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Paper exams for grade 12; schools to reopen in Sept

Panel OKs financing for small investors, studies proposal to cut school fees

Amir returns after medical checkups



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is received by senior officials as he returns to Kuwait yesterday after medical checkups abroad. — Amiri Diwan

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah returned to Kuwait yesterday evening after medical checkups abroad. HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received HH the Amir at the airport. Also present were Speaker of the National Assembly

Marzouq Al-Ghanem, Chief of the Kuwait National Guard HH Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah, HH Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and HH Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and senior officials. — KUNA

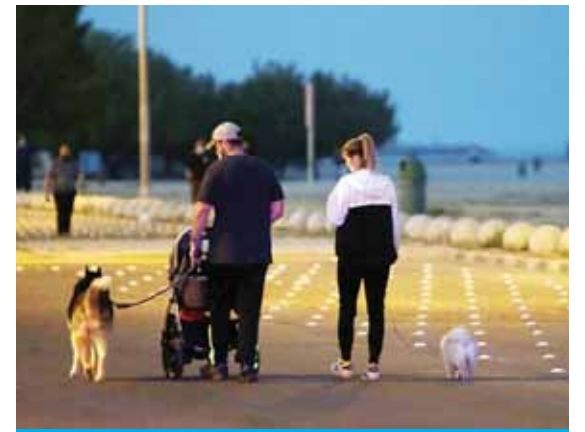
By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Education Minister Ali Al-Mudhaf said the Cabinet has agreed to hold paper-based exams for grade 12 students from May 30 till June 10. A second round of exams will be held from July 4 until July 13. The minister also stressed the importance of vaccinating all 12th-graders alongside their teachers and administrators.

Speaking during a virtual press conference late Monday, Mudhaf said all schools will reopen in September. He said kindergarten and first and second grade students will return to school on Sept 19, while the remaining elementary grades will resume classes on Sept 20.

Intermediate schools will reopen on Sept 26 and high schools on Oct 3. Mudhaf added administrative and teaching staff of kindergarten, elementary and middle schools will commence work on Sept 12, and high school staff on Sept 19.

Kuwait yesterday reported 1,288 new coronavirus infections, taking total cases to 221,743, the health ministry said. The ministry's spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said 13 more people died due to COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, taking the death toll to 1,246. He said 9,367 virus tests were conducted in this period, taking total PCR tests to 1,985,656. Sanad added 1,202 people recovered from the disease, as total recoveries in the country climbed to 206,180.



KUWAIT: A family walks by a beach yesterday with their pets after authorities allowed people to exercise till 8 pm amid a nationwide 11-hour curfew due to the COVID-19 pandemic. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Meanwhile, the National Assembly's financial and economic affairs committee yesterday approved a draft law setting conditions for local banks to provide financing to small and medium businesses affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Rapporteur of the panel MP Saadoun Hammad said the bill calls for banks to provide financing of up to KD 250,000 to small and

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Shooting sparks urgent calls for US gun control

BOULDER, Colorado: A 21-year-old man was charged yesterday with gunning 10 people down in a Colorado grocery store, as America reeled from its second mass shooting in less than a week - sparking urgent new calls for gun control. The suspect, named as Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa, was in hospital after being shot in an exchange of fire with officers following the attack on King Soopers in Boulder County, 50 km northwest of the state capital Denver, on Monday afternoon.

"He is charged with 10 counts of murder in the first degree and will be shortly transported to Boulder county jail," Boulder Police Chief Maris Herold told a press conference. The police chief also read out, one by one, the names of the 10 people killed in the attack, men and women aged from 20 to 65 who included a police officer who was a father of seven.

US President Joe Biden called yesterday for the US to ban assault weapons, as he urged Congress to act on gun control in the wake of the mass shooting in Colorado. "I don't need to wait another minute, let alone an hour, to take common sense steps that will save lives in the future - and to urge my colleagues in the House and Senate to act," Biden said in an address from the White House. "We should also ban assault weapons in the process," said Biden, recalling that Congress had overcome its divisions to pass a 10-year ban on assault weapons back in 1994.

The Colorado massacre came less than a week after another gunman shot dead eight people at multiple spas in the Georgia state capital Atlanta. The suspect in that case is also facing murder charges. Together the killings ignited new calls for US politicians to act against the country's notoriously lax gun ownership laws.

Tighter gun control is overwhelmingly popular with Americans - and backed by Biden - but Republicans have long stood against what a minority view as any infringement on their right to bear arms. With a Senate Judiciary hearing on the subject already scheduled, the familiar bipartisan divide was emerging once more.

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BOULDER: Healthcare workers walk out of a King Sooper's grocery store after a gunman opened fire on Monday. (Inset) Shooting suspect Ahmad Alissa. — AFP

Younger kids have stronger antibody response to COVID

WASHINGTON: Children who are 10 and younger produce more antibodies in response to coronavirus infection than adolescents and adults, a study showed Monday. The authors of the paper, which appeared in JAMA Network Open, said the finding helped illuminate why children are less susceptible to severe COVID-19 than adults - though this is still an area of very active research and many factors are believed to be at play.

A team led by researchers at Weill Cornell Medicine examined almost 32,000 antibody tests from New York City between April and August 2020, finding that a similar number of the 1,200 children and 30,000 adults showed signs of past infection - 17 percent and 19 percent.

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Rohingya camp blaze kills 15, 400 missing

COX'S BAZAR, Bangladesh: Fifteen people have died and 400 are missing after a huge fire destroyed thousands of the shanty homes of tens of thousands of Rohingya in the world's biggest refugee settlement in Bangladesh, the UN said yesterday. Nearly one million of the persecuted Muslim minority - many of whom escaped a 2017 military crackdown in Myanmar that UN investigators concluded was executed with "genocidal intent" - live in squalid conditions at the network of camps in the southeastern Cox's Bazar district.

The fire broke out Monday and left at least 50,000 people homeless as it ripped through their flimsy bamboo-and-tarpaulin shelters, according to police and aid groups. Terrified families fled with whatever they could carry, with distraught parents separated

from their children in the rush. It was just the latest blaze in recent weeks - and the biggest since 2017. Bangladesh has ordered a probe.

"People ran for their lives as it spread fast. Many were injured and I saw at least four bodies," said Aminul Haq, a refugee. "I couldn't save any of our belongings as I was busy saving my children from the fire. We simply ran away from our house," said another, Nasima Khatun. Johannes Van der Klaauw, the UN Refugee Agency's representative in Bangladesh, said that so far it has confirmed 15 people dead, 560 injured, 400 missing and at least 10,000 shelters destroyed.

But Bangladesh police put the death toll lower at 11. "What we have seen in this fire is something we have never seen before in these camps."

Continued on Page 2



UKHIA, Bangladesh: Onlookers gather at a Rohingya refugee camp yesterday, which was hit by a huge blaze. — AFP

Local

One million people registered to receive vaccine in Kuwait: Report

No bikes, scooters allowed during walking hours

KUWAIT: The number of people who have registered on the COVID-19 vaccination platform is approaching one million - both citizens and expats - since the start of the campaign until now, Al-Jarida Arabic daily reported yesterday, quoting informed health sources. They said the number of those who have received the vaccine is around 500,000 citizens and expats. The sources said the health ministry's plan to expand the campaign will witness the vaccination of new categories of people, including cooperative workers, administrators and others, in addition to mosque employees including imams, muezzins and workers.

Medical teams

They said the ministry will soon designate medical teams to visit these groups at their workplaces, adding that the ministry's strategy is to operate in two directions - the first by receiving citizens and expats at vaccination center at the Mishref fairgrounds or other medical centers designated for this purpose.

The second is to go to certain groups to vaccinate them at their locations, adding that medical teams will start their work in days. The sources said this

move will be launched as soon as vaccine shipments will arrive in the country. The sources emphasized the importance of vaccination at the current time, especially amid a spike in the number of deaths, cases and intensive care admittance among all age groups including children in the past two months.

No bikes in curfew

In other news, the Interior Ministry's Relations and Security Information Director General Brig Tawheed Al-Kandari said police will start implementing the new decisions issued by the Cabinet on Monday, which said the curfew is now from 6 pm to 5 am and walking is allowed from 6 pm to 8 pm.

In statements published by Al-Qabas Arabic daily yesterday, he said policemen have received clear instructions that only allow walking inside residential areas while complying with health protocols such as social distancing and wearing masks. People are not allowed to use vehicles or scooters. Kandari called on citizens and expats to comply with the Cabinet's decisions and not allow their children to use bikes or scooters during these two hours, because policemen will take strict action against violators.



KUWAIT: People queue as they wait their turn to receive a dose of COVID-19 vaccine at the make-shift vaccination center at the Kuwait International Fairground in the Mishref on March 21, 2021. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Top international cyber experts call for national cyber security centers

KUWAIT: The need for a National Cyber Security Centre to tackle the post-COVID cyber threat has never been greater. That's the message from a panel of leading global cyber security experts at the upcoming 8th eGovernment Forum (EGOV8) that convenes virtually on 30 and 31 March under the motto of 'Integrated E-Government, an Urgent Post Corona Need'.

Government, the private sector and individuals are all increasingly dependent on the internet and digital technology, and the pandemic has accelerated this shift to online services and home working. Yet, at the same time, the threat of cyber-attack is increasing at a frightening rate. Last year saw a significant increase in cyber-attacks including vaccine hacking and aggressive ransomware attacks, many linked to the pandemic. Experts estimate that

global cyber-crime now costs in excess of \$6 trillion and is growing at 15 percent per annum.

Gen (Ret) Keith Alexander, who led America's National Security Agency, established US CYBERCOMMAND and is Founder and co-CEO of IronNet Cybersecurity; Dr Henry Pearson, the UK Government's Cyber Security Ambassador; and Conrad Prince, formerly deputy head of the UK's cyber agency GCHQ and now a senior adviser to a leading global vendor in cyber security solutions, will speak on a panel chaired by Eng Laial Abdullah Al-Mansoury, Director of Information Security and Emergency Response at CITRA. Their debate will focus on why nations need to adopt a national coordinated approach to defending against these cyber threats to be resilient in cyber-space.



Laial Al-Mansoury



Keith Alexander



Dr Henry Pearson



Conrad Prince

Alexander said, "We face the beginning of a digital arms race in which adversaries are using cybersecurity attacks as a tool to wreak havoc, including destruction, intelligence-gathering, and extortion - ultimately presenting an existential economic threat to the public and private sectors. Compounding this problem, organizations frequently must defend themselves, often with limited resources, against well-funded nation state groups who plan, code and attack in teams over long periods of time. A

collective defense is the only way to gain better visibility into attacks, and to enable faster defensive action."

Drawing on the experience of countries around the world, the panel will explore the post-pandemic cyber threat landscape, and how to develop a coordinated national response to tackle this increasing threat. Conrad Prince said: "Government and society are increasingly dependent on digital solutions. But incidents like SolarWinds have shown how vulnerable we are to cyber-attack.

Nations need to take a coordinated approach, focused on a single centre that understands the cyber threat and leads the national response. Without that countries and their citizens will be increasingly vulnerable to threat actors, including hostile nation states, who seek to do them harm in cyber-space." The debate will take place during a special EGOV8 panel on March 30. NoufEXPO (Kuwait) is organizing the event under the auspices of His Highness the Prime Minister of the State of Kuwait.

Shooting sparks urgent calls for...

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"Too many families in too many places are being forced to endure this unfathomable pain and anguish," the top Democrat in the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, said in a statement. "Action is needed now to prevent this scourge from continuing to ravage our communities," she said. Biden has ordered White House flags to be flown at half mast, his office said.

"It doesn't have to be this way. It's beyond time for our leaders to take action," tweeted former congresswoman Gabby Giffords, who survived a gunshot wound to the head during a 2011 assassination attempt. Biden said last month he wanted Congress to pass laws that would require background checks on all gun sales and ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. "This administration will not wait for the next mass shooting to heed that call," he said at the time.

This month the House of Representatives passed two measures aimed at enhancing background checks and closing a loophole related to a deadly 2015 church shooting in Charleston. The bills address a hugely popular premise among American voters: That background checks be required for all US firearm sales, including those at gun shows.

Yesterday's Senate Judiciary hearing was to be the first of a series to examine proposals to reduce gun violence. "It's not 'timely' that the Senate is

having a hearing on gun violence prevention tomorrow," tweeted Senate Judiciary spokesman Jenna Valle-Riestra on Monday, hours after the Colorado attack. "That's not the point. The point is that gun violence is so common in this country, we can schedule a hearing on a random date and it ends up within a week of two mass shootings," she wrote.

The city of Boulder imposed a ban on "assault-style weapons" and large-capacity gun magazines in the wake of the Parkland, Florida shooting in 2018. But a judge last week blocked that ban, the Denver Post reported, in a decision hailed by the NRA, a powerful pro-gun advocacy group. The NRA tweeted a copy of the Second Amendment on the right to bear arms after the Colorado shooting. Yesterday, Biden senior advisor Cedric Richmond told MSNBC that "the regular sentiment of hearts and prayers are not enough. We need action". "The good news is that this president has a track record of fighting against the NRA and beating them," he added. — AFP

Witnesses at Colorado supermarket said they initially heard multiple loud bangs outside the shop. "I just nearly got killed for getting a soda and a bag of chips," Ryan Borowski, who was in the store when he heard at least eight gunshots, told CNN. "It doesn't feel like there's anywhere safe anymore."

Among the 10 people killed was a police officer, 51-year-old Eric Talley, who was the first on the scene. Colorado has previously suffered two of the most infamous mass shootings in US history - at Columbine High School in 1999, and at a movie theater in Aurora in 2012. Those massacres prompted nationwide soul-searching but did not result in major changes to gun laws. — AFP

law, in which it vowed to bear part of the interest.

The committee also studied a proposal filed by MP Osama Al-Munawar calling to reduce the fees of private schools and universities by 20 percent because of the pandemic. Munawar said the government asked for some time to study the proposal. The government also asked for time until tomorrow to respond to a draft law calling to defer the payment of loans for six months.

Separately, MP Osama Al-Shaheen yesterday submitted a proposal calling on authorities to open the recruitment of domestic helpers from all countries to help families ahead of the fasting month of Ramadan, which starts in mid-April. Kuwait recently eased a total ban on the entry of domestic helpers, allowing the return of maids or new recruits from a number of countries. Shaheen called to open up recruitment from everywhere.

Rohingya camp blaze kills 15...

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It is massive. It is devastating," Van der Klaauw told reporters in Geneva via videolink. Officials said the blaze appeared to have started in one of the 34 camps - which span about 8,000 acres - before spreading rapidly to three other sites despite desperate efforts to put out the flames.

Thick columns of smoke could be seen billowing from blazing shanties in videos shared on social media, as hundreds of firefighters and aid workers pulled refugees to safety. Firefighters finally brought the blaze under control around midnight. The cause of the fire was not known but police inspector Gazi Salahuddin said it spread after gas cylinders used for cooking exploded.

Mohammad Yasin, a Rohingya helping fight the fire, told AFP the blaze raged for more than 10 hours and was the worst he had seen. A volunteer for Save the Children, Tayeba Begum, said "children were running, crying for their families". Refugees International said in a statement: "Many children are missing, and some

were unable to flee because of barbed wire set up in the camps."

This was echoed by Myo Min Khan, a Rohingya, who wrote on Facebook: "We were unable to flee because of the fence, my youngest daughter got injured badly." AFP was not independently able to verify the claims about the fence. Police rejected the accusation, saying only a tiny part of the camp was fenced.

"This tragedy is an awful reminder of the vulnerable position of Rohingya refugees who are caught between increasingly precarious conditions in Bangladesh and the reality of a homeland now ruled by the military responsible for the genocide that forced them to flee," Refugees International said.

The UN's International Organization for Migration said it has pledged \$1 million to relief efforts but a further \$20 million would be required to react to the most urgent needs. It was the third blaze to hit the camps in four days, fire brigade official Sikder, who goes by only one name, told AFP. Two big fires also hit the camps in January, leaving thousands homeless and gutting four UNICEF schools.

Amnesty International's South Asia campaigner, Saad Hammadi, tweeted that the "frequency of fire in the camps is too coincidental, especially when outcomes of previous investigations into the incidents are not known and they keep repeating". — AFP

Younger kids have stronger antibody...

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The scientists then examined a subset of patients who tested positive - 85 children and 3,648 adults - to determine the levels of immunoglobulin G (IgG) antibodies. This is a key type of "neutralizing" antibody that binds to the spike protein of the virus, preventing it from invading cells. The 32 children aged one to 10 years showed median IgG levels almost five times higher than 127 young adults aged 19 to 24 years.

Finally, they focused on a subset of 126 positive patients aged one to 24 years, none of whom had experienced severe COVID-19, to further characterize the antibody response. In this final group, children aged one to 10 years had on average more than twice the levels of IgG antibodies of adolescents aged 11 to 18 years, who in turn had more than twice the average level of young adults aged 19 to 24 years.

The authors wrote: "Our findings suggest that the differences in clinical manifestations of COVID-19 in pediatric patients compared with adult patients could be partly due to age-related immune

response." The fact that children are less prone to severe COVID-19 is in some ways counterintuitive, given how much they are affected by other respiratory illnesses, and many theories abound.

