

# Friday Times

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Kuwait Times  
Established 1961  
The First Daily in the Arabian Gulf

## REGISTER TODAY

for the **COVID-19 vaccine**

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Egyptian tugboats try to free the MV Ever Given (Evergreen), which is lodged sideways and impeding all traffic across the waterway of the Suez Canal. — AFP

## Grounded ship forces Suez Canal to suspend all traffic

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## Local

## The walking hours



SCRIBBLER'S NOTEBOOK

By Jamie Etheridge

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The breeze feels cool and lifts the branches of trees as we pass beneath them. The night is quiet, most people in their homes, cars parked, the end of the day. We're out for our evening stroll, enjoying the new walking hours. Earlier this week the Cabinet adjusted the partial curfew to allow an extra hour at the end of the day for people to get home from work and added two hours - from 6 pm to 8 pm - for people to walk outside.

The walking hours might seem like a minor development in a yearlong pandemic but for my family, they are a gift. My children, safe at home, spend all day schooling, reading, doing chores and homework. By the time they've finished, it's past the curfew. Even without a curfew, the heat will soon make it impossible to go outside during the daytime for even short amounts of time.

That is why the nighttime walking hours are such a blessing. The first day of the new walking hours, my husband and I took our daughters for a nighttime tromp around our neighborhood. The streets were mostly empty - with only a few cars here and there. A cool breeze blew in off the Gulf, making the walk outdoors pleasant and comfortable. We walked for nearly an hour, exploring side streets and waving to others as they walked past.

Last year during the full lockdown, Kuwait allowed people to walk outdoors for two hours daily from 4 pm to 6 pm. This was in May, when the weather had already turned to summer and we often came home drenched in sweat. Still it felt great to be outside our home, even if it meant bearing the sun for a bit while walking in the neighborhood.

One thing I realized as we walked was how little I knew of our neighborhood. We've lived in the same flat in Salwa for more than a decade, and yet I never knew there were so many water fountains on the streets or that a new mosque was being built just around the corner. When driving in a car, one is usually worried about getting to one's destination and not really watching for the multitude of trees, plants and shrubs that line the streets.

But when out on foot, I was delighted to find magnolia trees, lemon-scented gum trees, azalea bushes, baby palm trees and many other small plants and flowers. It is also pleasant to pass neighbors on foot, to wave hello and perhaps stop for a quick - socially distanced and safe - chat. We were surprised to find that several acquaintances live in the same or neighboring blocks as us!

The walking hours are meant to give people an opportunity to exercise, to stretch, to move. But they are also beneficial for mental health. There are multitudes of studies and research that show walking improves physical and cognitive health. It can even help with eyesight and for older walkers, reducing cataracts and cloudy lenses, according to one Swedish research study. Walking can also improve sleep and ease feelings of depression and boredom.

Given that we are all caught in the current circumstances, an unending pandemic and limited options for travel or entertainment, walking at the least affords us a respite from the four solid walls of our stationary lives. And now with the ability to walk out in the evenings, we also have the chance to enjoy our neighborhoods in a new light.

## Photo of the Day



Chasing the light. A beautiful snap of the inside of the iconic Kuwait Towers reflecting the dome. — Photo by Vithiyavathi Stalin (Instagram: @vithisphotography) To have your photo featured in the Kuwait Times or Friday Times as photo of the day, send a high resolution image to local@kuwaittimes.com. Photo must be unedited and high resolution and related to Kuwait.

## Of checkpoints and checklists



KAFFEEKLATSCH

By Shakir Reshamwala

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With the advent of the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting lockdowns and curfews, checkpoints within the country - earlier found only outside embassies and other sensitive sites - can now be seen everywhere, especially during the curfew hours. On some days, I encounter up to five checkpoints on the way home from the newspaper during the night.

Mostly I am waved through these checkpoints; other times officers only take a brief look at my curfew pass; while occasionally the QR-code is scanned by the policeman to confirm its validity. I have a pass and a legitimate reason to be out on the streets at this late hour, so my mind is at ease, but Murphy's law is also at play here.

On the days you have all your papers and nothing to worry about, you will be waved through. Just the very day you forget your phone or wallet at home will be when the policeman decides to check all your documents. Ditto with when you forget to fasten your seatbelt or the taillight stops working - lo and behold you are pulled over by a passing traffic patrol.

This makes going through checkpoints an intimidating affair. Take for instance passport control at the airport. While leaving the country, a person may suddenly be told by the immigration officer that a travel ban has been placed against them, and they will have to miss the flight. If the

traveler manages to depart without any issues, there could be a problem waiting for them at the arriving destination. Despite having a visa and all required documents, they could be pulled aside for further questioning or even denied entry.

To be sure, the officers manning the checkpoints are courteous and professional, and one is on their way in a matter of seconds. Body language is also at play here - the officers can make out if someone is trying to pull a fast one. They have become adept at knowing whom to stop and whom to wave through. It may be an inexact science, but is effective most of the time.

Now for some checkpoint etiquette:

Rule one - have all your documents ready. If the curfew pass is on your phone, unlock your device and type in your details before your turn arrives. Having a screenshot of the pass works best. Make a checklist of everything that is needed and have them on hand. The last thing you want to do is fumble for your papers after you reach the counter and irk the guards.

Rule two - maintain eye contact with the officers and truthfully answer any questions.

Rule three - once you are given the all-clear, move! This is not the time to flip through your passport to check where the entry was stamped or leisurely put your documents back in the bag, or worse, start putting on your belt or socks. Holding up the line makes the already-jittery motorists or passengers behind you more irate and gets everyone's stress levels high.

So the next time you have to go through a checkpoint, be confident and have your credentials handy. The officers too will appreciate it and the experience will be a pleasant one. It's not the Checkpoint Charlie.



# 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](mailto:painting@kuwaittimes.net) in PDF format ONLY.
- Participant must include on the bottom of the artwork the following: name, age, email address, phone number and school in legible font.

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## Local

# Life after retirement

## Kuwaiti promotes active lifestyle for those aged 50+

By Nawara Fattahova

**“Y**ou can't sit near the emergency exit because you are over 50 years old". This remark motivated 54-year-old Khalid Al-Rayes to shoot an entertainment show encouraging those who are above 50 years of age to enjoy their life.

"Age is just a number. Reaching 50 doesn't mean that life is over. It's just the beginning. Those who retire at this or an older age can still enjoy life by taking care of themselves and participating in many entertainment activities," Rayes, producer of the 'After 50' show, told Kuwait Times. Over 670,000 people in Kuwait (16.5 percent of the population) are above 50 years of age. The Kuwaiti government is not focusing much on this category, as most of the attention is given to youth and children. Also in Kuwait many citizens prefer to retire in their early 50s, and they think that practicing sports and other activities are not suitable for them anymore.



**Khalid Al-Rayes speaking during the interview with Kuwait Times.**

Rayes aims to make a positive impact on society through entertainment. "Through the 'After 50' show, I highlight entertaining and challenging activities and adventures that I can do at my age. People don't necessarily have to travel to these places to live the same experience, but they can do many other physical activities to improve their health and have fun," he explained.

'After 50' or (Ba'ad alkhamseen) is being shown on Qatar TV and is also available on Rayes' channel on YouTube. "I shot 13 episodes of this show in five countries: Turkey, Bosnia, Montenegro, Albania and Kosovo. It took me five weeks of shooting in these countries. This is season one, and I'm planning to shoot more episodes in the future. I would like to cover all continents and have one season on each continent," Rayes pointed out.





## Local

**Positive feedback**

“After shooting the pilot episode, 300 people saw it and praised it. This encouraged me to continue and shoot the 13 episodes. The idea of After 50 started in the beginning of 2019 after I left work and decided to do something I really like. I had worked in around 15 different jobs including being self-employed, but I didn’t really love any of them. As I had studied film direction in the US and never worked in this field, I thought this is the best opportunity to do so, especially with the popularity of social media,” stressed Rayes.

“I first presented my idea of the show to various producers, who all agreed it’s a new and good idea. But they all said I have to produce a pilot episode to present it to sponsors. Unfortunately, the pandemic broke out after I shot the pilot episode and it was difficult to travel. I was posting photos and teasers on my Instagram account, and people were commenting on the posts, asking what do I mean by ‘Life starts after 50’,” he told Kuwait Times.

“In May 2020, a friend in Qatar asked to see the pilot episode, and he loved it. He then presented it to Qatar TV, where it was approved and they accepted to produce it. We then shot the 13 episodes that are now showing,” Rayes added.

The show even attracted a younger audience. “People I know told me after watching the show that it encouraged them to practice sports and take care of their physical health. They told me that they feel more positive after watching the show. I was targeting older people, but I was surprised that many of my viewers are children. The idea of my show is to entertain people in



the first place and then motivate them to change their life for the better,” he noted.

“People will enjoy watching the episodes that were shot in different countries and unique locations. In one of the episodes, I achieved one of my dreams of flying, as I tried the hang glider, which was very exciting. I experienced the feeling of a falcon while flying. In the first episode, I jump into the Blue Eye lake in Albania, which I

spent a long time reaching,” said Rayes.

“My mission is to make a positive impact on society through entertainment. During the lockdowns and curfews, people are looking for entertaining programs as they spend most of the time at home. I hope they will enjoy watching After 50,” he concluded.





## Local

## Wasted potential

By Mohammed Al-Hajeri

Lives are brought into and out of this world on a daily basis. Some dreams are lived out while others are shattered. That's life for you. It's pretty cool to set yourself goals every now and then, but it's even better when you achieve them. Then again, what's life without dreams? What's life without goals? What's life without passion?

Everyone has a certain potential in life. Most never end up fulfilling them, and that's ok, it totally is. Not everyone is destined for greatness. Not everyone is prepared to take their leap of faith, the leap that with no doubt will have them soaring with success, achieving everything they set their mind to.



Now, destiny is an interesting thing, because the only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be. Whoever you are, and whoever that may be, just know that whatever it is that's holding you back, is the very thing that separates you from the crowd. We all have our inner demons, we all go through anguish, pain, guilt, and we all grieve our losses. I'm not going to sit here and tell you that all these negative feelings won't leave their mark on you. What I can do is tell you, that you don't truly realize your greatest strength, until you come face to face with your greatest weakness, because only then, will you be able to channel all your feelings into strength, and only then, will you be able to grow into something else, someone else.

There comes a time in one's life when he or she will transition one's way of thinking from what could be and what could have been. To think of all that could be is to live with potential, but to look back and think of what could have been, is to live with regret. Make your move, and smile upon reminiscing beautiful memories, smile at all the times you stepped out of your comfort zone, at all the times you proved others wrong, at all the times you proved yourself wrong.

So what if you don't succeed at first, so what if you fail, over and over again. Failure defeats losers but inspires winners. Make most of life. You can either live out your years as though it was one day, repeating the same old routine, over and over again, or live every day as if there was no tomorrow, making the most out of every opportunity, and learning from your mistakes. Don't squander your potential by living a life that amounts to far less than the one you're capable of living.



KUWAIT: In this file photo Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah watches as a medic receives a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at the vaccination center at the international fairgrounds in Mishref. – KUNA

## The benefits of over-the-counter vaccines

By Hamad Al-Marzouq and Ahmad Al-Omar

Ever since the case of severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus - 2 (SARS-CoV-2) was diagnosed in Wuhan, China circa December 2019, the amount of deaths has been increasing exponentially worldwide. As of February 14, 2021, the number of patients globally has risen to 109 million, with over 2.4 million deaths. We have been fighting the virus for more than a year now, and it is blatantly evident that there is widespread distrust with vaccines and monopolies of global pharmaceuticals. The healthcare system has shown its flaws.

The vaccine against COVID-19 has been approved for emergency and general use in a few countries like; United Kingdom, United States of America, Russia, and China. Over one hundred million doses have been administered to people worldwide as of February 2021.

However, most countries have not yet started the vaccination process as their citizens are reluctant to get vaccinated. These countries' governments are putting considerable efforts into educating their citizens on the benefits of getting vaccinated against the deadly coronavirus.

The greatest challenge facing the acceptability of this vaccine is the mode of administration. Currently, the Coronavirus vaccines are being administered through injection hence causing a lot of anxiety among people. Therefore, this is because of the side effects that have been presented by getting the vaccine injection. Some of these side effects include pain and swelling at the injection area, headaches, fever, chill, and tiredness throughout the body. The COVID-19 vaccine requires that two shots are given to enhance maximum protection against the coronavirus disease. This has also contributed to the rejection of the vaccine among many people.

The second shot is given within three to four weeks after receiving the first one. Concerns have been raised on the safety of the second shot of the Coronavirus vaccine. It has been shown to exhibit worse side effects. Therefore, people are worried about the consequences the second shot is likely to bring. The distrust and worry are higher in people with a compromised immune system, especially those with chronic diseases. They are worried if their body will be able to handle the worse side effects resulting from the second shot of the vaccine. Production of the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine in a tablet form will make people more receptive to taking the vaccine.

In conclusion, producing a SARS-CoV-2 vaccine in a tablet form will ease many of the problems we face administering routine vaccines. It would be easily mass-produced, effortless to administer, and easily transportable. Hence does not include the psychological bias humans have towards tablets, as they are used to administering it themselves.



## Kuwait Times partners with BBS

Kuwait Times is delighted to collaborate with students from Bayan Bilingual School (BBS) to republish articles originally featured in the school's journal, Inkwell.

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## Local

# Ambassador urges Indians to register for COVID vaccination

By Sajeew K Peter

**KUWAIT:** The Indian Embassy in Kuwait held an open house under the theme 'COVID-19 Vaccination', underlining the importance of inoculation in view of the surge in infections in the country. "I have made 'COVID-19 Vaccination' as the main theme of today's open house. It is the single most important issue that all of us including our Indian community face today," Indian Ambassador Sibi George told the open house on Wednesday.

The ambassador requested all Indians in Kuwait to register for the vaccination. "No Indian can be left behind. We need to reach out to all Indians including domestic workers, drivers, one and all. Everyone above 16 years needs to register. Vaccination is the only way to get back to a normal situation," he added.

Appealing to all to adhere to and abide by the regulations and procedures announced by the government, including the curfew timings, George said the embassy has seen a few cases of deportation due to violation of curfew timings. The embassy has opened two counters at its premises for vaccine registration.

The ambassador urged all associations,

groups, volunteers and social workers to start a campaign to register. "I urge those without civil IDs or proper documents to also come forward and register with the embassy. We will work with the authorities to ensure that all Indians get vaccinated," he added.

In March, the embassy closed down its public service at the chancery premises for 10 days due to the COVID situation, although it continued emergency services. It also continued passport services at three centers in Sharq, Fahaheel and Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh.

Talking about the issue of examinations, George said: "For the first time, we held Joint Entrance Examinations (JEE) in Kuwait this year. We also have Kuwait as a center for NEET and NATA examinations. I am sure that this will help many students during these difficult times," he said. Regarding the CBSE examinations, he said the embassy is in regular touch with authorities in India and Kuwait.

The ambassador said the embassy is still grappling with a few unresolved issues like the Indian sailors on the MV Ula and missing persons like Harish Shanker. "Harish went missing with his car. Unfortunately, we are yet to get a breakthrough on the matter. We are working with the authorities," he said. Ansar



**KUWAIT:** Indian Ambassador Sibi George speaks during the open house at the embassy on Wednesday.

Kabeer, another person who also went missing this week, has been located, George re-

vealed. The embassy has also made some progress on the engineers' issue, he added.

## FM meets Indonesia, UAE envoys



**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets outgoing Indonesia ambassador Tri Tharyat yesterday. —KUNA photos



Sheikh Ahmad meets newly-appointed UAE Ambassador Matar Al-Neyadi yesterday.

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah met departing Indonesia ambassador Tri Tharyat yesterday at the end of his time in office. During the meeting, the minister praised the ambassador's contributions to boosting bilateral relations. Sheikh Ahmad also received

the credentials of newly-appointed UAE Ambassador Matar Al-Neyadi yesterday.

During the meeting, the minister wished the ambassador success in his new role. He also hoped for the two countries' solid and close-knit relations to witness further growth and prosperity. —KUNA

## Interior minister, Iraqi envoy discuss ties, cooperation

**KUWAIT:** Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah and Iraqi Ambassador to Kuwait Al-Manhal Al-Safi on Wednesday discussed some topics of common concern. During the meeting, the minister stressed the depth of relations between the two countries, the interior ministry's security media and public rela-

tions department said in a press statement.

The two sides discussed means of supporting and enhancing security cooperation between the two countries, it added. Meanwhile, the Iraqi envoy voiced appreciation to Kuwait for its efforts to maintain the region's security and stability. —KUNA



**Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah meets Iraqi Ambassador to Kuwait Al-Manhal Al-Safi.**



## Local

# Speaker: Dahoum's Assembly membership is 'null and void'

By B Izzak

**KUWAIT:** National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said yesterday that the membership of leading opposition MP Bader Al-Dahoum is "null and void" as declared by the constitutional court, and implementing the ruling is obligatory and does not need any voting in the house as demanded by opposition lawmakers.

"Dahoum's case is a constitutional and legal dispute settled by the constitutional court. Neither the Assembly speaker nor MPs or the house have anything to do with it," Ghanem told reporters. "It is not a political dispute as some are trying to show".

He said the constitutional court ruling on March 14 declared that

Dahoum's election was invalid, his membership is null and void and that a by-election must be held to replace him. He said the ruling must be implemented immediately and without voting by the Assembly, in a direct response to demands by a large number of opposition MPs.

"The membership is null and void by the force of the court ruling and this will not be subjected to voting," Ghanem said. Dahoum and opposition MPs insist that the Assembly must be allowed to debate and vote on this issue because Dahoum was allowed to participate in the election by a ruling by the court of cassation, whose rulings are superior to the constitutional court, according to opposition MPs.

About 34 MPs yesterday issued a statement in which they reiterated their backing of Dahoum and insisted that his case must be settled by the National Assembly. The opposition lawmakers are meeting next week to decide on what they will do amid reports that they could boycott the Assembly session, depriving it of quorum and ultimately barring the new Cabinet from taking the oath in the house.

Ghanem also said the Assembly will hold a session next week, the first regular session by the house - elected on Dec 5 - in several weeks. He said that a number of key legislation are on the agenda including the general amnesty, reducing preventive detention, support for businesses affected by the coronavirus pandemic and others.



Low visibility in Kuwait City caused by dust. —KUNA

## Weather slightly hot during day, mildly cold at night

**KUWAIT:** The Kuwait Control and Meteorological Center confirmed the weather will be slightly hot in the day and moderately cold at night, with active northwest dusty winds. In a statement to KUNA yesterday, weather forecast supervisor

Abdulaziz Al-Qarawi said yesterday's weather was slightly hot with moderate to fresh northwesterly wind with a speed of 20-45 km/h, while some scattered clouds appeared.

The lowest temperature was 20 to 22 Celsius with light to moderate sea waves between two to six feet. The weather yesterday night was slightly cold and partly cloudy with northwesterly light to moderate winds between 15 to 40 km per hour. Today and tomorrow will be slightly hot and partly cloudy with northeasterly light to moderate winds, with light to moderate sea waves. —KUNA

## Kuwait provides lab sample bags to Iraqi Kurdistan

**IRBIL:** Kuwait has provided Kurdistan with laboratory sample bags to help the Iraqi region in facing the impact of the deadly coronavirus pandemic, the

World Health Organization revealed yesterday. The region is home to hundreds of thousands of Iraqi and Syrian refugees, who will benefit from the WHO-administered assistance, the organization said in a statement.

This comes after Kuwait last month provided 13 tons of medical assistance for healthcare workers, worth \$1 million, and contributed to delivering six ambulances and 22 tons of health equipment to the region in August.

WHO expressed its gratitude to the Kuwaiti government for providing the funds for the lifesaving support.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the region hard, as Health Minister Saman Barzinji expressed anxiety over the rising cases. The positive case average has risen to 3.1 percent, edging closer to the 5 percent limit, with infections rising twofold recently since the highest numbers recorded earlier, Barzinji warned in a statement. —KUNA

## Kuwait's northern areas free of locust swarms

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's northern regions, especially Abdaly and Sulaibiya farms, were to be free of locust swarms by the end of yesterday, Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources spokesman Talal Al-Daihani said yesterday. In a statement to KUNA, the spokesman affirmed that the country is witnessing active northerly winds that have contributed to the spread of desert locust swarms in the interior

and southern regions.

Earlier, PAAAFR said it directed specialized teams to keep away the wave of desert locusts that hit the country on Wednesday, directed by strong winds towards the inner cities and southern regions of the country. The teams have been carrying out their tasks in tackling this wave of locusts coming from Saudi Arabia and falling in Kuwaiti territory due to strong southern winds. —KUNA



Locusts are seen in the inner regions of Kuwait. —KUNA



Laboratory sample bags sent by Kuwait to help Iraq's Kurdistan region. —KUNA





Iraq's Saddam-era laws being used to silence govt critics

Pandemic-hit US confronted anew by mass shootings

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Egyptian officials check the operation trying to free Taiwan-owned cargo MV Ever Given (Evergreen), a 400-metre- (1,300-foot-) long and 59-metre wide vessel, lodged sideways and impeding all traffic across the waterway of Egypt's Suez Canal yesterday. —AFP

## Crisis-hit Suez Canal suspends traffic

### Bid to refloat grounded ship hits trouble

**CAIRO:** The owners of a giant container vessel blocking the Suez Canal said yesterday they were facing “extreme difficulty” refloating it, prompting Egypt to suspend navigation through one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes. The Suez Canal Authority (SCA) said it was trying to refloat the Panama-flagged MV Ever Given, a 400-metre (1,300-foot) long vessel which veered off course and ran aground in a sandstorm on Tuesday.

Satellite pictures released by Planet Labs Inc show the 59-metre wide container ship wedged diagonally across the entire canal. Japanese ship-leasing firm Shoen Kisen Kaisha said it owned the giant vessel and was facing “extreme difficulty” trying to refloat it.

“In co-operation with local authorities and Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement, a vessel management company, we are trying to refloat (the ship), but we are facing extreme difficulty,” Shoen Kisen Kaisha said in a statement on its website. “We sincerely apologize for causing a great deal of worry to ships in the Suez Canal and those planning to go through the canal.”

