp 6777-9745

Ardhiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6902-0779

Rabiya Co-op
WhatsApp 2438-8316

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

Salmiya Co-op
Tel: 22253225

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

Rawdha & Hawally
WhatsApp 9662-2883

Shaab Co-op
WhatsApp 9090-4455

Wafra Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-0539

Keifan Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-1719

Rehab Co-op
WhatsApp 9222-2358

Mishref Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-9900

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

Rumaihiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-0045

Bayan Co-op
WhatsApp 9004-2500

Fahaheel Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-9951

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

Salam Co-op
WhatsApp 9788-7832

One year of the pandemic, Kuwait residents tell stories of hardships

Loss, family separation, lack of income among expats' woes

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Every one of us has a coronavirus story. To some the pandemic has been difficult and hard; to others gruesome and horrible; and to the rest tough and unkind. So what is your corona story? Saby, a middle-aged Indian man, has been working in Kuwait for the last 20 years. He said January 2020 was the hardest, as his father passed away. He couldn't even be by his side during his hospital ordeal.

"Until now I am mourning the passing of my father. The fact that you cannot travel and be with your loved ones in times of emergency is the hardest part. He was in hospital in October 2020, was placed in the ICU, then got better and went home. But in December he suffered other health-related issues, so he was admitted to the ICU again. When you want to be with your loved ones but cannot do anything is the most horrible thing. This has been the saddest moment in my life. Until now I feel terribly bad. At that time I wanted to fly back to India, but the timing and reality on the ground were not in my favor. I loved my father so much, but I didn't have a choice - even if you have money you cannot do anything," Saby said.

Saby said 2020 and now 2021 have been the cruelest years he has encountered. "These have been horrible years, not just for me, but for the entire planet," he said. As of yesterday, the world has recorded 2.7 million COVID-19 deaths, with Kuwait's death toll at 1,215. The coronavirus pandemic continues to devastate countries around the world and there is no

sign the virus is going to subside anytime soon, even as the world is slowly rolling out vaccines.

Family separation

Muhammad Tariq, a 47-year-old logistics coordinator, has a disheartening family separation story. His wife and 9-year-old daughter went home to Pakistan on vacation in early Feb 2020. At that time, reports about the coronavirus were just emerging from China and there was no indication it would spread rapidly throughout the world. The virus reached Kuwait in the middle of Feb 2020, and by early March, lockdowns and curfews has started and many people were stranded outside Kuwait.

Tariq's family too was stranded in Pakistan. When Kuwait eventually opened, they waited for some more time to avoid quarantining in a third country as direct flights were banned from certain countries. Some were able to enter Kuwait early on, but others like the family of Tariq who waited for new regulations were eventually stuck in Dubai when they finally decided to return to Kuwait.

On Feb 7, Kuwait decided to ban the entry of all foreigners to Kuwait for two weeks, which was later extended indefinitely. Prior to this ban, there was already a ban on the direct entry of passengers from 35 countries - later expanded to 68 - who had to stay 14 days in a third country before flying to Kuwait.

Hope and prayer

"In early January, my wife and daughter landed in Dubai, but due to a series of border closures, my

family is still waiting to be allowed to enter Kuwait. I hope and pray that Kuwait reconsiders the entry ban, especially for dependents, and arranges a mercy flight for them. My family is not the only one stranded in Dubai. They are many others. We have been paying for hotel accommodation based on daily rates and are broke. I hope the Kuwait government will do something about our predicament," Tariq said.

Meanwhile, Raju, an Indian expat, said he was lucky to enter Kuwait just before the coronavirus outbreak. "I returned from vacation before the coronavirus struck Kuwait. A few days after I arrived, they shut the airport. I thought this will be temporary, but my vacation in 2020 was scuppered. The problem I am facing now is that all my part-time jobs were cancelled. I used to earn well from part-time jobs before; now I only have a salary from my regular job. But I am glad that me and my family in India are in good health," he said.

Melody, a Filipina business owner who had opened a restaurant in Salmiya in late-2019, said she is seriously contemplating closing her business. "I cannot earn anything anymore - no more income from my restaurant business. The amount I am now earning is not even enough to pay my restaurant workers and rent. This business before was very lucrative, but now all my savings are gone and my business is about to collapse. I am picking up the pieces that I can and am trying to sell anything to add to my income. I really pray that we survive this trial, as the only other option is to go back home," she said.



KUWAIT: People queue as they wait to receive a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the vaccination center at the international fairgrounds in Mishref yesterday. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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News in brief

Kuwait Foreign Minister in quarantine

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah confirmed that he has tested negative for COVID-19. He added in statements to Al-Rai Arabic daily that he and his delegation are currently in quarantine after returning from Pakistan. This follows the news of Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan testing positive to the virus.

Vaccine mobile clinics

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health plans to launch this week a mobile clinic service across Kuwait to offer COVID-19 vaccines in order to speed up the vaccination process, according to a report published by Al-Jarida Arabic daily yesterday.

Eight children a day

KUWAIT: An average of eight children enter the COVID-19 wards at Jaber Hospital every day, up from one to two children in the past few months, health officials have warned in a report published by Al-Qabas Arabic daily yesterday.

Dollar stable at KD 0.301

KUWAIT: The exchange rate of the US dollar was stable at KD 0.301, while the euro dropped to KD 0.359 yesterday, compared with Thursday's rates. According to the daily bulletin of the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK), the sterling went down to KD 0.419, Swiss franc dropped to KD 0.424 and the Japanese yen was stable at KD 0.003.

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: People shop at the Mubarakiya Market in the capital Kuwait city on March 20, 2021. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



KUWAIT: Chief of the Kuwait Fire Force Lieutenant General Khaled Al-Mekrad meets with Pakistan's Ambassador to Kuwait Syed Sajjad Haider.

KFF chief discusses mutual issues with Pakistan ambassador

KUWAIT: Chief of the Kuwait Fire Force (KFF) Lieutenant General Khaled Al-Mekrad met in his office yesterday Pakistan's Ambassador to Kuwait Syed Sajjad Haider. The meeting discussed issues of common interest and ways to enhance bilateral

ties, KFF said in a statement to the press. Lt Gen Mekrad conveyed to Haider the greetings of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, it added. — KUNA

Kuwait Insurance Regulatory Unit issues regulations

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Insurance Regulatory Unit has issued Decision (1/2021) for organizing the sector. The unit's head, Mohammad Al-Otaibi, said in a statement on Saturday that issuance of the regulations ushered a new phase with respect of supervision and organization, indicating that the rules could be revised in the future. He boasted that the regulations were worked out although the division was established not a long time ago. The division operates in light of the vision of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, calling for tangible achievements that meet citizens' aspirations. Meanwhile, the unit's deputy president, Abdullah Al-Senan, said the executive bylaws would be published in the official Gazette (edition 1527) — incorporating 340 articles. The laws regulate issuance of permits, registration of companies, commitments regarding required solvency, investment policies, arbitration and penalties. Senan has added that the executive bylaw is posted on the division official website: <https://bylaw.iru.gov.kw>. The insurance division, established according to Law 125/2019, is tasked with regulating the sector in a just, transparent and competitive manner. — KUNA

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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Ooredoo Kuwait surprises mothers with burst of cheer

KUWAIT: It goes without saying that mothers influence us the most and their unwavering compassion impacts us deeply. In view of that, Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, in collaboration with DOH, a local, artisanal, handcrafted donut line, recognized this year's Mother's Day and distributed DOH brunch trays with sentimental message to all the strong accomplished mothers and women in Kuwait.

The campaign came to ensure the fact that Ooredoo proudly embrace all mothers as a highly compassionate figures that not only care for their immediate families and children, but also to their communities and their nations as well.

Ooredoo is aware that this year's Mother's Day is different due to COVID-19, however, even such a global pandemic did not prevent Ooredoo to recognize mothers and celebrate their unconditional love and care for their children self-sacrificingly, their essential role in creating a stable and healthy family

environment, and looking after the whole family's wellbeing.

Mijbil Alayoub, Senior Director, Corporate Communications, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "Mothers are extremely valuable in the sight of all societies. Not only do they protect their families and their children in particular, but they bear life and give warmth and care. This protection, validates the high premium mothers place on family centrality, an essential component of Kuwaiti womanism. Lovingly and responsibly, the Kuwaiti woman is the mother of all humankind, and thus, unquestionably the supreme mother nurturer."

Alayoub added: "Our collaboration with DOH goes in-line with Ooredoo's corporate social responsibility in supporting talented local businesses, youth and creative minds. And undoubtedly, DOH owns it all."

From her side, Fouz Al-Khonaini, CEO and Managing Partner, DOH, said: "Our shared vision of empowering local talents, and bringing the best experiences to customers and the public, is the goal. Our collaboration with Ooredoo Kuwait came to honor mothers and bring them a joyous experience."



Mijbil Alayoub

NAFO inaugurates online Kalolsavam 2021

KUWAIT: National Forum (NAFO) Kuwait, a leading non-profit, socio-cultural organization in the country, recently held the inauguration ceremony for its Online Kalolsavam 2021. The ceremony commenced with the prayer by Nivedita Anil Kumar. The inauguration of the online cultural competition schematized by the association was presided over by NAFO President C P Rajiv Menon. Renowned Mohiniyattam dancer Gopika Varma, a member of the Travancore Royal family in the Indian state of Kerala, inaugurated the function by lighting the traditional ceremonial lamp from her residence in Kowdiar Palace in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala State.

The main attraction was the online interactive session with Varma in which she shared her inspirational thoughts and gave advice to upcoming young dancers of NAFO about Mohiniyattam, lifestyle in Royal Palace of Travancore and shared a few beautiful personal moments with NAFO members. Another highlight of the inaugural ceremony was congratulatory messages from Padmabhushan singer K S Chitra

and silver-screen actress Anjali Nair, who congratulated NAFO for the efforts taken in holding an online Kalolsavam amidst the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and the related health and safety restrictions. They conveyed their best wishes to all participants in the kalolsavam.

NAFO General Secretary Vijayakumar Menon welcomed the guests to the online inauguration of the Kalolsavam program and then handed the floor to Bhavana Menon, the compere for the evening. Advisory Board member Rajeev G Pillai delivered the felici-

ation address and wished all participants the best of luck in the competitions. Cultural program convener Unnikrishna Kurup presented the highlights of NAFO Kalolsavam 2021, and summarized the guidelines for all competitions. He noted that the competitions would be conducted in five categories with around 100 participants taking part in the various competitions that will be held from 18 to 21 March. NAFO Kids Nila Ajay, Nandakishore Girish entertained the online spectators with their melodious songs, which were scripted by the NAFO Ladies Wing officials. Around 100 NAFO families participated in the online inauguration, and the program concluded with the formal vote of thanks by Joint Treasurer Rajeev Nair.





Evacuations ordered as Sydney's biggest dam overflows after rain

Calls grow for a national monument honoring America's COVID-19 dead

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TUNIS: Tunisian police detain a protester during an anti-government demonstration in the capital Tunis. —AFP

Young Tunisian activists under police watch

Protesters say risk of arrest places a 'sword of Damocles' over their heads

TUNIS: Hamza Nasri, a young Tunisian activist, hit the streets as part of anti-government protests in recent months. Now he says he is under police watch and afraid for his friends. "I've moved house three times in recent months. I've stopped going to see certain friends so I don't put them in danger," the 27-year-old told AFP. Tunisia won plaudits for its democratic transition, its free elections and new liberal constitution after its 2011 revolution. The popular uprising put an end to a police state and established freedom of expression that was unprecedented in the North African country.

But a decade later, in the face of limited reforms to the security and judicial systems, activists say the risk of arrest places a "sword of Damocles" over their heads. In January, security forces arrested hundreds of youths, including many minors, from underprivileged and marginalized neighborhoods across the country during several nights of unrest.

They have subsequently arrested several young activists who denounced what they saw as a repressive police response. Nasri said he feared the country had taken a U-turn. The law student twice spent 48 hours in custody after anti-government protests in the capital Tunis in December and January, and now risks more than three years in prison on charges including blocking roads and insulting a police officer. "If I am sentenced to more than six months (in jail), it will go down on my criminal record and I can say goodbye to my dreams of being a lawyer," he said.

'We don't feel safe'

In Tunisia, sex before marriage, same-sex conduct, social media posts deemed offensive and evidence of cannabis use in urine samples can all be punishable by

imprisonment. Observers say this leaves young people vulnerable when they stand up to the authorities. Rania Amdouni, a 26-year-old rights and democracy activist, was sentenced to six months in jail this month for insulting police officers, though her sentence was reduced to a fine on appeal and she was freed. Dozens of human rights organizations in Tunisia and abroad had called for Amdouni's release. Both Nasri and Amdouni are connected to the association Damj, which defends the rights of LGBTQI people. "Life for a young person in Tunisia is about trying to avoid the police as much as possible," said 25-year-old Ahmed Ghrum.