A paper in Nature Communications last month by researchers in Australia suggested children have a more active "innate" immunity - the immune system's first line of defense which gets triggered before it raises antibodies, and involves cells such as neutrophils that patrol the body looking for infections. Another theory is linked to the fact that children have fewer cell receptors in their respiratory tracts called "ACE2" which the coronavirus uses to gain entry to our cells.

One paradoxical result from the new research was that antibody levels were lowest for young adults but rose again with age - despite the fact that we know older people are more vulnerable. The authors admitted they could not completely explain this and suggested the reason for higher hospitalization and death rates among the elderly could relate to higher rates of comorbidities.

Obesity, which is a major risk factor for severe COVID-19, is associated with a phenomenon called "cytokine storm" where the immune system goes into overdrive, damaging organs. The fact that obese people have a higher baseline level of the signaling proteins called cytokines could also be associated with heightened antibody production, the authors wrote. — AFP

Paper exams for grade 12; schools...

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medium businesses after confirming they have been hit by the coronavirus.

The bill defines small businesses as those employing up to 50 workers with annual revenues of up to KD 750,000, while medium businesses are those that employ up to 150 workers and have up to KD 1.5 million in annual revenues. The bill stipulates that 80 percent of the loans will be guaranteed by the government, to be repaid over 10 years with a two-year grace period. The government has also submitted a similar draft

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. The curfew hours were later changed to be from 6:00 pm to 5:00 am starting March 23. 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 the start of the curfew to 10:00 pm every day, and then allowed restaurants and cafes to deliver food from 6:00 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, and the government later allowed people to practice walking and jogging from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm. 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. Meanwhile, taxis are allowed to carry only two passengers.

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry launched a booking service, allowing people to shop from 6:00 pm to 10:00 pm during the curfew hours. The service is valid for all co-ops and supermarkets around Kuwait. To book an appointment, a shopper should visit www.moci.shop, enter the required information (civil ID number and serial number, contact number and email address), the reason for appointment (food supply center) and the time and date of the appointment. The shopper would then receive a barcode to show once they reach the shopping center.

Where to obtain a curfew pass?

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

Co-op delivery during curfew hours

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

- Omariya Co-op
WhatsApp 6041-0067
- Farwaniya Co-op
WhatsApp 6767-8211
- Qairawan Co-op
WhatsApp 9000-3749
- Jahra Co-op
WhatsApp 5160-2458
- Abdulla Al-Mubarak Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-6338
- Nuzha Co-op
WhatsApp 9784-5531
- Khaitan Co-op
WhatsApp 6777-9745
- Ardhiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6902-0779
- Rabiya Co-op
WhatsApp 2438-8316
- Wafra Farm Co-op
Tel: 9883-5245 / 5170-0085
- Salmiya Co-op
Tel: 22253225
- Jabriya Co-op
Tel: 1805-353
WhatsApp 6566-6084
- Rawdha & Hawally
WhatsApp 9662-2883
- Shaab Co-op
WhatsApp 9090-4455
- Wafra Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-0539
- Keifan Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-1719
- Rehab Co-op
WhatsApp 9222-2358
- Mishref Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-9900
- Faiha Co-op
Tel: 1861-000
WhatsApp 9098-6000
- Rumaithiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-0045
- Bayan Co-op
WhatsApp 9004-2500
- Fahaheel Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-9951
- Adan & Qusour Co-op
Tel: 5034-3111 / 6593-3975
- Salam Co-op
WhatsApp 9788-7832

Kuwait Health Minister laments steady rise in COVID-19 infections, deaths

Cabinet urges public to follow health protocol, register for vaccine



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

KUWAIT: Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah lamented the steady rise in the number of coronavirus infections and fatalities in Kuwait. In a presentation made during the Cabinet's weekly meeting on Monday, Sheikh Dr Basel noted that the number of hospitalizations and intensive care units occupants is also increasing despite the imposed partial lockdown. The Cabinet urged citizens and residents to adhere to social distancing rules, health instructions and other precautionary measures to curb the spread of coronavirus and maintain the safety of all. It also called on the public to register for taking the coronavirus vaccine to be immunized against the virus. Kuwait had registered 1,330 new cases of COVID-19 and seven deaths on Monday, bringing the total numbers of infections and deaths to 220,455 and 1,233 respectively. Meanwhile, the number of people receiving treatment in intensive care stood at 246 cases as of Monday, while there were 14,244 patients receiving necessary treatment.

Nevertheless, the Cabinet had decided to relax the nationwide curfew and to exempt vaccinated

arrivals and Kuwaiti students from compulsory hotel quarantine as of yesterday. The Cabinet has changed the time of the curfew to start from 06:00 pm and to end at 05:00 am, said Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Dr Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohamad Al-Sabah in a statement following the meeting, chaired by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. The Cabinet allowed restaurants and cafes to offer home-delivery services during curfew time from 06:00 pm to 10:00 pm also from yesterday.

It also permitted the public to practice outdoor exercises and walk in their residential areas from 06:00 pm to 08:00 pm provided that they wear masks and abide by social distancing rules. The Cabinet also exempted arrivals, who were inoculated by one of the vaccines approved in Kuwait, and students, who are Kuwaitis, bedoons or children of Kuwait mothers, from the compulsory institutional quarantine. It formed a higher ministerial committee to study the required measures to pave the way for the reopening and students returning to schools.

In the meantime, the Cabinet approved draft laws on Kuwait's joining the Nairobi International Convention on the Removal of Wrecks; prevention of conflict of interests and amending some provisions of the penal code. It endorsed draft decrees on the approving the convention of the charter of the Islamic Civil Aviation Council, a memo of understanding for cooperation between the Kuwaiti and Canadian defense ministries, memo of understanding for legal and judicial cooperation with the Jordanian Kingdom, a memo on postal cooperation with Morocco and a memo for cultural and artistic cooperation with Djibouti. The Cabinet referred the approved draft laws and draft decrees to His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to refer it to the National Assembly. The Cabinet was also briefed about the recommendations of the economic committee with regard to the fifth periodical report of the national anti-money laundering and combatting terrorism finance committee and urged the committee to intensify its efforts in this regard. — KUNA



Cabinet ministers attend the meeting.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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Local

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Speaker hails initiative to end Yemen crisis

KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem yesterday hailed Saudi Arabia's initiative to end the crisis in Yemen and reach a comprehensive political agreement that includes a ceasefire under the UN supervision. In a press release, Ghanem called on the Yemeni parties to use this opportunity and put an end to the war in Yemen. Ghanem hoped that this initiative would help to end the Yemeni people's suffering. The Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry had welcomed Saudi Arabia's initiative on Monday, and called on the Yemeni parties to fully adhere to the initiative to reach the desired political solution according to the three agreed terms of reference. The ministry also urged the international society to support this initiative and launch a political process that ends the ongoing conflict in Yemen in a way that preserves its security and stability. — KUNA

No Kuwaitis among Colorado shooting casualties

KUWAIT: There are no Kuwaiti nationals among the victims of the latest shooting incident, which took place in Boulder, Colorado, Kuwait Consul General in Los Angeles, Faisal Al-Houli, affirmed yesterday. Houli urged all Kuwaitis in the city to contact the consulate in case of emergency on the following numbers: the Consulate: 3102793644 and Cultural office: 4246664214. On Monday, 10 people, including a police officer, were killed when a gunman opened fire in a supermarket in Boulder, Colorado. — KUNA

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Kuwait Towers lit up Monday with the flags of Kuwait and China to mark the 50th anniversary of the Kuwaiti-Chinese diplomatic relations. — KUNA

Chinese diplomat hails historical ties with Kuwait

KUWAIT: Chinese Ambassador to Kuwait Li Minggang affirmed on Monday that March 22nd was an exceptional date in the history of the Chinese-Kuwaiti ties, as the two countries in 1971 formally established diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level. This came during the virtual ceremony held on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations

between China and Kuwait, with the participation of the Kuwaiti Assistant Foreign Minister for Asian Affairs, Ambassador Ali Al-Saeed. The ambassador said that the past 50 years have witnessed a continuous and a mutual political trust between Kuwait and China. Kuwait was the first country in the West Asia and North Africa region to sign cooperation agreements within the 'Belt and Road Initiative' framework with China, he added. Furthermore, the ambassador stated that in 2020 the volume of bilateral trade between China and Kuwait reached \$14.3 billion. Meanwhile, Ambassador Saeed stressed that Kuwait attaches great importance to strengthening its relationship with China. — KUNA

Kuwait oil price up to \$63.87 pb

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti crude oil increased 87 cents to reach \$63.87 per barrel last Friday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Elsewhere, the price of Brent Crude saw a 9 cents rise to reach \$64.62 pb, but the West Texas Intermediate was down 13 cents to settle at \$61.55 pb. OPEC daily basket price increased by 75 cents to \$63.22 pb Monday, compared with \$62.47 pb last Friday, said the OPEC Secretariat yesterday. OPEC annual price in 2020 was \$41.47 pb. The OPEC Reference Basket of Crudes (ORB) is made up of the following: Saharan Blend (Algeria), Girassol (Angola), Djeno (Congo), Zafiro (Equatorial Guinea), Rabi Light (Gabon), Iran Heavy (Islamic Republic of Iran), Basra Light (Iraq), Kuwait Export (Kuwait), Es Sider (Libya), Bonny Light (Nigeria), Arab Light (Saudi Arabia), Murban (UAE) and Merey (Venezuela). — 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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KUWAIT: Canada's Ambassador to Kuwait Louis-Pierre Emond yesterday visited Al-Qurain Martyrs' Museum, where he was taken in a tour by National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters' officials including Secretary General Kamel Al-Abdujaleel. — KUNA photo



KRCS gets ISO certification for their quality management

KUWAIT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) announced that it has acquired an International Organization for Standardization (ISO) certificate of quality management systems in compliance with the requirements, as this certification is a successful way to achieve the concept of complete quality. Chairman of KRCS' Board of Directors Dr Hilal Al-Sayer said yesterday that KRCS is keen to achieve its goal of obtaining the ISO 27001 certification in order to improve work performance and protect the security of information and the data center. KRCS is the first humanitarian

charitable organization from the Red Crescent and Red Cross societies to receive the ISO 27001 certification in the Gulf and Middle East, Sayer mentioned.

KRCS has done a lot to keep pace with the scientific development in information technology to be always ready to face difficulties and provide the best technical solutions, he added, explaining that during the past years, several works and changes have been accomplished by KRCS. The obligation to continue working on this approach was the reason for receiving this certification, he pointed out, underlining that it is an incentive for them to provide more work and productivity, especially since they support a huge segment of society through volunteer work in helping individuals and families in need. Sayer congratulated the staff and volunteers in KRCS for obtaining this certification, appreciating the efforts that helped reach this advanced level of humanitarian charitable work. — KUNA



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Israelis vote to decide Netanyahu's fate

A split nation witnesses fourth election in less than two years

JERUSALEM: Israelis were voting yesterday in their fourth election in less than two years, with the nation deeply split on whether veteran Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should remain in power.

Election workers in full COVID protective gear staffed polling stations for voters currently in quarantine-but thanks to a world-leading vaccination effort most citizens wore only face masks.

Netanyahu, 71, is Israel's longest-serving premier and its most popular politician, but his inability to unite a stable governing majority behind him has mired the country in unprecedented political gridlock. He hopes to be rewarded by voters for the campaign that has inoculated half of Israel's roughly nine million people against the coronavirus, a pace envied by much of the world, and for striking historic diplomatic normalization deals with several Arab states.

But while his right-wing Likud party appears set to win the most seats, Netanyahu will need coalition partners to secure a majority in the 120-seat Knesset. That means Israel is looking at three possible outcomes: another coalition under Netanyahu who has been in power for 12 straight years, an ideologically divided government united only by its opposition to him, or a looming fifth election. As he cast his ballot in Jerusalem, Netanyahu voiced hope for an end to the gridlock, saying: "I hope this is the last election." Elsewhere, a polling booth worker, retired 65-year-old engineer Efraim Achzarad, wearing a blue gown and plastic face shield, told AFP that the repeated elections were "a catastrophe". "We are burning money and nothing changes," he said.

Corruption trial

Netanyahu is on trial over corruption charges-allegations he denies, but which have helped fuel a protest movement with weekly rallies outside his Jerusalem residence. The premier has said he will not block the trial and is looking forward to being exonerated, but critics suspect that if he wins a



An Israeli Bedouin casts his ballot yesterday in the Bedouin town of Rahat on the fourth national election in two years. — AFP

majority, he may seek parliamentary action to delay or end the process.

To form a government, Netanyahu would have to strike deals with small factions that control a handful of seats, possibly including a new extremist, far-right alliance called Religious Zionism. If Religious Zionism crosses the 3.25 percent support threshold, as polls predict, it will send to parliament Itamar Ben-Gvir, who has voiced admiration for the mass-murderer of 29 Palestinian worshippers in Hebron in 1994, Baruch Goldstein. Even top Likud member and energy minister Yuval Steinitz said it would be improper to sit with Ben-Gvir. Netanyahu's main

challenger is former television personality Yair Lapid, leader of the centrist Yesh Atid party, which is expected to finish second behind Likud.

"There are only two options: a large Yesh Atid or a government of darkness, racism and homophobia," Lapid said after voting in Tel Aviv. Leading political columnist Nahum Barnea of the Yediot Aharonot newspaper wrote that an alliance between Netanyahu and extremists could produce radical religious policies and an even harsher line towards the Palestinians.

The extremists "have an agenda. They, not Netanyahu, will define what right-wing means,"

Barnea said. Given Israel's right-ward shift since the turn of the century, Lapid has no evident path to power without support from Netanyahu's rivals on the right. That includes Likud defector Gideon Saar, whose New Hope party could win up to 10 seats, and who has ruled out serving under Netanyahu.

Lapid would also likely have to align with an ideological rival, religious nationalist Naftali Bennett. Bennett, a multi-millionaire former tech entrepreneur and one-time Netanyahu protege, has fallen out with the prime minister and hammered him during the campaign, while not ruling out a reunion. —AFP

Biden under pressure over border 'crisis'

WASHINGTON: After two months of relatively smooth sailing, Joe Biden has landed in choppy waters: faced with a migrant rush on the border with Mexico, the Democratic president stands accused of failing to respond effectively-and of lacking transparency with the media.

Questioned by Republican opponents, but also by some in his own party, Biden has launched into a difficult week that features, on Thursday, his first press conference since taking office.

The influx of thousands of migrants has provided an opening to his critics, who struggled to find an angle of attack as Biden successfully ramped up the coronavirus vaccination campaign-and it has united the fractured Republican Party in the process. They have accused the new president of creating the border chaos with a naive immigration stance.

"Despite your administration's refusal to admit this is a crisis, the American people are beginning to understand the gravity of the situation," said Republican Senator Ted Cruz, announcing he would visit the border this week with 14 of his colleagues. Cruz accused the White House of "hiding the truth" by preventing journalists from visiting border facilities, particularly those holding children.

Two rival senators-Republican John Cornyn and Democrat Kyrsten Sinema, who represent border states Texas and Arizona, respectively-also issued a joint letter urging Biden to step up his response.

Biden's predecessor Donald Trump chimed in, saying: "It's insane and it's nothing compared to what it's going to be over the coming months," fanning the flames on a topic that has long been a trigger for his political base. So far, Biden has largely

avoided the issue, but faced with reporters' questions at his press conference later this week, he knows he will have to address it head on.

Asked about it on Sunday evening after a weekend at Camp David, he remained evasive. Does he intend to go to the border himself? "At some point I will, yes," he said. Doesn't he feel the need to see for himself what is going on there?

"I know what's going on in those facilities," he replied. His last 10 tweets discuss masks, vaccinations, St Patrick's Day, the stimulus package, global warming and violence against Asian Americans... but not the situation on the border.

'The border is not open'

The crisis is thwarting the White House's plans to continue the "Help is Here" tour-a victory lap promoting the merits of Biden's gigantic, massively popular \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus plan adopted by Congress. The only presidential trip of the week is scheduled for Tuesday-Biden will travel to Ohio to highlight the positive impact of his aid initiative, dubbed the "American Rescue Plan," on the health sector.

At a time when lawmakers from both parties are visiting the border, and the first photos of unaccompanied migrant children, who are at the heart of the controversy, are being released-the White House is struggling to explain how it ended up here and what comes next.

Biden has pledged to erase what he has called "a moral and national shame" inherited from Trump-namely, the separation of thousands of migrant families, some of whom have still not been reunited.

But while children are no longer separated from their parents at the border, the arrival of large numbers of unaccompanied minors is a pressing issue.

"The border is not open. The majority of people are turned away," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Monday. "With children, our focus is on expediting the processing at the border and ensuring they can get to shelters as quickly as possible." —AFP

defence ministry, it added. Amnesty blamed in particular Lebanon's military intelligence bureau. "Detainees said they faced some of the same torture techniques routinely used in Syrian prisons," Amnesty said. Authorities used "metal sticks, electric cables, and plastic pipes" to carry out beatings, Amnesty said, citing refugees. "Detainees also described being hung upside down or forced into stress positions for prolonged periods of time," it added.

Four men said they were beaten unconscious and two had teeth broken. The arrests, starting in 2014, came as violence across the border in Syria spilled over into Lebanon.

That year, the Islamic State (IS) group and Al-Qaeda's then-Syria affiliate, Al-Nusra Front, kidnapped several Lebanese soldiers and police in a raid on the border town of Arsal. The army and the powerful Shiite Hezbollah movement reacted with an operation targeting jihadist hideouts on the outskirts of the town.