As shipping specialists warned it could take days or even

weeks to budge the vessel, the Suez Canal Authority announced it was “temporarily suspending navigation”.

Maritime sources said yesterday that a new dredger had been deployed to speed up the operation while northern convoy ships remain docked in the waiting areas of the canal. Satellite pictures released by Planet Labs Inc show the 59-metre wide container ship wedged diagonally across the entire canal.

“We’ve never seen anything like it before,” said Ranjith Raja, Middle East oil and shipping researcher at international financial data firm Refinitiv. “It is likely that the congestion... will take several days or weeks to sort out as it will have a knock-on effect on other convoys.”

#### ‘Days, maybe weeks’

The blockage has already hit world oil markets. Crude futures surged six percent on Wednesday as traders assessed the likely impact on deliveries. Broker Braemar warned that if tug boats are unable to move the giant vessel, some of its cargo might have to be removed by crane barge to refloat it.

“This can take days, maybe weeks,” it said. The vessel’s managers, Singapore-based Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement (BSM), said its 25 crew were unhurt and the hull and cargo undamaged. A MarineTraffic map showed large clusters of vessels circling as they waited in both the Mediterranean to the north and the Red Sea to the south. Historic sections of the canal were reopened in a bid to ease the bottleneck, with dozens of ships waiting at both ends of the waterway.

The waterway drastically shortens travel between Asia and Europe because it prevents vessels from having to navigate around southern Africa’s Cape of Good Hope. The Singapore-to-Rotterdam route, for example, is 6,000 kilometers (3,700 miles) and up to two weeks shorter than going around Africa.

It is an “absolutely critical” route because “all traffic arriving from Asia goes through the Suez Canal,” said Camille Egloff, a maritime transport specialist at Boston Consulting Group. Nearly 19,000 ships passed through the canal last year carrying more than one billion tons of cargo, according to the SCA. Egypt earned \$5.61 billion in revenues from the canal in 2020. —AFP



## International

# Greece celebrates revolution bicentennial with pomp, allies

## Foreign dignitaries attend parades and ceremonies in solidarity

**ATHENS:** Greece yesterday celebrated 200 years since the start of its independence war with the Ottoman Empire with parades and ceremonies attended by foreign dignitaries, though the pandemic forced officials to scale back events. "Today the nation celebrates," Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said as the Greek flag was solemnly raised over the Acropolis in Athens.

"Two centuries ago, a handful of determined fighters in and outside Greece raised the banner of independence... with the help of their allies, they fought heroically and won their freedom," he said, ahead of events planned all over Greece and among diaspora communities overseas.

In a sunny interlude to cloudy weather that later turned to snow, a parade of tanks, artillery and overflying jets and helicopters marked the occasion in the capital, alongside mounted troops and children in traditional costumes from the 1821 conflict and other wars. French Rafales and American F-16s were part of the show, while a cannon on Lycabettus Hill overlooking Athens had earlier fired a salute of 21 shots.

### 'Wellspring of Western civilization'

Security was tight, with 4,000 police, drones and snipers deployed in Athens, a police source said. Owing to the coronavirus pandemic, no spectators are allowed to attend the parade aside from a small number of reporters. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, Britain's Prince Charles, Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades and French Defence Minister Florence Parly had earlier placed wreaths at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Greece's foremost military monument. US President Joe Biden and French counterpart Emmanuel Macron—who pulled out of the event at the last minute owing to the latest COVID-19 lockdown in France—and other EU leaders sent messages of support.

"Your liberty is our (liberty)," Macron said in Greek in a recorded message. "We are here, and we will stand by your side when history is unfair towards you, when solidarity may be lacking, when menace returns," he said in an apparent reference to ongoing tensions with Turkey.

Britain, France and Russia were instrumental in helping Greece attain its independence in 1830 after nearly a decade of warfare against



**ATHENS:** Prince of Wales, Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall Camilla, Greek President Katerina Sakellariopoulou and her partner Pavlos Kotsonis pose for a photograph in Athens, Greece yesterday as Greece celebrates 200th anniversary of 1821 revolution and war of independence. — AFP

overwhelming odds. Americans, including a nephew of George Washington, were among volunteer combatants. At the time, the Ottoman Empire extended through the Balkans and modern-day Turkey to North Africa, the Arabian peninsula and the Caucasus.

"As the wellspring of Western civilization, Greece's spirit runs through our societies and our democracies," Prince Charles said at a dinner at the presidential mansion on Wednesday. "Without her, our laws, our art, our way of life, would never have flourished as they have." — AFP



Some of the burnt remains at the Kroo Bay slum in Freetown, Sierra Leone after the fire.

## Slum in Sierra Leone capital gutted by fire

**FREETOWN:** A slum in Sierra Leone's capital Freetown was destroyed in a fire late Wednesday, the city authorities said, adding that the toll was unclear but thousands may have been affected. "Earlier tonight, the Susan's Bay community was gutted by fire," Freetown City council said in a tweet overnight.

"The extent of the damage is unknown but thousands are likely to have been affected. We will provide more details as we receive them. Keep affected residents in your thoughts and prayers!"

Most homes in Susan's Bay are flimsy constructions of corrugated sheeting and recovered materials. The community is clustered on Freetown's seafront, close to the city's historic center. The European Union's ambassador to Sierra Leone, Tom Vens, said the EU was looking at ways of sending aid to the victims. "We will reflect with (the) authorities on needed structural measures to reduce risk of such catastrophes re-occurring," he said on Twitter.

The diamond-rich former British colony is one of the poorest countries in the world. Its economy was ravaged by a 1991-2002 civil war that claimed 120,000 lives, followed by an Ebola epidemic that ran from 2014-16. Further blows have come from a slump in global commodity prices and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

## Navalny allies raise health concerns about jailed critic

**MOSCOW:** Allies of jailed opposition figure Alexei Navalny yesterday demanded information about his health and whereabouts after Russia's prison service said his condition was stable but prevented lawyers from meeting with him. Navalny, 44, was jailed last month on old embezzlement charges, sparking large protests, an outcry from rights groups in Russia and abroad and condemnation from Western governments.

His lawyers on Wednesday sounded the alarm over his health in one of Russia's most notorious prisons and demanded immediate access, saying he had complained of back pain and numbness in his legs. The prison service told news agencies yesterday that medics had carried out checks the day before on inmates in the Vladimir region outside Moscow, including on Navalny. "According to the results of the examination, his state of health was assessed as stable and satisfactory," the Federal Prison Service (FSIN) said.

Navalny's chief of staff Leonid Volkov responded that lawyers had returned to Pokrov, the provincial town outside the Russian capital where Navalny is being held, but were denied access.

He added that FSIN's message suggested that Navalny was in hospital and that "something very bad is happening to him". Navalny was jailed in February for two-and-a-half years in a move his allies said was a pretext to silence his criticism of Russian leader Vladimir Putin.

The United States and the European Union have slapped sanctions on Russia for jailing Navalny and also for orchestrating a poisoning attack against him last year. He was detained in January on his return to Russia from Germany where he had been recovering from exposure to the Soviet-designed nerve toxin Novichok. — AFP



## International

# Libya militia leader wanted by ICC for war crimes shot dead

## European diplomats visit Libya in show of support for unity govt

**BENGAZI, Libya:** Libyan militia leader Mahmoud Al-Werfalli, wanted by the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes, was shot dead in the eastern city of Benghazi on Wednesday, security sources said. Werfalli, a member of forces loyal to eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar, was “shot dead with his cousin, Ayman, when unidentified gunmen opened fire on his car,” said one source who requested anonymity.

The pair were seriously wounded, before being pronounced dead on arrival at Benghazi Medical Centre, located near the scene of the shooting, another security source said. The ICC issued a first warrant for Werfalli's arrest in August 2017, accusing him of having ordered or personally carried out seven separate rounds of executions of 33 people in 2016 and 2017.

In July 2018, the ICC issued a second arrest warrant for Werfalli for his “alleged responsibility for murder as a war crime”. The court said he

“allegedly shot dead 10 persons in front of the Bi'at al-Radwan Mosque” in Benghazi on January 24 that year. Born in 1978, Werfalli was a commander of the Al-Saiqa brigade, an elite unit that defected from Libya's military during the 2011 uprising that toppled Muammar Gaddafi.

Meanwhile, The foreign ministers of France, Germany and Italy were in Tripoli to meet their Libyan counterpart yesterday in a show of support for the war-torn country's newly formed unity government. The joint visit by French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, Germany's Heiko Maas and Italy's Luigi Di Maio comes 10 days after the formation of an interim government to lead Libya to December elections. Oil-rich Libya descended into chaos after Kadhafi was toppled and killed in a 2011 NATO-backed uprising, resulting in multiple forces vying for power. Fighting only came to a halt last summer, and a formal ceasefire in October was followed by the establishment of a new Government of

National Unity (GNU) led by interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah.

The new transitional executive emerged from a complex UN-sponsored process launched in November, and its members were confirmed by Libya's parliament on March 10.

The country had been divided between two rival administrations: the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, and its rival in the east loyal to military strongman Khalifa Haftar. Libya's population of seven million, sitting atop Africa's largest proven crude oil reserves, faces a dire economic crisis with soaring unemployment, crippling inflation and endemic corruption. Another key challenge will be ensuring the departure of an estimated 20,000 mercenaries and foreign fighters still in the country, whose presence Dbeibah has called “a stab in our back”.

UN chief Antonio Guterres said he “remains deeply concerned” that “foreign elements” con-



This file photo taken on January 26, 2017 shows Mahmoud Mustafa Busayf Al-Werfalli, a senior Libyan military commander suspected of involvement in the deaths of 33 people in the war-torn city of Benghazi. — AFP

tinue to operate in the North African country, in a report discussed by Security Council members on Wednesday. —AFP

## Evidence emerges of ‘brand new’ physics at CERN

**PARIS:** Scientists believe they may have discovered a “brand-new force of nature” at CERN's Large Hadron Collider that could explain why certain atomic particles behave unexpectedly and which may transform our understanding the rudiments of physics. Authors of the research said this week that their results should “get physicists' hearts beating just a little faster” after they discovered evidence of a “brand-new” type of particle.

Since its inception over a decade ago, the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) has sought to delve into the secrets of the universe by studying the smallest discreet particles of matter as they collide at nearly the speed of light. Aside from the discovery of the Higgs Boson - a previously theoretical particle that gives matter mass - the project has so far failed to shed much light on how the building blocks of matter function.

According to the standard model of particle physics, particles known as quarks, many of which are unstable and exist only for a split-second, can form heavier particles such as protons and neutrons. Quarks can also decay into other particles known as leptons - including so-called “beauty” quarks - which were discovered at the LHCb in 2014.

The anomaly spotted at the time was that the quarks appeared to also decay into another type of lepton - muons - less often than they decayed into electrons. The standard model predicts that beauty quarks would decay into muons at the same rate as they do into electrons. “The only way these decays could happen at different rates is if some never-before-seen particles were getting involved in the decay and tipping the scales against muons,” wrote the authors of this week's research on The Conversation site. — AFP

## Half of Israelis fully vaccinated, Palestinians lag

**JERUSALEM:** More than half of Israel's 9.2 million people have received both doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine against COVID-19, the health ministry said yesterday. With more than 4.6 million residents vaccinated, Israel continues its world-beating campaign that sent infection rates plummeting and allowed for some limited loosening of restrictions.

In this week's general election, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasized his drive to obtain vaccines from pharmaceutical giant Pfizer in exchange for data on its effects. Voters rewarded Netanyahu's Likud with the most seats of any party, though his path to a majority coalition remains unclear. Israel has had three lockdowns and 6,157 deaths from the coronavirus pandemic. Public frustration grew at the uneven enforcement of health restrictions among the ultra-Orthodox population.

As of yesterday, the percent positivity rate was 1.1 percent, a drop from nearly 6 percent a month ago, according to the health ministry. In addition, there were 482 patients in serious condition yesterday, compared to more than 800 in late February. Vaccines are going far slower in areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, which has relied on donations and limited supplies from Israel. Human rights groups and some Democratic US lawmakers have



WEST BANK: Elderly Palestinians receive doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, provided by the Palestinian health ministry, at a vaccination clinic in the city of Hebron in the occupied West Bank on Wednesday. —AFP

called on Israel to offer vaccines to all Palestinians in the territories under Israeli control.

Israel vaccinated more than 100,000 Palestinian workers with permits to enter Israel or Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Earlier in March, the Palestinian Authority received 60,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech and AstraZeneca vaccines, which were delivered via the Covax program of the United Nations.

Palestinian officials said that health workers, people over 75 and patients with

kidney disease or cancer could get the vaccine. The UN says it plans to deliver enough doses to inoculate another million Palestinians via the Covax program. Palestinians have also received about 60,000 doses of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine from the United Arab Emirates, and they are set to receive a further 100,000 Chinese vaccine doses as well. The Palestinian health ministry said 1,910 people have died from the coronavirus in the occupied West Bank and another 593 in the blockaded Gaza Strip. — AFP



## International

# Iraq's Saddam-era laws being used to silence govt critics

## Arrest of political commentator revives bad memories

**BAGHDAD:** The arrest of a prominent political commentator has revived bad memories in Iraq, where laws inherited from Saddam Hussein's regime are still being used to silence critics 18 years after his ouster. Late Thursday night, Ibrahim Al-Sumeidi was arrested at his house after he criticized politicians over revisions to a law on the Supreme Court in a private online conversation later published on social media.

After being interrogated, he was released on Sunday by a Baghdad court. But he faces trial for defamation, "insulting" state institutions and spreading "false or biased information". The charges are based on a penal code dating back to 1969, shortly after the Baath party coup which eventually brought Saddam to power. The United States, which led a coalition to oust the dictator in 2003 with the stated aim of bringing democracy to Iraq, supervised the re-writing of the country's constitution. But 18 years later, the penal code remains.

"Arrest warrants are being issued against journalists, activists and commentators in Iraq based on laws dating back more than five decades, some of which carry sentences of life imprisonment or even death," says the country's Journalistic Freedoms Observatory. The organization's head, Ziad Ajeili, called for the repeal of "laws passed down from former totalitarian systems and which conflict with the post-2003 Iraqi constitution". Sumeidi's arrest comes as activists face a string of other threats.

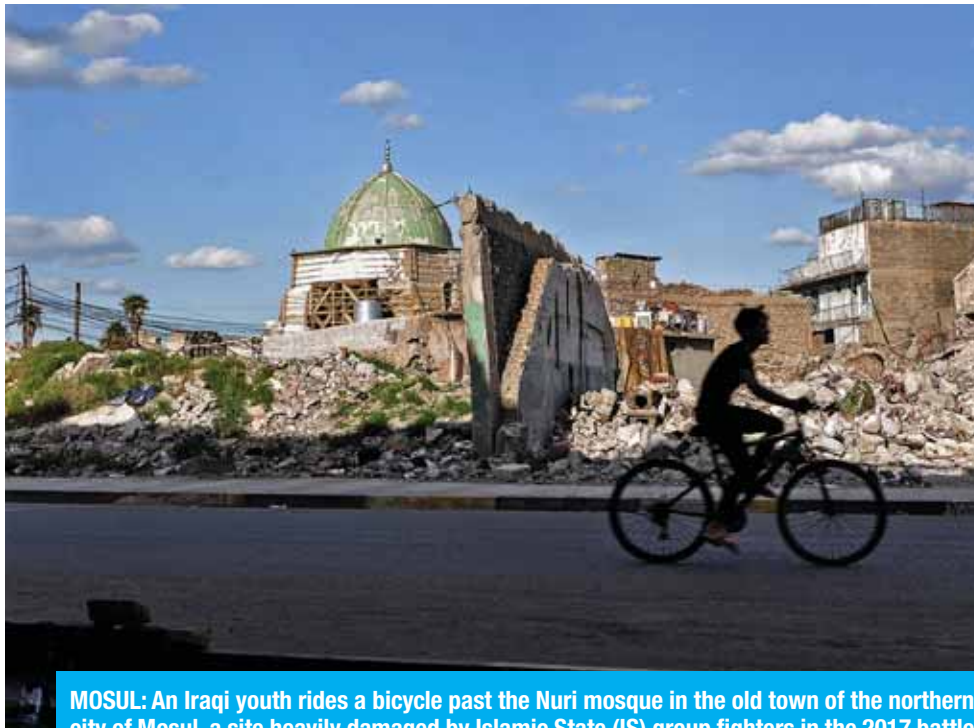
### 'Dictatorship is over'

Since the start of a mass protest movement in late 2019, dozens of organizers and supporters have been killed or abducted, with some going missing for over a year. Those responsible have not been arrested. Prominent politician Ammar Al-Hakim, who leads a faction presenting itself as a moderate Shiite bloc, wrote in a tweet after Sumeidi's arrest that "opinion-makers are facing assassinations, arrest and abductions aimed at silencing them".

"It's part of the A-B-C of democracy to guarantee freedom of expression," he wrote. The Baghdad court where Sumeidi appeared said he had "apologized" for "insulting state institutions". But he could face up to seven years in prison, under an article of the penal code targeting those who "publicly insult" parliament, the government, courts and the armed forces. Sumeidi is also facing accusations of defamation, brought by the defense ministry, and charges of spreading "false information".

In February last year, when Iraq was still being rocked by mass demonstrations and waiting for a government to replace that of outgoing premier

Adel Abdul Mahdi, Sumeidi made headlines by writing on Twitter that a party had offered the premier \$30 million in exchange for a ministry position. Such dealings are far from rare but seldom investigated in Iraq, which ranks 21st from bottom in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. A group of over 100 intellectuals and public figures wrote an open letter in support of Sumeidi. "We remind the judiciary and the government that the era of dictatorship is over and will not return, and that the Iraqi people cannot accept any form of clampdown on freedom of expression," they said. — AFP



**MOSUL:** An Iraqi youth rides a bicycle past the Nuri mosque in the old town of the northern city of Mosul, a site heavily damaged by Islamic State (IS) group fighters in the 2017 battle for the city. — AFP

sume" construction at the site "following the implementation of additional site security measures".

"Total and the government of Mozambique have worked together to define and implement an action plan" to reinforce the security of the Afungi site and the surrounding area, the company said in a statement. But several security sources who did not wish to be named later told AFP that Palma was under siege.

One military commander based in the capital Maputo said two groups of "militants" had concomitantly attacked a police checkpoint and residential neighborhoods. "Government forces resisted but then they had to flee," said another military source in Palma. "The militants are using heavy, new weapons that we have never seen before." A third source said a plane about to land in Afungi was forced to turn back due to a "heavy weapons attack".

Cabo Delgado's jihadists, known locally as Al-

Shabab, are affiliated to the Islamic State group. The insurgency has killed at least 2,600 people, half of them civilians, according to the US-based data collecting agency Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED). Amnesty International this month said locals were "caught" between militants and Mozambican security forces fighting the insurgents alongside private militia.

The watchdog accused all three parties of "war crimes" causing hundreds of civilian deaths. Nearly 700,000 people have been uprooted by the violence, placing severe pressure on humanitarian support in the region. Total itself evacuated some staff in January after jihadists launched a series of attacks just kilometres from the LNG site.

The \$20 billion project is still being built and not due to go online until 2024. Total is the main investor and hold 26.5 percent of the shares. Six other international businesses are also involved, including Italy's Eni and US major ExxonMobil. — AFP

## EU leaders seek to improve ties with Turkey

**BRUSSELS:** European Union leaders will consider diplomatic and economic incentives to encourage strategic southeastern neighbor Turkey to continue improving often fraught ties with the EU and promote stability. Relations with Ankara are on the table at a video summit of the 27 EU nations as the bloc plots a way forward after an alarming spike in tensions last year over Turkey's gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean.

European Council President Charles Michel, who chairs the meeting, said the bloc want to step up "engagement with Turkey in a phased, conditional and reversible manner". The EU is trying to build on recent conciliatory moves from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and has put sanctions over drilling in Cypriot waters on hold. Brussels has been encouraged by the resumption of talks with Greece over a disputed maritime border and by plans to restart UN peace efforts for divided EU member state Cyprus. But there are deep concerns over Ankara's recent moves to shut down an opposition party and its departure from a treaty on violence against women.

The EU "needs to work on concrete proposals for a 'positive agenda' that fosters a constructive dynamic, including in terms of regional stability," Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi told lawmakers. But he insisted on "the importance of avoiding divisive initiatives and the need to respect human rights" and described Ankara's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention as a "serious step backwards".

### 'All options on table'

EU members are divided over the approach to Turkey, with Cyprus, Greece and France urging a tough line while others, led by economic powerhouse Germany, take a softer approach. An initial copy of the draft conclusions for the summit seen by AFP contained a raft of incentives to convince Erdogan to make good on warming ties. These included the prospect of meeting key Turkish ambitions for top-level talks, renewing a customs union and liberalizing visa rules. But there was also the threat of renewed sanctions from the EU if Turkey backtracks, "to defend its interests and those of its member states". A European diplomat said the draft was criticized as too soft by Cyprus and wrangling over the wording could see Ankara's demands stripped out. — AFP

## Insurgents attack Mozambique town

**MAPUTO:** Suspected militants on Wednesday attacked the northern Mozambican town of Palma, the hub of a huge gas exploration project, security sources said, as construction work was due to resume on the scheme. Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province has since 2017 been the target of attacks by a shadowy jihadist group, raiding villages and towns in a bid to establish an Islamic caliphate.

The violence has rocked the development of Africa's largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) project off the Afungi peninsula, led by French oil giant Total. The latest attack came as Total announced earlier Wednesday that it would "progressively re-



## International

# EU races to catch up on vaccines as Brazil deaths cross 300,000

## AstraZeneca says vaccine 76% effective in updated US trial data

**BRUSSELS:** The European Union will look for ways to end its vaccine struggles at a summit yesterday, as a COVID-19 surge takes the death toll in Brazil past 300,000. A crucial tool in the fight against the pandemic, vaccines were in the spotlight again with AstraZeneca revising down the efficacy of its shot from 79 to 76 percent after a US agency raised concerns about outdated numbers.