The philosophy student, sporting short clipped hair and earrings, was jailed for 15 days in January over a Facebook post criticizing inequalities in the legal system. "We don't feel safe. We are not free," he said. Mehdi Barhoumi, an expert on rights and government in his thirties, said such arrests "place a real sword of Damocles over our heads". Barhoumi himself was arrested at a friend's house and jailed for two days after criticizing the growing presence of police unions during a private discussion.

He expressed concern at "the alarming security turn Tunisia is taking in its response to social movements". According to a study published in 2020 by peace-building campaign group International Alert, where Barhoumi works, 17 percent of 18 to 34-year-olds from several marginalized areas in Tunisia said they had been arrested over the past year. The organization said it had found irregularities in many of those arrests.

Generation of hope

However, Tunisian police no longer have the discre-

Australians in custody

Australia's foreign ministry confirmed yesterday it was providing consular assistance to two of its nationals in Myanmar. "Due to our privacy obligations we will not provide further detail," a spokeswoman said.

It is understood business consultants Matthew O'Kane and Christa Avery, a dual Canadian-Australian citizen, are under house arrest after trying to leave the country on a relief flight Friday.

The couple run a bespoke consultancy business in Yangon. A third Australian, economist Sean Turnell, an advisor to Suu Kyi, who was arrested a week after the putsch also remains in custody.

Weekend violence failed to deter hundreds of doctors and nurses donning hard hats and brandishing posters of Suu Kyi as they marched at dawn through Mandalay, Myanmar's second-largest city and cultural capital. Mandalay has been the scene of some of the worst violence from police and soldiers since the coup and local media said the rally was staged at dawn to evade security forces.

The protests came a day after a local monitoring group confirmed the killing of four protesters at the hands of security forces around the country. Two of the deaths were in Yangon, the country's commercial hub, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).—AFP

the goals of maintaining its insurgency in Iraq and Syria and a global cyber-presence," General Kenneth McKenzie, head of the US Central Command that oversees troops deployed in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, said last month. At the same time, the group is "building and retaining a cellular structure which allows it to carry out terrorist attacks", he said.

Shortly afterwards, France requested a meeting of the coalition partners who teamed up with Kurdish forces to drive out the insurgency, warning of a "strong resurgence of Daesh", an Arabic acronym for the group. The worries are well founded, analysts say. Between the fall of IS' eastern Syria holdout of Baghouz and last month, the group has claimed responsibility for 5,665 military operations - an average of eight per day - according to a widely followed terrorism expert who publishes on Twitter as "Mister_Q".

And Syria and Iraq are still subjected to IS attacks, like the one when twin suicide bombers struck Baghdad in January, killing more than 30 people at a market. —AFP

tionary powers they enjoyed under the regime of former autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. "Things have changed," said government spokesperson Hasna Ben Slimane. While she acknowledged reforms had been slower than expected, she said there was now more "professionalism" among the security forces, and that a handbook had been published to improve police legal compliance, such as on arrests. "We are taking action to radically change practices," Ben Slimane said.

The right to protest is enshrined in Tunisia's constitution and police abuse gets media attention. But Oula Ben Nejma, vice president of a civil society organization working for penal and security reform, said bad habits among

the security forces persisted because violations go unpunished. "We are yet to witness a trial where police officers are punished for misbehavior," she said. Amine Ghali, director of the Kawakibi Democracy Transition Center, said a return to a "systematic police state" was unlikely.

But he warned that some actors hostile to reforms, such as police unions and elements of the justice system, were returning to prominence. Expert Haykel Mahfoudh said the greatest source of hope came from the new generation of police officers who have grown up in a democracy. "There is a civic dimension to their conception of things," he said. They have "absorbed certain ideas about governance". —AFP

KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN
Ministry of Housing



مملكة البحرين
وزارة الإسكان

The Ministry of Housing would like to announce the tender for the following works:

Tender Title	Tender No.	Tender/Initial Bond	Documentation Fee	Closing Date & Time	
Construction of 256 Social Apartment Units & its associated External Woks & Infrastructure in Village C1/C2 at East Hidd in the Kingdom of Bahrain funded through the Kuwait Grant under the GCC Development Program to the Kingdom of Bahrain. (Package - A)	HP/07/20	BD 50,000 /-	BD 100 /- (non-refundable)	Sunday, 09-May-2021	1:30 PM (Bahrain local time)
Construction of 264 Social Apartment Units & its associated External Woks & Infrastructure in Village B1/B2 at East Hidd in the Kingdom of Bahrain funded through the Kuwait Grant under the GCC Development Program to the Kingdom of Bahrain. (Package - B)	HP/08/20	BD 50,000 /-	BD 100 /- (non-refundable)	Sunday, 09-May-2021	1:30 PM (Bahrain local time)

- Suitably eligible and qualified contractors are invited to participate in the above-mentioned Tender Packages. Eligibility to participate shall be given to Kuwaiti Grade 'A' Contractor registered with the Kuwaiti Central Tender Committee; and Contractors registered in Bahrain should be categorized as Grade A with the Ministry of Housing and/or Grade AA in Building Construction Projects with the Ministry of Works, Kingdom of Bahrain in a Joint Venture with any Kuwaiti Eligible Contractor. Full details of the tenderer's eligibility and qualification criteria are provided in the Invitation for Qualification document.

- This is a public tender whereby the prequalification of tenderers is combined with the submission of their technical and financial proposals. Full details are provided in the Invitation for Qualification Document no. QD EHH-HP-2020 attached to each of the tender Packages. This tender is a two-envelope tender and the prequalification & technical bids will be opened first and the financial bid of technically qualified tenderers only will be opened later.

- This tender is through the Bahrain Tender Board E-Tendering System and eligible contractors who wish to participate for above mentioned Project shall have to purchase and download the Documents online through the Bahrain Tender Board's portal <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.bh>. The tender documents shall be available for purchase and download beginning from Wednesday, 10-Mar-2021 up to Sunday, 18-Apr-2021.

- Contractors who are not yet registered in the Bahrain Tender Board's e-tendering system shall be required to register through the below-mentioned link. Details of registration are provided online at the Bahrain Tender Board website. For technical assistance please contact the Tender Board through email address helpdesk@tenderboard.gov.bh or call on Tel No. +973-17566617.

<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.bh/Tenders/registerUser>

- The completed Tender which comprise of the Application for Qualification, Technical and Financial Proposal documents shall be submitted online in accordance with the Instruction to Tender and the E-Tendering Guidelines of the Bahrain Tender Board. The Tenderer should include and enclose in his offer the Tender Bond for the amount specified above. The Tender Bond should be in the form and manner as prescribed in the tender document valid for 180 days from the closing date.

- This Tender is in accordance with the provision of the Kingdom of Bahrain's Law Regulating Government Tenders & Purchases No. (36) of 2002 and Its Implementing Regulations issued by Decree No. (37) of 2002; and is subjected to the Unified Rules for Giving Priority to National Products and Products of a National Origin (Article 8, Prime Ministerial Edict No. 21 of 1987).

- For any query regarding the invitation, please contact: Cost Engineering Section, Ministry of Housing, P.O. Box 5802, Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain, Tel. No.: +973-17533000-ext.519, Email: Chandramohan.Krishnapilla@housing.gov.bh.

- This advertisement shall be a supplementary to the Tender Document.

Protester shot dead in central Myanmar, 2 Australians in custody

YANGON: Security forces in Myanmar shot dead an anti-coup protester yesterday, as the Australian government confirmed it is assisting two nationals who were detained after trying to leave Yangon.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since soldiers ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi last month, triggering nationwide protests demanding a return to democracy. Security forces have responded with lethal force, using live rounds along with tear gas and rubber bullets in an effort to bring the demonstrations to heel.

One man was killed on Sunday in the central city of Monywa and at least two people were injured in a clash with security forces at barricades, two witnesses told AFP.

"I saw people carrying a man who was shot and killed," a local resident told AFP, adding the body was taken to a local hospital. "They used stun grenades and tear gas... later they started shooting. I don't know if the man, who died on the spot after he was hit on his head, was killed from rubber bullets or live rounds."

'Caliphate' or not, IS expands reach

PARIS: In the two years since Kurdish forces wrested away the Islamic State's last Syrian bastion, the jihadist group has proved it does not need a stronghold to pose a potent threat in more countries than ever. At their apogee, the extremists controlled a territory the size of Britain covering large swaths of Syria and Iraq, where it waged one of the most brutal campaigns of systematic terror in modern history.

Its defeat on March 23, 2019, was, it turns out, far from definitive, with the group managing to maintain its cohesion despite the dispersal of its leadership. It has also continued to claim scores of deadly attacks far beyond its original base, while taking advantage of the vast deserts of war-scarred Syria to target forces loyal to the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad.

"It has for the time being gone to ground, but with

International

Calls grow for a national monument honoring America's COVID-19 dead

Largest pandemic death toll more than 540,000

NEW YORK: Will the United States soon have a national monument commemorating the victims of COVID-19? Calls for a permanent memorial are increasing in the country with the largest pandemic death toll of more than 540,000. Since Joe Biden succeeded Donald Trump as president in January, and with America now in its second year of the pandemic, ceremonies honoring the dead—mostly virtual—have multiplied. Minute silences, flags at half mast, and places of contemplation: ephemeral moments of solemn respect have sprung up nearly everywhere. From 20,000 flags planted in the Mall in Washington last September when the US passed 200,000 dead, to 30,000 ribbons recently hung by a Florida resident resembling every death in the state, to murals paying tribute to caregivers, the pandemic has had markers in the landscape for months.

Now that the vaccination campaign is in full swing, and with the United States seeing light at the end of the tunnel despite a daily death toll of well over 1,000, appeals for lasting memorials are intensifying. “We are advocating for a permanent monument on the National Mall and funding for local, state, and tribal governments to be able to bring memorials and places all across the country,” said Kristin Urquiza, co-founder of the Marked by COVID association.

Urquiza helped launch the group shortly after her father died from coronavirus at the end of June. “It cannot be overstated how tragic and monumental this moment in our existence is,” she said. “We’re slated to lose more people than we lost in the Civil War,” when an estimated 620,000 Americans died, added Urquiza, an environmental official from San Francisco.

For Urquiza—who spoke about the death of her father, a Trump supporter, at the Democratic convention in August—erecting a monument and declaring a national holiday would be “an important step in the healing process.” It would also help ensure “that we impart upon future generations the unvarnished truth of what happened and why,” she said. Some municipalities have already green-lit monuments, with Jersey City in the New York suburbs the first. In December it designated a park under development as the site of 500 trees, symbolizing each COVID death in the city.

But the toll there has since risen past 700, highlighting the challenge facing supporters of these memorials. Many



WASHINGTON, DC: In this file photo taken on February 22, 2021 US President Joe Biden, First Lady Jill Biden, US Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, hold a moment of silence during a candlelight ceremony in honor of those who lost their lives to Coronavirus on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

relatives consider it essential to include the names of all the victims, even if the number makes that almost impossible. Supporters of a national place of remembrance all cite the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, which is inscribed with the names of more than 58,000 soldiers killed or missing in the war.

The long granite wall erected on the Mall in 1982 is one of the most visited monuments in the United States. It is the most successful contemporary memorial in America along with the 9/11 Memorial in New York City, according to Emily Godbey, a monument design expert at Iowa State University. “It’s an experience. It’s not something that you just look at,” she said. But “how do you honor the victims, when the numbers are so vast and we don’t know the end point yet?” she asks.

Virtual funerals

Godbey thinks an anonymous monument is more realistic, such as the “World Memorial to the Pandemic” proposed by Uruguayan architectural firm GomezPlatero. It resembles a large disc saucer and would be installed off the coast of Montevideo. But in the United States, where

the epidemic has been marred by political tensions, many relatives of victims expect real recognition, and even reparations, from the authorities. “We have to find a way to recognize each life lost to really make the tragedy understood,” said Urquiza.

Godbey says the debate over a national monument could last years. While waiting for physical monuments to be erected, the moment is virtual. Websites with photos and tributes to the victims are legion. A tribute site launched by journalism schools in New York last year calling on relatives to send photos and testimonies of their departed loved ones is the most exhaustive databases amassed so far, according to one of the site’s editors, Anjali Tsui. Despite the help of many volunteers the site only has some 2,000 names out of the more than 30,000 people who have died in New York City, highlighting the magnitude of the task. “What is so devastating about the COVID losses is that we’re having to experience them virtually,” said Godbey. After attending funerals online and watching a family member via a screen die in their hospital bed, over time a memorial is “going to have to be physical,” she added. — AFP

Southern European nations show united front on migration

ATHENS: Southern European countries showed a united front at a meeting in Athens, urging solidarity from other EU states in sharing the migration burden. Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Malta and Spain took part in the talks ahead of a March 25-26 EU summit focusing on EU-Turkey relations. Four of those southern EU countries that bear the brunt of refugee arrivals—Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain—have already told the European Commission that a proposed New Pact on Migration and Asylum does not share the burden of migrants arriving in Europe widely enough.