Amnesty acknowledged that "members of armed groups" must be held to account, but warned against flagrant violations committed against those arbitrarily detained. —AFP

Amnesty accuses Lebanon of 'torture' of detained Syrians

BEIRUT: Amnesty International yesterday accused Lebanese authorities of "cruel and abusive" treatment of more than 20 Syrians it said had been tortured in prison or during interrogation.

In a report called "I wish I would die", the rights group documents the cases of 26 Syrians, including four minors and two women, imprisoned between 2014 and 2021 on suspicion of terrorism-related charges. Sentences varied from a few months to several years, with at least six men still detained, Amnesty said. "In all but one of the 26 cases documented by Amnesty International, refugees reported being tortured, either during interrogation or detention," it said in the report.

The abuse was mostly at a military intelligence centre in east Lebanon's Ablah district, the General Security bureau in Beirut or at the

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 Sunday, 21-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. +973-17566666.

<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.

International

Blinken meets NATO allies, but no decision on Afghan pullout

Top US diplomat looks to rebuild ties on first EU visit

BRUSSELS: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken pledged yesterday to share Washington's "initial thinking" on a looming Afghanistan withdrawal deadline, as he meets NATO allies on his first official European trip.

America's top diplomat adopted a positive tone at the start of a two-day meeting of alliance foreign ministers as he looks to rebuild ties strained by former US leader Donald Trump. But high on the agenda for NATO is the future of the alliance's 9,600-strong mission in Afghanistan after Trump struck a deal with the Taliban to withdraw troops by May 1.

Allies are waiting anxiously for new US leader Joe Biden to decide whether to stick to that date-but Blinken said the US was still mulling it over. "We have a review under way in the United States. I'm here today in part to share some of our initial thinking with our NATO allies," Blinken said in opening remarks with alliance chief Jens Stoltenberg.

"But maybe even more important, I'm here to listen and consult because that is what allies do."

Biden said last week that it would be "tough" for Washington to meet the looming deadline. That prompted outrage from the Taliban, who warned that the US would be "responsible for the consequences". NATO allies have said they are willing to stay in Afghanistan longer if the US remains too, but they are keen for Washington to make up its mind.

Trump slashed US troop numbers to 2,500, the

lowest level in two decades, but American support remains vital to keep the NATO mission going. "Are we staying after May 1 or are we leaving," one European foreign minister asked, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity. "We don't know what we are going to do and that is a problem." Last year's deal saw the Taliban commit to peace efforts and cutting violence but the US has complained that talks have stalled and bloodshed has flared.

Washington is scrambling to inject fresh impetus into the peace process and Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin made an unannounced visit to Kabul Sunday. The US and its allies are desperate to avoid seeing Afghanistan slip back into being a haven for terror groups, two decades after they intervened in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

"Whatever the United States ends up doing will be informed by the thinking of our NATO allies, which I'll take back to me after these conversations," Blinken said. "We are united with our NATO allies in seeking to bring a responsible end to this conflict, and to remove our troops from harm's way."

'Rebuild our partnerships'

The visit by Blinken, which also includes meetings with top EU officials, aims to make good on Biden's assurances that the US wants to work closely with its allies. "I've come to Brussels because the United States wants to rebuild our partnerships, first and foremost, with our NATO allies," Blinken said.



BRUSSELS: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg give a press conference ahead of a Nato Foreign ministers meeting in Brussels yesterday. — AFP

"We want to revitalize the alliance, to make sure it's as strong and effective against the threats of today, as it has been in the past." Stoltenberg is currently hammering out proposals to reform the 72-year-old alliance, set to be pitched to leaders including Biden at a summit later this year.

NATO is looking to tackle growing threats from Russia and China and emerging security concerns such as cyberattacks and climate change. But inter-

national challenges remain for the 30-nation grouping, including bolstering defense budgets and squabbles with NATO member Turkey.

Trump harangued leading nations like Germany for failing to boost defense spending. Despite the marked change in tone, the new US administration is expected to remain firm on pressing other members to do more to share NATO's financial and military burden. — AFP

News in brief

Kosovo leftists take power

PRISTINA: Kosovo's leftists formed a new government Monday after vanquishing the old guard in a landslide election last month, with Prime Minister Albin Kurti vowing to bring vaccines and jobs to a pandemic-weary public. Kurti, the firebrand head of the anti-establishment Vetevendosje party, and his cabinet were voted in by 67 deputies in the 120-seat parliament, with 30 votes against. The election marks the third change of government since the pandemic hit Kosovo, claiming nearly 1,800 lives and exacerbating economic, social and public health crises in the former Serbian province. — AFP

Gambia votes for skin-bleaching ban

BANJUL, Gambia: Gambian lawmakers on Monday rejected a government proposal to lift a ban on skin-lightening products, which are widely used across Africa. Skin lightening is also practiced in other parts of the world such as South Asia and the Middle East, and is particularly popular among women. But it is controversial, with many people arguing that the phenomenon is a toxic legacy of colonialism and that the bleaching agents used to lighten skin pose health risks. Yahya Jammeh, who for 22 years ruled the tiny West African state with an iron fist, banned the practice in 1996. The former president fled The Gambia in 2017 after losing presidential elections to a relative unknown, Adama Barrow. — AFP

Spain raises upper age limit for AZ

MADRID: Spain on Monday raised the maximum age limit for people to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine, which has faced setbacks in Europe due to safety concerns, from 55 to 65. When the AstraZeneca vaccine was approved for use by European Union regulators in January, Spain said it would only be used on those under 55 for lack of data from trials in older age groups. But since then, more trial data has shown the efficacy of the vaccine, and other nations have expanded the use of the jab to older people. "The age limit set at 55 years is abolished and the limit is extended to 65 years," Health Minister Carolina Darias told a news conference following a meeting with regional health departments. — AFP

Air travel spike alarms US officials

WASHINGTON: A top US health official on Monday warned Americans it was too soon to resume traveling despite progress in the battle against the coronavirus, after data showed the country recorded its highest number of airport check-ins since last year. "Now is not the time to travel," Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), told reporters, urging people to keep up with measures to stem the spread of the virus even as the vaccination rate increases. — AFP

Tajikistan kicks off vaccination drive

MOSCOW: Tajikistan's authoritarian leader Emomali Rakhmon ordered his government on Monday to begin a vaccination drive against the coronavirus, less than two months after he declared the pandemic over. In a decree published on the Tajikistan government's website, Rakhmon said that the impoverished Central Asian country would begin "stage-by-stage immunization... among vulnerable groups of the population" starting from Monday. The decree provided no further details on which groups would receive the vaccine first. — AFP

Pandemic sharpens plight of Berlin's homeless women

BERLIN: "I never thought it would happen to me," said Petra, who found herself living on the street in Berlin as the pandemic gripped Europe's top economy one year ago. Petra's story reflects the struggle of the estimated 2,500 homeless women in the German capital, who have become even more vulnerable in the coronavirus outbreak.

It is dusk at "Evas Obdach" (Eva's Shelter) in Neukoelln, Berlin's largest district and one of its most ethnically diverse. After a full day in the winter cold, women carrying heavy bags or dragging overloaded shopping trolleys behind them file in, visibly weary. They can get a warm meal here, take a shower and spend the night, all in a comparably safe environment. Petra, who is in her 60s, takes a seat. "Look how nice it is here—it's really a place that's made for us. They even have different kinds of tea," she says in a soft voice, cracking a hesitant smile.

'Corona put me on the street'

She is one of the few women willing to talk a bit about her story, on

condition only her first name be used. Petra had arrived in Berlin last March, at the beginning of Germany's first shutdown.

She was counting on staying in a small hotel but was refused a room because coronavirus restrictions outlawed overnight stays except for business travellers. She ended up at a city mission and has been bouncing from shelter to shelter ever since. Asked why she moved to the capital and how much money she had when she did, Petra is not very forthcoming with answers but she's sure of one thing: "Corona put me on the street." "I was trained as a chemist, I worked in restaurants, I had a career... I never thought this would happen to me," she said.

Official statistics about the number of people in Germany rendered homeless during the pandemic and its ensuing economic crisis are hard to come by. "Nothing indicates at the moment that it has risen sharply," said Werenka Rosenke, director of the BAG association which groups several homeless aid organizations. "But

At Caracas cemetery, homeless mix with looters

CARACAS: Dragging a dead rat by a string, 11-year-old Jendry scoots on a single roller skate amongst the tombs and graves at a massive cemetery in the south of Caracas. The morbid setting of human remains and broken coffins has no impact on Jendry, who's lived at the site in the Venezuelan capital for two years. He's not alone. Several families live in the 19th century Southern General cemetery that was declared a national historic monument in 1982. They also rub shoulders with tomb raiders.

No respect

Jendry and his nine-year-old sister Wineisis, get by begging. They live with their alcoholic mother, who is often absent. His older sister Winifer, 17, is a neighbor having set up home with her 19-year-old husband Jackson and 5-month old daughter in a sort of chapel containing four tombs. "You

could say I've lived my whole life here in the cemetery," said Winifer, who can neither read nor write. Some people have even built huts around graves, placed their mattresses on top of tombs and their bags and belongings between gravestones. A pink bag with a smiling "Hello Kitty" image contrasts with the grey and sombre surroundings.

Some people are angry at what they see as the desecration of the graves where their loved ones have been laid to rest. "You have to respect the dead, it's still painful for us," said a woman called Maritza. She hit out at Winifer and her family for using the chapel where her murdered 21-year-old son and niece who died of cancer are buried, "like a kitchen."

Most of the graves in the cemetery have been desecrated or looted. With Venezuela mired in deep economic crisis, looters are looking for jewelry,



BERLIN: In this file photo a homeless woman begs for coins at Berlin's Friedrichstrasse, during the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

you may start to see it after the pandemic, when eviction orders—which are currently suspended—are carried out," she said.

Advocates say that reliable statistics about affected people are sorely lacking. In Berlin, a voluntary census in early 2020 — before the Covid-19 outbreak—counted nearly 2,000 people without homes, but charity groups put the number far higher, at between 6,000 and 9,000 including around 2,500 women.

Natalie Kulik, the founder of Evas Obdach, said their unique plight is often invisible to policy-makers and the society at large. Women try to avoid the street as long as possible, even if it means enduring violence in their marriage or turning to prostitution to pay the rent, she said. And if they end up failing to keep a roof over their heads, they often try to hide their situation, "paying particular attention to their appearance," Kulik said, blaming "a sense of shame". — AFP



CARACAS: A young woman and a baby rest at a makeshift refuge at the southern general cemetery in Caracas. — AFP

wedding rings, gold teeth—anything valuable that might have been buried with the corpses. Throughout the cemetery it's not unusual to come across a skull, a tibia or a femur just lying around.

Opportunism

One of the jewels of the cemetery is the mausoleum of former Venezuela president Joaquin Crespo (1841-1898.) It resembles a palace in

ruins with debris strewn all over the floor and a little staircase leading up to a cupola used by drug addicts. Huge mausoleums built by the National Guard and the old Metropolitan Police force to house the coffins of their men have not been spared. Funerary urns and niches in the police mausoleum have been gutted while the stairs down to the basement are covered with rubbish and excrement. — AFP

First US city passes reparation plan for Black residents

CHICAGO: Council members in Evanston city outside Chicago voted Monday in favor of giving funds to Black residents as a form of reparations for housing discrimination—the first city in the United States to take such action. The plan, passed with an 8-1 vote, will distribute \$400,000 of a \$10 million fund generated by marijuana tax revenue, to up to 16 families to use toward housing needs. For Alderman Robin Rue Simmons, the architect of the Evanston Local Reparations Restorative Housing Program and Program Budget, it was an "initial first step" after years of discussion and input from locals.

"It is not full repair alone in this one initiative but we all know that the road to repair and justice in the Black community is going to be a generation of work. It's going to be many programs and initiatives and more funding," Rue Simmons said. Under the plan, residents who qualify will receive \$25,000 to use towards home improvements or mortgage assistance.

To qualify, they must have either been or be descended from a Black person who lived in Evanston between 1919 and 1969 who suffered from discriminatory housing practices, including "redlining"—unfair refusal of services such as loans—from government and banks. The move has been closely followed in the United States, and could become a model for elsewhere in the country as racial injustice has risen up the political and public agenda.

Evanston is a suburban city of 75,000 people which is home to Northwestern University, and which lies just north of Chicago along the shores of

Lake Michigan. The meeting Monday, which clocked in at more than three hours, had more than 60 people giving public comments, both for and against the plan. Those opposed asked for more time for public discussion and called it a housing program rather than reparations. "As a Black woman, I am 100 percent in support of reparations... but what we have before us tonight, I will counter, is a housing plan, with the title reparations," said Cicely Fleming, the lone alderman to vote against the measure.

Rue Simmons said that they were ready for any legal challenges, saying that civic action groups and international law firms were "ready to provide pro bono legal defense to us in the event that we should have some sort of situation in court." Evanston mayor Steve Hagerty, who moderated the meeting, said that he expects families to begin applying for the funds this summer. Council members said the plan was not a substitute for any future federal reparations for the descendants of slaves. — AFP

International

Myanmar military brass hit with new US, EU sanctions over coup

Pro-democracy demonstrators go back to streets in defiance

YANGON: The European Union and the United States slapped sanctions Monday on top police and military commanders linked to last month's coup in Myanmar, as pro-democracy demonstrators went back to the streets in defiance of a violent crackdown on protest. The junta is increasingly using deadly force to crush activists who have risen up against the military's ousting of civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1. In a bid to pile international pressure on the regime, the European Union on Monday placed Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing on an assets freeze and visa ban blacklist.

Min Aung Hlaing is "responsible for undermining democracy and the rule of law in Myanmar", its official journal said. The EU also hit nine other senior military officers and the head of Myanmar's election commission with travel bans and asset freezes, in the 27-nation grouping's most extensive response yet to the February 1 coup. In Washington, the Treasury Department sanctioned Myanmar's police chief and an army special operations commander, saying they were responsible for using lethal force against demonstrators.

When anti-coup protests began the security forces did not use force to counter demonstrators-but since Than Hlaing was made police chief and deputy home affairs minister on February 2 "Burma's police have engaged in brutal acts of violence against pro-democracy protesters," it said, using an alternate name for Myanmar. Army commander Aung Soe was responsible for sending in troops to confront protesters using battlefield weapons and tactics, "demonstrating that lethal force is being used in a planned, premeditated and coordinated manner against the anti-coup protests," the Treasury Department said. The sanctions also named two army infantry divisions involved in putting down the protests.

Myanmar's top junta leaders are already under US sanctions. More than 2,600 people have been arrested and 250 killed since the coup, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a local monitoring group that has warned fatalities could be even higher. One of those held, Aung Thura, a



MANDALAY: Family members grieve over the body of teenage bystander Tun Tun Aung at a cemetery in Mandalay yesterday, a day after he was shot dead in front of his home by security forces during a crackdown on demonstrations against the military coup. — AFP

journalist with the BBC's Burmese service, was freed on Monday, the broadcaster said in a news story on its website. Men in plain clothes detained him while he was reporting outside a court in the capital Naypyidaw on Friday. A second journalist detained at the same time, Than Hlike Aung from the local outlet Mizzima, remains in custody.

The junta has sought to stem the flow of news about the protests and crackdown, revoking the licenses of independent local media-including Mizzima-raiding newsrooms and arresting journalists.

Scores of people, including teachers, marched on Monday through the pre-dawn streets of Mandalay, the country's second-largest city, some carrying placards calling for UN intervention in the crisis. Mandalay has seen some of the worst violence of the crackdown and recorded eight more deaths on Sunday, a medical

source told AFP, adding that as many as 50 people were wounded.

Machine gun fire rang out late into the night across the city of 1.7 million. "People were really scared and felt insecure the whole night," a doctor told AFP by phone. To protest against the brutal crackdown, a group of doctors in Mandalay staged a "placard only" demonstration by lining up signs in the street, Voice of Myanmar reported. A group of monks staged a similar "monkless" protest. There were also early morning protests in parts of Yangon, the commercial capital and country's largest city, where drivers honked their horns in support of the anti-coup movement. Residents in Yangon's Hlaing township released hundreds of red helium balloons with posters calling for a UN intervention to stop atrocities, local media reported.—AFP

'Catastrophic' floods prompt helicopter rescues in Australia

WINDSOR, Australia: Military helicopters, jet skis and rubber boats were deployed to rescue people stranded by "catastrophic" floods along Australia's populous east coast yesterday, with thousands of homes damaged. A relentless week-long downpour has soaked most of New South Wales, causing surging rivers to burst their banks: swallowing homes, roads, bridges and farmland.

Strained emergency services-which just one year ago were battling drought and unprecedented bushfires-used military aircraft and lightweight rubber dinghies to access cut-off communities. So far, around 850 people have been winched or ferried to safety, but tens of thousands have been told to flee their homes and wild weather has spread to more inland areas.

In hard-hit Windsor, near Sydney, residents traversed the murky debris-strewn torrent on jet skis and other vessels normally seen off the city's golden beach-

es. Some coastal regions have received a meter (three feet) of water in a week, the equivalent of two-thirds of normal annual rainfall. "We've never seen anything like this ever," said 50-year-old Jodie Sallustio, who has been stranded by floodwaters surrounding her partner's Port Macquarie home since Friday.