AstraZeneca's jab is also at the center of the EU's vaccine woes, with an infuriated Brussels tightening export controls after the firm failed to deliver the doses it had promised to the bloc. EU leaders will meet via videoconference to discuss AstraZeneca supplies, as well as new vaccine export rules that will weigh how needy countries are in terms of infection rates, how many jabs they have, and how readily they export doses to the bloc.

"Open roads should run in both directions," said European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen.

Britain, which has raced ahead with its immunization drive, is seen as one of the targets of the new export rules after a bitter spat over vaccine supplies. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned that the EU risked long-term damage to its reputation if it imposed "a blockade".

### 'Locked up'

Governments are trying to ramp up vaccinations, racing against the virus which is surging once again in many

parts of the world. Brazil's COVID-19 death toll passed 300,000 on Wednesday, the second-highest number of fatalities in the world, with its hospitals pushed to the brink. At a demonstration in Rio de Janeiro marking 300,000 virus deaths in Brazil, protesters held signs that read "Shame" and laid 30 roses on symbolic patient beds in front of a hospital. Mexico, another hard-hit Latin American nation, neared 200,000 deaths, as authorities pressed on with a vaccination program.

"How have we spent (the pandemic)? Locked up," said Miguel Molina, 75, who got a jab in Mexico City. "I have (spent) a year and three months locked up, without going out. This is the first time I go out.

British-Swedish drugmaker AstraZeneca on Wednesday revised down by three percentage points the effectiveness of its COVID vaccine after American authorities raised concerns that results reported from its US trial were outdated. The company now says its vaccine is 76 rather than 79 percent effective at preventing any kind of symptomatic COVID. It remains 100 percent effective against severe COVID, it added. The move came after an independent panel of experts appointed to supervise the trial expressed concern that AstraZeneca had failed to include updated data in its initially released figure. The US National Institutes of Health then issued a highly unusual statement asking AstraZeneca to work with the panel and issue a new press release. —AFP



**MEXICO CITY:** An elderly woman in a wheelchair is assisted before getting vaccinated with a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine against COVID-19 at the vaccination center set up at the University City Exhibition Center and Congress in Coyoacan, Mexico City on Wednesday. — AFP

## Belarus opposition to restart protests as crackdown widens

**MINSK:** The opposition in Belarus called for fresh demonstrations yesterday to breathe life into a protest movement against strongman Alexander Lukashenko that fizzled this winter in the face of a severe crackdown.

Rallies erupted in the ex-Soviet country last August after President Lukashenko claimed a sixth term in a vote the opposition and Western diplomats said was rigged. Demonstrations took place weekly and lasted for months, ballooning to crowds of some 100,000 at their peak, with Lukashenko's iron grip on the country of around 10 million people appearing to weaken.

But the movement was gradually stifled, with mass detentions that resulted in hundreds claiming torture in custody. Several protesters died during the months of unrest and convictions over violations of public order have seen more than 400 people receive lengthy jail sentences.

Now Lukashenko's main challenger in the August vote, exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, is hoping to spark new energy for protests as winter gives way to spring. "The whole world believes in you," she wrote on her Telegram channel Tuesday, calling on Belarusians to "take the future" in their hands and "demonstrate this spring". The resumption of the protests will coincide with Freedom Day in Belarus, which the opposition marks each year on the anniversary of the country's declaration of independence in 1918.

The Nexta Telegram channel, which mobilized and coordinated demonstrators over the six months of rallies, called on drivers to sound their horns and for people to set off fireworks in the evening. Tikhanovskaya, who fled to neighboring EU member state Lithuania as a crackdown began after the August vote, has lobbied foreign governments to support her call for new elections in Belarus. — AFP

## India's daily virus cases cross 50,000

**NEW DELHI:** India recorded more than 50,000 new coronavirus cases yesterday for the first time since November as a new wave of infections takes hold a year after one of the world's tightest COVID-19 lockdowns was imposed. The government and Indian vaccine giant the Serum Institute meanwhile declined to comment on reports that New Delhi is restricting exports to prioritize domestic needs for its faltering inoculation drive.

The nation of 1.3 billion people was this month overtaken by Brazil as the second-most infected country after cases dipped in December and January from a peak of nearly 100,000 per day in September. But recent weeks have seen an uptick, with health ministry data yesterday showing almost 54,000 new infections over the previous 24 hours. India's strict lockdown has been steadily eased over the past year and in recent months most activity, including weddings, religious festivals and some cricket matches, returned to normal.

Now many regions are reimposing curbs, particularly in the hard-hit western state of Maharashtra where officials have launched random virus checks in crowded areas in the local capital Mumbai.

"Just to enter a mall, you have to give 250 rupees (\$3.50) over here, (and) that too with a queue of one hour," said Mumbai resident Mohit Jain as he lined up to enter a shopping mall. "It will cause a lot of inconvenience for the malls as well as for the customers also," he said. The country's known coronavirus cases are approaching 12 million, with more than 160,000 deaths.



**NEW DELHI:** A medical worker inoculates a man with the Covaxin COVID-19 vaccine at a health center in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP

The health ministry said Wednesday that the variants first detected in Britain, South Africa and Brazil have been found in India, but not in "numbers sufficient to either establish (a) direct relationship or explain the rapid increase in cases in some states".

India meanwhile has administered more than 53 million vaccine shots. This week, it decided to allow all over-45s to be inoculated as it attempts to vaccinate 300 million people by August. India is a major vaccine supplier to poorer nations, having so far sent more than 60 million doses to 76 countries, mostly AstraZeneca shots manufactured by the Serum Institute.

The Hindustan Times newspaper reported yesterday citing unnamed sources that there will be no expansion of vaccine exports while India focuses on ramping up its domestic immunization drive. — AFP



## International

# Blinken offers shared vision to US allies in U-turn on Trump

## Brussels irritates Biden's team by agreeing an investment deal with Beijing

**BRUSSELS:** US Secretary of State Antony Blinken vowed a new approach to work closer with allies, promising Washington would not force them to take sides against China.

"When our allies shoulder their fair share of the burden, they'll reasonably expect to have a fair say in making decisions," Blinken said at NATO headquarters in Brussels. "We will honor that—that begins with consulting our friends, early and often."

The wide-ranging speech on his first official trip to Europe marked a dramatic shift under President Joe Biden from the combative approach of predecessor Donald Trump. It comes a day before Biden joins a video summit with EU leaders to press home the message that his administration wants to rebuild transatlantic ties.

Biden is keen to take a multilateral approach as he looks to enlist NATO allies and the EU in a united front of democracies to the authoritarian challenge of China. "The United States won't force our allies into an 'us-or-them' choice with China," Blinken said. America's top diplomat insisted "there's no question that China's coercive behavior threatens our collective security and prosperity."

"But that doesn't mean countries can't work with China where possible, for example on climate change and health security."

### EU-US China 'dialogue'

The US and EU took a first step towards joint action against Beijing by unveiling synchronized sanctions on Monday over the crackdown on the Uyghurs in China. But Brussels irritated Biden's team by agreeing an investment deal with Beijing weeks before he took office. Blinken said Washington wants to work with partners to "close the gaps in areas like technology and infrastructure, where Beijing is exploiting to exert coercive pressure."

"We will rely on innovation, not ultimatums," he said. Blinken and EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell announced after a meeting that the two sides were restarting a formal "dialogue on China" to discuss their approach to Beijing. Borrell said that would involve meetings of senior officials and experts on issues including economic interests, human rights, security and climate change.

The US is also seeking to stand together with allies in the face of a more assertive Russia. Blinken raised Washington's potential sanctions over the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project between Russia and Germany in a meeting with Berlin's top diplomat Heiko Maas. On the contentious issue of defense spending, Trump repeatedly harangued wealthy NATO members like Germany to reach



**BRUSSELS:** Belgian Foreign Affairs Minister Sophie Wilmes (left) welcomes US Secretary of State Antony Blinken for a meeting in Brussels yesterday. — AFP

a target of two percent of gross domestic product.

Blinken said this goal remained "crucial", but softened Washington's approach by admitting that allies could "shoulder their share of the burden in different ways". "No single num-

ber fully captures a country's contribution to defending our collective security," he said.

There appeared also to be a message for NATO members such as Turkey where the government has been accused of clamping down on the opposition and rights. —AFP

## Virginia becomes first southern US state to abolish death penalty

**WASHINGTON:** Virginia on Wednesday became the first southern US state to abolish the death penalty and the 23rd state in the country to end capital punishment. Democratic Governor Ralph Northam signed legislation repealing the death penalty in Virginia, saying it was "the moral thing to do." Virginia is the first of the southern states that made up the Confederacy during the 1861-65 US Civil War to eliminate capital punishment.

Virginia has carried out more executions—nearly 1,400—than any other of the 50 US states since its founding as a colony in the early 1600s. Northam signed the bill ending the death penalty at the Greensville Correctional Center in Jarratt, Virginia, which houses the state's execution chamber.

A total of 102 people have been executed at Greensville since it opened in 1991. Virginia last carried out an execution in 2017. "Signing this new law is the right thing to do," Northam said. "It is the moral thing to do to end the death penalty in the Commonwealth of Virginia."

"Virginia's history—we have much to be proud of—but not the history of capital punishment," he said.

The governor described the use of the death penalty in Virginia as "fundamentally flawed" and racially biased. "Virginia has come within days of executing innocent people, and Black defendants have been disproportionately sentenced to death," he said.

"We know that the system doesn't always get it right," he said. "We can't give out the ultimate punishment without being 100 percent sure that we're right." Northam said that in the 20th cen-



**In this file photo a guard walks up to the entrance of the Greensville Correctional Center in Jarratt, Virginia. — AFP**

tury, 296 of the 377 defendants executed in Virginia for murder were Black.

He cited studies that found a defendant is more than three times as likely to be sentenced to death if the victim of a crime is white than if the victim is Black. The European Union applauded what it called the latest step in a growing trend to abandon capital punishment. "The death penalty is incompatible with human dignity and the right to life, constitutes inhuman and degrading treatment, and does not have any proven deterrent effect," the bloc said in a statement.

The Virginia House of Delegates voted 57-41 last month to end capital punishment, two days after the state Senate approved a similar bill. Virginia has conducted the second-most executions after Texas since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. — AFP

## Mexico reports rising numbers of migrants

**MEXICO CITY:** Mexican authorities said Wednesday that they had detected a nationwide increase in the number of undocumented migrants so far this year, including nearly 1,300 unaccompanied children. The rise coincides with an influx at the Mexican-US border of migrants, many of whom are fleeing economic crisis, crime and environmental devastation in Central America.

The National Migration Institute (NMI) said that 31,492 migrants had been identified around Mexico between January 1 and March 21, mostly from Honduras and other Central American nations. That marked an increase of 4,779, or around 18 percent, compared with the same period of last year.

Mexican authorities usually send undocumented migrants to detention centers for eventual deportation. More than 3,400 minors were among those detected in checks of locations such as highways, roads, airports and freight trains, the NMI said. Of those, 1,297 were traveling alone and are now in the care of the government, it added. Mexico announced last week that it would step up security along its southern frontier with Guatemala to stop child migrants crossing on their way to the United States. US President Joe Biden's opponents have seized on the influx to accuse him of creating a "crisis" at the border with a naive immigration stance.

Roberta Jacobson, US coordinator for the southern border, held talks with Mexican officials and urged migrants not to travel to the United States. "Do not come to the border. The border is closed," she said in a message issued by the US Embassy in Mexico City. "People who intend to travel to the United States in an irregular fashion run the risk of becoming victims of crime and human smugglers," Jacobson said. — AFP



## International

# Pandemic-hit US confronted anew by mass shootings

## Firearms used to kill 43,535 people in 2020, including 19,379 homicides

WASHINGTON: Two US mass shootings in a week have thrust back to the fore the nation's plague of gun violence, which worsened during the pandemic and may have been further fueled by spiking firearm sales in 2020. The two separate bursts of killing, on opposite sides of the country, claimed a total of 18 lives and confronted the nation anew with a painful problem that was obscured by the virus's out-of-control spread. In the midst of the pandemic that has killed 545,000 in the United States—the world's worst absolute toll-cities around the country recorded worrying jumps in gun-related deaths last year. Firearms were used to kill 43,535 people in 2020, including 19,379 homicides—a roughly 25 percent jump in homicides over 2019, according to figures from the Gun Violence Archive. The group counted 611 “mass shootings,” defined as four people wounded or killed in one incident, in 2020 against 417 for the previous year in the United States.

Over the last year, communities have suffered not only from COVID-19 and its financial aftermath, but also from gun violence, a co-occurring public health crisis that has surged in all its forms,” Robyn Thomas, executive director of Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, told the US Senate on Tuesday. As the United States was battered by the coronavirus, the nation was also rocked by a historic mass movement against police violence that was sparked after African-American George Floyd suffocated under a white officer's knee.

In the midst of these twin crises, sales of firearms soared last spring. A Washington Post study said 23 million guns were purchased in 2020, with 2.5 million sold in June alone. “When Ameri-



DELRAY BEACH, Florida: Austin Title handles a weapon as he visits WEX Gunworks on Wednesday in Delray Beach, Florida.— AFP

cans are concerned about their personal security, they buy firearms,” a Brookings Institute study said in July.

“Such concerns have been rampant since March (2020), initially due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and then the social unrest in June that followed George Floyd's killing,” it added.

### Uphill political battle

A poll from the Pew Research Center reported that some 41 percent of adult Americans in 2017 said they lived in a home where there was at least one firearm. In this context, gun control is a divisive

minutes. Chauvin is currently on trial charged with murder and manslaughter and faces up to 40 years in prison if convicted of the most serious charge. Floyd's death sparked weeks of anti-racism protests in Minneapolis and riots and looting which destroyed a number of downtown businesses and a police precinct. In a mission statement on their Facebook page, the MNFF described itself as “an elite security unit dedicated to protect the citizens and businesses of the Minneapolis urban areas.

“Our objective is not to be the police, but the bridge to link the police and the community together,” it says. “We're tired of being looked

and politically explosive issue in the United States, where the right to possess firearms is among the freedoms of speech and religion in the nation's founding texts.

The question of more restrictions generally emerges after the horrifically recurrent mass killings, but national lawmakers have not approved any major reforms in years. Following the March 16 rampage that killed eight people at spas in the Atlanta-area and the deadly shooting of 10 people at a Boulder supermarket on Monday, new calls were raised to tighten US gun laws.

Background checks and waiting periods to finalize purchases are some of the controls advocates have urged. The Atlanta gunman bought his weapon the day of the killing and the Boulder shooter purchased his just days before the violence. “It's worth asking if waiting periods could've prevented this tragedy in Georgia,” Igor Volsky, director of advocacy group Guns Down America, wrote on Twitter the day after the Atlanta shootings. “Waiting periods for possession of firearms prevent impulsive, volatile acts of gun violence,” he added. In the wake of the latest violence, President Joe Biden called for tighter restrictions—something that about 60 percent of Americans said they supported in a 2019 Pew Research poll. Guns, however, are a highly partisan issue in the United States with Democrats frequently advocating for stricter rules and Republicans opposed.

Though Democrats hold the White House and the House of Representatives, they do not have enough seats in the Senate to push through gun legislation without convincing some Republicans to join them.—AFP

at as gang members because we have guns,” said Chrisman, a father of two children who works as a personal care assistant. “We're tired of being looked at like the enemy because of our skin color.

“When George Floyd happened, that's when we knew for a fact that we had to protect the community,” Chrisman said. “We were getting calls saying that white supremacists were going to come in and pretty much destroy the whole community,” he said. “They are going to set businesses on fire, they are going to break windows. They are going to vandalize the whole community.”— AFP



Minnesota Freedom Fighters (MNFF) member Step Child (R) (who doesn't want to have his real name published) 44, an IT operator from North Minneapolis, looks out of a window at his home, flanked by partner Erin Brennan, 49 (left), and step-daughter Mila Duron, 13, in Minneapolis.— AFP

## Freedom Fighters provide security to Minneapolis Black community

MINNEAPOLIS, US: Armed with AR-15 rifles and sporting bulletproof vests, members of the Minnesota Freedom Fighters (MNFF), a Black self-defense group formed after the death of George Floyd, describe themselves as a “bridge” between the police and the African-American community. “We're trying to show the world that we can protect our people also with arms and weapons and be trustworthy,” Randy Chrisman, a 30-year-old MNFF member, told AFP.

“Basically we want to change the narrative of Black people carrying weapons,” said Chrisman, who has been patrolling Minneapolis since last summer, when Floyd died while being arrested by a white police officer. The officer, Derek Chauvin, was seen on video with his knee on the neck of Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, for nearly nine

## Harris put in charge of migrant influx

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden on Wednesday tasked Vice President Kamala Harris with tackling an influx of migrants on the Mexican border, aiming to take charge of a situation that has energized opponents of the new administration. “I can think of nobody who is better qualified to do this,” Biden said at a White House meeting with Harris and other top officials as thousands flee violence in impoverished Central America. “When she speaks, she speaks for me,” Biden said, adding: “I give you a tough job.”

Harris said there was “no question that this is a challenging situation.”

It marks the first time that Biden has assigned a specific portfolio to Harris, who is seen as representing a younger generation in the Democratic Party and has been constantly at his side since they entered office on January 20. The administration also announced that the San Diego Convention Center would become the latest shelter for the rising number of migrant children and it sent a team to tour an existing facility in Texas.

The convention center will accommodate up to 1,400 children, said a spokesperson for the Office of Refugee Resettlement. In a sign of shifting national focus, the San Diego center until recently had been repurposed for the COVID-19 pandemic as a homeless shelter that permits social distancing between beds. Speaking earlier to CBS News, Harris acknowledged that the United States needed to speed up its processing of migrants' asylum claims and care better for them.

“It's a huge problem. I'm not going to pretend it's not,” Harris said in the interview.

But she said that the administration, in office for less than 100 days, needed to repair a structure torn apart by former president Donald Trump, who rose to power on an aggressive anti-immigration agenda. “We have to reconstruct it. It's not going to happen overnight,” Harris said of the immigration system. She also vowed a greater effort to address the “root causes” of the border situation—helping the so-called Northern Triangle of Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua so its people do not feel they need to flee. The Washington Post, in an analysis looking at data, said there in fact has been no “surge” of migrants entering the United States, with recent numbers in line with seasonal norms before the pandemic.—AFP



## International

# Taleban slam Afghan president's proposal for election this year

## US promises to protect women's rights in Afghanistan

**KABUL:** The Taleban rejected a proposal by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to hold elections later this year, after months of peace talks between the two warring sides have made little progress.

Although he hasn't made details public, Ghani will announce the election plan at a stakeholder conference in Turkey next month, according to two government officials. The move is likely an attempt to undercut a US proposal-supported by Russia-for the formation of an interim government involving the Taleban to rule the country once the last US troops withdraw.

"The government will go to Turkey with a plan for an early election which is a fair plan for the future of Afghanistan," one senior official told AFP. The Taleban immediately rejected the proposal.

"Such processes (elections) have pushed the country to the verge of crisis in the past," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said of Ghani's plan. "They are now talking about a process that has always been scandalous," he told AFP, saying any decision on the country's future must be hammered out in ongoing talks between the two sides.

"We will never support it." The United States is due to withdraw the last of its troops by May 1 under a deal hammered out with the Taleban last year, although President Joe Biden said earlier this month the deadline would be "tough" to meet. That deal also paved the way for the Taleban and Afghan government to negotiate a peace plan and hammer out an agreement on how the country should be ruled, but those talks-held since September in Doha, Qatar-have made little headway. Afghanistan has a troubled history at the polls, with elections beset by rampant fraud, low turnout and insurgent violence. The Taleban's response comes hours after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told NATO that Washington is still weighing up whether to withdraw its troops by the May 1 deadline.

The Afghan government is keen to keep US forces in the country for as long as possible for the vital air cover they provide, with violence raging in recent months. The United States, Russia and other

stakeholders however want to see some form of transitional government take power in Afghanistan, but Ghani has insisted leaders can only be chosen at the ballot box. Having made enormous gains on the battleground, the Taleban appear to have little to gain from either strategy. Meanwhile, the United States vowed to protect progress made in Afghanistan on women's rights over the past 20 years, as it pushes for a transitional government in Kabul that would include the Taleban.

"We must do more to support the women and girls of Afghanistan," the US ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, told the UN Security Council during a debate on Afghanistan. "Any agreement must preserve their gains if Afghanistan wants to ensure the international community's continued political and financial support. We will not give an inch on this point," the ambassador said.

President Joe Biden is weighing whether to respect a May 1 deadline for the withdrawal of the last US troops in Afghanistan as per an agreement reached by the administration of Donald Trump and the Taliban insurgents. US diplomats have warned that the Taliban could make quick territorial gains if the US troops withdraw completely.

The US and other countries are pressing the Kabul government and the Taleban to make progress in peace talks that are struggling to make headway. A meeting was held last week in Moscow and another is planned for early April in Turkey in a bid to relaunch a negotiation process that began in Qatar. The United States has presented the two sides with a draft plan that calls for the formation of a transitional government that includes the Taleban. So far the Kabul government has shown little enthusiasm for this idea. — AFP



**KANDAHAR:** A soldier walks near the destroyed section of a bridge connecting Kandahar city and Arghandab district, near Kandahar on Wednesday after a bomb blast. — AFP

## Coin hunters dive for fortunes in sacred Ganges

**HARIDWAR, India:** As a stream of Hindu devotees dip themselves in India's sacred Ganges river for a ritual believed to purify their souls, a young boy plunges into the water to find his fortune. Rahul Singh is one of dozens of coin pickers making a living by retrieving offerings thrown into the waterway by pilgrims visiting the northern holy city of Haridwar. Every day for six hours, the 13-year-old scours the chest-deep water with a magnet attached to a long stick, as hymn-chanting crowds toss in valuables. "It needs a lot of effort but I enjoy doing it," Singh

told AFP, after fetching 30 rupees (45 US cents) worth of coins.