“We repeat our strong plea in favor of a needed true balance between solidarity and responsibility as in its current format the Pact does not provide sufficient reassurances to the front-line Member States”, the common statement said on Saturday. The Commission wants to overhaul the rules so that the asylum-seekers are shared out across the 27 member countries and not left the responsibility of Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain.

Aware that some countries, mainly eastern EU states, resist that, the new pact proposes they contribute funds instead to help the others taking in asylum-seekers. On Saturday the ministers of the five front-line countries stressed the “need for an automa-

Greece to mark revolution bicentennial with 1821 allies

ATHENS: Greece will next week celebrate the 200th anniversary of the uprising that created its modern state, a romantic revolution that experts say captivated both elites and the masses around the world. A national parade alongside Athens’ central Syntagma Square on March 25 — the date traditionally associated with the revolution—will feature mounted troops in traditional costumes from the 1821 conflict and the 1912-13 Balkan Wars. Nations who helped the Greeks in their near-decade-long struggle against the Ottoman Empire will also be represented. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Prince Charles of Britain and his wife Camilla will be in attendance, the Greek prime minister’s office said.

A new coronavirus lockdown forced French President Emmanuel Macron to pull out, but French Rafale and American F-16 jets will overfly the Greek capital, while the USS Eisenhower aircraft carrier will dock in Crete, a defense ministry source said. France has also loaned Greece an 18th-century tapestry of Raphael’s Renaissance masterpiece The School of Athens, the French embassy said.

Debt to Greece

With passion for Classical Greece mounting among European elites through the 17th and 18th centuries, “providing aid to modern Greeks came to be seen as a ‘duty’ of Europeans, as the only possible way of repaying Greece for its contribution to the birth of occidental civilization,” said Konstantina Zanou, a Mediterranean Studies specialist at Columbia University. Poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in his 1821 verse drama ‘Hellas’ that “our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece. But for Greece... we might still have been savages and idolaters”.

ic and mandatory relocation mechanism to be put in place” and “a centrally managed European return mechanism, coordinated by the Commission and supported by relevant EU agencies such as FRONTEX”.

The MED5 group asked for an increase in “cooperation with origin and transit countries” but also to “ensure that the 2016 EU-Turkey Joint Statement is fully implemented by both the EU and Turkey towards all Member states”.

Cyprus and Greece are strongly critical of Turkey. Ever since a migration crisis in 2015 that saw over a million asylum-seekers enter Europe, the EU’s refugee and migration rules have been exposed as deficient.

Under a 2016 EU-Turkey pact, Ankara had agreed to take back migrants not entitled to international protection in return for billions of euros in aid. But Ankara has long accused the EU of not fulfilling its end of the bargain while it continues to host more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees.

The ministers who met at a hotel in Vouliagmeni, a seaside suburb of Athens, were joined by the vice-president of the European Commission, Margaritis Schinas and the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. “We can no longer be punished because of our geographic position. We can no longer be punished for saving lives at sea,” Malta’s Home Affairs Minister Byron Camilleri said. Greek Migration Minister and host Notis Mitarachi warned that “the pact shouldn’t allow in future the emergence of new camps like Moria”, referring to a notorious Greek island refugee camp destroyed by fire. He added that “there is a lack of balance between the obligations of the countries of first reception and the uncertain mechanism of solidarity of the rest of the EU”. —AFP

MIAMI BEACH: In this file photo taken on March 17, 2021 people watch a drag show at a club on Ocean Drive in Miami Beach. Throngs of revelers flocking to Miami Beach, Florida for spring break have become so uncontrollable that authorities imposed a curfew Saturday. — AFP

Miami Beach declares state of emergency

MIAMI BEACH: Throngs of revelers flocking to Miami Beach in Florida for spring break have become so uncontrollable that authorities declared a state of emergency Saturday and imposed a curfew meant to quash the party. The move marks the second year in a row that fun has been curtailed at the popular spring break destination—last March because the pandemic was just ramping up and this year due to unruly and destructive crowds. Authorities announced Saturday that visitors must be off the street and that restaurants would close their doors at 8:00 pm in South Beach, the epicenter of the city’s nightlife, following an increase of violence and vandalism over recent days. “It kind of sucks,” said John Perez, a student from Texas having beers with a group of friends on the sand, despite police efforts to prevent alcohol consumption on the beach.

In addition to the curfew, the three bridges that connect the Miami Beach island to mainland Miami will now be closed to traffic from 10 pm to 6 am. Only residents, workers and hotel guests will have access. “It’s been so much fun out here, you know, like we got the warm weather, you got the beach,” 22-year-old Perez said.

An aerial photo released by police Saturday night showed the city’s main strip, Ocean Drive, empty just two hours after the curfew went into effect. Miami Beach is no stranger to uncontrollable spring break crowds, but this year, with approximately 13 percent of US residents vaccinated, the atmosphere is particularly festive and the illusion that the pandemic is now under control is pervasive. “Just go get your vaccine y’all so that you could come out here and have a good time like us because we vaccinated, baby,” Jalen Rob, another student from Texas, said. Another man, with his face painted like the Joker, stood on top of a car yelling “Covid’s over, baby!” while waving an American flag, in a video posted to Twitter by filmmaker Billy Corben.

Acting City Manager Raul Aguila said the city’s curfew moves were “all about the public safety.” He described huge crowds that had gathered on Ocean Drive as looking “like a rock concert. You couldn’t see pavement and you couldn’t see grass.” Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber said Saturday while announcing the curfew that “the volume is clearly more than it’s been in previous years.” “I think it is in part due to the fact that there are very few places open elsewhere in the country, or they’re too cold or they’re not open and they’re too cold,” he said. —AFP

News in brief

Launch postponed for Soyuz rocket

MOSCOW: The launch of a Russian Soyuz rocket with 38 foreign satellites on board has been postponed until Monday, the Russian space agency Roscosmos said. The launch of satellites from more than half a dozen Asian, Arab and European countries, as well as Canada and Brazil, was originally scheduled for 0607 GMT on Saturday. It was initially postponed until yesterday, but Roscosmos later said it would take place today. Space agency chief Dmitry Rogozin said the launch was delayed after a surge in voltage was detected. “Having heard reports from the work managers, the State Commission decided to conduct the launch on the morning of March 22, 2021,” Roscosmos said in a later statement. —AFP

Police clash with protesters

KASSEL: German police clashed with protesters at a mass demonstration against coronavirus restrictions in the city of Kassel on Saturday, using water cannon, batons and pepper spray to disperse crowds. The protest attracted between 15,000 and 20,000 demonstrators, a Kassel police spokesman told AFP, making it one of the largest such rallies so far this year. “This is not what a peaceful protest looks like,” North Hesse police tweeted, adding that there had been “repeated attacks” by protesters against emergency service workers. An AFP reporter saw scuffles erupt when a group of corona skeptics tried to break through a police cordon to join up with other protesters, resulting in shoving and the use of pepper spray. — AFP

False alarm sends Mexicans into street

MEXICO CITY: Quake alarms roused thousands of residents of Mexico City early Saturday, sending some running into the street in their pajamas, but then nothing happened. Nerves were on edge because a 5.7-magnitude quake had struck south-central parts of the country hours earlier, though there were no reports there of injuries or damage. Alarms sounded in some of the capital’s central neighborhoods, including Escandon and Del Valle, sending dozens out of their homes, AFP journalists reported. Similar scenes were witnessed in the Iztacalco neighborhood farther south, as well as in Popotla in the city’s east, while in neighborhoods including Roma and Doctores no alarm was sounded. — AFP

Climate change row in Canada

TORONTO: Delegates of Canada’s Conservative Party rejected a resolution calling on the party to recognize the reality of climate change, snubbing a plea from the faction’s leader to take the environment more seriously. In a virtual policy conference that opened Thursday, 54 percent of delegates voted against a proposal recognizing that “climate change is real” and that the party is “willing to act” on it, according to results posted online. —AFP

‘Put me in jail’: Vaccine-skeptics still a barrier

MARTINSBURG, US: Patients stream steadily into the COVID vaccine center that Todd Engle can almost touch from his West Virginia backyard. But like scores of other Republican voters, force would likely be required to get a dose into his arm. Many of the party’s millions of supporters are among the nation’s most vaccine-skeptical people, which experts see as a dangerous barrier to finally taming the virus that has killed more than 540,000 in the United States. “If they try to make me get it, they’re just going to (have to) put me in jail,” the 58-year-old Engle told AFP from the porch of his home in Martinsburg, referring to health authorities. “I just don’t trust them.” West Virginia is heavily Republican—over 68 percent of its voters chose Donald Trump in November’s election—and it has long been one of the nation’s poorest states.

Yet not all West Virginia Republicans are vaccine skeptics. The state of under two million people has been lauded for quickly getting COVID vaccines to its people while bigger, wealthier and Democrat-led states have sometimes struggled to do the same. Part of that effort is the vaccine site behind Engle’s home, which operates in a recreation center gymnasium with the kind of efficiency that bustling, pre-pandemic airports could only dream of. Nurse Angela Gray, 51, said the site has administered as many as 1,500 shots in a day. “I try not to look at politics; that doesn’t matter,” Gray noted as nurses in masks, face shields and gloves delivered shots behind her. “But I’ve seen a lot of my fellow Republicans who are getting vaccinated.” She added that Republican elected officials in the area have spoken up for the safety and effectiveness of the shots and gotten inoculated themselves, a key part of efforts to convince the skeptical. But in towns across the United States, skeptics are numerous. According to a poll last week, 41 percent of Republicans nationally said they would not get the vaccine, compared to just 11 percent of Democrats. —AFP



Greek Presidential guards march past outdoor exhibition, featuring portraits of Greek revolution heroes titled ‘History has Face’ by Benjamin Mary, a Belgian diplomat on the occasion of the 200 years anniversary of the Greek Revolution against ottoman Turks. — AFP

International

Evacuations ordered as Sydney's biggest dam overflows after rain

Authorities ask 4,000 people to leave their homes in coming days

SYDNEY: Sydney braced for its worst flooding in decades yesterday after record rainfall caused its largest dam to overflow and as deluges prompted mandatory mass evacuation orders along Australia's east coast. Emergency services ordered people living in low-lying areas on the city's north-western fringes to flee to safety, as authorities warned of a potentially "life-threatening" situation in New South Wales state. It came after the Warragamba Dam, which provides much of the drinking water for Sydney, spilled over Saturday afternoon-causing officials to warn the downstream Hawkesbury River was expected to peak at levels not seen since 1961.

"It is one of the biggest floods we are likely to see for a very long time," Bureau of Meteorology flood operations manager Justin Robinson said. Floodwaters had already risen in several areas, prompting mass evacuations, and officials said another 4,000 people could be told to leave their homes in the coming days. Authorities urged residents to heed the "dozens" of official warnings in place across affected areas, with State Emergency Service assistant commissioner Dean Storey saying those in evacuation zones "must leave immediately".

People had already begun flocking to evacuation centers in towns north of Sydney on Saturday as torrential rains pummeled a vast coastal region already soaked by an unusually wet summer. State

Premier Gladys Berejiklian said the region was experiencing a "one in 100 year event" and a national disaster had been declared. In Taree, where television images showed one house floating down a bloated river, about 150 people slept in a local auditorium overnight that has previously been used as a refuge for people fleeing bushfires. Club Taree chief executive Paul Allen described the floods as a "catastrophe", telling public broadcaster ABC that some locals had "lost everything".

The Bureau of Meteorology said the wild weather was forecast to re-intensify north of Sydney today before easing later in the week. Conditions were "going to be treacherous yet again," senior climatologist Agata Imielska said. Rainfall records were forecast to continue tumbling in the coming days, she added. Emergency services reported receiving more than 7,000 calls for help and carrying out about 650 flood rescues since Thursday, with reinforcements being called in from other states.

The rain and floods were also expected to delay the already halting roll-out of coronavirus vaccines in Sydney and surrounding areas. Australia is due to begin the first major public phase of vaccine distribution on Monday although the program has slipped behind the government's announced timetable due to supply and delivery issues. —AFP



SYDNEY: Residents walk amid heavy rain in Penrith suburb yesterday, as Sydney braced for its worst flooding in decades after record rainfall caused its largest dam to overflow and as deluges prompted mandatory mass evacuation orders along Australia's east coast. —AFP

Thousands rally at anti-Netanyahu protest ahead of vote

JERUSALEM: Thousands of Israelis rallied outside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Jerusalem residence Saturday to protest his policies and premiership, days before a general election that could see the long-standing leader removed from power. Netanyahu, 71, in power for a record 12 consecutive years, is hoping to remain in office following Israel's fourth election in less than two years on March 23.