About 18,000 people have already been evacuated across New South Wales, with state Premier Gladys Berejiklian saying the wild weather was now "impacting a huge area of the state". "It is catastrophic in its dimensions and the impact will be severe, and the fact that 15,000 people may need to be evacuated within the next 24 to 48 hours is a huge concern," she said.

In parts of the state, residents have begun looking to clean-up efforts but meteorologists have warned that flooding will persist for days even though rainfall is forecast to ease today. Thousands remain without power and energy providers warned electricity will not be restored in some areas until later in the week. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the Warragamba Dam, Sydney's main drinking water source, was expected to continue spilling over into already swollen rivers for another week. "This is a complex weather event and becoming more complex," he told reporters in Canberra. WaterNSW, which manages the dam, said the daily overflow had now dropped to half of its peak

of 500 gigalitres on Sunday-roughly equivalent to the total volume of Sydney Harbor.

More extreme weather expected

Emergency services have responded to more than 10,000 calls for help. So far, no fatalities or serious injuries have been reported, but thousands of homes and businesses are believed to have been damaged.

Insurance Council of Australia CEO Andrew Hall said 11,700 claims had already been lodged and "a large number" were expected in the coming days. Organic farmer Rod Bailey said his property near Port Macquarie had suffered "complete devastation" with at least 95 percent of its crops destroyed by heavy rains. "We won't see any income short of three months," he said. "It's a difficult situation we're in but many of our neighbors have had it far worse." The Bureau of Meteorology warned yesterday that "we are not out of the woods yet", with half of New South Wales still under emergency weather warnings.

State Emergency Service assistant commissioner Nicole Hogan told public broadcaster ABC another 1,750 volunteers had arrived from interstate to support the efforts in what would be a "critical 24 hours". Flood and severe weather warnings have been extended to areas not previously affected, including the south coast of Sydney and outback areas to the northwest recently crippled by a prolonged drought.

Scientists have warned Australia can expect more frequent and more extreme weather events as a result of climate change. Just north of New South Wales, parts of Queensland state's populated southeast have also been hit by flooding after days of heavy rain.

Eight million residents in Sydney and across the state have been told to work from home if possible and avoid unnecessary travel. Health officials have said the rain and floods will delay the already halting roll-out of coronavirus vaccines in Sydney and surrounding areas.—AFP



SYDNEY: Residents look out at a flooded residential area in the Windsor area in northwestern Sydney yesterday after torrential downpours have lashed Australia's southeast for days. — AFP

Russia, China reject accusations of vaccine opportunism

MOSCOW: Russia and China yesterday rejected accusations they were seeking to use coronavirus vaccines to project their influence around the world. Speaking to reporters after talks with Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insisted that both countries were guided by principles of "humanity" rather than geopolitical interests.

"Russia and China have been models of openness, cooperation, and mutual assistance," Lavrov said in the southern Chinese city of Guilin in comments released by his ministry. When it comes to tackling the coronavirus pandemic, he said, it is impor-

tant to be guided by "humanity and the interests of saving lives" rather than "geopolitical considerations and commercial approaches". "Everyone, including our Western partners, who are trying to make Russia and China look like some sort of opportunists in the field of so-called 'vaccine diplomacy' should absolutely remember that," Lavrov added.

"This is absolutely divorced from reality," Wang said it was wrong to suggest China was "scheming to conduct some kind of vaccine diplomacy", accusing some countries of "selfish mass hoarding of vaccines".

"Our intention from the start is to let more

people receive the vaccine as soon as possible," he said. "For China and Russia, our choice is not to benefit only ourselves, but rather to help the whole world." China, where the coronavirus originated, has been supplying several countries with vaccines, sometimes for free. Russia has been proudly distributing its Sputnik V vaccine, named after the first satellites launched by the Soviet Union. Critics in the West accuse the two powers of using the vaccines to extend their global influence, while Moscow and Beijing say Western countries are buying up and hoarding vaccines, often to the detriment of poor countries.—AFP

News in brief

Bomb blast attack in China kills 4

BEIJING: Four people were killed when a man detonated a homemade bomb in a village government office in southern China, authorities said, in a rare act of violent social protest. A 59-year-old man suspected of being responsible for the explosive device was also killed in the explosion, local police said on their official Weibo account, adding that five people were wounded in the blast. The incident happened near the southern city of Guangzhou on Monday morning in the tiny village of Mingjing, which has about 3,000 residents and is the intended site of a major property redevelopment that involves relocating locals.—AFP

First vaccines arrive in PNG

PORT MORESBY: Papua New Guinea received its first batch of coronavirus vaccines yesterday as the country raced to quell a COVID-19 surge overwhelming its fragile health system. An initial shipment of 8,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine was flown in from neighboring Australia, earmarked to protect badly hit frontline hospital staff. Prime Minister James Marape greeted the grey air force C-17 bearing the vaccine, three mobile storage facilities and a small team of Australian public health specialists at Jacksons International Airport in Port Moresby. Papua New Guinea survived a year without widespread community transmission, but the impoverished Melanesian nation is now detecting hundreds of cases each day.—AFP

Facebook hit by French lawsuit

PARIS: Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders announced yesterday that it has filed a lawsuit against Facebook in France, saying the website breaks its own terms by failing to protect users against hate speech. The Paris-based campaign group, known by its French acronym RSF, said it was taking Facebook to court for "misleading commercial practices". The US social media giant has allowed the "massive proliferation" of hate speech and false information on its site, RSF said. The watchdog argues that while Facebook pledges in its terms of service to provide "a safe, secure and error-free environment" for users, it fails to do this as hateful content and misinformation are widespread on the site.—AFP

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Business

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 2021

China's Baidu debuts in Hong Kong after \$3.1 billion IPO

Latest mainland tech giant to flock to the financial hub

HONG KONG: Chinese search engine Baidu debuted on Hong Kong's stock exchange yesterday after raising \$3.1 billion in its initial public offering, the latest mainland tech giant to flock to the financial hub. Shares rose a modest 0.8 percent to HK\$254 from their listing price of HK\$252 after the market opened. Over the past 18 months Hong Kong has seen a flurry of Chinese tech firms hold IPOs in the city, part of a drive to list closer to home as relations between Beijing and Washington sour.

Until the recent trade tensions, New York tended to be the favored place for those companies to raise international capital. But now Hong Kong is dominant, something Beijing's authoritarian leaders have encouraged at a time when it is also looking to rein in the influence of some Chinese tech firms like Alibaba.

Last year Hong Kong raked in an impressive \$49 billion in IPOs. Some of the debuts in Hong Kong are dual listings such as Baidu, which is already traded on the Nasdaq in New York. Others are purely Hong Kong listings such as the medical arm of Chinese e-commerce giant JD.com which raised \$3.5 billion in its December homecoming. More are on the way. Chinese companies looking at selling shares in the city include Tencent's music group and video site Bilibili.

Anti-trust crackdown

The trend has delivered a shot in the arm for Hong Kong after a turbulent couple of years that have been

blighted by US-China trade tensions, Beijing's crackdown following huge democracy protests and the coronavirus pandemic. Last year's IPO total would have been even bigger had Alibaba's secondary listing not been pulled at the last minute on Beijing's orders. 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.

Beijing has since responded with an anti-trust crackdown in response to concerns in China over chaotic online lending and accusations of powerful platforms squeezing merchants and misusing consumer data. Baidu, for now, appears to have avoided that fallout. Once one of China's top tech firms, it lost out to competitors like Tencent and Alibaba who were much quicker at adapting to mobile, and creating the kind of super apps that are now ubiquitous on the mainland. Instead the company has spent billions in areas such as artificial intelligence, language learning and autonomous driving, betting on smart devices and vehicles of the future.

It has also invested in making its own computer chips at a time when there is a severe global shortage of semiconductors. Both AI and microchips have been identified by China's Communist Party as core industries to focus on as the two rival vie for global influence. In a recent interview with Bloomberg, Baidu



HONG KONG: Baidu is the latest Chinese tech giant to opt for a secondary listing in Hong Kong as relations with the United States sour.

founder Robin Li welcomed Beijing taking a closer look at the huge influence amassed by his tech rivals, likening it to similar concerns in the US over companies like Facebook and Google. "You just cannot imagine the number one and number two guy all of a sud-

den merging and gaining more than 90 percent of market share in the US," he said.

"But that happened quite a few times in China before. That's not good for innovation. So I think that the antitrust push is justified," he added. — AFP



Boom in innovation for overcoming disabilities: UN

GENEVA: Innovations aimed at helping people overcome mobility, sight and other disabilities have exploded in recent years, and are becoming ever more integrated in regular consumer goods, the United Nations said yesterday. More than one billion people worldwide currently need technology-based assistance to overcome a disability—a figure expected to double in the next decade as populations age, UN data shows. Meanwhile, only one in 10 people globally currently have access to the assistive products they need. To meet the growing demand, innovations in new assistive products have shown double-digit growth in recent years, according to a fresh report from UN's World Intellectual Property Organization. "People living with impairments have long relied on new technologies for increased independence and fuller interaction with their world," WIPO chief Daren Tang said in the foreword to the report.

"From the invention of the crutch in ancient Egypt through the simple prosthetics of the Middle Ages to our latter-day Braille tablets, we are now on the cusp of a future where autonomous wheelchairs, mind-controlled hearing aids and wearables monitoring health and emotion alleviate the impact of human limitations."

'Mass use'

A key finding in the report, he said, is "the evolution toward mass use of assistive tech." Using patent and other data, the report found that more than 130,000 patents were filed for conventional and emerging assistive technologies between 1998 and 2020.

More than 15,500 of those filings were for so-called emerging assistive technologies, like assistive robots, smart home applications, wearables for visually impaired people and smart glasses. That was eight times fewer than the 117,000-plus patents filed for conventional technologies for well-established products like wheelchair seats or Braille-enabled devices.

But WIPO pointed out that filings for new assistive technologies were growing 17 percent on average each year—three times faster than the growth rate for conventional technology filings. The report found that China, the United States, Germany, Japan and South Korea were the countries where most innovation in assistive technology was taking place.

Universities and public research organizations are the most prominent when it comes to filing patent applications for emerging assistive technologies. WIPO experts hailed how assistive technologies were rapidly converging with mainstream consumer electronics, paving the way for a greater commercialization and lower prices.

Marco Aleman, a WIPO assistant director general who leads the agency's IP and Innovation Ecosystems Sector, pointed to the swelling interest in enabling technologies like brain-machine interfaces.—AFP

Paris metro operator sued over air pollution

PARIS: A French air quality association has filed a complaint against the Paris metro operator accusing it of downplaying pollution risks for public transport users, who are unwittingly exposed to dangerous levels of harmful compounds. The Respire ("Breathe") group said it filed its suit in Paris on Monday after its own analyses at several stations, as well as pollution readings by the state-owned RATP operator, had revealed alarming levels of particle pollution in recent years.

It alleged that the RATP was refusing to provide commuters with data showing the true pollution

risks, "which constitute aggravated deceit and causing unintentional injuries."

Some four million people use the metro system each day, and the RATP employs tens of thousands of drivers and other workers. The concentration of fine particles, which can penetrate deep into a person's lungs, are compounded by limited ventilation as well as the braking action on the trains' metal wheels. "The RATP practices a sort of omerta on air pollution in the metro. It pretends there's no problem, but it needs to tell people the truth. Its denial is a key part of the problem," Respire's director Olivier Blond said in a statement.

Contacted by AFP, the RATP contested the pollution levels cited by Respire, saying the organisation used portable, non-certified measuring equipment whose readings could not be compared with its own. It also insisted that it was investing in its ventilation systems and experimenting with air treatment technologies as well as "electronic braking" that would release fewer fine particles as trains enter stations. — AFP



DHAMAN to complete first phase of healthcare system by 2021-end

KUWAIT: The Health Assurance Hospitals Company (DHAMAN) announced the start of preparing and equipping two new Primary Healthcare Centers in the Fahaaheel and Jahra areas in preparation for their entry into service by the end of 2021, thus completing the first phase of the DHAMAN's Health system in the various governorates of Kuwait, which includes five Primary Healthcare Centers and two hospitals distributed according to the population density of its main segment of residents working in the private sector and their families who benefit from the compulsory health insurance.

In this context, Dr Mohammad Al-Qenai, DHAMAN Acting CEO said: DHAMAN's health system represents the most important pillars of the development of the health system in Kuwait,

which makes the company's projects an essential part of the strategic projects in the National Development Plan and the vision of (New Kuwait 2035). DHAMAN shall provide integrated health services for residents working in the private sector and their families, which provides the opportunity to reduce the financial and operational burdens on government facilities and improve health services for citizens and residents alike.

Al-Qinae added that DHAMAN Primary Healthcare

Centers in Hawally, Farawaniya and Dhajeej are currently receiving patients commercially and provide integrated services such as family medicine, dentistry, pediatrics, radiology services, and laboratory services to all family members with high quality through highly qualified medical staff. Furthermore, Al-Qinae pointed out: At the same time, construction and equipping of DHAMAN hospitals in Ahmadi and Jahra are proceed-

ing rapidly, to be delivered by the end of the year as well, and with the completion of equipping its new Primary Healthcare Centres in the Fahaaheel area with an area of 5,000 square meters and in Jahra with an area of 2,100 square meters, DHAMAN will have completed its health system for the first phase in preparation for receiving the beneficiaries of compulsory health insurance and health services in cooperation and coordination with the Ministry of Health.

Al-Qinae concluded by praising the continuous cooperation and coordination with the Ministry of Health and other concerned parties to initiate the implementation of the transfer phase of the beneficiaries from the Ministry of Health DHAMAN's health facilities.

Sri Lanka secures \$1.5 billion Chinese loan

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka and China have signed a \$1.5 billion currency swap deal, the island nation's central bank said yesterday, as it struggles with a major foreign exchange crisis and debt repayments. Colombo had been negotiating for months to secure credit from China—its largest single source of imports—as the island's foreign reserves plummet amid the pandemic.

Chinese influence in the South Asian nation has been growing in recent years, through loans and projects under its vast Belt and Road infrastructure initiative, raising concerns among regional powers and Western nations. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka said the three-year swap arrangement for 10 billion yuan with the People's Bank of China was "with a view to promoting bilateral trade and direct investment for economic development of the two countries".

Officials said talks were also under way to secure another \$700 million from the China Development Bank. Sri Lanka's economy was already reeling from the deadly 2019 Easter bombings, with the coronavirus epidemic and lockdowns further weighing on growth.

The economy contracted by a record 3.9 percent last year. Foreign reserves fell to \$4.5 billion in February from \$8.0 billion a year ago, despite Sri Lanka banning the import of luxury goods and vehicles as well as some food commodities. Under former president Mahinda Rajapaksa between 2005 and 2015, Colombo borrowed billions from China, accumulating a mountain of debt for expensive infrastructure projects. Rajapaksa returned to power as prime minister in 2019, after his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected president. —AFP



Dr Mohammad Al-Qenai



Business

White House considering \$3tn for US infrastructure: Reports

Rescue plan to help US economy recover from pandemic damage

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden's administration is considering spending \$3 trillion on infrastructure in the United States, split into two bills that face narrow paths to approval in Congress, US media reported on Monday. The infrastructure plan would follow the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Biden signed earlier month, which was aimed at helping the world's largest economy recover from the damage done by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Biden, who took office in January, vowed to pass a second bill aimed at improving infrastructure in the United States and creating jobs, and US media reported that would likely be divided up into two proposals costing a total of \$3 trillion. "We'll use taxpayers' dollars to rebuild America. We'll buy American products, supporting millions of American manufacturing jobs, enhancing our competitive strength in an increasingly competitive world," Biden said in the January speech announcing the two plans.

However any new measures could face tough odds in Congress, where Democrats hold a thin margin in the House and are evenly split with Republicans in the Senate, forcing them to use a special parliamentary maneuver to pass the American Rescue Plan without opposition support.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki disputed the reports, saying "President Biden and his team are considering a range of potential options for how to

invest in working families and reform our tax code so it rewards work, not wealth." "Those conversations are ongoing, so any speculation about future economic proposals is premature and not a reflection of the White House's thinking," she said.

Twin proposals

Citing people familiar with the proposals, US media said the new measure would be broken up into two parts, with the first being aimed at improving infrastructure, including a \$400 billion investment in fighting climate change. Also included would be \$200 billion for housing infrastructure, \$100 billion for low-income homes and \$60 billion for green transit networks.

The second proposal would focus on the labor force, and pay for free community college, pre-kindergarten education and paid leave. It would also extend tax credits aimed at fighting child poverty and helping Americans afford health insurance, according to the reports.

The American Rescue Plan, along with the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act passed in March 2020 and a \$900 billion measure passed in December, have been credited with helping the US economy avoid a worse downturn after the pandemic caused mass layoffs and business closures nationwide.