Watching him closely is Raja Yadav, who was eight when he arrived in the city as a runaway boy after hearing tales of underwater treasures. Yadav-nicknamed "Jhinga" (shrimp) for his swimming prowess-literally struck gold six years ago when he found a necklace he was told was worth \$1,300. Now 22, he leads a team of 15 picker-boys including Singh. Last year's national coronavirus lockdown saw visitors to Haridwar dry up for several months, leaving Yadav's team struggling to survive on their meager savings. But like the pilgrims, Yadav had unflinching faith in the river goddess, and travellers returned this year, undeterred by a recent surge in cases.

"We always believe that Ganga is our mother and she will never let her children sleep hungry," he said. "The pilgrims are back and we are happily diving again."

### Finders keepers

Rivers play a central role in Hindu religious rituals, with devotees tossing in offerings of money, clothes and ornaments into the waters to show gratitude for sustaining life. In the Ganges, some immerse the ashes of deceased relatives to achieve "moksha"-liberation from reincarnation.

During the bathing festival of Kumbh Mela, immense crowds throng the Ganges in the world's largest religious gathering. This year it is taking place in Haridwar, where more than three million people took part in the ritual during one day in March. Underwater treasure hunters use their feet to feel out for the precious metals on the riverbed, or dive in and search with their naked eyes.

A one-day haul of coins adds up to 300-400 rupees (\$4.15-5.50) for each boy, although that soars up to 1,000 rupees during Kumbh Mela, Yadav said. Merchants pocket a 20 percent

## Militant acquitted of Pearl murder to leave prison

**ISLAMABAD:** A British-born militant sentenced to death for the murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl was ordered to be let out of prison yesterday by a Pakistan court in the latest twist to a legal saga spanning nearly two decades. The court said, however, that Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh should remain in custody in accommodation similar to that given to prison staff while another appeal is considered.

Sheikh and three accomplices have been behind bars since 2002 when they were convicted of the kidnapping and murder of Pearl — at the time the South Asia bureau chief for the Wall Street Journal. Since then they have won and lost a series of appeals and counter-appeals in connection with the case, with a top court last year overturning their murder convictions. That decision meant they had completed their sentences on the kidnapping charge, and the court in January ordered them to be released. They were kept in custody, however, as the provincial and federal governments — as well as Pearl's family — launched another petition to keep them behind bars. On Thursday the court said they should be confined to prison staff accommodation. "We are not satisfied with the continuous detention of this person," Justice Umar Ata Bandial told the court. "The detainee Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh shall be accommodated in a government building in which officers of jail reside." — AFP

commission in exchange for currency notes, while black-market buyers take jewelry at half of retail price, and copper and steel utensils are sold as scrap. The boys pick up coconuts and religious paraphernalia to resell if there aren't enough coins.

Coin pickers like Yadav's team work all year round, braving faster and deeper waters from heavier rainfall during the monsoon season. Seasonal treasure hunters visit in October when water levels are low due to an upstream dam. Singh says daily discoveries in the river are a source of satisfaction. He ran away from home in nearby Uttar Pradesh state two years ago and worked several odd jobs before moving to Haridwar, where a friend taught him swimming and coin-picking skills. The teenager now shares a shanty in a nearby slum with more than a dozen other coin hunters. "Back home there was a lot of tension and poverty, but I am happy here," he said. — AFP



## International

# Security forces open fire on protesters in Myanmar's east

## Demonstrators take to the streets in rallies to demand a return to democracy

**YANGON:** Security forces opened fire yesterday on anti-coup protesters in Myanmar's eastern Karen state, as demonstrators took to the streets in nationwide dawn rallies to demand a return to democracy. The military junta has unleashed a deadly wave of violence as it struggles to quell nationwide protests against the February 1 ouster and arrest of civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. But protesters have continued calling for the military to step down, defying nighttime curfews to stage candlelight vigils for the dead, and taking to the streets early in dawn marches to avoid security forces.

In the city of Hpa-An in Karen state, protesters were preparing sandbags around 6 am yesterday (2330 GMT Wednesday) when scores of soldiers and police swooped in and tried to clear the streets using stun grenades. "After that, they shot with rubber bullets as well as real bullets, about 50 shots," a protester told AFP by phone. "A student got shot in the thigh by a live round and is now receiving medical treatment." A local resident confirmed the crackdown to AFP, saying it started before the protest had got under way. Despite the police action, protesters in Hpa-An continued staging impromptu gatherings throughout the day, driving through the town and flashing the three-finger salute — a sign of resistance against the junta.

### Dawn protests

Early-bird protesters were also out in parts of Myanmar's commercial hub Yangon, marching



This photo taken and received from an anonymous source via Facebook yesterday shows medical personnel taking part in a dawn protest in Mandalay during a demonstration against the military coup. — AFP

with red balloons at dawn with signs saying "Get out terrorist dictator", according to local media. In the country's second largest city Mandalay, scores of health workers paraded through the streets at dawn carrying flags. Yesterday's protests followed a day of "silent strikes" on Wednesday that left the streets of Yangon and other major centers deserted.

Overnight, a village south of Mandalay used candles to show support for a group of ousted MPs — called the Committee for Representing Pyi-

Minister Yoshihide Suga was unequivocal, telling reporters: "North Korea launched two ballistic missiles." It had been a year since the last such incident, he added, saying: "This threatens the peace and security of our country and the region. It is also a violation of the UN resolution."

Tokyo said they came down outside the waters of Japan's exclusive economic zone.

### 'Familiar pattern'

Pyongyang has made rapid progress in its capabilities under Kim, testing missiles capable of reaching the entire continental United States as tensions mounted in 2017. Trump and Kim then embarked on an extraordinary diplomatic bromance, holding two headline-grabbing summits in Singapore and Vietnam. The United States pulled back on some joint military exercises with South Korea while the North froze intercontinental ballistic missile tests. But the February 2019 Hanoi summit broke up over sanctions relief and what North Korea would be willing to give up in return. Communications then dried up, despite a third encounter in the Demilitarized Zone that divides the Korean peninsula, and no substantive progress was made towards denuclearization.

"North Korea appears to be returning to a familiar pattern of using provocations to raise tensions and garner attention," said Jean Lee of the Wilson Center in Washington. Pyongyang carried out a series of weapons tests last year that it called "long-range artillery" but others described as short-range ballistic missiles.

daungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the Burmese word for "parliament" — working underground against the junta. The junta has banned the group, announcing that any involvement with them is akin to "high treason". State-run media also reported Thursday that police had arrested 14 Yangon youths caught fleeing the city for territories in Myanmar's east, which are controlled by ethnic armed militias.

So far, hundreds have fled to Karen state, where the rebel Karen National Union has sheltered hundreds of anti-coup activists escaping the junta.

Trump had been "willing to turn a blind eye to North Korea's ballistic missile launches as long as they were not tests of long-range missiles", Lee said. "But I suspect the Biden administration will confront any confirmed ballistic missile launches that violate UN Security Council resolutions." Yesterday's launch comes after Pyongyang fired two short-range, non-ballistic missiles in a westerly direction towards China at the weekend. US officials played that down as not a violation of UN resolutions, with Biden telling reporters: "According to the Defense Department, it's business as usual." —AFP



SEOUL: Television screens show file footage of North Korea's missile test as a news program broadcasts reports about North Korea's suspected ballistic missile test, at an electronics mall in Seoul yesterday. — AFP

More than 280 people have been killed, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners — a local monitoring group tracking the death toll and arrests. But the junta puts the death toll as much lower at 164, and has branded the victims as "violent terrorist people".

### Unrestricted access for UN

International condemnation from the UN, United States and former colonial power Britain has done little to quell the violent crackdowns. There are fears that Saturday — Myanmar's Armed Forces Day, usually marked with a parade in Naypyidaw — could be a flashpoint.

On Wednesday the United Nations Human Rights Council expressed grave concern over human rights violations and reiterated that those responsible should be held to account. The resolution called for Myanmar to allow UN monitoring officials unrestricted access to assess the country and for the junta to free all those arbitrarily detained — including Suu Kyi and President Win Myint. "We remain concerned at ongoing arbitrary arrests, including of journalists and civil society leaders," deputy UN spokesman Farhan Haq said.

But the junta-appointed deputy foreign minister Kyaw Myo Htut hit back in a pre-recorded video, state media reported. He said Myanmar's sovereignty had to be respected and UN meddling could bring "serious impediments on the efforts for bringing peace." — AFP

## Australia begins 'long haul' to recovery

**LONDONDERRY, Australia:** Thousands of flood-stricken residents along Australia's east coast began a massive cleanup effort yesterday, as waters receded revealing damaged homes, piles of debris and mud-caked roads. The region has been devastated by widespread flooding brought on by a torrential downpour, inundating towns, destroying farmland and leaving two people dead. On Thursday, David Williams stepped back inside his home in flood-hit Londonderry, to find waters lapping just below his knees and "gut-wrenching" destruction. "That was pretty heartbreaking," he told AFP. "But we're fortunate that we're able to save a lot of stuff."

Williams said he was now on the "long haul" to recovery from the devastating floods, clearing out over eight trailer loads of once-prized possessions — now a sodden, twisted mess dumped on the side of the road. In coastal areas north of Sydney, hundreds of troops and volunteer firefighters bolstered efforts in stretched communities by digging mud from roads and clearing debris from properties. Ben Shepherd, an inspector from the Rural Fire Service, said the teams wanted "to try and return communities to some sense of normality as soon as possible". "This is going to be a prolonged event that is potentially going to take weeks — if not months — in some areas," he told AFP. —AFP

## North Korea fires two suspected ballistic missiles

**SEOUL:** North Korea fired two suspected ballistic missiles into the sea yesterday, in its first substantive provocation to the new US administration of Joe Biden. The nuclear-armed North has a long history of using weapons tests to ramp up tensions, in a carefully calibrated process to try to forward its objectives. Donald Trump's first year in office was marked by a series of escalating launches, accompanied by a war of words between him and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Pyongyang had been biding its time since the new administration took office, not even officially acknowledging its existence until last week.

But Seoul's joint chiefs of staff said the North fired two short-range missiles into the Sea of Japan, known as the East Sea in Korea, from South Hamgyong province. They travelled 450 kilometers and reached a maximum altitude of 60 kilometers, the JCS added, and after an emergency meeting South Korea's National Security Council expressed "deep concern" at the launch.

North Korea is banned from developing any ballistic missiles under UN Security Council resolutions, and is under multiple international sanctions over its weapons programs. Japanese Prime



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# Lifestyle

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Friday Times

An art installation called "The Cupola" is seen during the Noor Riyadh light and art festival, by the Royal Commission for Riyadh City. —AFP

## 'Sesame Street' introduces new muppets in videos on race

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# 'Sesame Street' introduces new muppets in videos on race

US children's television show "Sesame Street" has released videos featuring two new muppets to educate children about race. One of the videos, uploaded to the show's website Tuesday, features African-American dad Elijah and his son Wes talking to Elmo about differences in skin color due to melanin. They stress the importance of not forgetting that despite differences in appearance we are all human. The approximately three-minute segment is part of a new series of videos called the "ABCs of Racial Literacy."

They aim to "provide families with the tools they need to build racial literacy, to have open conversations with young children," Sesame Workshop, the non-profit be-

hind the popular children's program, said in a statement. In another video due out soon, muppets portraying characters of Hispanic origin will be confronted with "a racist incident in a grocery store," the statement added. "The work to dismantle racism begins by helping children understand what racism is and how it hurts and impacts people," said Kay Wilson Stallings, Sesame Workshop's executive vice president of creation and production. "Sesame Street," launched in 1969 and present in more than 150 countries, is the benchmark of educational programming. In June, the show partnered with CNN to hold a town hall on racism following the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. —AFP



## Chrissy Teigen quits Twitter, citing well-being

American model and cookbook author Chrissy Teigen quit Twitter on Wednesday, becoming the latest celebrity to ditch the platform after facing abuse. Like many tech behemoths, Twitter is under increasing scrutiny for facilitating torrents of invective against users, commonly from anonymous accounts, in posts often carrying racist or misogynistic overtones. Earlier this week, Teigen faced a backlash after announcing the launch of a line of plant-based cleaning products, in partnership with reality TV star Kris Jenner.

Some users accused her of "selling out" during a time of pandemic-induced economic anxiety, while others questioned her commitment to environmental protection, given her family's regular use of private jets. "It's time for me to say goodbye," she wrote in a tweet Wednesday, shortly before deactivating her account, which had more than 13 million followers. "This no longer serves me as positively as it serves me negatively, and I think that's the right time to call something." "My desire to be liked and fear of pissing people off has made me somebody you didn't sign up for, and a different human than I started out here as! Live well, tweeters."

Her Instagram account, where he has more than 34 million followers, was still active. In recent years Teigen has built a reputation for a frank and unfiltered online presence. In October she posted on Instagram an image of herself and her husband, the singer John Legend, grief-stricken in hospital after their son was stillborn. The post was "liked" more than 11 million times and praised as helping to reduce the stigma around miscarriages during pregnancy, but was also criticized by some as overly shocking and intimate. Teigen previously took a break from Twitter in 2014, after facing a torrent of vitriol—including from users who wished her death—for a post decrying

the level of gun violence in America.

### 'Too many trolls'

Other notable users who have renounced personal use of Twitter include Grammy-winning singer Lizzo, who walked away saying the site had "too many trolls". Comedian Pete Davidson quit all social media in 2018, after facing abuse and insults related to his relationship with the singer Ariana Grande. Before his digital departure, he posted that the internet was "an evil place and it doesn't make me feel good."

In 2016, comedian and actor Leslie Jones left Twitter, citing "sickening" cyberbullies who were racially abusing her.

Jones, who is African American, had been inundated by disturbing tweets containing racial slurs and insults about her appearance. Last



month Twitter said it would not end the practice of allowing anonymous accounts, after top soccer clubs complained about abuse suffered by several of their star players. Arsenal players William and Eddie Nketiah, Manchester United's Marcus Rashford and Anthony Martial and Chelsea's Reece James are among those who have suffered racist slurs on social media.

Defending its policy at the time, Twitter said: "At Twitter, we are guided by our values, and never more so than when it comes to fundamental issues like identity. We believe everyone has the right to share their voice without requiring a government ID to do so." The American company did promise to work alongside the British government and football authorities to tackle the issue. —AFP

## Depp to hear if he can appeal UK 'wife-beater' ruling

Hollywood superstar Johnny Depp was set to find out if he can appeal against a British court ruling that upheld claims he beat his ex-wife Amber Heard. The 57-year-old "Pirates of the Caribbean" actor brought a libel claim against The Sun tabloid for a 2018 article that branded him a "wife-beater". But a judge ruled against him and he was ordered to pay the newspaper's publishers News Group Newspapers (NGN) £628,000 (\$873,000, 733,000 euros) in legal costs.

The judge in the case initially blocked an immediate appeal, saying he did not think it had a "reasonable prospect of success" but allowed a direct application to the Court of Appeal. A hearing was held last week and a written ruling on whether to grant the application will be handed down at 1000 GMT. In the application, Depp's lawyers cast doubt on testimony given by his Amber Heard at the original libel trial.

They argued in submissions she had given the whole of her divorce settlement to charity had prejudiced the case against Depp, while only a fraction had been paid. But a lawyer for NGN dismissed the issue, saying Heard, 34, said she had "donated the money, not that she had paid it" and that the two charities had understood the fee would be paid in installments. Depp himself did not appear at the appeal application.

### Excruciating detail

The November ruling has already damaged Depp's career, with the actor saying afterwards he was asked to step down from his role in the "Fantastic Beasts" film franchise based on the book by Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling. The case, which laid bare the actor's battle with drink and drugs, was dubbed "the biggest English libel trial of the 21st century". NGN relied on the defense of truth, arguing it had a valid basis for the 2018 story by detailing 14



This combination of file pictures shows US actress Amber Heard and US actor Johnny Depp at the High Court in London. — AFP

alleged instances of Depp abusing Heard.

The judge dismissed Depp's claim after three weeks of revelations about the couple's stormy relationship, saying the article had been proven to be "substantially true". Depp brought the action because he said The Sun's allegations had done a "disservice" to the #MeToo movement it was trying to support, his lawyer David Sherborne said. The 16 days of proceedings in July, which both Depp and Heard attended, exposed the couple's troubled and volatile relationship in excruciating detail.

Depp faced days of cross-examination in which the star admitted to only hazily remembering some events because he was high on drugs. But he vehemently rejected accusations he hurt Heard while battling a drug addiction over a three-year span that ended with her 2016 decision to seek a restraining order and file for divorce. He is also suing Heard in the United States over a 2018 Washington Post article in which she claimed to be a victim of domestic violence. — AFP



## Turkmen leader writes song to mark birth of baby horse

Inspired by his favorite horse giving birth to a foal, the strongman leader of Turkmenistan has written a song with his grandson to celebrate the occasion, state television said Wednesday. The verses written by President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov were set to music composed by his grandson Kerimguly, with whom he previously recorded a hit song devoted to Ak Khan (White Khan), a steed of the Turkmen Akhal-Teke breed. The new song titled "My White City Ashgabat" premiered at the State Cultural Centre performed by "masters Turkmenistan's music scene," a state channel said, showing footage of the event.



Singers and dancers performed the song with photos of the 63-year-old president riding his favorite horse in the background. The channel said that the president was "inspired by the birth of the foal named Ashgabat from the legendary Turkmen racehorse Ak Khan, who was bred by the leader of the nation himself". The president said it was "inspiring" that the foal was born in the year marking 30 years of Turkmenistan's independence and 140 years since the founding of the capital Ashgabat. The leader of Turkmenistan, one of the most reclusive and authoritarian countries in the world, is accustomed to staging celebrations of his multiple sporting and musical talents, nurturing a cult of his personality.

The Akhal-Teke horse and the Turkmen shepherd dog breed alabai have been elevated to national symbols by the head of state. The alabai dog is also recognized with a national holiday and had a gold statue built in its honors. No political opposition is tolerated in the country and the media is under strict government control. Last month the president appointed his 39-year-old son Serdar Berdimukhamedov to key political posts, edging the country towards family rule. — AFP



Singer Manizha (Manizha Sangin), who will represent Russia at the 2021 Eurovision Song Contest in Rotterdam, poses at Lukashv studio in Moscow. — AFP photos



Singer Manizha (Manizha Sangin), rehearses at Lukashv studio in Moscow.

## Russia's feminist Eurovision singer sparks conservative backlash

Russia's unlikely entry to the Eurovision song contest, a Tajik-born refugee and feminist activist, knows she is riling the country's conservatives. "I've hit a nerve," Manizha Sangin told AFP, after two conservative groups lodged complaints with the authorities over her song "Russian Woman". The 29-year-old singer, who performs under the name Manizha, was not expected to win the public vote that was broadcast this month to pick Russia's song for the contest in the Netherlands in May.

Donning a brightly coloured and elaborate traditional Russian costume, then shedding it to reveal red overalls, her performance was a far cry from values usually promoted on state channels. "You're 30! Hello? Where are your kids? You are cute overall. But should lose some weight," went one line from her song. "Every Russian woman needs to know-you strong enough, you gonna break the wall". A columnist at the opposition-leaning newspaper Novaya Gazeta voiced surprise the performance was broadcast at all, saying the song "declares war on Russian xenophobia and misogyny".

The openly feminist tune has since found a huge support base with more than 5.5 million views on YouTube. But it also led to an outpouring of scorn from conservative groups, who demanded that Manizha be pulled as Russia's Eurovision entry. An association of Orthodox women in an open letter accused Manizha of "insulting and humiliating Russian women" and of inciting "hatred towards men". The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes in Russia, has also said it is following up on a complaint from a veterans' organization, which said the text incites "inter-ethnic tension and enmity".

Manizha told AFP that the song, which fuses Russian folk music with hip hop, was an anthem "against stereotypes that I had faced". But this is not the first time that Manizha, with nearly a million followers

across various social networks, has drawn attention for her views.

### The 'smell of fear'

After building up a large online presence by posting short music clips on Instagram, Manizha leveraged her popularity as a platform for her activism. In 2019, she launched a phone app to connect crisis centers with victims of domestic violence—a problem in Russia that activists say the authorities have ignored. She caused a scandal that same year for taking part in a video defending LGBT rights, a move that she says cost her 10,000 subscribers on Instagram.

in Moscow in the midst of the post-Soviet economic crisis. The "smell of fear" dominated her childhood as an immigrant in Russia, she told AFP.

But the experience led her last year to become a goodwill ambassador for the UN refugee agency in Russia. In the role, she launched projects like collecting money to buy school bags for children from refugee families in Moscow. Manizha says she has an "innate empathy" especially for immigrants who live, according to her, in "legalized slavery" all over the world. The psychology graduate who dreamt of a musical career since she was a seven-year-old



Singer Manizha (Manizha Sangin), poses at Lukashv studio in Moscow.

Always accompanied by her mother—her "guru" and costume designer—Sangin (which means "tender stone" in Tajik) recalled a difficult youth. She spent eight days in a coma after her birth in Tajikistan in 1991. Then her home was ravaged by shelling during a civil war that tore the country apart after the fall of the Soviet Union. Manizha and her family fled in 1994 to live the difficult life of refugees

singing along with Celine Dion tunes, now identifies as Russian and treats her host country as her homeland. "I think in Russian. I say I love you in Russian," she says. "I want to live in Russia and I want the same for my future children." — AFP



## Lifestyle | Features

# JAZZ NOODLING: HONG KONG BAND STREAMS INSIDE CRAMPED RESTAURANT

In a densely populated city with notoriously high rents, Hong Kong's musicians are used to playing cramped stages. But few venues are quite as pokey-or unorthodox-as Yuen Hing Lung noodles. On a recent weekday night a jazz band was in full swing inside the 300-square-foot restaurant, perched on cola crates and using dining tables as music stands. The double bass player was squeezed into the space where the noodles are usually bubbling away. There were no live spectators.

Hong Kong has placed strict social distancing limits to control the coronavirus pandemic and-like most forms of entertainment-live music has been decimated. So instead the musicians inside the 47-year-old noodle restaurant streamed their gig online, asking for donations in return from the few hundred who logged in. The get together was the brainchild of double bassist Justin Siu who invites various fellow jazz musicians for a gig at the restaurant once every two months. They have all seen their work evaporate over the last year.