His detractors accuse him of corruption and say his management of the coronavirus pandemic, including protracted lockdowns, battered the economy and contributed to job losses. Waving flags including the Israeli blue-and-white, protesters led by a young man with a bullhorn chanted "Bibi go home", using the prime minister's nickname.

They also held up signs carrying a broad range of messages, from the need for a leader-

ship "revolution" to mistrust in the police. "We came to protest against a dictator," Anat Gourelle, a 60-year-old lawyer from Tel Aviv, said of Netanyahu.

"It is outrageous what is going on in Israel. It is unthinkable that somebody is using his power to steal from his own people," she said. "We will keep on protesting until he gets out of Balfour," she said, using the name of the Jerusalem street where the premier's official residence is located.

Netanyahu was the first Israeli premier to be indicted in office for corruption when he was formally charged last year in three cases over claims he accepted improper gifts and sought to trade regulatory favor with media moguls in exchange for positive coverage. The combative premier denies wrongdoing and claims he is the victim of a witch-hunt, but he would be forced to resign if convicted with all appeals exhausted.

'Go vote'

First launched in June last year, the vocal and colourful demonstrations against Netanyahu have gained momentum over the past 38 weeks, with Saturday night's rally—the 39th—the largest in recent months. "I have come here every Saturday since the

beginning," said Simon, a Tel Aviv resident who drove to Jerusalem for the demonstration. "People will not change their side from right to left, but this event is to convince them to go to vote, not to remain silent," he said. "It is a very emotional event for us." Others, like Hagit, were at the weekly rally for the first time. —AFP



JERUSALEM: A protester holds a sign reading "BB GO HOME" depicting Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the character 'E.T.' —AFP

beginning," said Simon, a Tel Aviv resident who drove to Jerusalem for the demonstration. "People will not change their side from right to left, but this event is to convince them to go to vote, not to remain silent," he said. "It is a very emotional event for us." Others, like Hagit, were at the weekly rally for the first time. —AFP



BRAZZAVILLE, Commune de Brazzaville: Republic of Congo incumbent president Denis Sassou-Nguesso, candidate for the presidential election waves at his supporters, at the end of his last campaign rally in Brazzaville. —AFP

only opposition party to have a parliamentary group in the current national assembly. Flanked by its giant neighbor the Democratic Republic of Congo and Gabon, the former French colony has oil reserves and most of its budget comes from petroleum revenue. —AFP

Subramanian, a former chief government economic advisor, resigned from Ashoka in solidarity. That the university "can no longer provide a space for academic expression and freedom is ominously disturbing," media reports cited his letter of resignation as saying. Students have held several days of demonstrations at the Ashoka campus outside New Delhi, calling for a boycott of classes. The university faculty also issued a statement saying Mehta's departure "raises urgent questions about the university's commitment to academic freedom as well as its internal processes."

More than 150 academics worldwide including from Columbia, Yale and Oxford said in an open letter that they were "deeply distressed" that Mehta had resigned "under political pressure". They said that the values of "free inquiry, candor, and a rigorous distinction between the demands of intellectual honesty and the pressure of politicians, funders, or ideological animus... come under assault whenever a scholar is punished for the content of public speech." —AFP

North's diplomats 48 hours to leave the country.

Yesterday the North Korean flag and a plaque were taken down from the country's embassy—a large house in an upmarket area of Kuala Lumpur—and the gates were chained up. Before departing, North Korean charge d'affaires, Kim Yu Song, accused Malaysia of siding with Washington in a "conspiracy" against Pyongyang, and committing a "large hostile act". Malaysia had aligned its policies with those of the US, "which seeks to deprive our state of its sovereignty, peaceful existence and development," Kim, the North's most senior diplomat in Malaysia, told a large media

Internet blackout as Congo votes, with Nguesso set to win

BRAZZAVILLE, Congo: The Republic of Congo voted yesterday in a presidential election boycotted by the main opposition and attacked by critics as tilted towards veteran leader Denis Sassou Nguesso. Access to the Internet and social media was cut hours before polls opened at 7:00 am. AFP correspondents said. The 77-year-old Sassou Nguesso is widely expected to win against six contenders, led by economist Guy-Brice Parfait Kolelas, who revealed Saturday that he is gravely ill with COVID-19.

Sassou Nguesso, a former paratrooper, first rose to power in 1979 and has since accumulated 36 years in office, making him one of the world's longest-serving leaders. He is hoping for a first-round victory to secure a fourth term running the central African oil exporter. Meanwhile challenger Kolelas posted a video message from his sickbed, declaring he was "battling against death" after tak-

Furor after govt critic quits top Indian university

NEW DELHI: The resignation of one of India's most prominent intellectuals and a fierce government critic from a top university has sparked student protests and worries about freedom of speech in the world's biggest democracy. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a respected scholar on political theory and constitutional law, had long been dismayed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, firing off stinging editorials and speeches denouncing the "death of liberalism". The Oxford and Princeton alumnus had already stepped down as vice-chancellor of Ashoka University in 2019, reportedly

because the trustees were worried by his outspoken views, but remained a political science professor.

But last week he threw in the towel, saying that the board of the university—founded in 2014 as a bastion of the liberal arts and India's answer to the Ivy League—saw him as a "political liability". "My public writing in support of a politics that tries to honor constitutional values of freedom and equal respect for all citizens, is perceived to carry risks for the university," he said in his resignation letter. Ashoka's founders met Mehta recently and said they could no longer protect him in the "current political environment", the Indian Express daily reported. According to the university's student newspaper, Mehta's resignation was endorsed by the board because it would speed up efforts to acquire land needed for an expansion.

'Political pressure'

The university has yet to comment on the controversy but matters escalated Thursday when Arvind

move Friday, labeling Malaysia's extradition of a North Korean man last week an "unpardonable crime" carried out under "blind obedience" to American pressure.

The Southeast Asian country had been one of Pyongyang's few allies but ties were already strained following the 2017 assassination of leader Kim Jong Un's half-brother at Kuala Lumpur airport.

A court ruling earlier this month that Mun Chol Myong could be extradited to the US to face money laundering charges for allegedly exporting prohibited items to the North in violation of sanctions proved the final blow. After Pyongyang cut ties, Malaysia gave the

N Korean diplomats set to leave Malaysia after ties cut

KUALA LUMPUR: North Korea's diplomats in Malaysia shuttered their embassy and fled home yesterday, after Pyongyang severed diplomatic ties over the extradition of a citizen to the US. Pyongyang announced the shock

News in brief

Arauz, Lasso to contest poll

QUITO: Left-wing economist Andres Arauz and conservative former banker Guillermo Lasso will contest the second round of Ecuador's presidential election on April 11, the National Electoral Council (CNE) confirmed Saturday after resolving all disputes from the first round. "Once 100 percent of the votes have been counted and the legal appeals filed by the political organizations have been resolved, the plenary of the electoral body has decided to proclaim the final results for the presidential run-off," CNE secretary Santiago Vallejo said. Arauz, 36, won the first round in February with 32.72 percent of the vote but not enough to win outright, followed by Lasso with 19.74 percent, according to the CNE count. —AFP

Peru govt, unions to end strike

LIMA: The Peruvian government and transport unions, striking since Monday over fuel price increases, have reached an agreement to end the protests, authorities announced Saturday. "After a long day of dialogue, leaders of the transport unions reached an agreement with the government and signed an act benefitting the sector and are committed to lifting their strike," the Ministry of Transport said on Twitter. As part of the agreement, state-owned Petroperu will reduce the price of diesel and fuel will be subsidized by a special fund protecting against price volatility. The resolution also sought to place more responsibility on "highly polluting" Canadian companies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support innovation in green technologies. —AFP

Protesters march in Spain

MADRID: Hundreds of demonstrators on Saturday rallied in cities across Spain, including Madrid and Barcelona, calling for the release of a controversial rapper, jailed in mid-February for tweets criticizing the royal family and the security forces. Shouting slogans such as "Freedom for Pablo Hase!" and "We are the anti-fascists", several hundreds of people took to the streets in the Spanish capital in an unregistered demonstration, according to an AFP reporter. The march passed off peacefully before the crowds dispersed at the request of the police. In Barcelona, the main focal point of protests last month, around 100 people marched, waving banners demanding "complete amnesty for Pablo Hase!". —AFP

Ex-Malta PM faces graft charges

VALLETTA, Malta: A top aide to former Maltese prime minister Joseph Muscat accused of graft by journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, whose brutal murder rocked the nation, was charged Saturday with money laundering and fraud. Anti-corruption campaigners hailed the prosecution of Keith Schembri as a vindication of the work of Caruana Galizia, whose death in a car bomb in 2017 sparked grief and anger across the Mediterranean island. Schembri, who was Muscat's chief of staff from 2013 to 2019, appeared in court Saturday charged with money laundering, corruption, fraud and forgery. He pleaded not guilty and was denied bail. —AFP

pack. Kim and what appeared to be a group of diplomats and their family members then departed on a bus.

They arrived later at Kuala Lumpur airport, loaded stacks of luggage onto trolleys and went to check in at the counters used by regular passengers. An airport security official, speaking anonymously, told AFP that about 30 North Koreans were expected to fly to Shanghai yesterday. Pyongyang's decision to cut ties came after a visit last week by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin to South Korea, part of an Asian tour to rally support against the nuclear-armed North and China. —AFP

Business

MONDAY, MARCH 22, 2021

Saudi Aramco's 2020 profits slump on lower crude prices

Pandemic weighs heavily on global demand

RIYADH: Energy giant Saudi Aramco on Sunday posted a 44.4 percent slump in 2020 net profit due to lower crude prices, as the coronavirus pandemic weighed heavily on global demand. Aramco, Saudi Arabia's cash cow, has revealed consecutive falls in profits since it began disclosing earnings in 2019.

That has piled pressure on government finances as Riyadh pursues multi-billion dollar projects to diversify the oil-reliant economy. "Aramco achieved a net income of \$49 billion in 2020," the company said in a statement—down from \$88.2 billion in 2019.

Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest crude exporter, was hammered last year by the double whammy of low prices and sharp cuts in production. Aramco chief executive Amin Nasser described it as "one of the most challenging years in recent history".

The firm said "revenues were impacted by lower crude oil prices and volumes sold, and weakened refining and chemicals margins." But compared to many of its loss-generating international peers, the company, which made its stock market debut in 2019, played up its "strong financial resilience" despite the challenges.

Crude prices have risen in recent weeks to over \$60 per barrel. But in the short term, analysts say the Saudi giant is bracing for a possible further waves of coronavirus infections that could undermine a tentative global economic recovery. As the global vaccination program gains momentum, however, Aramco said it was seeing a pick-up in crude demand in energy-hungry Asia and other parts of the world. Analysts say the company's debt levels surged last year as it offered shareholders a bumper dividend even as its earnings

plunged. Aramco said it stuck to its commitment of paying shareholders dividends worth \$75 billion in 2020 — an amount that exceeds the declared profit. Dividend payments from Aramco help the Saudi government, the company's biggest shareholder, manage its ballooning budget deficit.

A brake on reforms

Without addressing the company's debt, Aramco's Nasser said belt-tightening had kept the firm's financial position "robust", enabling it to pay out the dividends. "As the enormous impact of COVID-19 was felt throughout the global economy, we intensified our strong emphasis on capital and operational efficiencies," Nasser said. The statement said Aramco "expects capital expenditure for 2021 to be around \$35 billion, significantly lower than the previous guidance of \$40-\$45 billion".

Aramco has also slashed hundreds of jobs as it seeks to reduce costs. Bloomberg News reported last June. A drop in oil income is expected to hinder Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ambitious "Vision 2030" reform program to overhaul the kingdom's energy-reliant economy. Aramco was listed on the Saudi bourse in December 2019 following the world's biggest initial public offering, generating \$29.4 billion for 1.7 percent of its shares. In January, Prince Mohammed said the kingdom would sell more Aramco shares in the coming years. The kingdom's de facto ruler said future share offerings would be a key way to boost the Public Investment Fund, the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund which is the main engine of its diversification efforts. But analysts say further share offerings could struggle to generate investor interest amid a downbeat energy market, as the coronavirus pandemic saps global demand. There are also concerns over an uptick in drone and missile attacks on Aramco's facilities in the kingdom, claimed by Yemen's Houthis rebels. A drone strike sparked a fire at a Riyadh oil refinery on Friday, in the second major assault this month on Saudi energy installations claimed by the Iran-backed insurgents. — AFP

E-sportsmanship

The association can also be hired by companies to run team-building events. Just as the pandemic was starting, CEA introduced a "Comprehend" tool that analyzes which players are inspiring teammates and which are spoiling the fun. Players are told the tool is being used and are given copies of results. "We're explicit with players about what Comprehend is and what it measures," Tenenholtz said. "We go to great lengths to make sure there are no surprises."