Yet the expensive proposals have wreaked havoc



WASHINGTON, DC: US President Joe Biden departs after delivering remarks in the State Dining Room of the White House on March 15, 2021 in Washington, DC. — AFP

on the national finances, sending the budget deficit to \$3.1 trillion in 2020, an all-time high, which the Congressional Budget office forecasts the national debt will rise above GDP this year. It remains unclear

how Biden would pay for these plans, but the report said he could consider tax increases on corporations or the highest earners—proposals Republicans may reject. — AFP



WASHINGTON, DC: In this file photo, US Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell gives a press briefing in Washington, DC. The US recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic "looks to be strengthening," Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said on Monday. — AFP

Powell says US economy recovering

WASHINGTON: The US recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic "looks to be strengthening," Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said on Monday, but vowed the central bank would continue its efforts to aid racial minorities and other groups hurt most by the downturn. In testimony released ahead of his appearance scheduled before the House Financial Services Committee, Powell underscored that the central bank would continue policies like zero interest rates that it rolled out to aid the economy as the pandemic hit. Those measures, together with massive government spending approved by Congress, have helped keep the US economy from an even worse downturn, though fears that an improving economy could cause the Fed to raise rates have hurt Wall Street stocks in recent weeks.

Powell acknowledged that the economic recovery "has progressed more quickly than generally expected," which he credited to "unprecedented fiscal and monetary policy actions" that kept businesses afloat. "However, the sectors of the economy most adversely affected by the resurgence of the virus, and by greater social distancing, remain weak, and the unemployment rate—still elevated at 6.2 percent—underestimates the shortfall," Powell said.

"We welcome this progress, but will not lose sight of the millions of Americans who are still hurting, including lower-wage workers in the services sector, African Americans, Hispanics, and other minority groups that have been especially hard hit."

Inflation fears

As the COVID-19 pandemic began, the Fed cut its benchmark lending rate to zero and rolled out trillions of dollars in liquidity measures to keep markets afloat. Powell noted that many of those programs have already closed or "are following suit imminently," while saying one supporting the Paycheck Protection Program of loans and grants to small businesses has been extended for another quarter.

Markets in recent weeks have struggled as traders sold off bonds, sending yields up, amid fears that a \$1.9 trillion stimulus plan President Joe Biden signed earlier this month would overheat the economy and cause inflation, making the Fed raise rates. Bond yields however pulled back on Monday, sending hard-hit tech stocks higher at the close.

In the testimony released after trading finished, Powell signaled no changes to the Fed's policy of letting inflation rise to a sustained 2.0 percent level before hiking rates, only reiterating that "We are committed to using our full range of tools to support the economy." In her released testimony, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said she was "confident that people will reach the other side of this pandemic with the foundations of their lives intact.

"And I believe they will be met there by a growing economy. In fact, I think we may see a return to full employment next year." She said one-in-ten homeowners with a mortgage were behind on their payments, and almost one-in-five renters were behind on their rent. — AFP

US existing home sales fall 6.6% in February

WASHINGTON: Sales of existing homes in the United States fell 6.6 percent in February, the National Association of Realtors (NAR) said on Monday, as tightening inventory pushed prices up and kept buyers away. Last month's seasonally adjusted rate of 6.22 million annualized was worse than analysts expected, yet 9.1 percent higher than February 2020, after the US housing market boomed even as the Covid-19 pandemic caused wider economic malaise. "Despite the drop in home sales for February—which I would attribute to historically-low inventory—the market is still outperforming pre-pandemic levels," the association's chief economist Lawrence Yun said.

Analysts said bad winter weather also made homebuyers delay purchases last month, but warned that the sector could be set for a slowdown in 2021 as rising prices chill demand. "We look for the pace of existing home sales to drift lower over the course of

the year as headwinds from a lack of supply and eroding affordability are partially offset by the tailwinds of still-strong demand, particularly from younger households, and a solid recovery," Nancy Vanden Houten of Oxford Economics said.

Buyers jumped into the housing market in 2020 after the Federal Reserve cut its benchmark lending rate, sending mortgages to record lows. Construction firms have struggled to keep up with demand, and the NAR said housing inventory as of the end of February was unchanged from January at 1.03 million units, 29.5 percent lower than a year ago.

The median existing home price had meanwhile risen 15.8 percent from February 2020 to \$313,000, which Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics warned was a sign that the housing market was no longer leading the broader US economy's recovery from the Covid-19 downturn.

"The market is stalling, at best, though with sales at a high level, inventory still very low and prices rising rapidly," he said. The slowdown in sales was widespread, with the two regions most affected by the bad weather, the Midwest and Northeast, seeing the sharpest declines of 14.4 percent and 11.5 percent respectively. Sales in the South decreased 6.1 percent.

The West saw sales gain in February, rising 4.6 percent. — AFP

ABK bolsters digital adoption with 'Go Digital & Win' campaign

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) announced the launch of its 'Go Digital & Win KD 50 Cash' reward campaign, granting 30 of its prepaid and credit cardholders a chance to win KD 50 cash. The campaign which runs through to the 29th May 2021, with the first draw announcing 3 winners on the 29th March 2021, underscores the bank's commitment to bolstering digital channels, especially during the current situation with COVID-19, to limit direct interaction wherever possible.

Eligible ABK customers can enter the draw and win KD50 cash by simply adding and using their cards on Samsung, Fitbit or Garmin Pay devices. Customers can easily access the service by registering their credit or prepaid cards, by either scanning or manually entering the card's details via the applications.

Accelerating the adoption of mobile payment solutions amongst ABK customers and expediting the region's transition towards a cashless future is key to realizing ABK's 'Simpler Banking' strategy.

Debt-averse Germany to take on billions in new borrowings

BERLIN: The German government will borrow a record 240 billion euros in 2021 and break its taboo on taking on new debt again in 2022, ministry sources said Monday, as Berlin looks to soften the economic blow of the pandemic. In budget adjustments to be put before cabinet this week, Berlin is set to take on around a third more debt this year than initially forecast in December, with the total equivalent to \$290 billion.

Europe's largest economy will also borrow 81.5 billion euros in 2022, breaching its so-called "debt brake" for a third year in a row. The limit on net new debt is a rule enshrined in the constitution which forbids the government from borrowing more than 0.35 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in a year. Having originally planned to halt borrowing in 2022, the government is now aiming to return to its constitutionally enshrined fiscal discipline a year later, with only 8.3 billion euros of new debt in 2023.

The budget adjustments drawn up by the finance ministry will be presented to the cabinet on Wednesday and would then require approval from parliament. Germany smashed its domestic taboo on new government borrowing in 2020 and 2021 as it scrambles to shield businesses and workers from the economic hit of the coronavirus.

The state has already paid out more than 114 billion euros of financial support to businesses since the beginning of the pandemic in the form of guaranteed loans, direct aid and shorter-hours work schemes. The German economy suffered its biggest contraction in 2020 since the 2009 financial crash because of the pandemic, although the decline was smaller than the slumps seen in other European countries.

Yet hopes of a recovery this year have been dashed by ongoing shutdown measures which have seen entire sectors of the economy idled for months, with the government revising down its 2021 growth forecast to 3 percent in January. — AFP

Liberia to print new banknotes after shortages

MONROVIA: Liberia has approved a scheme to print new banknotes, according to an AFP journalist, in a bid to address long-running cash shortages in the poor West African nation.

The central bank will now be empowered to print notes worth 48.7 billion Liberian dollars (\$281m, 235m euros) and to withdraw old ones from circulation. People regularly complain of the difficulty of getting cash in Liberia, in shortages the central bank has said are due to high demand, few ATMs, and the circulation of foreign currency.

Liberia has two legal currencies: the Liberian dollar and the US dollar. The country also imports the vast majority of its food, and wholesale imports and taxes are payable in US dollars only.

Among other economic woes, the country of 5 million people suffers periodic fuel shortages and suffers from high inflation. President George Weah, 54, in January urged the Liberian legislature to approve his plan to print banknotes to resolve supply shortages.

Liberia's lower house signed off on printing new bills on Thursday, before the Senate approved it on Monday. The new scheme will not introduce new denominations, although the five and ten dollar bills are due to become coins.

Liberia is still recovering after back-to-back civil wars from 1989 to 2003, and the West African 2014-16 Ebola pandemic, which killed 4,800 people in the country. — AFP

KIPCO announces a net profit of KD 6.5m for 2020

KUWAIT: KIPCO - the Kuwait Projects Company (Holding) - has announced a net profit of KD 6.5 million (\$ 21.4 million) for the year ended 31 December 2020, compared to KD 30 million (\$ 99 million) originally reported for 2019. The drop of 78 per cent is attributed to the impact that the global events of 2020 have had on our business operations.

Earnings per share for 2020 came to 0.4 fils (\$ 0.13 cents), compared to 10.1 fils (\$ 3.3 cents) per share originally reported at the end of 2019. The company's 2019 financials were restated during 2020 due to a change in the classification of OSN after an increase in ownership.

KIPCO's Board of Directors is recommending a cash dividend of 5 per cent (5 fils per share) subject to approval by the company's General Assembly and regulatory authorities. KIPCO's consolidated assets remained at the KD 10.3 billion (\$ 34 billion) reported at year-end 2019. With the global COVID-19 pandemic evolving throughout 2020, the uncertain situation was one that KIPCO monitored closely in order to continually evaluate its business impact and mitigate its repercussions.

Our commercial banking business suffered from a lower discount rate, interest deferral of loans in Kuwait mandated by the authorities, and increased provisioning. The pandemic provided an opportunity to accelerate the digital transformation of our platforms, where Borgan Bank introduced a new retail smart phone application and other digital solutions for SMEs. In the insurance sector, the core business was mostly stable, with reduced gross written premiums in motor and travel policies offset by the reduction in claims from motor and medical insurance. Revenue was preserved thanks to corporate business lines. Our media business, namely OSN, was served by the health recommendations to stay at home. While new sales were impacted by retail outlet closures, customer consumption of content increased and churn decreased. OSN's OTT platform, OSN Streaming, saw a rise in subscriber numbers. Real estate and hospitality was affected by travel restrictions and closures, leading to a waiver of rent for several months to help tenants whose businesses were closed due to mandatory lockdown. Hospitality net income suffered a loss, while demand for commercial real estate witnessed a drop in 2020. Our petrochemical investments were impacted by the drop in oil prices and low demand for the better part of 2020.

In education, extended school closures resulted in a transition to e-learning classes. E-learning platforms have been upgraded to accelerate the digitization of our schools and university, and operating costs were reduced across the board.

Faisal Al-Ayyar, KIPCO's Vice Chairman (Executive), said that with the challenges brought on by 2020, reporting profitability is an achievement: "Our 2020 results reflect the efforts of our core companies to mitigate the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Our businesses worked hard to ensure that the services provided to our customers continued uninterrupted, while safeguarding the health and safety of our employees. Our companies were able to report profitability despite the uncertainty and challenges of 2020."

He added: "Today we face the challenges that come with a second wave of the pandemic, and while we hope that the vaccine rollout will help curb the spread of the virus, we continue to be cautious. We will continue to closely monitor the unfolding events throughout 2021, and though it has become evident that it will be some time before we go back to a more normal way of life, people have started to adjust and this has reflected in the form of a slight recovery in the latter months."



Faisal Al-Ayyar

Business

Big Tech critic gets approval for key US regulatory post

Nomination of Lina Khan FTC seen an aggressive posture

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden on Monday named a prominent advocate of breaking up Big Tech firms to a key regulatory post, in a move suggesting an aggressive posture on antitrust enforcement. The White House said it was submitting the nomination of Lina Khan, an associate professor of law at Columbia University's law school, to the Federal Trade Commission, an agency with authority over some mergers and antitrust policy. The move follows the naming of Tim Wu, another Big Tech critic, to an economic advisory post in the White House. Khan previously served as counsel to the US House of Representatives' subcommittee on antitrust, which last year released a lengthy report suggesting grounds for breaking up giants such as Facebook, Google, Amazon and Apple.

She also authored a 2017 paper called "Amazon's Antitrust Paradox," which outlined the growing dominance of the e-commerce and tech giant, which some

helped shift sentiment on antitrust.

Khan worked in the office of Federal Trade Commission member Rohit Chopra and was legal director at the Open Markets Institute, a think tank which has been highly critical of the Silicon Valley giants. The news comes amid a growing backlash against tech behemoths that have dominated key economic sectors and seen their influence grow during the coronavirus pandemic.

The move is likely to trigger a contentious nomination fight, with some Republicans already expressing opposition to Khan. Utah Senator Mike Lee said earlier this month that "being less than four years out of law school," Khan "lacks the experience necessary for such an important role as FTC Commissioner."

Additionally, Lee said, "her views on antitrust enforcement are also wildly out of step with a prudent approach to the law" and that her appointment "would signal that President Biden intends to put ideology and

politics ahead of competent antitrust enforcement." But Charlotte Slaiman of the consumer advocacy group Public Knowledge welcomed the news, saying earlier this month that Khan's appointment "will signal that antitrust enforcement and important competition policy changes will be a high priority." Lawmakers and policymakers in recent years have been mulling the decades-old "consumer welfare" standard of antitrust enforcement, which allows for a largely hands-off approach for big firms as long as prices are not impacted. Critics say this approach has allowed Big Tech firms to grow unchecked with unprecedented power over key sectors of the economy. Last week, acting FTC chair Rebecca Slaughter suggested heightened antitrust scrutiny, including of the digital economy. "The increasing presence of large technology companies in our daily lives and in our economy animates recent calls for antitrust reform," Slaughter told a congressional panel. — AFP



Lina Khan, an associate professor of law at Columbia University's law school, has been nominated to the Federal Trade Commission.



KUWAIT: Diraar Yusuf Alghanim addresses the ordinary Annual General Assembly Meeting of Markaz for the year 2020 on 22 March 2021.

Markaz stands tall and resilient to the pandemic

KUWAIT: Kuwait Financial Center "Markaz" held its ordinary Annual General Assembly Meeting for the year 2020 on 22 March 2021, with an attendance rate of (72.75 percent). The Assembly approved the Board of Directors' recommendation not to distribute dividends for shareholders and Board members' remuneration for the year ending on December 31, 2020, and to continue to monitor the impact of the pandemic on the business in the medium term.

Standing tall and resilient to the pandemic

During his opening speech, Diraar Yusuf Alghanim, Chairman of Markaz, said: "The momentum seen in global financial markets at the start of 2020 dissipated with the onset of the health crisis, which rapidly morphed into a worldwide economic crisis in an unexpectedly short time frame. Markaz's top priority during this period was to comply with the governmental health and safety regulations and to ensure the well-being of all our employees by quickly adopting a 'work from home' policy early in the year. We are proud of how our teams swiftly adapted to this new work style and demonstrated impressive ongoing dedication and commitment in servicing our corporate, institutional, and private clients".

Overcoming challenges with minimal losses

Alghanim pointed out that despite these ongoing challenging market conditions, Markaz delivered a relatively resilient financial performance underpinned by a strong rebound in the second half of the year, in spite of the net loss attributable to shareholders for the year that was contained to KD 1.72 million or negative earnings per share (EPS) of 4 fils. In December 2020, Markaz successfully closed its KD 35 million 5-year bond issue through a private placement. Markaz also continued to maintain strict financial discipline across the firm, and to operate with a robust capital structure while ensuring that liquidity remained aligned to the near-term business needs and outlook.

Rising with business, environment and society

Alghanim emphasized Markaz's continuing commitment to promoting a culture of diversity and inclusion in the workplace and maintaining strong and effective governance practices. He also added that despite the challenges wrought by the pandemic, Markaz remained

closely connected, and delivered high-quality advice, to its clients. Alghanim also expressed his pride in Markaz's achievements at winning prestigious awards in recognition of its performance and initiatives. In 2020, Markaz was named 'The Best Investment Bank in Kuwait' by Global Finance and EMEA Finance and won 'The Best Asset Manager in Kuwait' and the 'Corporate Social Responsibility in the Middle East' awards from EMEA Finance.

Prospects

Markaz looks forward to a positive performance in 2021 with the ongoing COVID-19 vaccination drive around the world leading to a faster recovery in business and economic activity, but remains cautiously optimistic as there is an ongoing need to closely monitor the course and impact of new Covid-19 strains in the near-term. Ending his speech Alghanim thanked all regulatory authorities, including the Central Bank of Kuwait, the Capital Markets Authority and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry that have continued to provide Markaz with professional guidance and support during these challenging times. In addition, he extended his gratitude and appreciation to the clients, business partners and stakeholders who provided their unwavering support to Markaz. He also thanked Markaz's former CEO, Manaf A Al-Hajeri, who resigned on 29 October 2020, for his relentless efforts during his journey at Markaz, and affirmed his confidence that the Executive Management under the leadership of Ali H Khalil, CEO, and the entire Markaz family will persevere to continue implementing its vision to be the partner of choice in wealth creation and preservation.

Strategic initiatives

Ali H Khalil, CEO, explained that Markaz swiftly moved to remote systems, continuously monitored market developments, and adjusted client portfolios to align with their revised investment objectives. To keep the clients fully informed, Markaz launched a daily investment dashboard to monitor investments and assets across the world and the GCC, and report movements in a timely manner. Markaz further enhanced its internal control systems and used secured platforms to ensure the confidentiality and integrity of data.

Khalil emphasized that since its inception, digital transformation was one of the most important ongoing initiatives in line with the strategy of Markaz. Recently, Markaz implemented new solutions to enhance the customer experience from the start at the onboarding stage, through the entire investment journey. Khalil said: "The launch of our personalized investment app 'Markaz' in February 2020 represents a major accomplishment in our efforts to service our clients better and cater to their evolving needs and expectations.