"We played party music, cocktail music,



A jazz band playing in a local noodle shop in Hong Kong during a live streaming jazz performance. — AFP photos



wedding music and now all of that is gone," Siu told AFP. "They won't have the budget to hire us for a while," he added, speaking of his usual clients. Owner Paul So said he knew musicians were struggling, even more than restaurants, which have had to weather reduced opening hours and multiple lockdowns. "I don't know much about music at all, but I love listening to it," said So. "What I

do is simply to offer him the venue and see if it gives him any sparks of creation," the 61-year-old added, saying Siu is allowed to use the shop for free on the rare days off So takes.

Unlike high-end hotels and jazz bars where he used to perform, Siu said Yuen Hing Lung has a distinctly traditional vibe. Most of its decor is exactly the same as it

was in the 1970s. Livestreaming donations bring in a fraction of real paid gigs. But Siu said he'll take whatever he can get right now. "We hope that at some point it will become mutually beneficial," Siu said. "Ultimately I want to make livestreaming something that can support Hong Kong artists." — AFP

This undated file handout photo shows the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart. — AFP



## AUSTRALIAN FESTIVAL PULLS PLAN TO SOAK UK FLAG IN INDIGENOUS BLOOD

A popular Australian arts festival has cancelled a Spanish artist's project to soak a British flag in Indigenous people's blood after angry protests from the Aboriginal community. The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Tasmania commissioned the artwork from Santiago Sierra for

its Dark Mofo festival, which draws thousands to the island state capital of Hobart each winter and often courts controversy. Just three days after posting a social media callout for Indigenous people from colonized territories of Britain to donate up to 470ml of their blood for the exhibit, MONA cancelled the project Tuesday amid a public backlash.

"A colonizer artist intending to produce art with the actual blood of colonized people is abusive, colonizing and re-traumatizing," Indigenous author Claire G. Coleman tweeted. "The idea is disgusting and terrible and should not have been considered." MONA curator Leigh Carmichael initially defended the plans, posting on the festival's Facebook page on Monday that "self-expression is a fundamental human right". But a day later he apologized "to all First Nations people for any hurt that has been caused", cancelling

the project and calling it a "mistake". A group of Indigenous artists, curators and arts workers have created a petition saying they will not work with MONA or its festivals "until there are organizational reforms to be respectful to First Peoples, our culture and our histories".

MONA's founder, millionaire professional gambler David Walsh, admitted he had given little consideration to the project, which also created an internal protest from museum staff who called it "tone-deaf". "Naively, perhaps incredibly, I thought it would appeal to the usual leftie demographic. I approved it without much thought (as has become obvious)," Walsh wrote in a blog post. "I am the archetypal beneficiary of colonialism. And I've caught myself using that as an excuse for my ignorance." Sierra appeared unapologetic, defiantly posting on Instagram:

"OFTEN THE SLAVE DEFENDS THE SYMBOLS OF THE MASTER."

So far, more than 2,000 people have signed the petition that calls on MONA to issue a formal apology, hold mandatory staff cultural awareness training and decolonization workshops and appointment an Indigenous advisory board. They are also demanding the appointment of multiple Indigenous curators and the funding of more Tasmanian Aboriginal art. MONA, which was opened 10 years ago and displays Walsh's vast personal art collection, is widely credited with helping to revitalize Hobart and along with its annual festivals is a major tourist drawcard for the city. — AFP



## Lifestyle | MUSIC &amp; MOVIES

# 'Nomadland' revs up Oscar hopes with Hollywood producers award

Hollywood's producers named "Nomadland" the year's best film at their virtual prizegiving on Wednesday—a prestigious award that revs up the US road movie's status as the firm Oscars favorite. Disney-owned Searchlight's intimate portrayal of semi-retired Americans living off the grid in worn-out vans already has a Golden Globe in its glovebox, and again sped past streaming rivals like Netflix's "The Trial of the Chicago 7" and "Mank" in an award season transformed by COVID-19. "In a year where we have all been leading such isolated lives and movies felt so vital, we are proud to have produced a film about community, and what connects us," said producer Peter Spears.

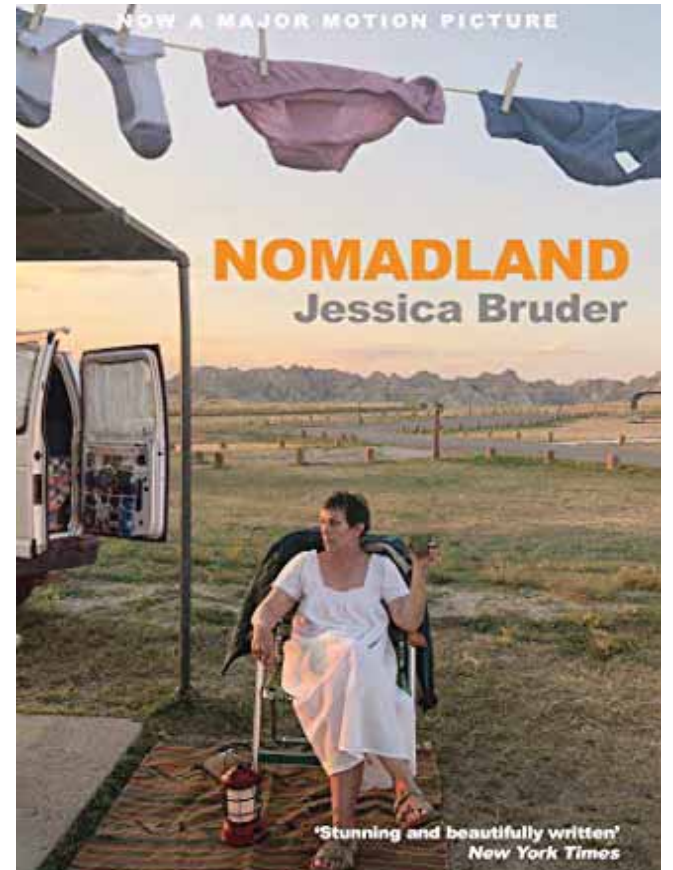
The annual Producers Guild of America (PGA) Awards, chosen by the 8,000-odd Hollywood movers and shakers of the producers' union, have predicted 10 of the past 13 winners of the Academy Award for best picture. Earlier in the largely pre-recorded show, Charlene Swankie—one of several real-life nomads who plays a fictionalized version of herself in the film—said inviting director Chloe Zhao and star Frances McDormand into their world had been "a special road trip" that was eye-opening for all parties. "If you were to ask me last year what the PGA was, I would have said it was a golf organization," she joked.

### 'Thank you very much'

With movie theaters only beginning to reopen in Los Angeles

last week after a year of COVID-19 restrictions, streaming services had been widely tipped to supplant the traditional Hollywood studios this award season. Netflix and Amazon alone bagged more than half the film nominations chosen by the PGA this year, but the night's top prize went to a movie produced by Searchlight, the arthouse label Disney recently acquired from Fox. Disney's existential jazz adventure "Soul" continued its sweep of this year's animated film prizes, while the filmed Broadway performance of "Hamilton" airing on its Disney+ streaming service won the PGA's best televised motion picture.

But Netflix's aquatic wildlife feature "My Octopus Teacher" bolstered its Oscar hopes by winning best documentary. The streaming giant also dominated the main television categories, with zeitgeisty chess drama "The Queen's Gambit" winning best limited series and the latest series of British royals saga "The Crown" named best drama. "The Last Dance," Netflix's co-production with ESPN about basketball superstar Michael Jordan, won best non-fiction show. The final season of "Schitt's Creek" won best comedy, while HBO's "Last Week Tonight" was named best talk show for a sixth consecutive year. Host John Oliver used his pre-taped acceptance speech to poke fun at the night's unusual format. "Thank you very much for this, it means a great deal," he said. "If we have won, that is of course... if we haven't won, please destroy this."—AFP



## Singing opera in a surgical mask

No one loves wearing a mask at work, but spare a thought for the chorus of the Paris Opera, having to project through multiple layers of cotton and polyester. When they took the stage recently for a rehearsal at the Bastille opera house, the 70 or so chorus members certainly did not appear to have lost any of their sonorous beauty. But having a mask strapped across one's face is far from ideal for a singer. "It really disturbs the delivery," said Sylvie Delaunay, who has been with the chorus for more than 20 years. "When one sings opera, there are deep inhalations and deep exhalations, so if breathing is restricted, we get tired very easily."

With all cultural institutions in France shut due to the pandemic, the chorus of the Paris Opera was preparing for a new staging of "Faust" by 19th-century French composer Charles Gounod, to be screened on television and online from Friday. The chorus has learned what works and what doesn't. And the high-filtration FFP2 masks proved difficult, said Delaunay. "As soon as you take a breath, you swallow it!"—so the chorus has opted for stiff surgical masks, in stylish black for the actual performance. The need for such protective equipment was highlighted this week when it was found that Culture Minister Roselyne Bachelot was carrying COVID-19 when she attended one of the last rehearsals for "Faust" and tested positive the following morning.

### 'Extremely demanding'

This is the third time that the Paris Opera—shut for more than a year, first because of strikes, then because of the coronavirus lockdowns—has live-streamed its performances, following Verdi's "Aida" and Mozart's "The Magic Flute" earlier this season. For opera fans, such internet broadcasts offer nowhere near the thrill of a seat in the auditorium. But the house is least able to reach a global audience for the first time. Each new staging has been subtly transformed by the circumstances: "Aida"—in a controversial new production by Dutch director Lotte de Beer starring German tenor Jonas Kaufmann—was a largely stationary affair because of social-distancing constraints. By contrast, the new staging of Gounod's "Faust" by German director Tobias Kratzer with a star-studded line-up including Albanian soprano Ermonela Jaho and French tenor Benjamin Bernheim, and conducted by Lorenzo Viotti, includes a bustling—albeit masked-nightclub scene, a setting that might have a nostalgic

edge for some in the current climate. Soloists have been permitted to perform without a mask, albeit with daily COVID-19 tests.

But while the chorus was bunched together for the final show, they had to socially distance throughout rehearsals. "We're less able to hear each other. We hear our neighbours... but the sound of the group is more distant. It's not at all the same," said Delaunay. Masks mean some of the articulation is lost, said chorus master Jose Luis Basso: "The job of a chorus singer is all about exaggerating the pronunciation of words. "But still the results aren't too bad," he added with a smile. In opera, the chorus often takes centre-stage, as in

ever-popular set pieces like "Va, pensiero" from Verdi's "Nabucco" or the Gypsy Chorus from "La Traviata".

In "Faust", perhaps one of the best-known French operas alongside Bizet's "Carmen", their opportunity to shine is in famous choruses such as "Wine or Beer" and "Immortal Glory of our Ancestors". Basso says the current crisis has underlined the importance of the chorus. He hates the idea that its members are sometimes dismissed as "people who failed to become great soloists". "The tests to join the Opera are extremely demanding," he said, requiring a mastery of multiple languages, musical styles and technique. Despite the difficulties, it has been vital to keep working, said Alexander Neef, Paris Opera's director-general. "If we don't perform, we don't exist," he said. — AFP



Two journalists stand on the back of a horse-shaped statue on display to promote the art performance titled 'Yu Ma' presented by Taiwan's Paper Windmills Theater, during a photo call outside the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in Taipei on Wednesday. — AFP





A general view shows old airplanes and helicopters at the Aviation Museum in Riga. — AFP photos

# ‘Nowhere to go’: Soviet-era aircraft museum faces closure



A Mi-6 military cargo helicopter is seen at the Aviation Museum in Riga.

A private museum in Latvia holding dozens of Soviet aircraft collected over half a century by a retired flight engineer is facing closure. Viktors Talpas told AFP that his museum, which attracts several thousand visitors a month in non-pandemic times, is being forced to move before the end of the month to make way for an expansion of Riga airport. “I have to relocate my museum or face its destruction,” said Talpas, who was born in Ukraine and served in the Black Sea fleet in Soviet times before moving to Latvia. Looking out at the rusty hulks from the USSR’s military and civilian fleet, the 82-year-old said he began collecting “for society’s benefit, not for myself”.

“I have nowhere to go,” Talpas said. Talpas, who also worked for many years for the airline Aeroflot, expanded his collection after retiring through donations, purchases

and trades. Most of the planes date from the Cold War era and include a MiG-21 fighter, an Mi-6 helicopter gunship and a Tupolev Tu-22M1 training plane.



Visitors look at an old fighter jet at the Aviation Museum in Riga.





Parts of an Aero L-13 Blanik airplane are pictured.



A boy looks at an old small plane at the Aviation Museum in Riga.



A Let Z-37 Cmelak aircraft (OK-ZKC) is pictured.

**Pricey relocation**

The collection also has deactivated Russian anti-aircraft missiles and Polish, Czech and Ukrainian civil aircraft, as well as remnants of World War II planes such as German Messerschmitt fighters. There is also the blade of a propeller plane from 1927 — an example of Latvia’s own aviation



Old aircrafts are pictured at the Aviation Museum in Riga.



Museum owner Viktors Talpas poses for photos in the cockpit of an old Mi-6 military cargo helicopter.

Airport spokeswoman Laura Kulakova told Latvijas Radio 1 that the airport was offering to transport the collection to a different part of the airport. But Talpas said he had refused so far because the location proposed would only be accessible from the runway, not from public roads, and tourists would not be able to visit. Talpas said he had received offers to host the museum but, since none of the aircraft are airworthy, transport would cost at least 200,000 euros (\$238,000) “and that amount of money we simply do not have”. — AFP

construction industry, which did not survive World War II. The planes are on a plot of land owned by the airport that will be house a new hangar and control tower, with only a fence separating the museum from the contemporary planes of Latvian carrier airBaltic. The museum saw a drop in visitors because of the pandemic but Talpas said they were returning as the restrictions allow visits to open-air facilities.



Engine parts of aircrafts are pictured at the Aviation Museum in Riga.



A Mikoyan Gurevich MiG 21ST airplane is pictured.



## Lifestyle | Features

## Vietnam's wildlife defender fights poachers and prejudice

As a small girl, Trang Nguyen saw a bear stabbed through the chest with a giant needle at her neighbor's house in northern Vietnam. The bear, flat on its back, was being pumped for its bile, a fluid drawn from its gallbladder that has long been used in traditional medicine to treat liver disease. "I had seen visitors to Hanoi zoo who brought sticks to poke animals and it really made my blood boil," Trang, the founder of local conservation group WildAct, told AFP. "But conservation wasn't something I really wanted to do until I witnessed what happened to this bear."

It was the first of her many encounters with a global multi-billion-dollar illegal wildlife trade that devastates species the world over, fuels corruption and threatens human health. The 31-year-old-named by the BBC in 2019 as one of the world's most inspiring and influential women-has spent much of her time since then trying to end the scourge.



This picture shows Trang Nguyen, founder of local conservation group WildAct, posing with her book along Hoan Kiem Lake in Hanoi. — AFP

She has gone undercover in South Africa to snare traffickers and secured a PhD in traditional medicine's impact on wildlife. Trang has also set up her home country's first post-graduate course for aspiring conservationists, to help more Vietnamese make it to the top of her field. In the 1990s, decades of war and isolation meant environmental awareness was a new notion in Vietnam. Trang recalls her parents telling her: "Only rich people from western countries do that kind of work".

Now there are more local conservationists, wildlife protection laws have been enacted, if patchily enforced, and the number of bears kept in captivity for bile farming has dropped by 90 percent in the last 15

years, according to Education for Nature Vietnam. But as the country grew richer, demand for exotic wildlife dishes soared and animal parts sought for their perceived health benefits—such as rhino horn and pangolin scales—became a status symbol for some within the fast-growing middle classes.

### Wildlife trafficking hub

Today the communist country is a key producer, consumer and transit point for trafficked wildlife, says WildAct. Through courses at Vinh University in central Vietnam and community programs in wildlife trade hotspots, Trang is trying to empower Vietnamese people to resolve these problems themselves. In turn, she hopes they will become a louder voice in the global conversation about illegal wildlife trade, and help shape policy. The responses of some global wildlife organizations to the coronavirus pandemic, widely thought to have begun at a market known to sell wild animals in China's Wuhan, were hugely unhelpful for campaigners in Asia and Africa, says Trang.

One called for a complete ban on "wet markets", even though the term is used in Asia and Africa to describe any market where fresh produce is sold, while another termed them "unhygienic". "When things like that are said it's very difficult for conservationists to ask people to participate in our work," she explains, as they are seen as "prejudiced". Trang also wants more women in conservation—a field still dominated by men—and has written a book to inspire young girls. Loosely based on her personal story, "Saving Sorya" tells the tale of a Vietnamese conservationist who must prepare a rescued baby sun bear for life in the wild. Already published in Vietnamese, and due out in English this year, the children's book has a female protagonist—something she insisted on despite being told "no-one was going to read it" if she did.

### Going undercover

Trang's own story is one of remarkable determination. From the age of eight, she pestered wildlife groups with requests to intern and learnt English by watching the BBC documentary Planet Earth late at night. She won scholarships to study in Britain, including for a masters degree in conservation leadership at Cambridge University, and founded WildAct in her mid-20s. Wildlife traffickers are in prison because of her.

"It was very easy for me to pose as a buyer of wildlife products," she remembers of her time working undercover in South Africa. Around three rhinos are poached there every day, largely for the Vietnamese and Chinese consumer markets, according to wildlife trade monitoring network Traffic. But it was there that she learnt that the trade is not "black and white". "One guy I was helping get arrested, he wasn't high up the chain: he was a poor person who got exploited... (and was asked to) to go kill the animal and be the transport." After the arrest, "I was actually feeling really sad," she said. —AFP



These handout images show preservation of hands and feet (above) and skull (right) of the newly identified fossil tree-climbing kangaroo (*Congruus kitcheneri*) from the Nullarbor Plain of Western Australia. — AFP photos



## An extinct tree-climbing kangaroo in a 'treeless plain'

The most remarkable thing about the nearly perfect fossils was not that they belonged to 40-kilo kangaroos that mysteriously evolved to climb trees, though that was remarkable enough. What really startled paleontologists is that southwestern Australia's Nullarbor Plain, site of the discovery, is a treeless shrubland and was thought to be that way even when the newly named *Congruus kitcheneri* hopped—and, apparently, climbed—across its reaches some 50,000 years ago. The Latin-derived name says it all: "Null" for "none", and "arbor" for "tree".

The barren, slug-shaped region — 1,100 kilometers (700 miles) from head to tail—is even bookended by road signs that say, in all capital letters, "END OF TREELESS PLAIN". "I remember looking at the bones on the hands and the feet with their big, curved claws and saying to my colleague, 'You're probably not going to believe me, but I think it was climbing trees!'" recalled Natalie Warburton, a researcher at the Centre for Climate-impacted Terrestrial Ecosystems at Murdoch University in Perth.

The "hugely unexpected" tree-climbing behavior, detailed Wednesday in the journal Royal Society Open Science, is certainly significant, she told AFP. With the exception of distant cousins in the tropical canopy of New Guinea, the 60-odd living species of kangaroos, wallabies and other marsupials in the family macropodidae—all descendants of tree-dwelling, possum-like ancestors—have long since evolved to make their way on terra firma.

### 'Completely incongruous'

But the find, Warburton added, "also tells us that the habitat and environment in the area over the last 50,000 to 100,000 years

were really different to what they are now, and perhaps different to what we might have previously interpreted for that time based on geological and botanical evidence". The fossils, in sum, are "completely incongruous" with expected behavior and ecology. Strictly speaking, Warburton and her colleague Gavin Prideaux, a paleontologist at Flinders University in Adelaide, were not the first fossil hunters to unearth this oddball roo.

But the earlier specimen of the same species has been incorrectly slotted into a taxonomic bracket based on a few partial teeth and the fragment of an upper jaw. With two full skeletons to work with—one male, one female—Warburton and Prideaux were able to reclassify what had been *Wallabia kitcheneri* as *Congruus kitcheneri*, a sub-genus up to now occupied by a single species, also extinct. Exactly what pushed these big-boned creatures to evolve arboreal skills is unknown. "Tree climbing would have required a lot of energy and big muscles to hoist itself up," Warburton said.

"There must have been some pretty good food resources in the trees to make that worth doing." The fossils turned up in the Thylacoleo Caves, named after lion-like marsupial carnivores that lorded over the region for nearly two million years until going extinct at about the same time as the tree-climbing kangaroo. Exactly why the menagerie of megafauna that populated Australia's sun-scorched landscape—including giant wombats, one-ton marsupials and croc-sized lizards—almost all died out at about the same time is a subject of hot debate.—AFP





This picture shows a view of a Dionysiac stone sarcophagus depicting the god Dionysius riding a lion, on display at the Cyrene Museum which houses Greco-Roman artefacts, in the eastern Libyan town of Shahat, near the ruins of the ancient city of Cyrene.



A view two female Roman sculptures on display at the Cyrene Museum which houses Greco-Roman artefacts, in the eastern Libyan town of Shahat, near the ruins of the ancient city of Cyrene.



A view of a statue of Greco-Roman sculptures on display at the Cyrene Museum, in the eastern Libyan town of Shahat, near the ruins of the ancient city of Cyrene. — AFP photos

## BULLDOZERS AND LOOTING THREATEN LIBYA'S ANCIENT TREASURES

The spectacular ruins of the ancient Greek city of Cyrene survived Libya's 2011 revolution and an ensuing decade of lawlessness, but today they face new threats: plunder and bulldozers. Under balmy spring sunshine, a handful of tourists take advantage of the North African country's months-old ceasefire to wander around

years of history is written into its ruins," it said. Yet beyond the fence marking out the protected part of Cyrene, residents of modern-day Shahat are taking possession of lands held in trust by the state, then selling them on to property developers. Other areas are being dug up by treasure-seekers hoping to smuggle looted artefacts to sell

key cities that rose up against longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The country has since fallen into anarchy and violence which sparked fears for its rich ancient heritage. UNESCO in 2016 added Cyrene and four other sites in Libya to its List of World Heritage in Danger. The war saw the country splinter into fiefdoms under the control of a kaleidoscope of militias including the Islamic State group which at one point held a stronghold in Derna, just 70 kilometers (45 miles) further east.