The software can identify people who work well together and those to whom peers look for leadership, according to Tenenholtz. The tool also measures how well players communicate to achieve goals, and it spots comments that cause conflict.

The feedback is intended to help companies improve workplace camaraderie and collaboration, with happier workers who feel connected to peers being less likely to quit their jobs. Jost, whose Ninjacats team has only played in charity matches where Comprehend is not used, credits the league with making him feel more closely bonded with Microsoft, which, thanks to its Xbox division, has status in the video game world. A point of pride for his team is having won thousands of dollars for Child's Play, a charity that gives toys and games to children in hospitals.

"The bond with this community of players is absolutely a selling point for me to be with Microsoft," Jost said. Playing for charity and representing one's company helps keep rivalries good-natured. Plus, since tech talent tends to be mobile, players sometimes find themselves facing former colleagues on rival teams. "There is a lot of emotion and passion to win, and your competitive spirit kicks into overdrive," Jost said of matches. "Amazon is particularly fun to beat because we share the same hometown." Nearly every major tech company has at least one team playing in CEA matches, with League of Legends and Rocket League the most popular games. "It makes sense, as workforces attract a greater percentage of gamers, and many of those games—Rocket League in particular—are easy to play and fun for the participants," said Wedbush Securities analyst Michael Pachter.—AFP



In this file photo, Team Curse players Christian "IWillDominate" Rivera (left), Joedat "Voyboy" Esfahani (center) and David "Cop" Roberson (right) prepare for the start of a match during the League of Legends North American Championship in Manhattan Beach, California. — AFP

China crackdown cuts Big Tech down to size

SHANGHAI: Tighter regulations, billions in lost overseas share value and government pledges to get even tougher—Chinese tech giants are reeling under what looks like a sustained Big Brother assault on innovation and enterprise. But there's a reason why the escalating crackdown is largely drawing shrugs from Chinese consumers: it is widely seen as necessary. Concern is rising in China over chaotic online lending and accusations of powerful platforms squeezing merchants and misusing consumer data, reflecting global unease with Big Tech that has Facebook, Google and others also facing scrutiny at home and abroad.

"With China, it immediately becomes about the Communist Party. But if the UK government were doing this, people would probably be OK with it," said Jeffrey Towson, head of research at Asia Tech Strategy. "These actions look quite reasonable."

Companies such as e-commerce giants Alibaba and JD.com, along with messaging-and-gaming colossus Tencent, are among the world's most valuable businesses, feasting on growing Chinese digital lifestyles and a government ban on major US competitors.

But they have become victims of their own success. The troubles burst into public view last October when Alibaba co-founder Jack Ma committed the cardinal sin of publicly criticizing China's regulators for their increasingly dire warnings concerning his company's financial arm, Ant Group. Ant Group's Alipay platform is ubiquitous in China, used to buy everything from meals to ride-hailing, groceries and travel tickets. Slow-footed regulatory oversight also allowed Ant to expand into loans, wealth management, even insurance. Tencent's fintech profile also has risen.

Consequently, they have become "overly powerful actors capable of pushing regulatory boundaries without regard for systemic risks," Eurasia Group consultancy said in a research note. These ambitions have collided with Beijing's years-long campaign to purge its chaotic financial system of a dangerous debt build-up.

Size matters

China's debt spiraled to 335 percent of gross domestic product by the end of 2020, according to the Institute of International Finance. Previous lower levels had already prompted International Monetary Fund concern. The official response to Ma's unusual outburst has been uncompromising: Ant's record-breaking \$35 billion Hong Kong-Shanghai IPO was abruptly suspended, Ma disappeared from public view for weeks, and regulatory screws have been tightened.

China is expected to force Ant and Tencent to begin running their lending operations like banks, with resulting higher scrutiny and financial liability—things the fintech leaders had largely avoided. "They'll have to meet capital requirements and set up financial holding companies. They can't escape it," said Ke Yan, lead analyst at DZT Research. The Wall Street Journal reported last week that Alibaba was also being pushed to shed wide-ranging media assets, including a potential sale of Hong Kong's South China Morning Post. The tumult has sliced billions off Chinese tech firms' share values. In China's crackdown, size matters.

While just over 20 percent of US retail spending takes place online, China is forecast to surpass 50 percent this year. Major Chinese platforms boast hundreds of millions of users, amplifying concerns about industry concentration and data privacy. Ma's unusual outburst was seen by many as a direct Big Tech challenge to Communist Party authority and influence.

But Ke says: "I don't think (the crackdown) was triggered by Jack Ma. It's been planned for a long time." Unease over tech's growing influence is not unique to China. "Most major governments globally are focused on this issue in a way that weren't two years ago. Everyone seems to think that Big Tech has gotten too powerful," Towson said. Such crackdowns are not unusual in China. Its economy has transformed so rapidly in recent decades that regulators often play catch-up, eventually making headlines with clampdowns that analysts say are often necessary—though belated—attempts to address problems that appear.—AFP



JEDDAH: A view of a damaged silo at the Saudi Aramco oil facility in Saudi Arabia's Red Sea city of Jeddah. — AFP

Carbon pawprint: Is man's best friend the planet's enemy?

PARIS: Is your adorable puppy as bad for the planet as a gas-guzzling SUV?

While the precise carbon pawprint of our pets is the source of scientific debate, one thing is becoming increasingly clear: lovable, they may be, cats and dogs have an impact on the planet.

In their 2009 book "Time to Eat the Dog?", Brenda and Robert Vale sparked anger among pet owners for saying that the meat eaten by an average canine companion had twice the carbon footprint as driving an SUV 10,000 kilometers. A decade on, the verdict is still out on the planetary impact linked to the diets of cats and dogs.

"I've got nothing against pets," said Gregory Okin, a professor at the University of California's Institute of Environment and Sustainability. "I know that they bring a lot of good to people, both working animals and companion animals."

"But, I believe that for people who want to make informed choices, they should have the information available to them," he said. In a 2017 study, Okin estimated that the 160 million domestic cats and dogs in the US were responsible for between 25-30 percent of the environmental impact of meat consumed in the country. That's 64 million tons of CO2, equivalent to the annual emissions of 13 million petrol or diesel cars. Kelly Swanson, a professor in animal nutrition at the University of Illinois, disputes the findings of that study, saying the calculations were based on "a lot of inaccurate assumptions".

"Because most pet foods are based on secondary products from the human food industry, especially the ingredients that are animal-based, the environmental costs of those ingredients are not the same as those being consumed by humans," he said. For Sebastien Lefebvre, from Lyon's VetAgro-Sup veterinary school, carbon emissions from conventional mass-produced animal food was "negligible".

He said emissions from pet food would only be a concern "when mankind stops food waste (and becomes) completely vegetarian." He said that unfashionable cuts of meat, including offal, which many humans turn their noses up at, would be ideal for pet food in order to avoid waste. Yet in some countries, including the Netherlands, meat is reared specifically for animal consumption. Pim Martens, professor of sustainable development at Maastricht University, said that — as with humans — animal carbon footprints "depend on where you live in the world". In a 2019 study, Martens found the lifetime emissions of a dog weighing 10-20 kilograms in the Netherlands was anywhere between 4.2 and 17 tons of CO2 equivalent.—AFP

With rivalries, eSports gain traction in corporate world

SAN FRANCISCO: Microsoft software engineer Daniel Jost has found a way to take on his peers at Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google in friendly fashion—through video game competition.

His team is the one to beat when it comes to using jet-powered cars to score points by knocking giant balls, soccer-style, into nets on virtual fields in Rocket League tournaments organized by the Corporate Esports Association (CEA). "It feels similar to the company bowling or soccer league, it's just being done in front of a computer screen instead of meeting at the bowling alley every Friday," said Jost.

Matches are streamed online at an array of platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, with bragging rights and charity dollars on the line. Like video-game play overall, interest in company team matches has boomed during the COVID-19 pandemic as real-world options from soccer to softball stopped being viable.

"It really is the corporate sports leagues in just a very slightly different form," said Brad Tenenholtz, a cybersecurity industry veteran and co-founder in 2018 of the association with Terence Southard, a scientist with Jeff Bezos's space exploration endeavor Blue Origin. Company workers are free to form teams and sign up to compete in leagues set up by the CEA, with registration fees going to a charity chosen by the victors. "My dad works at a steel mill in Cincinnati, Ohio, and plays on his corporate softball team," CEA chief Tenenholtz said. "No one is going to fly him to another city for some kind of national competition, but with eSports we can bring people together electronically and just as meaningfully." Leagues organized by the association include competitions for League of Legends, Dota, Overwatch, Valorant, Call of Duty, and even chess.



Business

stc Kuwait, Virgin Mobile MENA-led consortium win license from CITRA

stc Kuwait enables Virgin Mobile to operate as first virtual telecom provider in Kuwait



KUWAIT: Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Communications and Information Technology, Dr Rana Al-Fares, Chairman and CEO of CITRA, engineer Salim Muthib Al-Ozainah, as well as representatives from the authority, CEO of stc Kuwait, engineer Maziad Alharbi, CEO of Virgin Mobile Kuwait, Benoit Janin during the press conference.

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, and Virgin Mobile Middle East and Africa (VMMEA) received the Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority's (CITRA) approval for the first-of-its-kind mobile virtual network operator (MVNO) license to launch Virgin Mobile Kuwait (Connect Arabia WLL).

The announcement of the first mobile virtual network operator in Kuwait was made during a press conference attended by the Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Communications and Information Technology, Dr Rana Al-Fares, Chairman and CEO of CITRA, engineer Salim Muthib Al-Ozainah, as well as representatives from the authority, CEO of stc Kuwait, engineer Maziad Alharbi, CEO of Virgin Mobile Kuwait, Benoit Janin, and various members of the local press.

Virgin Mobile Kuwait will operate using stc's network, with stc acting as a Host Facilities Based Provider "FBP" with Virgin Mobile Kuwait, offering prepaid plans to users, making it the first virtual telecom service provider in Kuwait.

By combining VMMEA's role as the region's leading MVNO and digital innovator, and the strong infrastructure of stc's network, the two companies aim to provide an unparalleled customer experience within this market, transforming the user and on-demand experience for pre-paid mobile users through a range of digital solutions.

Engineer Salim Muthib Al-Ozainah, Chairman and

- **Al-Ozainah:** This milestone achieved by CITRA aids in stimulating healthy competition in the local market while elevating the quality of service in Kuwait
- **Alharbi:** We are delighted to partner with a prominent global brand to engage in a new market layer within the local telecom sector
- **Nielsen:** We are proud to launch Virgin Mobile in Kuwait as part of our ongoing commitment to provide customers with innovative digital services, transforming the traditional mobile experience.

CEO of CITRA, said, "Stemming from CITRA's goal of promoting positive competition, we are glad to license the first MVNO to Virgin Mobile Kuwait. We are also glad to see the entry of a reputable international investor such as Virgin International in bringing their digital expertise to the Kuwaiti market. This move will surely contribute greatly to the telecom sector in raising the quality of service and overall customer experience."

The previously established consortium was led by VMMEA and included stc as a strategic partner to provide a range of new-to-market fully digital consumer services in the Kuwaiti telecom sector.

The license awarded by CITRA to Virgin Mobile Kuwait to provide MVNO services is pursuant to the agreement for the provision and resale of the services necessary to allow the reselling of services to end-users and operate as a business. Virgin Mobile Kuwait aims to launch its innovative app-based platform with

proven technology derived from VMMEA's digital operator platform, mainly targeting the local youth population.

Commenting on this significant milestone in the local telecom market, engineer Maziad Alharbi, CEO of stc, said, "In line with our commitment to assist in the development of the Kuwaiti economy, we are proud to partner with a prominent global brand to engage in a new market layer within the local telecom sector. stc's well-built network infrastructure will provide Virgin Mobile Kuwait with high quality advanced service to meet the diverse needs of its customers, specially focusing on the youth."

Alharbi expressed that through this partnership, Virgin Mobile Kuwait aims to provide users with accessible and customized services. The online prepaid plan services will allow digital subscribers to take full control of their monthly bills and add ons. He also mentioned that this initiative falls in line with stc's

commitment to enable digital transformation in Kuwait, providing customers and the people of Kuwait with pioneering telecom and digital solutions that meet and exceed their expectations.

Alharbi added, "I would also like to thank and extend my sincere gratitude to CITRA, as this would not be possible without their guidance and support. CITRA's role in backing the telecom sector has enabled local providers to operate in line with international standards. They have continuously supported the various initiatives initiated by local telecom providers to expand their offerings and capitalize on lucrative opportunities that have proved beneficial for the providers and the community."