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Zainab Al-Shammari, Manager, Strategic Marketing & Business Planning, B2B/B2B Marketing, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "We are pleased to be recognized as an Infoblox partner in the State of Kuwait which will maintain our focus on delivering a unified, secure and intelligent solutions that transforms the employee experience by organizing, guiding, and automating all activities people need to perform at their best."



Zainab Al-Shammari

KIB supports 'Let's become Aware' campaign

KUWAIT: Under the umbrella of its participation in the national "Let's Become Aware" campaign, and in line with the Bank's social responsibility focus on financial literacy, KIB is seeking to generate greater public awareness when it comes to all matters related to finance. This includes improving resilience to and awareness of fraudulent financial practices and highlighting the role of the banking sector in general, and banking products the sector offers in particular, in people's lives. Accordingly, the Bank is focusing on disseminating instructional and informational content regularly through its various communication platforms and social media channels. It serves to note that the "Let's Become Aware" campaign, organized by the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) in collaboration with Kuwait Banking Association (KBA) and local banks, was launched in an effort to strengthen and expand the role of the local banking sector when it comes to social responsibility, with the ultimate goal of empowering people with life-enhancing financial knowledge. The campaign is being driven across the social media platforms of CBK, KBA and all local banks as well as through the campaign's website, dirayakw.com.

As part of the effort to highlight various financial tools within the framework of the campaign, Othman Tawfeeq, General Manager of KIB's Retail Banking Department, spoke about the various types of financing solutions available to consumers. "Business owners and individuals often need an infusion of cash to finance certain activities, purchase a commodity or simply cover personal expenses. Accordingly, banks, whether conventional or Islamic, as well as financing providers offer financing solutions to consumers based on their specific request and needs, in return for repayment within a set period of time with an agreed-upon repayment schedule," said Tawfeeq. "Here, it becomes necessary to distinguish between Islamic financing solutions and conventional options, as they are distinctly different in concept and action. The former provides funds through Murabaha, wherein the Islamic bank purchases the asset from a third-party supplier/vendor and sells it to the customer at a price that includes a profit margin agreed upon by both parties, which is then repaid in installments. Conventional banking, on the other hand, relies on an interest-based system as a proportion of

the amount lent, where the bank has the right to review the interest rate every five years. The new interest rate is then determined by adding a profit margin to the current discount rate set by CBK, which is later distributed over the remaining monthly installments."

Tawfeeq pointed out that the types of financing solutions available are varied in order to cater to customer's diverse financial requirements, with the most common types being consumer financing to finance the purchase of a car, home furniture, medical care or education, as well as other consumer needs. The financing of individuals is approved after assessing the eligibility

of the potential borrower against the criteria set forth for lending, including the ability to repay the bank on time. The bank might also request an employment verification letter, a net monthly income certificate and a salary continuation confirmation. One of the key benefits of consumer financing is the fact that a smaller profit margin can be added with more flexible repayment conditions to suit the customer's needs. Tawfeeq emphasized that financing solutions are an important financial activity that help boost economic development and support local businesses, such as for example when it comes to real estate financing provided to customers in order to purchase or maintain a home or make a real estate investment. Banks also play a major economic role by providing financial solutions to small businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs which are instrumental in helping them start or grow their businesses, and which include a variety of options tailored to suit their different business needs. "KIB is always keen to provide comprehensive financial solutions and Sharia-compliant financial services to employees in both the public and private sectors, which help them achieve their goals and meet their financial needs with ease and flexible repayment plans. Our financial services include automotive financing of up to KD 25,000 to finance the purchase of a new or used car, with a grace period of up to 6 months, as well as up to KD 70,000 construction material financing for purchasing construction material with no down payment and with up to 6 months grace period before paying the first installment. KIB also offers up to KD 25,000 personal financing which covers the purchase of commodities and consumer goods such as furniture, electronics and marine equipment, with up to 3 months grace period before paying the first installment.



Othman Tawfeeq

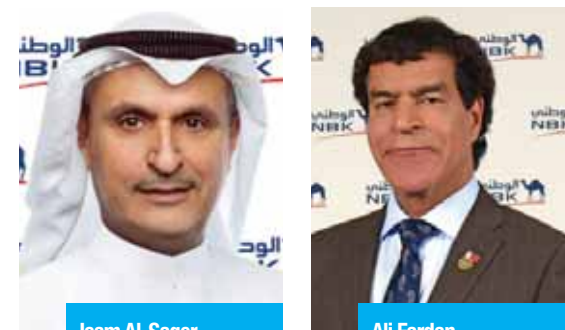
NBK-Bahrain reports net profits of KD 94.68m for 2020

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait-Bahrain (NBK Bahrain) reported net profits of BHD 117.51 million (KD 94.68 million) for the year 2020, compared to BHD 117.89 million (KD 94.98 million) for the year 2019. As of end of 2020, NBK-Bahrain's total assets decreased by 5 percent y-o-y to BHD 6.92 billion compared with BHD 7.29 billion in 2019. Total shareholders' equity increased by 4 percent y-o-y to BHD 818.10 million, whereas Customers deposits stood at BHD 1.8 billion by end of December 2020.

Commenting on NBK Bahrain's year-end financial results, Isam Al-Sager, NBK Group Chief Executive Officer said, "National Bank of Kuwait - Bahrain realized good profits for 2020, despite the unprecedentedly challenging operating environment worldwide in decades, combined with the record low interest rates globally." "The performance of international operations played a key role in supporting the Group's profits for the past year, which manifests our unique business model, and at the same time proves the success of our regional expansion strategy in hedging against the risks and fluctuations, and its contribution to diversifying income sources," he added. Al-Sager noted that year after year, NBK-Bahrain continues to consolidate its position in the Bahraini market, which is one of the key growth markets for NBK Group, given the promising growth opportunities and positive prospects of this market.

Al-Sager stressed that NBK Group will continue to strengthen its competitive edge and seize the opportunities in its international markets to ensure regional leadership, in addition to continuing to implement the bank's customer-focused strategy for stronger future growth. On his part, Ali Fardan, General Manager of NBK-Bahrain, said: "NBK-Bahrain's results for 2020, in view of the challenges facing the banking sector, are a testament to our resilient and diversified business model and quick adaptability to the challenges resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, without deviating from our strategic priorities for this year."

"The bank has taken upon itself to support its customers during the pandemic by deferring credit card installments and payments, in addition to working closely with the Central Bank of Bahrain to mitigate



Isam Al-Sager

Ali Fardan

the pandemic's impact, as part of the bank's commitment to its national duties," he noted. Fardan pointed out that the bank is moving steadily in strengthening its position in Bahrain by providing high-quality banking and financial services to its retail and corporate customers, noting that the bank has great potentials to achieve further growth in the Bahraini market in the future. Fardan praised the Central Bank of Bahrain's efforts, in particular, and all government agencies, in general, for their continued support extended to NBK-Bahrain and the entire Bahraini banking sectors. He also highlighted the great support extended by NBK Group through its vast regional and global network of branches and subsidiaries, as it has been vitally important in strengthening the bank's activities in the Bahraini market, through capitalizing on its high credit ratings, broad relationship network, and leading reputation as one of the top banks in the Middle East, and one of the safest banks in the world. NBK is the largest financial institution in Kuwait with effective market dominance in the commercial banking market and has been consistently awarded one of the highest credit ratings among all regional banks from Moody's, Standard & Poor's, and Fitch Ratings. NBK also stands out in terms of its local and international network, which includes branches, subsidiaries and representative offices in China, Geneva, London, Paris, New York, and Singapore alongside its regional presence in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Turkey, and the UAE.

Ooredoo Kuwait partners with Infoblox

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, continues to boost the efficiency and quality of its services, which contributes to solidify the company's performance. Ooredoo Business, the trusted technology partner for your business solutions, announced its partnership with Infoblox, the pioneer in delivering the world's most reliable, secure and automated networks, to provide network infrastructure control solutions.

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Lifestyle | Features

BANKSY PAINTING TO RAISE
MILLIONS FOR UK HEALTH SERVICE

A painting by UK street artist Banksy is expected to raise millions of pounds for the staff of Britain's state-run National Health Service (NHS) at auction yesterday. The painting by the elusive artist, titled "Game Changer", first appeared at Southampton General Hospital on England's south coast, during the first

The artist-who first emerged out of Bristol's graffiti scene in southwest England in the 1990s-left a note with the painting thanking hospital staff for their work battling the pandemic. "Thanks for all you're doing. I hope this brightens up the place a bit, even if it's only in black and white," he wrote. Christie's auction house has placed a pre-sale estimate of

'Shock and surprise'

Christie's said in a statement the painting was a departure from Banksy's usual irreverent style and was instead "a personal tribute to those who continue to turn the tide of the pandemic". "As an artwork, however, it will remain forever a symbol of its time: a reminder of the world's real game changers, and of the vital work they perform," the international art seller said. The painting may also have a political subtext though, as it was donated shortly after Prime Minister Boris Johnson told the public antibody tests could be a "game changer" in the pandemic-only to have experts quickly pour cold water on the idea.

Speaking in a video shared by Southampton Hospitals Charity earlier this month, staff at Southampton General Hospital thanked Banksy for the painting and shared their enthusiasm for the work. Steph Gurney, a senior nurse with the hospital's Acute Medical Unit, said the appearance of the painting had come as a "real shock and a surprise" and that it "meant so much that a world-renowned artist would want to donate a piece of work to our hospital".

Banksy has continued to create other works in the pandemic. In July 2020, disguised as a cleaner, he spray-painted a series of rats encouraging people to wear face masks on the London underground. In December, he drew a woman sneezing on the side of a house in Bristol.— AFP



A handout picture shows a member of staff posing with an artwork by street artist Banksy called "Game Changer". — AFP

wave of the global health crisis last May. The black-and-white painting shows a small boy playing with a nurse doll wearing a mask and a cape. Spiderman and Batman superhero toys lie discarded in a bin behind him.

between £2.5 million (\$3.5 million, 2.9 million euros) and £3.5 million on the artwork. Proceeds from the auction will go to NHS charities and a reproduction of the piece will continue to hang at Southampton General Hospital.

Nonconformist **Youn Yuh-jung:**
S Korea's first Oscar-nominated actress

Septuagenarian Youn Yuh-jung, the first South Korean actress nominated for an Oscar, has spent decades portraying nonconformist characters, from a vicious heiress to an ageing prostitute, challenging social norms in both her career and life. Her role in "Minari", a family drama about Korean immigrants in the US, is more conventional: grandmother to a mischievous young boy trying to fit into rural Arkansas. The film secured six Academy Award nominations last week, also including best picture, best director and best actor.



This undated handout photo shows South Korean actress Youn Yuh-jung in a scene from Korean-American director Lee Isaac Chung's film "Minari".

That raises the prospect of a second multi-Oscar haul for a Korean-language film in successive years, after "Parasite" became the first non-English Best Picture winner in 2020 — though it did not snag any acting nominations. Youn played down excitement over her chance to make history at next month's ceremony, saying: "I don't enjoy competition." "This is not a playoff game of actors, placing them in order. I consider this nomination just as valuable as the actual award."

Her two grown sons are Asian-Americans and she said she had taken a role in "this small movie made by second-generation Korean-Americans" for its own reward. Based on director Lee Isaac Chung's experiences growing up in the 1980s, "Minari" follows a Korean-born father who moves his family to an all-white town in rural Arkansas in pursuit of a better life. Bong Joon-ho, who earned last year's Best Director Oscar for dark satire "Parasite", said the role

was "the loveliest character Youn has ever played". It is the latest of several grandmotherly castings for Youn, who has already picked up a host of best supporting actress awards at US film festivals and is on the shortlist for a Screen Actors Guild Award.

Busan International Film Festival program director Nam Dong-chul told AFP that Youn's Oscar nomination "acknowledges an extraordinary actress who has pioneered her own path for a very long time". "I don't think she ever intended to break into the international film scene," he said, "but throughout decades she has developed a fine taste when choosing her projects".

'Scarlet letter'

In a career spanning more than 50 years, Youn has often played provocative and atypical characters who do not conform to the rules of socially conservative Korean society. Born in 1947 in Kaesong-now in North Korea-she made her film debut in groundbreaking director Kim Ki-young's 1971 "Woman of Fire", as the live-in maid to a middle-class household who becomes impregnated by the father of the family.

The thriller was a critical and commercial hit, and remains a classic of modern South Korean cinema. But Youn's first heyday came to an abrupt end in 1975, when she married singer Jo Young-nam and the couple moved to the US. Youn returned to South Korea in 1984. But after divorcing Jo three years later, she battled heavy stigma to resume her acting career to support her two children. "To be divorced was like having the scarlet letter at the time," Youn told a local magazine in 2009. "There was this thing that dictated women shouldn't make TV appearances so soon after their divorce." She countered by accepting every role she was offered, however small. "I worked very hard. I had this mission of somehow feeding my children. I'd say yes even when I was asked to climb 100 stairs." By the 1990s Youn was a regular in TV dramas, often portraying mothers, and later grandmothers. — AFP



This undated handout photo shows South Korean actress Youn Yuh-jung (left) in a scene from Korean-American director Lee Isaac Chung's film "Minari". — AFP photos



In this file photo US actor Jamie Foxx arrives to attend the 11th Annual Governors Awards gala hosted by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences at the Dolby Theater in Hollywood.— AFP photos



In this file photo former US boxer Mike Tyson speaks during a news conference to announce India's first global mixed martial arts Kumite 1 league in Mumbai.

Jamie Foxx
set to star in
Mike Tyson
biopic series

Jamie Foxx won an Oscar for his portrayal of singing legend Ray Charles. Now, he looks set to take on the life story of another iconic American-controversial boxing great Mike Tyson. The television limited series about "Iron Mike" is in development, the boxer announced, with Antoine Fuqua ("Training Day") to direct and Martin Scorsese on the production team. "I have been looking to tell my story for quite some time," Tyson said in a statement sent to AFP Monday, which confirmed information first reported by The Hollywood Reporter.

"I look forward to collaborating with Martin, Antoine, Jamie and the entire creative team to bring audiences a series

that not only captures my professional and personal journey but also inspires and entertains." A spokeswoman for Fuqua confirmed he is attached to the project. So far, the series has not been acquired by a network or streaming service, according to The Hollywood Reporter. Tyson said his recent comeback to the ring-he fought to a draw with Roy Jones Jr in an exhibition in November 2020, at age 54 — made this the perfect time for his story to be told. The former world heavyweight champion is one of boxing's most successful-and most controversial-figures. Considered one of the best heavyweights of all time, he went 50-6 with 44 knockouts, retiring in 2005 with a loss to Kevin McBride.

But he is also known for his erratic behavior-biting off a piece of Evander Holyfield's ear before losing their infamous 1997 bout-and his brushes with the law, including a conviction for rape and a cocaine addiction. Tyson bounced back, playing himself in "The Hangover" (2009) and then taking a one-man show to Broadway. In late February, streaming platform Hulu announced it was making a limited series about the boxer called "Iron Mike." —AFP



In this photo a couple visits the promenade on the Bund along Huangpu River in Shanghai.— AFP photos

Love on the rocks: Inside China's
marriage counseling boom

From a small office in Shanghai, marriage counselor Zhu Shenyong livestreams advice over several phones simultaneously to an attentive audience keen to save their relationships. On his wall hangs the mantra: "Let there be no bad marriages under heaven." But in the earthly realities of modern China, divorce rates are surging, and Zhu's services are in high demand. "I always say that Chinese marriage counseling is mostly like treating late-stage cancer," said Zhu, explaining the majority of his clients arrive in "absolute crisis". "Only a minority are considering divorce, but want advice on whether it's the right thing to do," said the indefatigable 44-year-old, who wears a flat cap during his streaming sessions. Earlier this year, Zhu went viral after claiming that he makes one million yuan (\$154,000) a year. Now he pulls up to 500 viewers whenever he goes online, in a mission he describes as to "avoid unnecessary divorces". But Zhu is also a realist who strives to help couples find the softest landing as a relationship breaks up, for the sake of their children. The number of registered divorces in China reached a record 8.6 million in 2020 — almost double the 2019 total and eclipsing the number of marriage registrations for the first time, according to government data.

After decades of the "one-child policy", China faces a stark gender imbalance with 30 million more men than women. Coupled with rock-bottom birth rates, a demographic crisis is looming on the horizon. Family pressure to wed early, the competitive grind of urban life, skyrocketing house prices, inadequate childcare and career support for mothers: all these are fraying marriages, especially among a younger generation who prioritise personal freedom. "From a positive perspective, divorce is a manifestation of civilised society and of women's awakening," Zhu said, adding affairs and money problems are also prime triggers for divorce.

With the birth rate nose-diving, The Lancet recently predicted China's population could halve by 2100, falling behind India and Nigeria. That has spooked the government, which is now encouraging its citizens to get married-and stay married.



In this photo marriage counsellor Zhu Shenyong (left) advises a client in Shanghai.

'It's extremely unfair'

Lawmakers last year introduced a mandatory 30-day cooling-off period for divorce by agreement, which previously could be settled within a day. The aim was to prevent impulsive divorces, but right advocates fear it is trapping women in abusive marriages as it can be extended indefinitely if one side refuses to agree. "The 'divorce cooling-off period' has become a 'divorce abuse period', which completely deviates from its original purpose," said Guangzhou marriage lawyer Wang Youbai. "It's extremely unfair to sufferers of domestic violence ... who are eager to escape from their unhappy marriages."