Today, despite the signing of a peace deal between Libya's main factions and the creation of a unity government this month, many residents have more immediate concerns than protecting ancient heritage. "They want us to stop using our land around the ruins, saying there are still artefacts underneath them-but this is our land, and we have the right to exploit it," said Saad Mahmoud, who owns farmland nearby. "It's up to the state to find solutions and pay landowners compensation that fits with the rising prices of real estate, which have made it hard for us to find alternatives."

### Graffiti and looting

Like Mahmoud, many of Shahat's 50,000 residents see the pressing need for housing as a higher priority than preserving old ruins. A town plan last updated in 1986 has been largely ignored. Ismail Dakhil, an official at the museums department of eastern Libya, says as much as 30 percent of the ancient city may have been built on. And that is not the only problem. "There has been graffiti on the ancient ruins, and lots of informal digs, where antiquities are dug up and smuggled out of the country," he said.

Libya does have laws aimed at protecting its ancient heritage, overseeing archaeological digs and sanctioning violators. But Dakhil says they have little effect, with



A view of the mosaic of a nymph and satyr from the villa of Jason Magnus at the Cyrene Museum.



A view of a mosaic of Medusa on display at the Cyrene Museum which houses Greco-Roman artefacts.

"derisory fines and prison sentences" of up to a maximum of a year. Some are now hoping that after a decade of violence the new government will also improve protection of precious historical sites. "The policies on protecting heritage must be reviewed," says researcher and historian Ahmad Faraj. "I hope this government will come up with a new vision."—AFP



A view of a statue of the Naxian Sphinx (left) on display at the Cyrene Museum which houses Greco-Roman artefacts, in the eastern Libyan town of Shahat, near the ruins of the ancient city of Cyrene.

the temple of Zeus, perched atop a wind-battered hill near the eastern end of Libya's Mediterranean coast. There are no queues here. The scarce visitors—all Libyans—amble through the sanctuary of Apollo and the amphitheatre, before visiting a museum housing faceless busts of Greek divinities and naked statues in marble.

Founded in the seventh century BC, Cyrene "was one of the principal cities in the Hellenic world", according to the UN's cultural agency UNESCO, which added the site to its World Heritage List in 1992. "A thousand

abroad. "Some people are coming in and bulldozing areas containing artefacts, dividing them and selling them, then building housing blocks on top of these priceless sites," said Adel Abu Fejra, of the Cyrene department of antiquities.

### 'This is our land'

Abu Fejra said his department "can't even measure" how much has been lost, as the plots "are outside the fenced area under our protection". Cyrene lies between the Egyptian border and Benghazi, one of the



Kids Page

Word Search

Hollywood Divas

Word Search

**DIRECTIONS:**  
Find and circle the ALL CAP NAMES in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.



- Lauren BACALL
- Lucille BALL
- Ingrid BERGMAN
- Jean CRAWFORD
- Bette DAVIS
- Olivia DE HAVILLAND
- Marlene DIETRICH
- Jean FONTAINE
- Greta GARBO

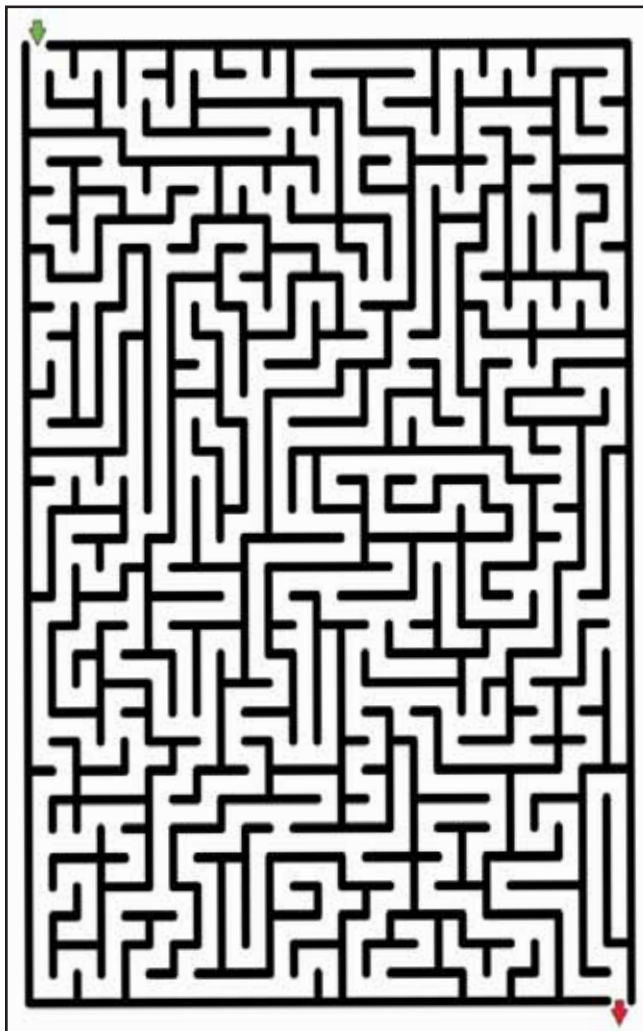
- Ava GARDNER
- Judy GARLAND
- Jean HARLOW
- Rita HAYWORTH
- Audrey, Katherine HEPBURN
- Audrey HEPBURN
- Grace KELLY
- Vivien LEIGH
- Carole LOMBARD
- Sophia LOREN
- Marilyn MONROE
- Debbie REYNOLDS
- Ginger ROGERS
- Barbara STANWYCK
- Elizabeth TAYLOR
- Shirley TEMPLE
- Lana TURNER
- Loretta YOUNG



Color It

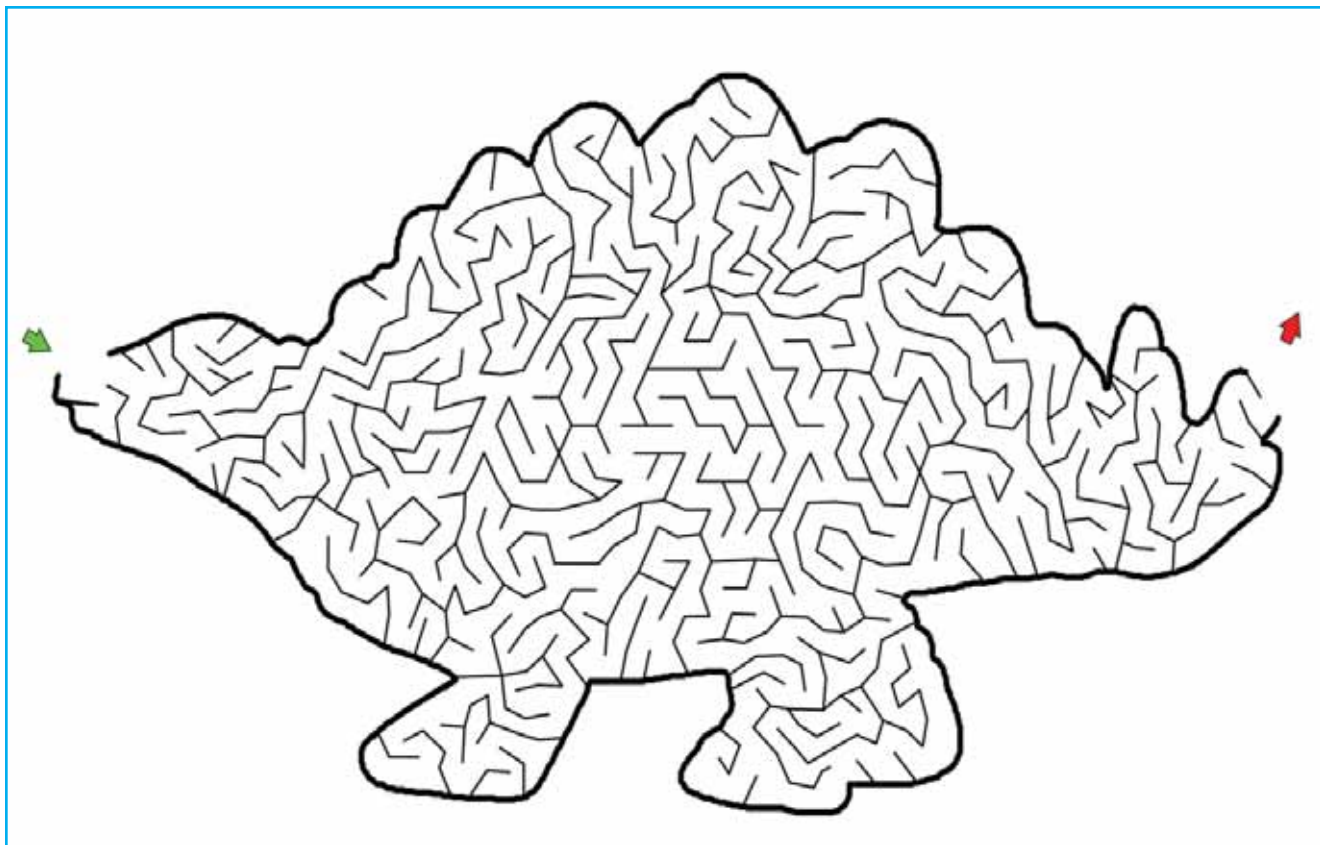


Kids Mazes





### Find the way



### Word Scramble



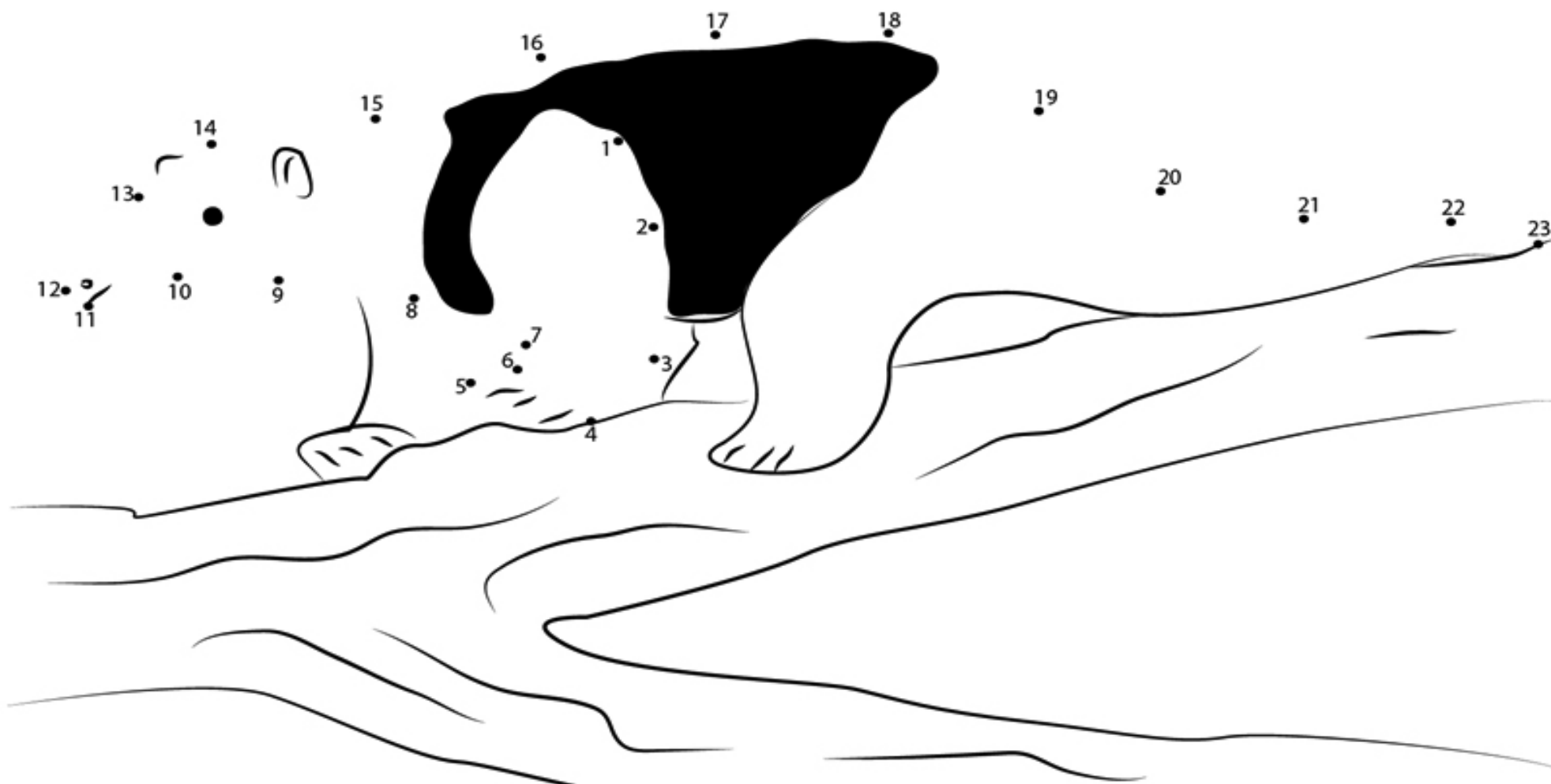
#### Beauty And The Beast

#### Word Scramble

Belle is trying to help the servants to clean up the Beast's castle which is in a state of disarray. Can you sort out the words and help her out? Watch out! Some of the words are actually two.

UTERVENDA	_____	AICMG	_____
EUIMLRE	_____	OREWT	_____
ORSE	_____	MRIGRAEA	_____
RRYAIBL	_____	ELLEB	_____
RSGOOTHCW	_____	IMRROR	_____
RECAIUM	_____	OSIRENPR	_____
TGASNO	_____	SOLVEW	_____
OULEF	_____	VOEL	_____
BATES	_____	CETSLA	_____
DNIERN	_____	ILAGLVE	_____
SOWDO	_____	NWWSTEIG	_____
BERLTAL	_____	GPHI	_____

### Join the dots





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- ◆ Stomach Balloon insertion & removal
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- ◆ Gallstones & Abdominal Hernias Surgery

◆ Colonic Hydrotherapy & Fecal Incontinence Treatment

◆ Laparoscopic mini bypass

◆ Transanal minimally Invasive surgery

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- ◆ Fellow of American College of Surgery
- ◆ Canadian Board of General Surgery
- ◆ Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians & Surgeons of Canada
- ◆ American Board of Colo - Rectal Surgery
- ◆ American Board of Surgical Critical Care

**Dr. Abdullah Al Haddad**  
Surgery Department  
Consultant General Surgery, Laparoscopic & Colo - Rectal Surgeon

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**Dr. Ahmad Alaeddine**  
Head of Cardiology departments  
at Dar Al Shifa hospital

- Consultant Interventional and conventional cardiologist.
- Specialised in the Diagnosis and treatment of all adult cardiac diseases, including those cases that need urgent intervention in Cath lab (primary angioplasty).

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## Health & Science

Friday, March 26, 2021

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- ◆ Laryngology Fellowship, McGill University- Canada.
- ◆ Fellow of the European Board of Otolaryngology – Head & Neck surgery.
- ◆ Member of the American Academy of Otolaryngology Head & Neck Surgery.
- ◆ Member of the British Laryngological Association.
- ◆ Member of the European Laryngological Society.
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Ex Head of ENT department in Farwaj Hospital HSM Kuwait  
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**DR. WALEED S BUHAIMED**  
Consultant of General Surgery  
Laparoscopic and Bariatric Surgery



Academic Certificates – Training

- Kuwait Board of General Surgery.
- (IFSO) member .
- Faculty member of (BEST).
- Member of Kuwait Surgical Association.

Scope of clinical Practice.

- Bariatric surgeries.
- Gallbladder stones surgeries.
- Abdominal wall and hernia surgeries.
- G.I. surgeries.
- Thyroid and para - thyroid surgeries.
- Anal surgeries.

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## Stars

## STAR TRACK

**Aries (March 21-April 19)**

Reading could take up a lot of your time today, Aries. Books on psychology or the occult sciences might seem interesting, particularly as your intuition is operating on a higher level than usual. You might not want to talk about what's coming up for you, but that's OK. You will need to make sense of it first before you can share it with clarity.

**Taurus (April 20-May 20)**

Reading could take up a lot of your time today, Aries. Books on psychology or the occult sciences might seem interesting, particularly as your intuition is operating on a higher level than usual. You might not want to talk about what's coming up for you, but that's OK. You will need to make sense of it first before you can share it with clarity.

**Gemini (May 21-June 20)**

Increased communication with a close friend or lover, more on a subtle than verbal level, could bring you closer and enrich your relationship. Quiet time spend together today could generate a new sense of closeness. Images and ideas that come from deep within you can contribute to your creative self-expression. Write down any insights so you can refer to them later. Work from the heart.

**Cancer (June 21-July 22)**

Today you might crave solitude, Cancer, perhaps for meditation or to contemplate your current situation. You may feel you're at a crossroads and need to decide which way to go. This could involve the next step in your material progress or self-expression, or it might involve your spiritual path. Emotions from the past could well up, but this is a positive development. Don't fight it.

**Leo (July 23-August 22)**

You might spend a lot of time in conversation with friends who share your interests. Their insights could lead to new insights on your part, Leo, and vice versa. This process could bring all of you closer together. Good news could come through the mail, email, or phone regarding goals you've been trying to reach. You're also likely to send out a lot of communications yourself.

**Virgo (August 23-September 22)**

Paperwork involving finances, Virgo, perhaps personal, perhaps involving your employer's funds, or both, is likely to need some intense attention during the day. This doesn't necessarily imply anything negative. In fact, just the opposite. It does mean that some careful planning or budgeting is going to be required in order to make the most of your current situation.

**Libra (September 23-October 22)**

Today you may want to spend your free time alone, contemplating various ideas, Libra. Spiritual or metaphysical philosophies from ancient cultures or foreign lands might be more appealing than usual. Reading about them at this time could approach obsession, but this is OK. Whatever you learn today is likely to contribute greatly to your personal growth and perhaps self-expression.

**Scorpio (October 23-November 21)**

Today, Scorpio, your mind may turn toward deep subjects. You could explore the sciences, psychology, the occult, or metaphysics. You will probably discover some new facts or ideas that could keep your mind occupied for hours. Needless to say, you will spend much of your time alone exploring these themes. You might also want to write down your insights and revelations to study later.

**Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)**

A sudden upsurge in your intuition could have you feeling more in tune to the thoughts, feelings, and desires of others, Sagittarius. Your communication is going to be clear and open as a result. You're likely to grow closer to everyone dear to you, especially your romantic partner. Don't expect everything you pick up to be positive. Others have their issues. Let them know you understand.

**Capricorn (December 22-January 19)**

Your mind is strong and focused today, Capricorn. As a result, you're probably feeling especially physically robust. Sudden insights could earn you some satisfying acknowledgement, not to mention the respect of someone important to you. Your intuition level is high and apt to serve you well now, particularly where work and health are concerned. Make the most of it!

**Aquarius (January 20- February 18)**

Expect to spend much of your day alone, Aquarius. Information obtained from books or videos, perhaps involving history, philosophy, or religion, might inspire you to look deeper into a subject and turn it to your own advantage. You might decide to take a trip or return to college. There's also the chance that you could be inspired to write or otherwise express your ideas and feelings. Go to it!

**Pisces (February 19-March 20)**

Some strange dreams could stimulate your imagination and start you on new avenues of exploration. You might at some point play detective. What you seek is likely to be within your psyche. Don't be surprised if you learn new things about yourself that you hadn't been aware of before. You could also find your psychic faculties increasing.

## Country Codes

Afghanistan	0093	Iran	0098
Albania	00355	Iraq	00964
Algeria	00213	Ireland	00353
Andorra	00376	Italy	0039
Angola	00244	Ivory Coast	00225
Anguilla	001264	Jamaica	001876
Antigua	001268	Japan	0081
Argentina	0054	Jordan	00962
Armenia	00374	Kazakhstan	007
Australia	0061	Kenya	00254
Austria	0043	Kiribati	00686
Bahamas	001242	Kuwait	00965
Bahrain	00973	Kyrgyzstan	00996
Bangladesh	00880	Laos	00856
Barbados	001246	Latvia	00371
Belarus	00375	Lebanon	00961
Belgium	0032	Liberia	00231
Belize	00501	Libya	00218
Benin	00229	Lithuania	00370
Bermuda	001441	Luxembourg	00352
Bhutan	00975	Macau	00853
Bolivia	00591	Macedonia	00389
Bosnia	00387	Madagascar	00261
Botswana	00267	Majorca	0034
Brazil	0055	Malawi	00265
Brunei	00673	Malaysia	0060
Bulgaria	00359	Maldives	00960
Burkina	00226	Mali	00223
Burundi	00257	Malta	00356
Cambodia	00855	Marshall Islands	00692
Cameroon	00237	Martinique	00596
Canada	001	Mauritania	00222
Cape Verde	00238	Mauritius	00230
Cayman Islands	001345	Mayotte	00269
Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
Chad	00235	Micronesia	00691
Chile	0056	Moldova	00373
China	0086	Monaco	00377
Colombia	0057	Mongolia	00976
Comoros	00269	Montserrat	001664
Congo	00242	Morocco	00212
Cook Islands	00682	Mozambique	00258
Costa Rica	00506	Myanmar (Burma)	0095
Croatia	00385	Namibia	00264
Cuba	0053	Nepal	00977
Cyprus	00357	Netherlands (Holland)	0031
Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
Czech Republic	00420	New Caledonia	00687
Denmark	0045	New Zealand	0064
Diego Garcia	00246	Nicaragua	00505
Djibouti	00253	Niger	00227
Dominica	001767	Nigeria	00234
Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
Egypt	0020	Northern Ireland (UK)	0044
El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
England (UK)	0044	Norway	0047
Equatorial Guinea	00240	Oman	00968
Eritrea	00291	Pakistan	0092
Estonia	00372	Palau	00680
Ethiopia	00251	Panama	00507
Falkland Islands	00500	Papua New Guinea	00675
Faroe Islands	00298	Paraguay	00595
Fiji	00679	Peru	0051
Finland	00358	Philippines	0063
France	0033	Poland	0048
French Guiana	00594	Portugal	00351
French Polynesia	00689	Puerto Rico	001787
Gabon	00241	Qatar	00974
Gambia	00220	Romania	0040
Georgia	00995	Russian Federation	007
Germany	0049	Rwanda	00250
Ghana	00233	Saint Helena	00290
Gibraltar	00350	Saint Kitts	001869
Greece	0030	Saint Lucia	001758
Greenland	00299	Saint Pierre	00508
Grenada	001473	Saint Vincent	001784
Guadeloupe	00590	Samoa US	00684
Guam	001671	Samoa West	00685
Guatemala	00502	San Marino	00378
Guinea	00224	Sao Tome	00239
Guyana	00592	Saudi Arabia	00966
Haiti	00509	Scotland (UK)	0044
Holland (Netherlands)	0031	Senegal	00221
Honduras	00504	Seychelles	00284
Hong Kong	00852	Sierra Leone	00232
Hungary	0036	Singapore	0065
Ibiza (Spain)	0034	Slovakia	00421
Iceland	00354	Slovenia	00386
India	0091	Solomon Islands	00677
Indian Ocean	00873	Somalia	00252
Indonesia	0062	South Africa	0027



# Business

FRIDAY, MARCH 26, 2021

**34** Oil surges as trade mixed amid latest COVID wave



**35** China squeezes Western brands as Xinjiang backlash builds



**36** Beef-addicted Uruguay aiming to make farming more greener



A Rohingya refugee child stands at his burnt home days after a fire at a refugee camp in Ukhaia, in the southeastern Cox's Bazar district yesterday. — AFP

## Bangladesh at 50: Booming economy, shrinking rights

### Critics cite a growing cult of personality amid rights abuses

**GAZIPUR, Bangladesh:** Bangladesh turns 50 this week as an economic success story but also an increasingly repressive de facto one-party state where a cartoon or Facebook post can land you in jail, or worse. A.B.M. Shamsuddin has been a major beneficiary of the boom. He launched his sweater factory in 1998 with 110 machines and 250 workers. Now Hannan Group's five factories supply two dozen European brands and employ more than 10,000 people.