Erik Dudman Nielsen, Founder & Chief Executive Officer of Virgin Mobile Middle East & Africa, said, "We are very excited about launching Virgin Mobile in Kuwait. This forms part of our ongoing commitment to providing customers with innovative digital propositions, transforming the traditional mobile experience. We have no doubt that Virgin Mobile will introduce a new era for mobile connectivity with customer-led services, enabling a seamless customer experience."

Virgin Mobile Middle East and Africa has established a leading position across the Middle East and Africa region. Currently operating in Saudi Arabia, Oman and providing advisory services to Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company (EITC) in the UAE, Virgin Mobile Middle East & Africa has been catering to a continuously growing number of mobile users offering world-class products and services since 2007, serving more than 3 million customers across the region.

Congested ports and supply chain woes hit US factories, stores

NEW YORK: The cold snap that gripped the United States in February not only caused chaos in Texas and the southwest, it also triggered a shortage in plastics that has disrupted a supply chain already under strain from a lack of microchips and growing congestion at ports as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. So factories have had to shut their doors and consumers are feeling the crunch.

At Toyota, a petrochemicals shortage affected production at plants in Kentucky, West Virginia and Mexico. Honda cited supply chain issues "related to the impact of COVID-19, congestion at various

ports, semiconductor shortages and severe winter weather" to justify the temporary closure of five of its factories in Canada and the United States.

Consumers are also being affected. Nike said Thursday that its sales of shoes and sportswear were being affected by congestion at ports around the country. At a Best Buy home appliance store in suburban Washington, a customer said she spent an hour with a sales assistant, only to find that many stove models wouldn't be available for several weeks.

"I had to buy a black stainless steel stove when I wanted a white one, and for \$200 dollars more than I'd budgeted", complained Virginie Hines, a French woman living in Maryland. The problems in the plastics sector are the latest glitch in the supply chain. In mid-February, freezing temperatures paralyzed Texas and Louisiana, home to many of the factories that transform oil into polyethylene, which is used to make plastic bags, shampoo bot-

les or toothpaste tubes, polypropylene, used for the hard plastic of car dashboards or refrigerators, or PVC, which is used to make pipes or window frames.

While they are used to weathering hurricanes, these plants rarely experience low temperatures. At the height of the cold snap, more than 70 percent of ethylene production capacity was down and at least 62 percent of polypropylene production, according to S&P Global Platts. "Not only was supply knocked off line from a freeze, but the demand for products had just started to rebound," said Robert Benedict of the American Fuel & Petrochemical Manufacturers (AFP).

The consequences are hard to pinpoint, but with petrochemicals accounting for a third of the raw material costs of a car, "it's easy to understand why we're now seeing ripple effect in other manufacturing supply chains," he said.—AFP

Al-Tijari announces winners of Al-Najma account campaign

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

The results of the draws were as follows:

- 1- Al-Najma weekly account - the prize of KD 5,000 went to the winner Medhat Mohamed Mohamed Ibrahim
- 2- Salary account campaign - the prize of up to KD 1,000 went to the winner Fahad Ali Al-Temeemi

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

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

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

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

NBK Money Markets Report

Fed maintains a hold on interest rates till 2023

KUWAIT: In its meeting last week, the US Federal Reserve continued to project near-zero interest rates at least through 2023, maintaining its dovish stance even as it significantly upgraded growth forecasts. Estimates are now for 6.5 percent growth for this year, up from the 4.2 percent predicted in December. And in regards to the labor market, unemployment is expected to fall to 4.5 percent by the end of the year instead of 5 percent. Looking at inflation, the Fed's preferred measure is projected to rise to 2.2 percent, above the bank's target, compared with a smaller rise of 1.8 percent predicted in December.

While the Fed acknowledges a surge in inflation is likely, the central bank feels it will be short-lived and not a cause for concern. Predictions are for PCE inflation to fall back to 2 percent in 2022 and 2.1 percent in 2023, even as unemployment is anticipated to drop further. The market seems to be in line with the Fed's dot plot and is pricing 0 changes in interest rates for the next year through the Federal Funds Futures.

The 10-year US treasury yield reached a high of 1.75 percent last week, which is a 14 month high. Markets seem to be bullish on global recovery and are selling the safe-haven long-term US Treasury bonds and heading into riskier assets. Moreover, LIBOR rates are moving back-up gradually as 3-months LIBOR reached 0.19 percent on Friday up from 0.18 percent on Monday.

Fall in retail sales

Retail sales in the US fell by 3 percent in February following the robust 7.6 percent rise in January, the Commerce Department reported last week. Meanwhile, the core figure which excludes volatile items such as automobile sales declined 2.7 percent. The decline coin-

cided with harsh winter weather, overwhelming some areas of the country with sub-freezing temperatures and winter storms. This caused a temporary setback in demand that is expected to accelerate in the coming months with President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion stimulus package, an easing of COVID-19 restrictions, and warmer weather ahead.

German sentiment on the rise

In Europe, the German ZEW headline which tracks economic sentiment improved to 76.6 in March following 71.2 in February. The figure beat expectations of 74. ZEW President Professor Achim Wambach said following in the release: "Economic optimism continues to rise. Experts expect a broad-based recovery of the German economy. They anticipate that at least 70 percent of the German population will be offered a vaccine against COVID-19 by autumn."

Brexit saga continues

The European Union launched legal action against the UK in a major escalation of tensions between the two sides less than three months after Brexit was formally completed. It follows Britain's unilateral decision to delay implementing a key part of the Brexit deal relating to Northern Ireland. The move could ultimately lead to financial penalties or trade tariffs being imposed on the UK.

On the FX front, The UK has been a great model to lead in vaccinations and steady plans to reopen their economy which helped push the Sterling above the 1.40 levels. As for the EU it has been struggling to push its vaccinations across and is lagging behind major economies in vaccination delivery percentage. As such we have seen the single currency fall down from the 1.22 levels to 1.18 levels.

BOE keeps policy unchanged

The Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee has voted 9-0 to keep rates on hold at 0.10 percent and the QE target unchanged at GBP 895 billion, as expected by markets. The committee also announced that the pace of government bond buying will remain unchanged at 4.4

Kuwait

Kuwaiti dinar USD/KWD closed last week at 0.30195.

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Swiss kids suit up for 'Mission to Mars'

A pupil of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing a spacesuit costume, runs holding a self-made paper rocket during their project "Mission to Mars".

Leo pulls on a shiny, silver suit and places the helmet gingerly over his head before marching with the other budding astronauts towards their spaceship. "Going to Mars is really my dream," the eight-year-old said, jumping excitedly from foot to foot. While the world has been riveted by the escapades of NASA's Perseverance Mars rover, a group of Swiss primary school children has been eagerly preparing their own mission to the red planet.

Some of Switzerland's top space experts, including the country's only astronaut, Claude Nicollier, evaluated the detailed mission plan the children had developed over nine months. And on March 8, they gave it the all-clear for lift-off. The children "exploded with joy" when they heard, their teacher at the Vivalys private school near Lausanne, Sebastien Roussel, told AFP. "It was like watching the NASA engineers' ecstatic reaction when Perseverance touched down." This week, they finally blasted off. Their rocket is actually a bus, with images of astronauts astride a spaceship heading towards a bright red sphere covering the windows, flanked by the message: "Mission Vivalys. Direction Mars".

Space station

Their destination? A Mars space station conveniently situated a bus-ride away in a secluded wooded area on the outskirts of Lausanne in western Switzerland. Here, the 16 eight- and nine-year-olds will spend three days carrying out experiments similar to some conducted by actual astronauts, including attempting to grow plants to sustain them on the long journey.



A pupil of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing a spacesuit costume, shows a self-made paper rocket during their project "Mission to Mars".

And while the idyllic, snow-sprinkled surroundings are far less hostile than the windswept, dusty surface of Mars, the children wear suits and helmets whenever

they step outside. Inside the base, with his helmet-actually a face-covering scuba-diving mask-under his arm, Leo says this "analogue mission to Mars" made him all the more eager to see the real thing. "But I don't want to land where Perseverance landed. It's radioactive

Ewan, the project's appointed leader, recommends using a lot of tape. "We are going to pump air into them, so it is important to close them tightly," the youngster explains. He pulls on his mask and heads out to help secure the launch site with safety cones and tape. When the



Pupils of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing spacesuits costumes, pose for a group picture during their project "Mission to Mars" in Lausanne. — AFP photos

there and very cold," he said. In a bid to simulate a true space mission, all the children's meals consist of freeze-dried space food.

Initial plans for them to sleep on site were meanwhile scrapped due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "Our biggest concern is not bringing the virus to Mars," Olivier Delamadeleine, head of the Educalis group that runs the school, told AFP. The mission fits with the school's general approach aimed at deepening the students' learning through "real life" experiences, he said. During the months of preparation, the children participated in workshops on astronomy and rocket engineering hosted by students at the neighboring EPFL-among the most prestigious technical universities in Europe.

A motivation 'win'

The mission required them to use mathematics to calculate the distance to Mars, and they have also sharpened their language skills, learning how to spell the names of the planets. Roussel said the mission was "a win" for a teacher seeking to motivate his students. The first experiment the team embarks upon after arriving at the space station is launching home-made paper rockets into space. The children get to work rolling sheets of paper into tubes, before adding pointed paper tips and fins.

other children arrive, he helps Roussel place one rocket on a large metal contraption attached to a pump. When they flip a red lever on the valve, the paper rocket flies as high as the treetops amid wild applause.

Exploding rockets

After all the rockets have been launched, the children have a debrief Zoom session with Jonas Morfin, known as "Jupiter Jonas", at EPFL's Space Innovation unit. Lined up in front of the camera, they detail the problems some rockets ran into, and he provides pointers on how to improve the structures for the next launch. "Maybe reinforce the next one with more tape?" Morfin tells a girl whose rocket exploded in mid-air.

The preparation for the mission, and especially the Zoom conversation earlier this month with Nicollier, has left some children dreaming about becoming astronauts themselves. "That's what I have in mind," Leo said. "Now I want to be a scientist or an astronaut." Perseverance's images from Mars have also left some children eager to see humans walk on the red planet. "It's possible for robots," said Nina, one of two children named mission leaders. "I think it will be possible for us too, soon." — AFP



Pupils of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing spacesuits costumes, build paper rockets during their project "Mission to Mars".



Pupils of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing spacesuits costumes, take part in their project "Mission to Mars".



Pupils of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing spacesuits costumes, take part in their project "Mission to Mars".



Pupils of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing spacesuits costumes, plant a Swiss national flag in the ground during their project "Mission to Mars".

HUNGARY POP MUSIC REFORM OPENS NEW FRONT IN CULTURE WAR

A Hungarian government plan to reinvigorize the local pop music scene and promote Hungarian culture at the same time has sparked concerns about political influence and censorship. Details of the 62-million-euro plan revealed Tuesday include funding for training and talent spotting, grants for content creation and marketing, and infrastructure like studios and performance venues. "It's about producing quality Hungarian pop and rock, and identity-building," said the project's frontman Szilard Demeter, 44, appointed by Prime Minister Viktor Orban's government as a cultural commissioner in 2019.

"Music can express what is different in Hungarians' character, vision, and historical experience," Demeter told AFP after a draft of the plan was published last year. "Perhaps that's not always understandable when looked at by western Europeans, but that's why it can be exciting and exotic," he said.

'110 percent Orbanista'

Government critics however fret that the music plan opens a new front in an escalating culture war. The self-styled "illiberal" nationalist premier Orban, 57, in power since 2010, declared in 2018 that "big changes" were coming for Hungary's cultural and academic scenes, seen in pro-government circles as hotbeds of liberalism. Since then, the government has tightened control over theatres and universities while an anti-LGBT campaign has been launched. A university founded by the liberal US billionaire George Soros, a bete noire of Orban, said it was forced from Budapest into exile in Vienna.

Demeter, a writer and amateur bass guitarist who hails from the Hungarian minority in Romania, has also sparked controversy by comparing Soros to Adolf Hitler. "I totally support the Prime Minister's policies, I am 110 percent an Orbanista," Demeter, who also heads a prestigious literary museum in Budapest, told AFP. "Yes there is a fierce culture war going on, the big question is whether Hungarian culture will exist at all in 100 years," he said. "The guarantee of survival is that we live in our own national culture, national identity has got weaker, and should be restored," he said.

Although in another interview Demeter said that he does not like pop singers "spluttering" about politics as "that divides the audience" he told AFP that political affiliation will be no bar to funding under the new scheme. "Everyone should be involved, from left to liberal to right, far-right to Marxist, diversity is the source of Hungarian culture's strength, just as diversity of national cultures is Europe's strength," he said. "So if a band is good quality, why shouldn't it be supported?" he added.

Censorship

But according to Ferenc Megyeri, 55, lead singer of punk group "Usual Disappointments", the state is already censoring musicians. Megyeri's band, founded in 1990, has penned songs like "Viktor", "Absurdistan", and "Soros" that criticize or parody Orban's policies. The songs were cut from the broadcast version of its concert last October during a series of state-sponsored online gigs.