The other method, divorce by court litigation, usually takes one to two years, said Beijing marriage lawyer Yi Yi, with significantly higher costs. Many Chinese provinces have rolled out state-organized counseling for tens of thousands of couples, including newlyweds and marriages on the verge of a breakdown. In central Wuhan, city authorities attributed the 'cooling-off period' to rescuing almost two-thirds of the marriages of the 3,096

couples who applied for divorce in January alone. Counselors are also permanently stationed in all marriage registry offices in Beijing.

'We don't think it's shameful'

But for 36-year-old civil servant Wallace, mandatory mediation sessions came too late to alter the course of his divorce. It was granted by a Shanghai court last summer after a year of pandemic-related delays, ending a three-year marriage which he says failed due to interference from in-laws. "For those who really want to divorce, (mediation) is just a formality," he said.

Wallace is among a growing cohort of Chinese millennials disillusioned with marriage-and of the government push to encourage it. Many of his friends are pre-occupied with getting into marriages, and then escaping them. "Some marry just as a compromise, without having considered whether they can tolerate their partner's weaknesses." He blames Shanghai's high divorce rate partly on what is locally known as "involution"-a form of social stagnation in China's hyper-competitive, status-driven urban centers that leaves people increasingly dissatisfied with their lives.

Wallace now likens marriage to a risky bet. "If you know there is a 50 percent chance of failure, would you still want to speculate?" he said. Pressures persist-especially on women-to marry young and have children. But more Chinese women are also refusing to cave in, with marriage registrations last year falling to their lowest level in nearly two decades. For 31-year-old Vivien, who married after a whirlwind romance, divorce is not something to fear but a path towards emancipation. "Our elders' mindset is: divorce means nobody wants you... but my generation thinks it is just a personal choice," she says. "We don't think it's shameful, but instead admire those who successfully divorce." — AFP

Yemen's Socotra archipelago awaits ecotourists



This picture shows a view of Desert rose (*Adenium socotranum*) plants growing on Di-Hamri mountain in the Yemeni Island of Socotra, a site of global importance for biodiversity conservation, located in the northwestern Indian Ocean. — AFP photos



A view from a boat off the Yemeni Island of Socotra.

With its lush landscape, distinctive trees, unique animals and turquoise waters home to dolphins, Yemen is hoping its Socotra archipelago will become a dream destination despite the country's nightmarish conflict. Lying in the Indian Ocean some 200 kilometers off the Yemeni coast, the four islands and two rocky islets are home to some 50,000 people and have remained relatively untouched by the war that has devastated the mainland.

While most of Yemen is embroiled in a conflict that erupted in 2014 between Houthi rebels and the government-plus the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic-adventurous travellers are showing a growing interest in visiting Socotra. Many set off from the wealthy United Arab Emirates, which is close to the authorities that control the islands. "Fortunately, Socotra has never been affected by the war dynamics of the Yemeni mainland," local travel agency Welcome to Socotra told AFP.

"No tensions or fights have ever been reported, hence there is no reason for tourists to worry." Since flights resumed with a chartered Air Arabia aircraft once a week from Abu Dhabi, the agency has received "hundreds" of requests, it said. Yemen, already the poorest country on the Arabian Peninsula even before the war, has for years been trying to develop the archipelago into a hub for ecotourism. But despite the reassuring words and the lure of the pure white

beaches, Socotra hit the headlines in June 2020 when Yemen's UAE-trained southern separatists seized it from the government.

The two sides have since established a power-sharing deal, substantially dial-

ing down tensions in the south. Socotra is located just 250 kilometers from the Horn of Africa, and 1,000 kilometers from the southern city of Aden where Yemen's government is based. It is famed for its unique biodiversity: nearly one-third of its 825 plants and 90 percent of its reptile species are considered unique to the island, according to

the UN's cultural agency UNESCO. The unique and spectacular vegetation, such as the Dragon's Blood Tree with its distinctive umbrella-shaped canopy and red sap, has earned it a listing as a World Heritage Site.



An aerial view of cows grazing atop Hajhir Mountain in the Yemeni Island of Socotra.



An aerial view of the Arher sand beach in the Yemeni Island of Socotra.



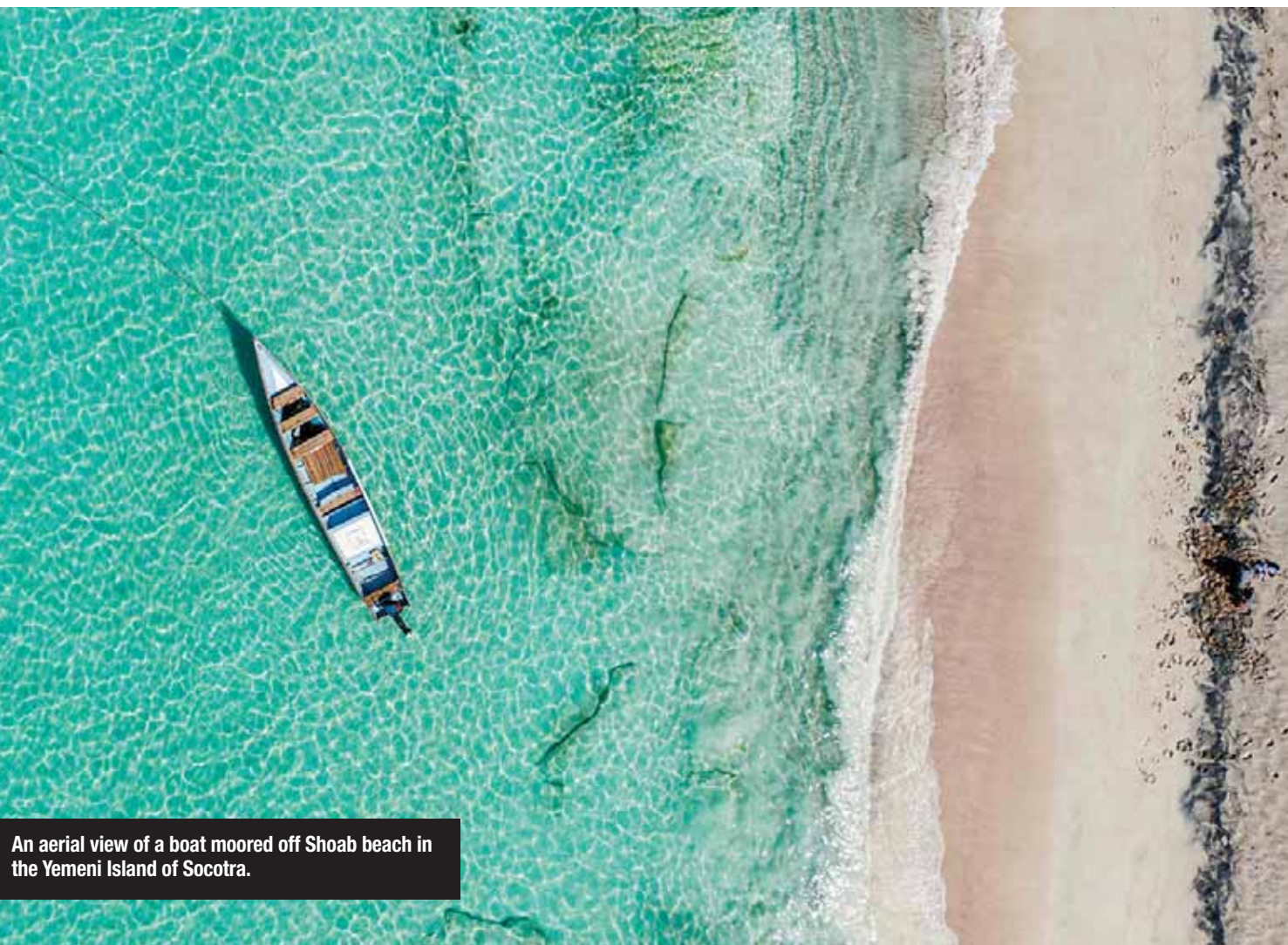
A view of Dragon's blood (*Dracaena cinnabari*) trees at the top of Dixam mountain in the Yemeni Island of Socotra.



An aerial view of a fresh water spring on the mountain of Homhil in the Yemeni Island of Socotra.



An aerial view of a man atop a peak on Di-Hamri mountain in the Yemeni Island of Socotra.



An aerial view of a boat moored off Shoab beach in the Yemeni Island of Socotra.



Fishermen taking their boat to sea off Shoab beach in the Yemeni Island of Socotra.



An aerial view of fishermen in the water by a boat off Shoab beach in the Yemeni Island of Socotra.

Sports

Kennard sparks Clippers to comeback over Hawks

Jazz victorious, Rockets end losing streak

LOS ANGELES: Luke Kennard conjured a perfect shooting display and Terance Mann added 21 from the bench as the Los Angeles Clippers overturned a 22-point deficit to end the Atlanta Hawks eight-game winning streak on Monday.

Kennard went eight-from-eight and made four three-pointers to take the Clippers — who had trailed 88-66 with four minutes remaining in the third quarter — to a 119-110 win at the Staples Center. Kennard's 20-point haul came from just over 18 second-half minutes as coach Ty Lue sent on the bench in a desperate bid to turn the tide with Atlanta romping towards a blowout victory.

Mann was another vital contributor from the bench, hauling down 10 rebounds in addition to his 21 points. "It's heart - that was all heart," Kennard said afterwards. "Just staying ready. Guys have been staying ready throughout this entire year. We just needed to bring a little boost to the floor, a little energy, and that's what we did. That was a hard-fought win. We showed a lot of heart and guts."

Atlanta, chasing a ninth straight win, had exploded for 34 points in the second quarter to open up a 63-48 lead at half-time. They retained that healthy lead until the arrival of the Clippers bench swung momentum in the closing stages of the third period and final quarter, with the home side ending on a 53-22 run. Kawhi Leonard led the Clippers scoring with 25 points, seven rebounds and five assists. Trae Young topped the Hawks scorers with 28 points while John Collins added 23.

Rockets win

Elsewhere Monday, Donovan Mitchell scored 30 points and Rudy Gobert grabbed a sixth consecutive double-double as the Utah Jazz tightened their grip on the Western Conference standings with a 120-95 road win over the Chicago Bulls.

Mitchell laid on an exhibition of long-range shooting with five three-pointers from eight attempts in a comfortable victory for Utah, who improved to 31-11 with the win. French international Gobert meanwhile added 21 points for the visitors while hauling down 10 rebounds and a career-high nine blocks in a dominant Utah defensive display.

Chicago led by five points early in the first quarter, but when Mitchell and the Utah offense clicked, the home side were unable to respond. Mitchell finished the first half with 21 points from seven-of-12 field goals as the Jazz swept into a 56-42 lead.

Utah kept up the scoring momentum after the interval, with in-form Australian Joe Ingles adding 17 from the bench while Jordan Clarkson (16) and Mike Conley (15) also cracked double figures. Zach LaVine led the Chicago scoring with 27 points while Thaddeus Young added 14 for the Bulls, who fell to 19-23 with the loss.

In Milwaukee, the Bucks shrugged off the injury absence of Giannis Antetokounmpo to extend their winning streak to seven games with a 140-115 blowout over the Indiana Pacers. Point guard Jrue Holiday finished with 28 points and 14 assists as the Bucks shared the offensive duties around with NBA Most Valuable Player Antetokounmpo ruled out



LOS ANGELES: Luke Kennard of the LA Clippers shoots the ball during the game against the Atlanta Hawks on Monday at STAPLES Center in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

with a knee injury.

Khrist Middleton had 25 points for Milwaukee and Pat Connaughton 20 while Brook Lopez and Bobby Portis contributed 18 points apiece. The Bucks improved to 28-14 to remain in third place in the Eastern Conference, behind leaders Philadelphia and second-placed Brooklyn. Indiana are 10th in

the Eastern Conference table on 19-23.

There was a collective sigh of relief at the Toyota Center in Houston as the Rockets finally halted a 20-game losing streak with a 117-99 win over the Toronto Raptors. Jae'Sean Tate's 22 points and 20 points from Sterling Brown handed the Rockets their first victory since February 4. — AFP

Bangladesh blunders gift New Zealand ODI series win

CHRISTCHURCH: New Zealand secured a series-clinching five-wicket win in the second one-day international against Bangladesh yesterday after a string of fielding errors dashed the tourists' hopes of victory. Black Caps skipper Tom Latham scored an unbeaten 110 after being dropped twice with New Zealand chasing 272 at Christchurch's Hagley Oval.

New Zealand batsman Jimmy Neesham was also given a life, with the errors undoing Bangladesh's good work in making 271 for six after losing the toss and being put into bat. Bangladesh captain Tamim Iqbal was left frustrated after seeing his side come close to a maiden victory on New Zealand soil.

"We should have won this game. We created chances but we just couldn't hold on to those dropped catches," he said. "We hardly ever win games but in this kind of situation

we have to make sure that we do everything 100 percent. I'm disappointed."

Tamim top-scored for the tourists with 78 and Mohammad Mithun contributed an unbeaten 73 off 57 balls. Latham's 110 came off 108 balls and was his fifth ODI century, while Devon Conway's 72 helped anchor the innings.

The Black Caps reached the target after 48.2 overs, finishing on 275 for five to take an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match ODI series. Tamim had demanded a better performance from his players after they were skittled for 131 in the opening match and slumped to an eight-wicket defeat.

Signs did not look promising when opener Liton Das departed for a duck in the second over. But Tamim and Soumya Sarkar preserved their wickets, grinding out an 81-run partnership at an agonizingly slow run rate to



CHRISTCHURCH: New Zealand's Tom Latham (right) is congratulated by teammate Daryl Mitchell after scoring a century during the second one-day international (ODI) cricket match between New Zealand and Bangladesh at the Hagley Oval in Christchurch yesterday. — AFP

lay the foundation for a big finish.

Soumya was stumped on 32 trying to lift the run rate as Tamim brought up his 50th ODI half-century off 84 balls after surviving two umpiring reviews. His luck ran out trying to pinch a quick single, when Neesham showed impressive soccer skills to

kick the ball into the stumps side-on and dislodge the bails. Entering the final 10 overs at 183 for three, Bangladesh finally stepped on the gas through Mithun's career-best ODI knock. New Zealand began briskly in reply despite the early loss of opener Martin Gupthill for 20. — AFP

Cornwall blasts West Indies back into contention

ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA: Rahkeem Cornwall blasted a maiden Test half-century and dominated an eighth-wicket partnership of 90 with Joshua da Silva to lift the West Indies to 268 for eight in their first innings, a lead of 99 runs, at the close of the second day of the first Test at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in Antigua on Monday. Outstanding seam bowling by Suranga Lakmal, who claimed his fourth five-wicket innings haul in 64 Tests, had restricted the home side to 171 for seven just after tea in reply to the tourists' modest first-day effort of 169.

However the burly Cornwall, selected primarily for his off-spin bowling but also well-known for his powerful hitting in the domestic game, joined wicketkeeper-batsman da Silva in first resisting the best efforts of the Sri Lankan bowlers before opening

into an array of expansive strokes upon the arrival of the second new ball. His unbeaten 60 has come off 79 balls with two sixes and nine fours embellishing an entertaining innings.

Da Silva, who is already building a reputation in his young international career for featuring in useful lower-order partnerships, was within sight of his second Test half-century when he fell for 46 just minutes before the close of play, caught behind off fast bowler Dushmantha Chameera attempting to ride a lifting delivery over the slip cordon.

"I needed to get some runs because I haven't been showing the best I can do with the bat so far," said Cornwall in reflecting on his innings. "I think we are in a very good position at this stage of the match. We need to come tomorrow and try and make the most



ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA: Rahkeem Cornwall (left) of West Indies hits 6 as Niroshan Dickwella (right) of Sri Lanka watches during day 2 of the 1st Test between West Indies and Sri Lanka at Vivian Richards Cricket Stadium in North Sound, Antigua and Barbuda, on Monday. — AFP

of the first hour, then we can set up the match by having something to run at them in the second innings."

Such a healthy advantage seemed out of the realms of possibility with Lakmal in full flow on the way to outstanding figures of five for 45 off 24

accurate overs. When he dismissed Jason Holder and Alzarri Joseph in quick succession after tea to complete the five-wicket haul, the Sri Lankans may have even entertained the prospect of erasing a minimal first innings deficit before the end of the day. — AFP

Sharjeel happy with Pakistan welcome after return from ban

KARACHI: Pakistan opener Sharjeel Khan said yesterday he was delighted with the welcome he had been given since being recalled to the national squad after completing a lengthy ban for spot-fixing. The 31-year-old was banned in 2017 for five years — with half the sentence suspended — for his part in rigging Pakistan Super League (PSL) matches in the United Arab Emirates.

Although illegal in Pakistan, gambling on cricket is widespread with punters betting on specific outcomes during the game — such as the number of no-balls or wides bowled in a particular over. This gives individual players the opportunity to "spot-fix" — influencing the lucrative betting market without, supposedly, affecting the overall outcome of the match.

Sharjeel was named earlier this

month in the squad to play a series of Twenty20 internationals in South Africa and Zimbabwe next month. "It was a good welcome and the atmosphere was very good," Sharjeel said after being asked if fellow squad members had given him a hard time on his return. "I have played with all these players in the past and in recent domestic matches, so there was no difficulty in adjusting."