"My annual turnover is \$100 million," Shamsuddin, 66, told AFP as his workers stitched clothes for German high-street outlet Esprit. "I became a hero from zero."

Praising the government for building decent infrastructure such as roads, ports and energy facilities, he predicts "a new era of prosperity" for the country of 168 million people. One of his employees is Ruma, part of a three-million-strong army of garment workers who have turned Bangladesh into the world's second-largest clothing exporter behind China. When Ruma's mother died from diarrhea in the 1980s, she was sent to live with relatives where an uncle tore up her books because "education isn't for girls".

She now earns \$420 in some months. During the Eid festival she

and her husband take home more than \$1,000 and are able to spend \$120 a month educating their two children. "I am determined that my children will not be deprived of education," she told AFP in her two-room concrete home in the dusty industrial town of Gazipur.

#### 'Basket case'

When Bangladesh won independence from Pakistan in 1971 after a brutal war that killed three million people, it was written off as a "basket case" by then US national security advisor Henry Kissinger. More than 80 percent of people lived below the poverty line. Famines and military coups were frequent and most industry including the huge jute sector was owned by Pakistani businesspeople.

Now, according to Norwegian researcher Eirik G. Jansen, who has closely studied Bangladesh over the last four decades, a little over 10 percent of people live in extreme poverty. Production of rice, the main staple, has more than trebled, while life expectancy has risen to 73 from 41 in 1971, according to his latest book "Seeing the End of Poverty: Bhaimara Revisited".

For the last decade the economy has grown more than seven per-

cent annually and per capita GDP has more than quadrupled since 2000. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government aims to make Bangladesh a "developed country" by 2041.

#### At what price?

But campaigners say democracy is being eroded under Hasina, premier since 2009 and the daughter of Bangladesh's murdered "Father of the Nation" Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Both are the subject of what critics call a growing cult of personality, with murals of their faces springing up around the country. The main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is in tatters, with its chief, Hasina's arch-rival Khaleda Zia, in jail for corruption and ailing. The party says at least 3.5 million of its activists and supporters have been charged since 2012 under trumped-up charges, with many of them now behind bars. Hundreds of others are missing after being picked up by security forces, the BNP says. Authorities are clamping down on criticism, particularly online, with "digital security" legislation that rights groups say is used to arrest hundreds of journalists, activists and others. — AFP



## Business

# Oil surges as trade mixed amid latest COVID wave

## Blockage of Suez Canal helps crude prices rise

**NEW YORK:** Oil prices surged following the blockage of the Suez canal, while stocks were mixed as governments struggle to contain the latest wave of the coronavirus. Crude futures surged six percent as traders assessed the likely impact from the grounding of a giant container ship in one of the world's busiest shipping routes. Dozens of ships were blocked by the Panama-flagged ship, but historic sections of the canal were reopened in an effort to ease the traffic jam.

"The energy market has largely priced in the short-term crude demand hit," said Ed Moya of Oanda. Meanwhile, Wall Street stocks suffered another down day, despite strength in petroleum-linked equities. The tech-rich Nasdaq slumped 2.0 percent behind drops in Apple, Facebook and other tech giants. "We're sort of taking a pause for breath," said FHN Financial economist Chris Low. "There's definitely some rotation going on."

Low said disappointing durable goods data fueled the rout, including weakness in motor vehicles and parts, an industry that has seen pro-

duction cuts due to a shortage of semiconductors. Another source of economic pressure has been the Texas power outage in February, Low said. Angst is also rising in the wake of congressional appearances by Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, who confirmed that President Joe Biden is willing to hike corporate taxes to pay for his administration's priorities.

"People thought Biden was going to be centrist and moderate, but his taxing and spending program are moving him further left than expected," said Gregori Volokhine of Meeschaert Financial Services. "All the talk of tax hikes is making investors nervous."

### Easter mea culpa

European stocks were mixed amid continued concerns the continent's worsening coronavirus crisis could derail economic recovery, although survey data showed the eurozone economy had returned to growth in March for the first time in six months. Europe's two biggest economies, Germany and France, have been forced along



A handout picture released by the Suez Canal Authority yesterday shows Egyptian tug boats trying to free Taiwan-owned cargo MV Ever Given (Evergreen), a 400-metre-(1,300-foot)-long and 59-metre wide vessel, lodged sideways and impeding all traffic across the waterway of Egypt's Suez Canal. — AFP

with other countries to impose new restrictions to battle the disease, as they also struggle to get vaccination programs rolling properly.

But Germany scrapped plans to close most of the country's shops over Easter from April 1 to 5 after stinging criticism of the plan. —AFP



## ABK receives UNHCR commissioner

**KUWAIT:** Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) recently welcomed the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Head of Private Sector Partnerships in Kuwait Nader Al-Nakib, who handed a token of appreciation to Fawzy Al-Thunayan, ABK's General Manager of Board Affairs, for the annual contribution towards its 2020-2021 Regional Assistance Plan.

There are over 10 million Syrian and Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. For many, this was the tenth consecutive winter in displacement, with families facing even greater hardships this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic impact. The latest humanitarian contribution from ABK will assist the UNHCR to provide the IDPs and refugees with core relief items. In addition, the contribution will aid in general maintenance and shelter including weather-proofing and repairs. It will also be a pivotal resource in the improvement of drainage systems and other infrastructure fixtures in camps and informal settlements.

The partnership with UNHCR is closely aligned with ABK's continuous efforts to make a difference in the markets in which it operates. The Bank has previously participated in UNHCR's "Warm their Hearts" campaign that supported UNHCR's regional response plan for winter 2019.

## Maritime trade to slow down after ship blocks Suez Canal

**PARIS:** Maritime trade will slow down for days after a giant container ship got stuck sideways in the Suez Canal, causing a bottleneck in one of the world's busiest shipping routes.

Here are questions and answers about the incident and its consequences:

### What happened?

The Taiwan-run MV Ever Given had sailed from Yantian, China, and was heading to Rotterdam, Netherlands, when it became lodged at an angle across the canal on Tuesday. The Suez Canal Authority said the 400-metre (1,300-foot) long and 59-metre-wide ship was caught in a gale-force sandstorm which affected the captain's visibility. Tug boats worked Wednesday to free the Ever Given and analysts say it could be moved out of the way in a matter of hours, but traffic could nevertheless be disrupted for a few days.

Dozens of ships were blocked by the Panama-flagged ship, but historic sections of the canal were reopened in an effort to ease the traffic jam. Ships sailing from the Mediterranean were able to travel south. But broker Braemar warned that if the tug boats are unable to move the ship, some containers may have to be removed by crane barge to lighten the vessel and "this can take days maybe weeks".

### Why is the canal important?

The canal was widened and modernized several times to accommodate new ships since it was inaugurated in

1869. It is responsible for 10 percent of global maritime trade. The waterway drastically shortens travel between Asia and Europe: The Singapore-to-Rotterdam route, for example, is 6,000 kilometers (3,700 miles) and up to two weeks shorter than going around Africa.

It is an "absolutely critical" route because "all traffic arriving from Asia goes through the Suez Canal," said Camille Egloff, a maritime transport specialist at Boston Consulting Group. "If it doesn't go through the canal it has to go via Cape of Good Hope", at the southern tip of Africa, Egloff said.

The canal was widened again in 2015 to allow super-sized cargo ships like the Ever Given to use the route. A project is under way to double its capacity by 2023 to allow around 100 ships to use the canal per day, compared to 50 today.

### Is there a shortage threat?

While traffic has slowed down, there is little risk of shortages in goods. "There are existing stocks. If you look at oil supply, it is only the one from the Middle East and we have other supply sources," Egloff said. Braemar said that, if it takes more than a week to free the passage, then ships could take the alternative route around the Cape of Good Hope.

The extra eight or nine days travel "will be problematic for cargo already on the way" but it "can be compensated for in the longer-term by means of ordering cargo earlier than normal," it said.

But there could be an adverse effect on certain sectors. An existing shortage of semiconductors has already disrupted production of cars that rely on the technology. And the deputy director general of the Federation of German Industries, Holger Loesch, said the blockage exacerbates an already "tense situation in the international transport of containers". Egloff said: "There will be domino effects in European ports in the days to come." — AFP



## Business

# China squeezes Western brands as Xinjiang backlash builds

## Celebrities severing ties with Nike, H&M facing a boycott and Burberry dumped from a deal

**BEIJING:** China yesterday launched a PR war on Western brands critical of rights abuses in Xinjiang, with celebrities severing ties with Nike, H&M facing a boycott and Burberry dumped from a deal with a gaming giant. At least one million Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim minorities have been held in camps in Xinjiang, according to right groups, where authorities are also accused of forcibly sterilizing women and imposing forced labor.

It is one of the world's top cotton-producing regions feeding many western garment brands with textiles. But several firms have tried to put distance between their brands and Xinjiang cotton producers since the allegations emerged. That has enraged China, which denies any abuses, insisting labor camps are in fact training programs and work schemes have helped stamp out extremism and raise incomes.

Yesterday celebrities, tech brands and state media-aided by outrage on China's tightly-controlled social media-piled in on several global fashion brands, as China's vast consumer market

was mobilized. "Chinese people will not allow some foreigners to eat China's rice while smashing its bowls," foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told reporters in Beijing.

"The Chinese market is here... we open our hearts to welcome foreign companies. But we oppose malicious attacks on China based on rumors and lies, and harm to China's interests."

Chinese TV stars Wang Yibo and Tan Songyun said they would end all promotional partnerships with Nike, after a year-old company statement was regurgitated online noting it was "very concerned" by the allegations of forced labor. Tan's manager said she "resolutely opposes any bad behavior of smearing and making rumors about China", with Wang's agent releasing a statement saying "the country's dignity is not to be violated".

Gaming giant Tencent pulled a new 'skin' project linked with Burberry on avatars in the Glory of Kings game, while Swedish clothing giant H&M's products vanished from shopping sites in apparent retaliation for its decision to no



**BEIJING:** A policeman tries to prevent photos being taken outside a store of Swedish clothing giant H&M in Beijing yesterday after H&M faced calls for a boycott as a backlash brews against Western firms speaking out on human rights. —AFP

longer source cotton from Xinjiang. Global brands are often consumed by PR crisis' in China after touching politically-sensitive subjects.

The NBA in 2019 was dropped by Chinese

broadcasters after Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey tweeted a message of support for pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong. —AFP

## Tencent boss vows 'compliance' with China regulators

**BEIJING:** Tencent's billionaire founder Pony Ma-China's second richest man-has met anti-monopoly regulators and agreed his firm will be "as compliant as possible", after rival tech giant Alibaba was battered by legal woes. Tencent, which owns the super-app WeChat and a lucrative gaming empire, is the latest tech conglomerate to fall into the crosshairs of China's regulators.

They have launched a blitz on apparent anti-competitive practices, threatening to slice up supersized firms whose reach now stretches into the daily finances of the public. Tencent's Ma, also known as Ma Huateng, said he would "actively cooperate with regulatory authorities and be as compliant as possible" during a news briefing late Wednesday on Tencent's annual results, reported Chinese financial outlet Yicai.

Martin Lau, Tencent's president and executive director, also said they had met the government several times to discuss anti-monopoly efforts and hoped to create a "healthy environment" to foster innovation. "Tencent has throughout attached high importance to compliance," he was quoted as saying. The company's shares slumped 5.1 percent in New York trade Wednesday, while its Hong Kong-listed stock was more than two percent lower.

The Chinese government is also discussing plans to establish a state-backed entity to oversee how big e-commerce and payment companies use data collected from millions of consumers, Bloomberg News reported Thursday citing people familiar with the matter.

China's current data and privacy protection allows individuals to decide how companies can use their information, but enforcement is lax owing to a lack of transparency.



**This file photo, the headquarters of Tencent, the parent company of Chinese social media company WeChat in Beijing. —AFP**

The move would be the latest by officials who are looking to reel in the country's tech sector. Authorities last year halted a record \$34 billion initial public offering by fintech provider Ant Group, owned by Tencent's nearest rival Alibaba. They called in its billionaire founder Jack Ma and then opened an investigation into Alibaba business practices deemed anti-competitive.

Ant was then instructed to transform into a financial holding company that is subject to more regulatory restrictions. Since then, the normally flamboyant and outspoken Ma has kept a low profile as the dragnet widens to include competitors. Alibaba has been under pressure to divest its media assets as government officials are worried about its growing public influence, the Wall Street Journal reported last week.

In the past few months, regulators have also fined more than a dozen tech firms—including Tencent—for practices such as undisclosed acquisitions. Last week they summoned 11 tech firms for talks on cybersecurity. —AFP

## Tech CEOs face fury over disinformation

**WASHINGTON:** Tech CEOs defended their platforms' practices as they girded for a fresh grilling from US lawmakers angered over rampant disinformation about the US elections, the Capitol attack and COVID-19. The leaders of Facebook, Google and Twitter sought to head off critics leading into a House of Representatives hearing, the latest in a series highlighting concerns over moderating online content.

The remote video hearing is the fourth for Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter's Jack Dorsey since last July and the third for Google's Sundar Pichai: evidence of how the companies' vast economic and political power has landed them squarely in the crosshairs of Democrats and Republicans alike.

"Whether it be falsehoods about the COVID-19 vaccine or debunked claims of election fraud, these online platforms have allowed misinformation to spread, intensifying national crises with real-life, grim consequences for public health and safety," said the heads of the two congressional subcommittees holding the hearing, in a statement. The tech CEOs said they were doing their best to keep out harmful content.

"Every day Twitter grapples with complex considerations on how to address extremism and misinformation," Dorsey said in his written testimony released in advance by the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

"Our efforts to combat misinformation, however, must be linked to earning trust. Without trust, we know the public will continue to question our enforcement actions," Pichai said. Google is dedicated to giving people "trustworthy content and opportunities for free expression across our platforms, while limiting the reach of harmful misinformation." —AFP



## Business

# Beef-addicted Uruguay aiming to make farming more greener

## Farmers resorting to new tactics to mitigate impact of cattle on climate change

**CERRO PELADO, Uruguay:** Rotating cattle to keep the grass long, synching cows' pregnancies and improving bovine diet are just some of the tactics Uruguayan farmers are using to mitigate the impact of cattle on climate change. There are four cows for each person in Uruguay, the South American country of 3.4 million people where agriculture accounts for 75 percent of greenhouse gas emissions.

A large part of that comes from the methane emitted by cattle, meaning Uruguay has no choice but to focus on livestock if it wants to combat global warming. Cattle methane, which accounts for 62 percent of emissions, "weighs heavily on climate change," said Cecilia Jones, the livestock ministry's coordinator on the issue.

Looking out across a group of 20 cows at a farm in the southeastern Lavalleja department, Rosa Correa remarked that "all these need to get pregnant." Her farm is one of 62 taking part in a livestock and climate initiative launched by Uruguay in 2020 to help reduce direct and indirect emissions, sequester carbon in the soil and reverse land deterioration. The program, made possible with help from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and funding from the Global Environment Facility, is meant to increase productivity "through smart climate practices," Soldeda Bergos, the initiative's coordinator, said.

## Forests, soil may not keep pace with CO2 emissions

**PARIS:** The world is counting too heavily on soil and plants to soak up planet-ravaging carbon pollution, researchers cautioned Wednesday. Climate projections mistakenly assume that land and what grows on it are able to absorb the CO2 humanity loads into the atmosphere, they reported in the journal *Nature*.

In reality, there's a trade-off. "Either soil or plants, but not both, will absorb more CO2 as carbon levels rise," lead author Cesar Terrier, a researcher at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, told AFP. It is tempting, he said, to hang hopes on supercharged plant growth and massive tree-planting campaigns to reduce CO2 produced by burning fossil fuels, agriculture and destroying forests.

But researchers said that when elevated carbon dioxide levels boost forest and grassland growth, the accumulation of CO2 in soil slows down.

"Soils store more carbon worldwide than is contained in all plant biomass," said senior author Rob Jackson, a professor at Stanford's School of Earth, Energy and Environmental

### Sustainable productivity

Synchronizing mating and pregnancies as well as the weaning of calves are some of the practices that Correa, 56, and her husband Alejandro Rodriguez, 55, began implementing based on advice from the FAO. It's "one of the ways to increase productivity in a sustainable way," said Correa, since more kilograms (pounds) of meat are produced when more calves can be birthed from the same herd. The couple and their two daughters manage an 800-hectare (1,975-acre) farm that has been in the family for 35 years. "In Uruguay livestock has been the mainstay of agriculture for 400 years, and it's mainly produced on natural fields," said Bergos.

Although only eight percent of the globe is covered by productive temperate grasslands, that figure is 50 percent in Uruguay, which Bergos described as a paradise for livestock farming and a "valuable resource." Uruguay has little industry and so relies heavily on its meat exports, particularly beef, with more than 2.2 million cattle slaughtered in 2019, according to the national meat institute.

The country exported more than 330,000 tons of beef that year, worth more than \$1.8 billion and representing 83.4 percent of the country's meat exports. Much of that meat is exported to China, the United States and Brazil.

Sciences. So far, Earth's terrestrial ecosystems have kept pace with rapidly increasing CO2 emissions, consistently absorbing some 30 percent even as those emissions have more than doubled over the last 50 years. Oceans have also syphoned off a steady 20-odd percent of CO2 pollution during the same period.

Without these natural sponges, the amount of CO2 in the atmosphere today might be double preindustrial levels, enough to heat up the planet's surface by four to six degrees Celsius, according to a new generation of climate models. With only 1.1C of warming so far, the planet has seen a crescendo of deadly heatwaves, flooding and other extreme weather.

The new study adds to growing evidence that the terrestrial carbon sink is weaker than once thought.

Terrer and colleagues analyzed data from more than 100 published experiments on soil carbon levels, plant growth and CO2 concentrations, which have risen by half since pre-industrial times.

They were surprised by the results. "It proved much harder than expected to increase both plant growth and carbon soil," said Jackson. Researchers found that soils only accumulated more carbon in experiments where plant growth remained fairly steady, despite high levels of CO2 in the air. — AFP



Rosa Correa herds cows to be vaccinated against foot-and-mouth disease in a field in Cerro Pelado, Lavalleja Department, 160 km northeast of Montevideo, Uruguay. —AFP

Uruguayans also consume more beef per person per year than anywhere else in the world at almost 48 kilograms (105 pounds). Many were angered several weeks ago when US billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates said that rich countries

should eat synthetic meat to combat climate change. "There are people who say 'cattle don't pollute, other things pollute much more.' That's true, but we have to try not to contaminate anything," said Correa. —AFP

## Yellen defends IMF reserve increase aimed at poor nations

**WASHINGTON:** US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Wednesday defended the IMF's move to boost its reserve offerings, calling the increased aid a "joint effort" to help the poorest nations hit by COVID-19. IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva on Tuesday said the fund wants to increase its allocation of special drawings rights (SDR) by \$650 billion with the aim of safeguarding the financial health of impoverished countries. Yellen defended the raise in response to questions from lawmakers on the Senate Banking Committee who were concerned the money would aid rich countries that don't need it, including Washington's rivals.

"I would say that the current crisis has increased the need for global reserves, and that's the IMF's assessment. The global economy suffered a very severe, severe collapse in 2020," Yellen said in testimony alongside Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell.

"This allocation will help countries meet this need for reserves." Yellen added that many countries intend to forgo their SDR increase in favor of poor countries, which would magnify the impact of the new allocations. Georgieva will submit her proposal to the IMF Board in June, which if approved

would be the first SDR increase since 2009, amid the downturn caused by the global financial crisis.

### Global minimum tax

Finance ministers from the G7 richest countries, including the United States, agreed last week to support the IMF move. SDRs, created by the International Monetary Fund in 1969, play an influential role in global finance and help governments protect their financial reserves against global currency fluctuations. It is also used as the basis of loans from the IMF's crucial crisis-lending facilities. While not a true currency itself—there are no SDR coins or banknotes—the IMF uses it to calculate its loans to needy countries, and to set the interest rates on those loans. Yellen also reiterated comments she'd made in testimony before the House on Tuesday indicating President Joe Biden is in favor of hiking US corporate taxes to 28 percent as he looks for ways to fund administration priorities like an infrastructure bill.