Organizers also asked Megyeri to remove a T-shirt he wore with "Soros" written on it. "I refused, so the broadcast focused on close-ups of my face," he told AFP in his hometown of Pecs, south of Budapest. "It is a good idea to help musicians, after all it's our money, taxpayer money, but not by censorship," he said. "Most bands will take government funding and stay silent. But we are not that type," he added.



Director of Petofi Literary Museum Szilard Demeter gives an interview in his office of Budapest, Hungary. — AFP photos



An award-winning songwriter and musician Zoltan Czutor gives an interview in Budapest, Hungary.

Indoctrination

Zoltan Czutor, an award-winning songwriter, says "wonderful things can be done" with the funding like teaching schoolkids how to play an instrument, but he worries about the risk of "indoctrination". "I hope there won't be mandatory visits to nationalist rock operas for kids," he told AFP in a Budapest studio.

According to Czutor, 51, who teaches music as well as leading four projects—an acoustic guitar band, his own solo act, a pop-rock group, and a kids' music band—only a handful of stars can make a living from pop music. "Most income comes from big state or municipality-sponsored festivals, and organizers don't want trouble. Bands avoid politics for fear of being blacklisted from gigs or radio airplay," he said. Exclusion from the airwaves is a familiar feeling for Zsuzsa Koncz, 75, an iconic pop singer whose career began in the 1960s.

"I haven't been invited to perform on state media in the last decade," Koncz, who has supported liberal causes in the past, told AFP. For her, the new plan revives uncomfortable memories of a communist-era cultural policy - "Tolerated, Forbidden, Supported" - where any artwork that questioned the system was banned. "The last 10 years have shown that the closer you are to the regime's honey pot the easier it is to eat from it," she said. — AFP

Rare Bernini drawing fetches record price at French auction

A rare drawing by the Italian 17th century sculptor and architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini sold for 1.9 million euros (\$2.3 million) in France on Saturday, the highest price ever paid for a drawing by the artist, the auction house said. The original estimate price for the sanguine, or red chalk drawing of a male nude dating from somewhere between 1630 and 1640, had been set at 30,000-50,000 euros by the Acteon auction house in Compiègne, northern France.

But an anonymous, "probably Anglo-Saxon", buyer secured it for 1.3 million euros, which including fees and commission represented a final purchase price of 1.9 million euros, auctioneer Dominique Le Coent told AFP. The previous world record price paid for a Bernini drawing was 139,000 euros in 2014. Bernini (1598-1680) designed statues for many of Rome's landmarks such as the Four Rivers Fountain in Piazza Navona. The "Academie d'Homme" drawing, which belongs to an "extremely small body of academic drawings known to be by Bernini", Le Coent said. Art historians know of only seven others, "all preserved



A handout photo made available by the Acteon auction house shows a drawing entitled "Academie d'homme" by Italian artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini aka Le Bernin. — AFP

in museums and institutions, including one at the Uffizi Museum in Florence". The auction, broadcast live on the internet, attracted the interest of many collectors, mostly international, and there were nine telephone bidders. Discovered in Compiègne, the drawing was first mistakenly attributed to the French Baroque sculptor Pierre Puget (1620-1694) before being authenticated as a work by Bernini. — AFP



Owners Sophia and Jesse Sutton-Jones pose for a photograph at the Sourdough Sophia bakery in north London. — AFP photos



Sophia Sutton-Jones (left) pours out the dough for shaping after bulk fermentation at Sourdough Sophia bakery in north London.

London woman turns lockdown loaves into bakery success

When Britain first entered lockdown in March last year, Sophia Sutton-Jones decided to try making sourdough bread. A year later, she is running her own popular bakery. "I'd always thought about it, but I never had the courage to do it," she told AFP. Now Sutton-Jones, 29, and her husband

London neighborhood. Producing the loaves from home soon became impractical as everything got coated in flour, Sutton-Jones recalls. "Our dining room was the bakery and our guestroom the storage space. So you could come as a guest and sleep on flour bags." Fired by their initial success, the couple turned to



Staff deliver orders at the Sourdough Sophia bakery.

Jesse, 28, work alongside half a dozen staff members pulling hot loaves out of the oven, putting out flaky pastries and cutting slices of cakes topped with cream.

It all started when Sutton-Jones, whose father was also a baker, made a loaf of bread for a neighbor who was sheltering during the first national lockdown in March 2020. "He talked to his friends about it," she says. "Very quickly, we had 12 people waiting in front of our house." The couple, who sold kitchenware online before the pandemic, began to deliver orders by bicycle in their north

crowd funding to launch their business. They were hoping for £25,000 (\$35,000, 30,000 euros) but ended up raising £33,000.

Sourdough success

The distinctive pink-painted bakery—"Sourdough Sophia"—opened in January. Their pains au chocolat, croissants and cruffins—a cross between croissant and muffin—sell like hotcakes. But their biggest hit is sourdough bread, which the British have embraced enthusiastically. Home-baked bread became a major trend of lockdown, with enthusias-



Sophia Sutton-Jones (right) shapes the dough after bulk fermentation at Sourdough Sophia bakery in north London.

tic amateurs posting pictures of their efforts in pursuit of the perfect golden crust.

The surge of interest led to shortages of yeast and people "understood that actually, there is another way to make bread and it's actually much better, much healthier", says Sutton-Jones. Sourdough bread is made using a fermented starter instead of yeast and its enthusiasts believe it is more beneficial than ordinary bread, causing blood sugar to rise more gradually and helping gut health. It takes longer to rise but thanks to stay-at-home protocols—people were finally not in a rush. "It's the oldest way of making bread," says Sutton-Jones.

'A real kick'

"Sourdough Sophia" attracts a long line of customers as soon as it opens even though it sits a short distance from the local shopping street with many other bakeries. "I've been to all of them.

The bread is much better here," says 43-year-old Ben Claypole, waiting outside with his small dog. He adds that he is keen to support small businesses. The bakery opened while "non-essential" shops remain shuttered until April 12 and financial pressures mean some will never reopen. Sutton-Jones, who has a baby daughter, says she realized the risk of opening during the current situation and put in long 14-hour days. But she has no regrets.

Baking something and seeing a customer come in to enjoy it "gives me a real kick", she says. "Lockdown made people think about their priorities," she says, with the life-and-death situation prompting some big questions. "What if something else happens to us? Shouldn't we follow our dreams now? Because anything could happen." — AFP



Freshly baked sourdough loaves on sale at the Sourdough Sophia bakery.



Staff remove freshly baked loaves at the Sourdough Sophia bakery.



Sophia Sutton-Jones shapes the dough after bulk fermentation.

Tourists in Mexico party like there's no COVID

Tourists writhe their bodies to pumping techno beats on dance floors along Mexico's Caribbean coast—a magnet for people from around the world who want to party during a pandemic. The Latin American country is among those worst hit by COVID-19 with a death toll fast approaching 200,000. But such worries seem a world away in tourist resorts like Tulum and Cancun, where visitors can dance late into the night at discos, electronic music festivals and invitation-only parties. Once a sleepy fishing village, Tulum now attracts international tourists lured by its turquoise waters, Mayan ruins and the chance to party next to lush jungle, freshwater sinkholes and golden beaches.

"The coronavirus thing is nonsense. Life must go on," said Greta from Spain who described the rave she attended in December as "amazing." "The party in Tulum was magical—a combination of the jungle, rituals, the sea breeze," she said. But what is a dream for Greta is a nightmare for many others, leaving the town facing accusations that it is putting lives at risk by allowing mass gatherings with lax sanitary measures.

Mexico is one of the few major tourist destinations not to have closed its borders or demanded a negative coronavirus test result on arrival. That has ensured that the plane-loads of visitors keep coming, making Mexico the third-most visited country in the world last year. In destinations like Cancun, hotels offer incentives such as free COVID-19 tests and discounts for guests if they are infected and forced to extend their stay in order to quarantine.

'Super-spreader event'

Tulum made international headlines in November when 50 attendees were infected at Art With Me, Mexico's version of the Burning Man festival that was quickly dubbed a super spreader event. As a result, organizers of the Zamna electronic music festival were forced to pull the plug on the 16-day series of events that was supposed to start in December. Ticket holders who paid up to \$300 for a night dancing to

international DJs and techno music acts will now have to wait until April—and bring a mask.

"Sadly, the image of Tulum is being affected, in the eyes of the world, by the negligence of some entrepreneurs to organize events without respecting health and safety protocols," the organizers said. Lower-key events continue to go ahead, with more than 20 private parties organized in the past two weeks, according to messages in WhatsApp groups promoting them.

Quintana Roo, the southeastern state home to Tulum, Cancun and the Riviera Maya, is now at yellow status—the second highest of four under the country's traffic-light system. Bars, discos and mass events are—in theory—prohibited from operating in the area, where hundreds of thousands of visitors are expected during the Easter period. The hotel industry is unhappy that parties continue to be held in secret. Such events are a "stain" on the area's image, said David Ortiz, president of the Tulum Hotel Association. An agreement has been signed with the municipal council and a "citizens' initiative" will be presented to the local Congress to toughen punishments for anyone flouting the rules.

'Real battle'

That does not seem to worry the members of the WhatsApp group

Eddy's Tulum Party Squad where people can keep up to date with the nightlife events calendar. Social media users share videos and photos of parties, with little sign of social distancing or face masks. In Cancun's nightlife district, the music from the discos is deafening even during a pandemic, although there are fewer customers than before. Venues have found a way around the restrictions by reinventing themselves as "restaurant-bars."

Ecuadorian tourist Alexandra Freire was astonished when the restaurant where she was dining one night suddenly turned up the music and customers began dancing without masks. "It is the most shocking thing I've seen in the pandemic. It's as if COVID never reached Cancun," said the 35-year-old engineer. Stopping big parties is a "real battle" that sometimes ends in defeat, said Dario Flota, a representative of Quintana Roo's tourism promotion board.

Some visitors even fly home unaware they have the coronavirus. This month 44 Argentine high school students tested positive for COVID-19 after returning from Cancun. They had boarded the plane to Buenos Aires with negative test results from a clinic that turned out to be unlicensed and has since been shut down. — AFP

How Finland embraced being 'world's happiest nation'

Once notorious for its bland food and long, harsh winters, Finland's repeated success in the annual happiness rankings has helped transform the country's global reputation, boosting tourism and business. The UN-sponsored World Happiness Report elicited some raised eyebrows when it first placed Finland at the top of its listings in 2018: many of the Nordic country's 5.5 million people freely describe themselves as taciturn and prone to melancholy, and admit to eyeing public displays of joyfulness with suspicion.

"When I first heard—and I'm not alone, I would say—I had a big laugh," television producer Tony Ilmoni told AFP on the still-snowy streets of the capital Helsinki on Friday, when Finland was crowned the happiest nation on earth for the fourth year running. But the worldwide survey in fact seeks to quantify individuals' personal freedom and satisfaction with their lives, using survey data from 149 countries alongside measures such as GDP, social support and perceptions of corruption. Finland excels with its quietly world-class public services, low levels of crime and inequality, and high levels of trust in authority.

"The basics are really good here: we don't have anyone living in the streets, we do have unemployment but the health service works, the big things like that," flower seller Riitta Matilainen told AFP. "But we could be a bit more outgoing and joyful!" The northern country's long dark winters were once reputed to be behind high levels of alcoholism and suicide, but a decade-long public health drive has helped cut rates by more than half.

'Who wouldn't want to live here?'

For tourism and country-branding chiefs, the "world's happiest" title has been a blessing they were quick to capitalize on. "It's a really powerful, emotional, evocative thing to say you're the happiest country in the world. Why would anyone not want to live in the happiest country in the world?" said Joel Willans, a British digital marketer and creator of the "Very Finnish Problems" social media page, who has lived in Finland since the early 2000s. "Awareness of Finland has grown during the past few years," Paavo Virkkunen, head of Finland Promotion Services at Business Finland, told AFP. After four years, the happiness trope has been used by countless Finnish businesses to market lifestyle products and to try to attract workers to relocate and join the country's tech sector. Finland's unflashy cuisine was once derided as something to "endure" by Italian then-president Silvio Berlusconi, and slammed by his French counterpart Jacques Chirac. But restaurateurs and product manufacturers now tout the simplicity and natural ingredients of Finnish cooking, claiming it as key to the country's no-nonsense approach to wellbeing.

The happiness marketing drive has been led, however, by the travel industry, with Finland's tourist office appointing Finnish "happiness ambassadors" tasked with introducing visitors to the secrets of Finnish wellbeing. "People are curious about (our happiness) and they want to learn about it," Virkkunen said. Key to the Finnish brand of happiness is going outdoors to enjoy the country's vast forests and thousands of lakes, as well as the traditional Finnish steam bath, the sauna.