Before his ban, the left-handed batsman had played one Test, 25 one-day internationals and 15 Twenty20 matches for Pakistan. "Now I am back in the squad my focus is only on cricket," he said. "All the talk of the past is now past."

Sharjeel, who struck a century in this year's PSL before the competition was suspended last month because of a coronavirus outbreak, also pushed back against questions about his fit-



LAHORE: Pakistan's cricket team head coach Misbah ul Haq (right) with players attend a practice session at the Gaddafi Cricket Stadium in Lahore on March 19, 2021 ahead of the South Africa and Zimbabwe tour. — AFP

ness. "I have played 55-60 days of domestic cricket and I will achieve the goals given to me by the Pakistan team trainer," said Sharjeel. "I want to play my natural game on the tour."

Sharjeel — selected only for the four Twenty20 matches in South Africa and three in Zimbabwe — has until

April 10 to further improve his fitness. Pakistan's tour begins on April 2 with the first of three one-day internationals against South Africa. "I am selected for Twenty20 internationals only, so I will do fitness work on the tour and get ready." The squad flies to South Africa on Saturday. — AFP

Lakers legend Baylor dies aged 86: Team

LOS ANGELES: Los Angeles Lakers legend Elgin Baylor, widely regarded as one of the greatest players never to win a championship after playing and losing in eight NBA Finals, died on Monday, the franchise announced. He was 86.

The 11-time Hall-of-Famer, a dominant force for the Lakers during 14 seasons in the league between 1958 and 1971, passed away peacefully surrounded by his wife Elaine and daughter Krystal, the Lakers said.

"Elgin was the love of my life and my best friend," Elaine Baylor said in a statement released by the team. "And like everyone else, I was in awe of his immense courage, dignity and the time he gave to all fans. At this time we ask that I and our family be allowed to mourn his passing in privacy."

Baylor was chosen with the top pick in the 1958 draft when the Lakers were based in Minneapolis. He made an instant impact, averaging 24.9 points, 15 rebounds and 4.1 assists in his debut season to romp to Rookie of the Year honors.

It marked the beginning of an illustrious playing career with the Lakers which ended after a handful of games in his 14th season in 1971 because of knee problems. The 6ft 5in (1.96m) small forward finished his career with 23,149 points at an average of 27.4 per game, along with 11,463 rebounds (13.5), and 3,650 assists (4.3).

Yet although he was pivotal in turning the Lakers into a dominant force in the 1960s, he was never able to crown his legacy with a championship. He reached eight NBA Finals with the Lakers but lost all of them, including three seven-game series defeats to the Boston Celtics. Baylor's NBA Finals appearances however did include a memorable 61-point outing against the Celtics in 1962, which remains the record for the highest ever score by an individual in a NBA Finals game.

In a twist of fate, the Lakers finally won a championship in the 1971-1972 season — when Baylor had retired through injury after only nine games. The Lakers later gave Baylor a championship ring in recognition of his contribution to the team which he sold for \$132,000 in 2013. "Elgin was THE superstar of his era - his many accolades speak to that," Lakers Governor Jeanie Buss said in a statement on Monday. — AFP



CENTURY CITY: In this file photo taken on May 18, 2013 former NBA player Elgin Baylor speaks onstage at the 28th Anniversary Sports Spectacular Gala at the Hyatt Regency Century Plaza in Century City, California. — AFP

Sports

Germany seek redemption as Loew starts swansong

Mannschaft play Iceland tomorrow, Romania on Sunday

BERLIN: Germany will seek redemption for November's humiliating thrashing against Spain as Joachim Loew's squad look to get the fans back behind them by winning their first three World Cup qualifiers. Germany host Iceland in Duisburg tomorrow before facing Romania away on Sunday, then play North Macedonia three days later back in Duisburg.

"We want to start the European championship year with an exclamation mark and please our fans again," Loew said after naming teenagers Jamal Musiala, 18, and Florian Wirtz, 17, in his squad. "Our ambition and goal is to get ourselves into a good starting position with three wins."

A fortnight ago, Loew announced he will step down, after 15 years in charge, following the European championships, due to take place from June 11-July 11. He badly needs convincing wins to restore their fans' faith in the Mannschaft following November's 6-0 rout by Spain which handed Germany their heaviest defeat since 1931. In the aftermath, a survey of German fans by magazine Kicker showed 89 percent felt Loew had failed to rebuild the team since crashing out of the 2018 World Cup in the group stages. As Germany team director Oliver Bierhoff acknowledged Monday, the Mannschaft must "set an example" after the disgrace of the thrashing in Seville.

It is a far cry from July 2014, when Loew could seemingly do no wrong after masterminding Germany's World Cup triumph in Brazil. The 61-year-old is desperate to end on a high at the Euros after three lean years which have badly tarnished his glittering legacy.

The three World Cup qualifiers are his last chance

to look at options before naming his squad for the European championships. He has high hopes for Bayern Munich midfielder Musiala, who has dual nationality and has opted to play senior football for Germany despite two appearances for England Under-21 last November.

Likewise, Leverkusen's Wirtz, the youngest ever scorer in the Bundesliga, is considered a bright prospect and has also been called up by Loew for the first time. The head coach wants to see his players working hard in training to win starting places for Germany. "We want to see in the training sessions and matches which players are imposing themselves, who definitely wants to be there," said Loew.

He has been able to call up five Premier League players after Germany relaxed some of the Covid-19 travel restrictions at the weekend. Nevertheless, Manchester City midfielder Ilkay Gundogan, Chelsea trio Kai Havertz, Timo Werner and Antonio Ruediger plus Arsenal goalkeeper Bernd Leno will be placed in a 'working quarantine' within the Germany camp.

The five will only be allowed contact with other players during training, team meetings and matches. Meals will be taken separately. "The situation is aggravated, but we are not complaining," Bierhoff added.

There is also no room for Dortmund captain Marco Reus who has struggled for consistency after a lengthy injury lay off. Loew is also refusing to reverse his 2019 decision to end the international careers of Thomas Mueller, Mats Hummels and Jerome Boateng. Mueller is in arguably the form of his career with four assists in as many Bundesliga games. — AFP



MUNICH: In this file photo taken on December 16, 2020 Bayern Munich's German midfielder Jamal Musiala plays the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match between Bayern Munich and VfL Wolfsburg in Munich. — AFP

Emotional Zlatan returns to Sweden squad

STOCKHOLM: An unusually reserved and humble Zlatan Ibrahimovic had to hold back the tears on Monday as he arrived in Sweden ahead of his return this week to the Swedish national squad after nearly five years away.

Veteran striker Ibrahimovic showed a more sensitive side to his usually brash public persona when he was asked about what his two teenage sons, Maximilian and Vincent, thought of his international comeback. "It's not a good question you're asking. I had Vincent here, who actually cried when I left him. But it's OK, it's OK," he said with tears in his eyes.

Speaking to reporters days ahead of Sweden's 2022 World Cup qualifier against Georgia tomorrow, the often boastful 39-year-old acknowledged he was much more "patient both on and off the field" than when he announced the end of his international career after Euro 2016. "Right now you're thinking: 'He's much too nice and much too humble,'" Ibrahimovic joked.

Sweden's most successful player, the AC Milan forward retired from international football with 116 caps and 62 goals for his national team. He announced his return to the squad last week on Instagram with a picture of himself in the Swedish team kit. But 'Ibra' said Monday he didn't want to be given a spot on the team for his past achievements but because he "deserved" it.

He is in good form this season for Milan, with 15 goals in as many Serie A games, including the opener in Sunday's 3-2 win at Fiorentina which kept the pressure on league leaders Inter Milan. He also said he didn't mind no longer being team captain, a role now taken by Alexander Granqvist, who plays for Swedish club Helsingborgs.

In another sign of a "new chapter," Ibrahimovic said he had asked to don the number 11 on his jersey rather than the 10 he used to sport. "I asked nicely if I



STOCKHOLM: Zlatan Ibrahimovic (second right), forward of Sweden's national football team, attends a training session with teammates yesterday in Stockholm, prior to the World Cup qualifier of Sweden vs Georgia to be played tomorrow. — AFP

could have the 11," he said, adding that teammate and Real Sociedad forward Alexander Isak had graciously agreed to give up the number.

'Best in the world'

Ibrahimovic and Sweden's head coach Janne Andersson, who also attended the press conference, have had public arguments in the past but both of them insisted repeatedly those disagreements were now behind them.

Andersson travelled to meet Zlatan in Milan in November last year after the star attacker had said in an interview that he missed playing for Sweden. "When we parted we had put everything that happened behind us," Andersson said.

Glimpses of the old Ibrahimovic did however make an appearance. "If you ask me I'm the best in the world," Zlatan said as he broke into laughter. He

also said he had promised Andersson he would "decide matches". "I have my experience, I know what I'm good at." The question of whether the top scorer would ever return to the national team has often divided the Scandinavian nation. Some fans have pined to see him back on the pitch, while others argued he no longer had a place on a team that has managed to qualify for top international competitions without him.

Andersson, who took over the squad in 2016, has over the years worked to build a team with a collective ethos and little tolerance for diva antics. Questions had therefore emerged about Ibrahimovic's place on the team. Noa Bachner, football pundit for Swedish daily Expressen, told AFP that Ibrahimovic "knows he's entering into a much more flat hierarchy where he can't expect to be elevated in the same manner." — AFP

China coach says 'door open to everyone' as injuries strike

SHANGHAI: China coach Li Tie is missing several key players, including forward Wu Lei, as he attempts to stamp his mark on the national squad ahead of must-win World Cup qualifiers in June. Injuries and other factors mean that the former Everton midfielder is unable to assess his full range of options as the squad embarks on two weeks of preparations in Shanghai.

Li named four naturalized players in a 28-man squad, but only the Brazil-born attackers Elkeson and Alan Carvalho took to the field when training began on Sunday. Former England youth defender Tyias Browning and another ex-Brazilian, Fernando, are injured and will not feature, while captain Hao Junmin did not take part in the session.

London-born former Arsenal midfielder Nico Yennaris was left out because he had only recently returned to China. Experienced defender Zhang Linpeng was also not named in the squad, but the most notable absentee is the 29-year-old Wu, who came on as a substitute for second-tier Espanyol on Sunday and has not made the trip home to China.

"We're in touch with Wu Lei all

the time," said Li, adding that "although he's far away, in Spain, he is still a very important member of our team". Li, appointed in January 2020, conceded that "it's a pity that lots of injuries happened to players recently". "In the past year I can feel that all the players cherish the national team more and more and they have a strong desire to join the team," he added.

"In training and games, I can see that the players are working really hard," added the 43-year-old Li, who because of the coronavirus is yet to take charge of China in a competitive match since being named coach in January 2020.

Attitude and effort

"None of us knows who will be fit for the World Cup qualifiers so we have to get everyone ready. As long as when they join the national team they train hard every day, have a good attitude and perform well in competitive matches, the door is open to everyone."

Most of Li's squad are still in pre-season training with their clubs for the delayed Chinese Super League season, which normally begins in March.

Chinese football chiefs are yet to announce a start for the 2021 campaign. China are second in Group A of Asian qualifying for the 2022 Qatar World Cup, eight points behind leaders Syria. Only the top team is guaranteed to reach the next qualifying stage.

For the Asian qualifiers on May 31 to June 15, matches have been moved to centralised locations because of the coronavirus pandemic. China will

host games in Group A, which also includes the Philippines, Maldives and Guam.

China has reached only one World Cup, in 2002, when they failed to score a goal or win a point in their three group games. Five years ago China pledged to become a football power by 2050 but the team remains ranked at a lowly 75th in the world, just above war-ravaged Syria. — AFP



SHANGHAI: In this file photo taken on May 25, 2020, China's head coach Li Tie (right) takes part in a training session with members of the Chinese national football team in Shanghai. — AFP

Leverkusen fire Bosz after slump, Wolf takes charge

BERLIN: Bayer Leverkusen yesterday sacked head coach Peter Bosz and brought in Hannes Wolf in a bid to stop their slide down the Bundesliga table after having been top in December. Bosz, 57, has been replaced by former Germany Under-18 coach Wolf, 39, until the end of the season with Leverkusen currently sixth in Germany's top flight.

Wolf won the second division title with Stuttgart in 2016/17, but was sacked after a season at Hamburg after failing to get them back into the Bundesliga in 2018/19. "With the new coaching team, we want to turn things around and again take the path to success that we had left," said Leverkusen's sporting director Simon Rolfes. "Even as a very young coach, Hannes Wolf has impressed with big clubs and was particularly convincing through his promotion to the Bundesliga with VfB Stuttgart."



BERLIN: In this file photo taken on March 21, 2021 Leverkusen's Dutch head coach Peter Bosz reacts during the German first division Bundesliga football match between Hertha Berlin and Bayer Leverkusen in Berlin. — AFP

Wolf's opening game will be at bottom club Schalke on April 3, the first of eight league games he will have to bridge the seven-point gap to the Champions League places. Under Dutch coach Bosz, who took charge in December 2018, Leverkusen have won just three of their 13 league games since they lost to Bayern Munich just before Christmas as then-Bundesliga leaders.

Sunday's 3-0 defeat at struggling Hertha Berlin, who are fighting relegation, was the final straw with Leverkusen now seven points from fourth and a Champions League berth next season. In total, the 'Werkself' has lost 10 of their 17 games in all competitions since the start of 2021.

"We have come to the conclusion that the separation from Peter Bosz can no longer be avoided," said club boss Rudi Voeller. "The 3-0 defeat at Hertha on Sunday was unfortunately characteristic — our team has recently fallen into the same pattern over and over again. We therefore agreed to make a cut, despite the great appreciation for the work of Peter Bosz." — AFP

Fukushima hopes Olympic torch will shine light on recovery

FUKUSHIMA: When the Tokyo Olympics torch relay kicks off in Fukushima tomorrow, runners are hoping it will show the world the area is no "nuclear wasteland", a decade after the 2011 disaster. The pandemic might have overshadowed a Games once billed as the "Recovery Olympics" after the earthquake and tsunami catastrophe, but Fukushima torchbearers say the relay can show their home in a new light.

"From afar, Fukushima might look like a place where time has stood still," Hanae Nojiri, a reporter with a local TV station who will take part in the relay, told AFP. "But when people see the spectators lining the roads and the passion of the runners, I think they'll update their image of the place."

The virus-delayed torch relay begins about 20 miles (32 kilometers) from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant that went into meltdown when the massive quake and tsunami struck on March 11, 2011. Around 18,500 people were left dead or missing, most of them victims of the devastating tsunami.

Tens of thousands were forced to flee their homes, with radiation making some areas uninhabitable for years. The area's recovery is not complete even now, but residents are ready to show the world how much progress has been made.

The torch relay will start at the J-Village football training facility, which was once the front-line command center for the clean-up operation at the nuclear plant. Now it has been restored to its original purpose, with pristine green pitches welcoming the footballers who train there. "I think it's very meaningful that the relay will start from Fukushima 10 years after the disaster," said Nojiri.

'Mixed feelings'

The Olympics and the relay were delayed by a year because of the pandemic and ongoing virus

fears mean the torch festivities have been pared back, with the departure ceremony and first leg closed to the public. Cheering is forbidden along the route, which will criss-cross Japan and involve around 10,000 runners, and the relay will be suspended if large crowds gather.

Yumiko Nishimoto, a torchbearer on the first day, has "mixed feelings" over the behind-closed-doors departure ceremony, which features a simplified program with a reduced number of performers. "Local people were looking forward to it, and some of them wanted to go and watch," said Nishimoto, who leads a community project to plant 20,000 cherry trees, one of the initiatives to restore the area. "I wonder if organizers could have made more of an effort, considering it's an outdoor event. The situation with infections is not the same here as it is in Tokyo."

But Nishimoto is determined not to let the virus put a dampener on the occasion, which she sees as a chance to show "both positive and negative aspects" of Fukushima's recovery. Organizers have been keen to play up the benefits of hosting the Olympics for areas affected by the disaster.

But parts of the region remain off-limits due to high radiation, and some hollowed-out towns are still struggling to lure people back to rebuild their communities. "The torch relay will pass through areas where people still can't return, and you can't cover that up — that's the reality and you need to understand that," said Nojiri. "But a lot of people are moving forward and living life with a smile on their faces, and I want people to see that."

'Back on its feet'

William McMichael, a Canadian lecturer at Fukushima University who has lived in the area since 2007, has been inviting overseas students since the disaster, in the hope of changing per-



HIRONO: In this picture taken on February 28, 2021, Tokyo 2020 Olympic torch relay runner Yumiko Nishimoto poses for a photo in Hirono, Fukushima Prefecture. — AFP

ceptions. "There was a huge gap between what the world was saying about Fukushima and what was actually going on here," McMichael said, arguing it was portrayed as "a nuclear wasteland" outside of Japan.

McMichael, who will run on the third day of the relay, wants the world to see what Fukushima is really like and hopes residents will "realize that the whole world is still thinking about them".

Fukushima will also play an active part in the Games, hosting Olympic baseball and softball.

And Nojiri thinks the region can offer the world important lessons and hope at a tough time. "Ten years ago, Fukushima went through a disaster that other countries haven't experienced, but it got back on its feet," she said. "I want people to see that positive attitude, especially now with the world facing up to a crisis." — AFP



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