However, she said any increase would best be done alongside an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) agreement on a global minimum tax rate to protect the US business environment. "We, at this point, collect only a tiny amount of revenue through the corporate tax, less than one percent of GDP, and, I believe it is appropriate to raise the tax rate, but we need to worry about the competitiveness of American firms," Yellen said. "I think it would be important to make sure that it is done in the context of a global agreement." —AFP



## Sports

# Bucks hold off charging Celtics, Fournier helps Magic edge Suns

**LOS ANGELES:** The Milwaukee Bucks pushed their NBA winning streak to eight games on Wednesday, squandering a 25-point third-quarter lead but holding on to edge the Boston Celtics 121-119. Khris Middleton scored 27 points and pulled down 13 rebounds for the Bucks, who escaped with the victory when Boston center Daniel Theis' three-point attempt failed to drop as time expired.

"Man, I thought it was good," Middleton admitted of Theis's wide-open effort - which came on the heels of missed attempts from Boston's Kemba Walker and Marcus Smart. "Great play, great look." For most of the night, it hadn't appeared the Bucks would be cutting it so close. The Celtics trailed 90-65 midway through the third quarter but Jaylen Brown's three-pointer cut the deficit to two with 1:32 remaining.

"They made shots, we slowed down, missed some good looks," Middleton said. "Credit them, they hung in the game, found a way to get back in it and had a chance to win at the end." Donte DiVincenzo blocked a Walker layup with 34.8 seconds to play and Brook Lopez blocked a Smart attempt with two seconds to play. Milwaukee's two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Giannis Antetokounmpo had a quiet night of 13 points, eight rebounds and seven assists as he returned after resting his sprained left knee.

Bobby Portis scored 21 points off the bench for the Bucks. Lopez and DiVincenzo added 17 apiece. Jaylen Brown paced Boston with 24 points. Walker had 23 and Jayson Tatum, back after missing a game because of illness, added 18. Orlando Magic

guard Evan Fournier drove for the game-winning layup with 6.4 seconds remaining in a 112-111 victory over the Phoenix Suns.

Magic center Nikola Vucevic put up 27 points and 14 rebounds - his 30th double-double of the season. Fournier added 21 points and Chuma Okeke scored a career-high 17 off the bench in the dramatic win. "I'm honestly just very happy about the win tonight because I feel like we deserved it," said Fournier, who is being touted as a likely trade candidate with multiple teams interested as the deadline approached. Devin Booker scored 25 points and Chris Paul scored 23 for the Suns, who had won three straight and were trying to join the Utah Jazz as the only Western Conference teams with 30 wins.

## 'Definitely different' for Lowry

The West-leading Jazz improved their league-best record to 32-11 with a 118-88 demolition of the Brooklyn Nets. The Nets were a big disappointment in the absence of their big three. Kyrie Irving missed the game for personal reasons and James Harden's sore neck left him sidelined along with Kevin Durant, who is still nursing a hamstring injury.

Nets coach Steve Nash acknowledged his depleted team would face "a big challenge" in the Jazz, who raced to a 21-point lead in the first quarter and led by as many as 38 in the third. Utah's Donovan Mitchell led all scorers with 27 points on 11-of-18 shooting. Alize Johnson, a 24-year-old who inked a 10-day contract with Brooklyn on Monday, paced the Nets with 23 points and 15 rebounds.



**MILWAUKEE:** Giannis Antetokounmpo #34 of the Milwaukee Bucks is defended by Jaylen Brown #7 of the Boston Celtics during the second half of a game at Fiserv Forum on Wednesday. —AFP

The Toronto Raptors snapped their nine-game losing streak, but star guard Kyle Lowry admitted the 135-111 victory over the Denver Nuggets felt "weird" amid widespread reports he would be traded at the deadline. "It was different tonight, for sure," said Lowry, a key figure in the Raptors' 2019 championship campaign. "I mean, who knows what's going to happen? No one knows

what's going to happen. But it was definitely, for sure, different."

Pascal Siakam scored 27 points for the Raptors, who won for the first time since Feb. 26. OG Anunoby scored 18 of his 23 points before halftime for the Raptors, and Norman Powell - also mentioned as a likely trade candidate - added 22. —AFP

## Hamilton and Mercedes face Bahrain challenge

**MANAMA:** Lewis Hamilton's team chief Toto Wolff is confident that champions Mercedes can bounce back from a poor pre-season test and fight for victory in Sunday's season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix. The Austrian boss, who conceded that the team had suffered a "tough test" in Bahrain earlier this month, said he believed his outfit would draw on its experience and strengths to recover as Hamilton goes in pursuit of an unprecedented eighth title.

"This team's biggest strengths are our people and our values and after a tough time I know that we can fight back stronger," said Wolff. "It was a tricky three days - the W12 car wasn't as stable, predictable or planted as some of our rivals - and Red Bull looked strong on both the long and the short runs, but as always with testing, it's difficult to be certain of true performance."

As Wolff and Mercedes pledged to recover, chief rivals and - for some paddock observers - favorites Red Bull played down the potential of their dominant show in testing at the Bahrain International Circuit, where this weekend's race takes place. "I know people are excited and think we are just saying this, but Mercedes are still the favorites," said Red Bull's Max Verstappen, who hopes to end Hamilton's run of six drivers' titles in seven years with Mercedes. —AFP

## Sweet 16 as Shcherbakova leads worlds

**STOCKHOLM:** Russia's Anna Shcherbakova, just 16 and making her world figure skating championship bow, led after the short program on Wednesday. With 81 points, Shcherbakova was ahead of Japanese 18-year-old Rika Kihira (79.08) with the free program to come today. Another Russian, 24-year-old 2014 world champion Elizaveta Tuktamysheva, is third (78.86).

"I was nervous, controlled every movement and I am happy that all elements were successful," said Shcherbakova who pulled off a double Axel, triple flip and triple Lutz-triple loop combination in her skate to "O doux printemps d'autrefois". However, the 16-year-old admitted she missed not having fans supporting her with Covid-19 restrictions meaning a ban on spectators at the Stockholm venue. "A lot of people write that they support me from their homes. It is also very important for me. But I miss full stands of people supporting you before the start and during the performance. Maybe for this reason I was very nervous, but I understand why the restrictions are needed."

As Shcherbakova shone, her highly-regarded compatriot Alexandra Trusova, also 16, and a pupil of former superstar Yevgeny Plushenko, struggled in 12th place. She scored just 64.82 points having been penalized heavily for not employing jump combinations. In the pairs competition, Russia's Aleksandra Boikova and Dmitrii Kozlovskii, the 2020 European champions, finished the day ahead of China's Sui Wenjing and Han Cong.



**STOCKHOLM:** Russia's Anna Shcherbakova performs during the ladies' short program event at the ISU World Figure Skating Championships on Wednesday. —AFP

Boikova, 19, and 21-year-old Kozlovskii scored 80.16 points with their Chinese rivals on 77.62. Russia's Anastasia Mishina and Aleksandr Galliamov are third on 75.79. Two-time world champions Evgenia Tarasova and Vladimir Morozov are fourth on 71.46. As well as world medals up for the grabs, the 2021 championships is key in deciding team make-ups for the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. —AFP



## Sports

# Turkey beat Netherlands, Belgium see off Wales, Ukraine hold France

**PARIS:** The Netherlands slumped to a dramatic 4-2 defeat by Turkey in their opening 2022 World Cup qualifier on Wednesday, while reigning champions France were held by Ukraine despite a brilliant Antoine Griezmann goal and Belgium came from behind to beat Wales. European champions Portugal battled to a 1-0 victory over Azerbaijan, but 2018 World Cup runners-up Croatia lost 1-0 in Slovenia as they started their bid to reach the finals in Qatar.

In Istanbul, Turkey led 3-0 shortly after half-time through two Burak Yilmaz goals and a Hakan Calhanoglu strike, but substitutes Davy Klaassen and Luuk de Jong gave Frank de Boer's Dutchmen hope. Yilmaz's wonderful free-kick sealed him a hat-trick and Turkey a crucial win, though, in a match between the two favorites to qualify from Group G. "Very disappointing result, and also the way that result came about," De Boer told NOSTV.

The defeat was a dreadful start to the campaign for the Netherlands, who failed to qualify for either Euro 2016 or the 2018 World Cup, but are one of the fancied sides ahead of the delayed Euro 2020 finals this year. France kicked off their title defense with a 1-1 draw against Ukraine at the Stade de France.

Griezmann curled a fine finish from outside the box into the top corner in the 19th minute to draw level with David Trezeguet in fourth place on France's all-time goalscoring list, with 34. But Presnel Kimpembe put through his own net before the hour mark

to draw Ukraine level. The Paris Saint-Germain defender had a late chance to make amends, but headed too close to away goalkeeper Georgiy Bushchan.

"We need more accuracy and movement against these opponents," France coach Didier Deschamps told TF1. "Qualifying is a long haul and not a long, quiet river, it never has been." The other game in Group D saw Finland and Bosnia and Herzegovina draw 2-2, with Teemu Pukki netting twice for the Finns in Helsinki. "It left a bad taste in my mouth," said Pukki. "I'm a bit gutted we couldn't get the three points."

## Belgium see off Wales

Belgium, the world's number-one-ranked side, fell behind early against Wales but fought back to outclass their opponents 3-1. Harry Wilson scored an excellent 10th-minute opener for Wales in Leuven, but Kevin De Bruyne and Thorgan Hazard netted in the space of six minutes to put the hosts ahead before the half-hour mark. Belgium's record goalscorer Romelu Lukaku wrapped up the points with a penalty 17 minutes from time, gaining the Red Devils a measure of revenge for their Euro 2016 quarter-final loss to Wales.

"It was important to start with a victory at home," said winger Thorgan Hazard. "It's always important to start qualifying well. We were a little scared during the first 15 minutes." Roberto Martinez's men sit second in the early Group E table behind the Czech Republic, who thrashed Estonia 6-2 on neutral ground



**ISTANBUL:** Turkey's forward Burak Yilmaz (right) is challenged by Netherlands' defenders Owen Wijndal (left) and Matthijs De Ligt during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification Group G football match at the Ataturk Olympic Stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

in Poland, with West Ham midfielder Tomas Soucek scoring a hat-trick. Portugal, who defend the title at Euro 2020 later this year, struggled in their Group A opener against Azerbaijan in Turin. But Maksim

Medvedev's own goal nine minutes before half-time was enough, despite Cristiano Ronaldo, on 102 international goals, failing to close the gap to Iranian Ali Daei's all-time record of 109. —AFP

## B Faso, Guinea qualify, four-goal Ethiopia crush Madagascar

**JOHANNESBURG:** Burkina Faso and Guinea qualified Wednesday for the Africa Cup of Nations in Cameroon next January, while Ethiopia trounced Madagascar 4-0 as matchday 5 kicked off. The Burkinabe secured a place for the sixth time in their last seven attempts by forcing a 0-0 Group B draw away to Uganda near Kampala.

Uganda must avoid defeat in Malawi Monday to join Burkina Faso at the 24-team tournament, which has been delayed one year by the coronavirus pandemic. Malawi kept hopes of a first Cup of Nations appearance since 2010 alive by edging South Sudan 1-0 through a Richard Mbulu goal in Sudan as the national stadium in Juba is being renovated.

Guinea booked a place from Group A by defeating already-qualified Mali 1-0 in Conakry via a goal from substitute Seydouba Soumah with 15 minutes remaining. Burkina Faso and Guinea join defending champions Algeria, Mali, Senegal, Tunisia and automatic qualifiers as hosts Cameroon in securing places, leaving 17 places up for grabs. Ethiopia rose from third to first in Group K with an unexpectedly convincing triumph over Madagascar, who were the surprise side of the 2019 Cup of Nations in Egypt, reaching the quarter-finals as debutants. The Ethiopians are ranked 42nd in Africa - 21 places below the Malagasys - but it was hard to believe that fact as they dominated the first half in Bahir Dar to turn over with a three-goal advantage. —AFP

## Harder strikes for Chelsea against old club; Lyon win

**PARIS:** Pernille Harder scored what turned out to be the winner against her old side as Chelsea beat Wolfsburg 2-1 in the first leg of their Women's Champions League quarter-final on Wednesday, while Wendie Renard's late penalty gave holders Lyon a precious 1-0 victory at French rivals Paris Saint-Germain. German champions Wolfsburg were last season's beaten finalists and have been one of Europe's leading forces over the last decade.

However, Danish forward Harder's decision to join Chelsea at the start of this campaign for a reported world record transfer fee was seen as a sign of the growing threat of English clubs at this level. Sam Kerr set up Harder to score Chelsea's second goal of the night in the 66th minute after a dreadful pass out by Wolfsburg goalkeeper Katarzyna Kiedrzynek in a game switched to Budapest due to Covid-19 travel restrictions between Germany and the UK.

Reigning English WSL champions Chelsea had earlier taken the lead in the 55th minute when Fran Kirby found Australian star Kerr and she rounded the goalkeeper before scoring from a tight angle. However, Wolfsburg remain in the tie after Dutch defender Dominique Janssen pulled a goal back from a penalty awarded for a foul on Svenja Huth by Chelsea captain Magdalena Eriksson.

"We had to suffer at moments but the first leg is about staying in the tie. There is no home advantage for either team and I am left feeling they have the advantage with the away goal," said Chelsea manager Emma Hayes. The teams will meet again in Budapest for the return next Wednesday. "The reality is they are a team who have been well developed over a number of years. But it wasn't an easy tie for them, we gave them a game and I am happy with that," added Hayes.



**BUDAPEST:** Chelsea's Danish forward Pernille Harder (left) controls the ball past Wolfsburg's German defender Kathrin Hendrich during the UEFA Women's Champions League quarter-final first leg football match at Szusza Ferenc Stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

## Barcelona stun Man City

Lyon are looking to continue their remarkable run of winning the Champions League in each of the last five seasons and are in a strong position to reach the semi-finals after their narrow victory in Paris. PSG had beaten Lyon at the Parc des Princes when the teams last met in the French league in November, going top of the league in the process as they ended their all-conquering opponents' 73-game unbeaten run.

A recent crunch league rematch between the sides was then called off due to a spate of Covid-19 cases in the Paris camp which also saw them have to forfeit the second leg of their last-16 tie against Sparta Prague.

They still went through on aggregate, but PSG were beaten on the night as Lyon skipper Renard converted an 86th-minute penalty following a handball by veteran Brazilian midfielder Formiga. —AFP



## Sports

# 'Ray of light': Olympic torch relay begins after year's delay

**IWAKI, Japan:** The Tokyo Olympics torch relay got underway yesterday after a year's coronavirus delay, with officials hoping it will be a "ray of light" after the problems caused by the pandemic. Spectators were barred from the departure ceremony and first leg over ongoing fears about the coronavirus, which forced the 2020 Games' historic postponement a year ago.

But they will line the rest of the route during the 121-day relay, which will crisscross Japan and involve 10,000 runners before the torch lights the Olympic cauldron on July 23. Organizers are hoping the relay will dispel doubts about holding the Games during a pandemic, and Tokyo 2020 chief Seiko Hashimoto called the flame "a ray of light at the end of the darkness".

"This little flame never lost hope and it waited for this day like a cherry blossom bud just about to bloom," she told the ceremony at Fukushima's J-Village sports complex, which was a base for responding to the 2011 nuclear disaster. Azusa Iwashimizu, one of Japan's 2011 World Cup-winning women's footballers, was the first to carry the rose-gold, cherry blossom-shaped torch, accompanied by former teammates.

She passed the flame to Fukushima high school student Asato Owada, who like all the runners wore an official white tracksuit with a red diagonal stripe. A handful of fans, wearing their compulsory masks, watched the relay from its second section. But with cheering and large crowds banned for virus safety, the loudest sound came from clicking cameras. "I

think it somewhat lacks excitement because there are rules," Tetsuya Ozawa told AFP in the town of Naraha. "I think more people would have come and there would have been more excitement if there wasn't coronavirus."

## 'A great memory'

But 10-year-old Tsuzumi Sugeno was thrilled nonetheless. "This will be a great memory," he told AFP. "I want to become a professional baseball player and play at the Olympics." Organizers were making final preparations for the relay last year when the virus prompted the unprecedented decision to postpone the Games, as sport around the world ground to a halt.

A year on, the pandemic is still in full swing despite vaccine rollouts, and many in Japan fear the Olympics will cause a spike in cases. Overseas spectators are barred from the Games, and limits are likely on domestic fans, so the relay is seen as a vital opportunity to build positive momentum. The Fukushima launch also puts the spotlight back on the northeastern region of Tohoku that was affected by the 2011 quake, tsunami and nuclear disaster.

The Games were initially billed as the "Recovery Olympics", showcasing reconstruction in the region. The relay will pass through some towns that remain only partially open to the public, as radiation decontamination continues. In Iwaki city, the largest stop on



**NARAH, Japan:** Tokyo 2020 president Seiko Hashimoto (left) applauds as a member of Japan's women's national football team carries the Olympic torch on day one of the torch relay in Fukushima Prefecture yesterday. —AFP

the flame's first day, 78-year-old Hikomitsu Onodera was dressed in the same blue blazer he wore as an official overseeing weightlifting at the Tokyo 1964

Olympics. "It was good - sport is something that can bring everyone together," he said, after the flame passed. —AFP

## Lee downplays Olympic hopes after England win

**MALAYSIA:** Malaysian badminton star Lee Zii Jia downplayed expectations yesterday that he could win the country's first Olympic gold in Tokyo following his breakthrough victory at the All England Open. The 22-year-old defeated Denmark's Viktor Axelsen 30-29, 20-22, 21-9 at the weekend to win the All England, one of the sport's most prestigious tournaments, for the first time.

On his way to victory, he also beat two-time world champion Kento Momota, and is now seen as Malaysia's best hope to win Olympic gold at the Tokyo Games this summer. Malaysian badminton legend Lee Chong Wei came achingly close to winning gold but never achieved it, picking up three Olympic silvers during his career.

But yesterday, Lee Zii Jia brushed off questions about his chances of bringing home Malaysia's first gold from Tokyo. "I just want to (go) step by step," he told a press conference. "So far, the progress is going well, so I don't want to put too much pressure on myself. I just want to enjoy the game and try my best in every match." He also downplayed suggestions that he is the heir to Lee Chong Wei, who was one of the greatest players of his generation until his retirement in 2019. "I just want to be myself, and not (be compared) with Lee Chong Wei," said the younger Lee. "His achievement is unbreakable, his record is unbreakable, he's a legend. "I have my own journey." —AFP



Lee Zii Jia

## Bid to help Pacific rugby's 'sleeping giants' wins praise

**WELLINGTON:** World Rugby received widespread support yesterday for backing plans to include two Pacific island teams in the southern hemisphere's Super Rugby competition, with claims it could change the face of the international game. Fiji winger Nemani Nadolo said the concept could transform rugby in the Pacific, where there is immense playing talent but scarce financial resources to prevent top stars moving overseas.

"This will be massive exposure playing against some of the world's best on a constant basis... a sleeping giant will be awoken!" Nadolo tweeted. Pacific Rugby Players Welfare estimates about 20 percent of all professional players come from islander backgrounds. But major hurdles remain before World Rugby's push to add the Pacific islands to the southern hemisphere tournament from next year become reality. The island nations of Fiji, Samoa and Tonga all boast a rich rugby heritage and a wealth of playing talent, but have battled to overcome financial hardships and geographic isolation. Players are often lured to foreign clubs and in order to receive lucrative contracts are quietly discouraged from playing for their national teams. The islanders also lack exposure to top opposition outside of World Cup years and head offshore to develop their playing skills, often switching allegiances to an adopted homeland once they meet residency requirements.

World Rugby said including Pacific teams in Super Rugby would allow top talent to play professionally while remaining in the Pacific region. "I'm lost for words... this will go beyond improving Pacific island rugby - it will change lives," said Ben Ryan, the Englishman who coached Fiji's sevens team to Olympic gold at the Rio 2016 Games. Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama called it "fantastic news". "Our boys have proved they belong in the Super Rugby circuit. I know I speak for every Fijian when I say it's time we get this effort over the try line!" he tweeted.

## Powerbroker NZ

The fate of the two Pacific teams - the Fiji Drua and Moana Pasifika - will ultimately be decided by New Zealand Rugby, which has emerged as Super Rugby's de facto powerbroker in the coronavirus era. The New Zealanders have made clear in the past that any Pacific teams in Super Rugby must be commercially viable and well governed. Crucially, these are areas in which World Rugby has offered to help the Pacific bidders.

The governing body will provide £3.2 million (\$4.9 million) over three years to help cover costs, as well as supplying administrative and high-performance expertise. But the World Rugby money alone will not be enough to get the bids over the line financially. The Fiji Rugby Union last month estimated it needed at least NZ\$10 million (US\$7.0 million) to be viable.

It said costs included paying for a 37-man playing squad, plus another 28 in coaching and administration, as well as a contingency fund "if we have a bad year or two". That will require corporate backers with deep pockets, which are scarce in Fiji, Tonga and Samoa, where the combined population is only about 1.5 million. NZR has shown in the past that it will not allow changes that weigh on its bottom line, scuppering plans to include a Pacific team in this year's Super Rugby because the numbers did not stack up. The competition's previous governing body, SANZAAR, did the same in 2018 after weighing up the costs.

## 'Work to be done'

NZR head of professional rugby Chris Lendrum said he was confident all criteria could be met this time around. "There's still work to be done, finances can't be pulled together overnight, legal agreements can't be agreed overnight and there's obviously still the issue of contracting players and coaches, but we remain really positive," he said.

Lendrum said NZR was in discussions with Rugby Australia and hoped to confirm plans for the 2022 season "in a few weeks". The Pacific bids, should they succeed, offer a glimpse of how Super Rugby could look in a post-pandemic world. South Africa has already said it wants to move its four Super Rugby teams to Europe's Pro14, and there is no room for Japan's Sunwolves or the Jaguares of Argentina. If borders reopen, there will be five Australian teams - including the Western Force - and five from New Zealand, along with the two new Pacific franchises. —AFP





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**STEP 1:** Click on COVID-19 VACCINE REGISTRATION **STEP 2:** FILL OUT BASIC INFORMATION **STEP 3:** SUBMIT FORM

The COVID-19 vaccine is safe, effective and approved by Kuwait's Ministry of Health