By the start of 2020, tourism to Lapland in northern Finland had reached record levels and the country was attracting more foreign direct investment projects than anywhere else in the Nordics. While pausing international visitors, the pandemic has, if anything, increased overseas interest in Finland's clean, sparsely populated nature, leading tourist providers to offer virtual tours. "Even though people are not able to travel now, you are able to dream about Finland and the happiness of a true connection with nature, where you can really unwind," said Virkkunen.

Finland's four-year dominance in the happiness stakes leaves one problem, however—where to go from here? When this year's results were announced, "it would've been more news if Finland had been knocked off the top spot," Joel Willans joked. — AFP

Sports

Man City late shows books place in FA Cup semi-finals

Southampton ease past Bournemouth to reach last four

LONDON: Manchester City's quest for an unprecedented quadruple of trophies remains intact after seeing off Everton 2-0 to reach the FA Cup semi-finals on Saturday as Southampton also booked their place in the last four.

City were far from their flowing best at Goodison Park, but goals in the final six minutes from Ilkay Gundogan and Kevin De Bruyne booked City's place in the semi-finals for the fourth time in five seasons. Pep Guardiola described the clash as the toughest his side have had since November as they recorded a 25th win in 26 matches in all competitions.

"It was the toughest game since the last international break we had. We have been incredible in terms of results and performances (over that period)," said Guardiola. "Tonight was so difficult, they have experienced players behind the ball with two up for the counter-attack. It was incredible commitment from my players. An incredible victory."

City won the domestic treble of Premier League, FA Cup and League Cup for the first time in English football history two seasons ago and are firm favorites to repeat that feat. Guardiola's men are 14 points clear at the top of the Premier League, face struggling Tottenham in the League Cup final next month and were drawn against Borussia Dortmund in the quarter-finals of the Champions League on Friday.

Oleksandr Zinchenko cleared Everton defender Yerry Mina's header off the line with the best effort either side mustered before half-time. Joao Virginia started in goal for The Toffees for just the second

time due to injuries to regular goalkeepers Jordan Pickford and Robin Olsen.

However, the 21-year-old Portuguese stopper produced a brilliant save early in the second-half to prevent Raheem Sterling converting Fernandinho's pinpoint low cross. Guardiola was forced to introduce Riyad Mahrez and De Bruyne off the bench in the final quarter.

But it was Aymeric Laporte who opened Everton up as he broke forward from center-back before Virginia brilliantly turned the Frenchman's initial effort onto the crossbar. Gundogan was following up, though, to head into an empty net and end the resistance from Carlo Ancelotti's men. De Bruyne then wrapped up the tie with a thundering finish in stoppage time as Everton appealed in vain for a high boot by Mahrez on Mina.

Chance to 'write history'

Southampton cast aside their Premier League struggles to ease past Bournemouth 3-0 to reach the semi-finals. Ralph Hasenhuttl's side have slumped into the Premier League relegation battle after losing 10 of their last 12 top-flight matches.

But the Saints have been immune to those woes in the FA Cup and booked a place in the Wembley semi-finals thanks to Nathan Redmond's double after Moussa Djenepo's opener. While Premier League survival is the priority, Hasenhuttl insisted the FA Cup was a "big target" and he made just two changes against a Bournemouth team who sat sev-



LIVERPOOL: Manchester City's German midfielder Ilkay Gundogan (center) celebrates scoring his team's first goal with teammates during the English FA Cup quarter final football match between Everton and Manchester City at Goodison Park in Liverpool, north west England on Saturday. — AFP

enth in the Championship.

"I'm definitely happy, not only for coming to the next round but also for seeing a performance from my team that was very lively and by far one of the

better ones in the (recent) past," said Hasenhuttl. "I said in January that now is the time to take this chance because it's always a good chance for a smaller club like we are to write history." — AFP

Zidane mystified by France continuing to exclude Benzema

MADRID: Zinedine Zidane admitted he is still baffled by Karim Benzema's exclusion from the French national team after the striker starred again in Real Madrid's 3-1 victory over Celta Vigo on Saturday. Benzema continued his scintillating form at Balaídos by scoring twice to make it 10 goals in his last 10 games, before he set up Marco Asensio to add a third in injury-time.

Many in Zidane's squad will now join up with their national teams on Monday but Benzema will remain in Madrid, with the 33-year-old still sidelined by France after his alleged role in a plot to blackmail Mathieu Valbuena in 2015. "How can you understand it? I don't understand it, you don't understand it, there are many people who don't understand it," Zidane said

after the game. "What he did today was spectacular." Zidane confirmed Sergio Ramos will join up with Spain, despite the defender missing the Celta win with a bruised tibia. Benzema's latest contribution came in the same week Zidane admitted a Madrid return could be "possible" for Cristiano Ronaldo this summer.

But speculation around Ronaldo makes light of Benzema's superb showings in recent weeks, with his five goals in Madrid's last three league games earning a crucial draw at Atletico, victory over Elche and now a win at Celta.

His hot streak appears to be Madrid's best chance of catching Atleti, who are still three points clear but look increasingly vulnerable to the momentum of their nearest rivals. "We're entering the

final stretch and we're happy with how we're playing and how we are physically," said Zidane.

Kroos' persistence pays off

Benzema had two early chances, the first after Vinicius Junior skipped around Celta goalkeeper Ivan Villar and the second when the ball spilled loose in the area, but both shots were blocked. His two goals both owed a lot to Toni Kroos, who glided past three Celta shirts on the edge of the area in the 20th minute before feeding Benzema, who swivelled and shot crisply into the far corner.

Kroos' incision set up the first and his persistence created the second 10 minutes later, as he robbed Renato Tapia and Benzema profited by curling in with his left foot. Celta grew stronger towards the end of the half, Santi Mina flicking wide and then heading in after being left completely unmarked from a free-kick, conceded by Kroos.

Madrid lost some control in the sec-



VIGO: Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema celebrates with Real Madrid's Brazilian forward Vinicius Junior after scoring a goal during the Spanish League football match between Celta Vigo and Real Madrid at the Balaídos stadium in Vigo on Saturday. — AFP

ond half and needed Thibaut Courtois to save an Iago Aspas header, even if Vinicius and Benzema might have extended the advantage on the counter-attack. Aspas' free-kick late on might

have flown in had the ball not grazed Casemiro's fringe on its way onto the post but Madrid breathed a sigh of relief and then celebrated, Asensio tapping in Benzema's cross in injury-time. — AFP

Sevilla goalkeeper scores dramatic equalizer against Valladolid

MADRID: Sevilla's goalkeeper Bono scored an incredible 94th-minute equalizer to rescue a 1-1 draw against Real Valladolid on Saturday. Bono went up for a corner in injury-time and finished brilliantly with his left foot at the end of a mad scramble in the area to earn Sevilla a point. The result damages Sevilla's hopes of rejoining La Liga's title race, but the team and staff were celebrating at the end, ecstatic at avoiding defeat in the most unlikely of fashions.

Bono is the first Sevilla goalkeeper to score a goal in La Liga but the second goalkeeper to

score in the Spanish top flight this season, after Eibar's Marko Dmitrovic successfully took a penalty against Atletico Madrid in January. "It was the last play of the game and it gives us a taste of happiness," Sevilla coach Julen Lopetegui said. "A goal from a goalkeeper is nothing normal."

Bono was in the right place at the right time after Luuk de Jong's header was kept alive by Oscar Rodriguez, only for his cross to hit the outside of the post. But the ball was cut back again by Youssef En-Nesyri and while Jules Kounde was unable to shoot, he poked it into the path of Bono, who struck hard with his left foot through the crowd of players and into the net.

The Moroccan swung his shirt around his head, for which he was shown a yellow card, and ran towards the Sevilla bench, where he was mobbed by teammates and staff. Valladolid had earlier taken the lead just before half-time, Fabian Orellana scoring a penalty for the hosts, who stay 16th in the table. — AFP



VALLADOLID: Sevilla's Moroccan goalkeeper Yassine Bounou Bono scores during the Spanish League football match between Real Valladolid and Sevilla at the Jose Zorrilla stadium in Valladolid on Saturday. — AFP

Classifieds

HOSPITALS

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Rawda	22517733
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Adaliya	22517144
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Khaldiya	24848075
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Kaifan	24849807
Chest Hospital	24849400	Shamiya	24848913
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Shuwaikh	24814507
Adan Hospital	23940620	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Nuzha	22526804
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Qadsiya	22515088
Clinics		Dasmah	22532265
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Arsenal fightback denies West Ham

Chelsea beat Sheffield Utd to reach FA Cup semi-finals

LONDON: Arsenal came from 3-0 down to claim a 3-3 draw at West Ham yesterday, but a share of the points from a thrilling encounter did little for either side's hopes of a top-four Premier League finish. A blistering start from the Hammers had them three goals up inside 32 minutes thanks to goals from Jesse Lingard, Jarrod Bowen and Tomas Soucek.

But own goals from Soucek and Craig Dawson cut Arsenal's deficit before Alexandre Lacazette's header rescued a point eight minutes from time. West Ham remain in fifth, but are two points adrift of fourth-placed Chelsea. Arsenal's realistic hopes of Champions League football next season now hinge on success in the Europa League as they are nine points adrift of the top four down in ninth.

Mikel Arteta's men suffered a hangover from their European exertions in midweek as they progressed to the quarter-finals despite a 1-0 home defeat by Olympiakos. West Ham took full advantage of a sluggish start from the visitors. Lingard was recalled to the England squad by Gareth Southgate for his fine form since joining on loan from Manchester United in January. The midfielder smashed into the top corner from just outside the box for his fifth goal in seven games for the Hammers.

Two minutes later, Lingard's quick thinking created the second for David Moyes's men as his free-kick caught Arsenal napping and Bowen beat Bernd Leno at his near post. The Gunners were all over the place defensively in the opening half-hour and were caught out again when Michail Antonio's header was deflected in by Soucek. West Ham were cruising towards three points which would have brought them level on points with Chelsea at that stage.

However, Arsenal awakened from their slumber before the break. Soucek was credited with a deflected goal at both ends as Lacazette's fierce strike flicked off the Czech and high beyond former Arsenal goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski. Bukayo

Saka then fired too close to the Polish international moments later with the chance to pull back another goal.

Instead, it was another West Ham mistake which got Arsenal right back in the game just after the hour mark as Dawson diverted Calum Chambers' driven cross into his own net. The home side were pressed back inside their own box for much of the second period, but still had two clear chances to seal victory on the break. Kieran Tierney made two brilliant blocks to deny Bowen and Antonio before Antonio hit the post from point-blank range as he stretched to reach Said Benrahma's cross.

A week on from being dropped for ill-discipline prior to the north London derby, Arsenal captain Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang was hauled off by Arteta 10 minutes from time as he chased an equalizer. But Aubameyang was still making his way back to the bench when Lacazette headed home another brilliant cross from the Arsenal right, this time by Nicolas Pepe.

Meanwhile, Chelsea moved into the FA Cup semifinals as Oliver Norwood's own goal and a late Hakim Ziyech strike sealed a 2-0 win against Sheffield United yesterday. Thomas Tuchel's much-changed side were below their best at Stamford Bridge, but Norwood's first half mistake put them on course to win a hard-fought quarter-final.

Hakim Ziyech netted in stoppage time as Chelsea joined Manchester City and Southampton in the April semifinals at Wembley. Leicester hosted Manchester United in the last quarterfinal later yesterday. The Blues are back in the FA Cup semifinals for a fourth time in the last five seasons after losing last year's final against Arsenal. Chelsea won the last of the club's eight FA Cups under Antonio Conte in 2018.

Despite their uncertain start, Chelsea took the lead in fortuitous fashion in the 24th minute. Aaron Ramsdale couldn't hold Callum Hudson-



LONDON: Arsenal's French striker Alexandre Lacazette scores his team's third goal during the English Premier League football match between West Ham United and Arsenal at The London Stadium yesterday. — AFP

Odoi's cross and Phil Jagielka scrambled it clear for a corner. When the corner curled out to Ben Chilwell on the edge of the area, the Chelsea left-back hit a low shot that Norwood turned into his own net as he stretched in a failed attempt to block it.

The moribund Blades are bottom of the Premier League and look destined for relegation following the recent departure of boss Chris Wilder. Christian Pulisic should have put them out of their misery when he jinked past three defend-

ers, only to shoot straight at Ramsdale and scuff the rebound over the bar.

Picked out by John Lundstram's cross, David McGoldrick wasted a golden opportunity to equalize when the United forward sent his diving header wide from just four yards. Oli McBurnie's long-range drive was pushed away by Kepa before United substitute Rhian Brewster shot just wide. But United's late flourish wasn't enough to force extra-time as Ziyech came off the bench to fire home from Chilwell's pass. — AFP



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