



2 Preparations to recruit Filipino domestic helpers continuing



8 Tehran and Beijing sign 25-yr cooperation pact



10 Gulf Bank holds AGM, announces cash dividend of 5 fils per share



16 'MVP' Harden hits 44 to spark Nets while Celtics beat Bucks





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Nurseries struggle to stay afloat as closure drags on

No respite for owners, employees • Children, parents suffering too

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: When the Cabinet announced last week that schools will reopen in September, there was no mention of nurseries. After being closed for over a year, many nurseries in Kuwait went bankrupt and had to close, while others have fallen in debt waiting to reopen.

There used to be around 500 nurseries in all of Kuwait's governorates. According to a study by the Preschool Owners Forum (POF), 200 nurseries closed down in the previous year due to the volatile work environment, while 100 nurseries shut down due to the pandemic. The remaining 200 nurseries have been closed since last year and are struggling due to accumulating debts, and many may not survive if the closure lasts any longer.

The number of children aged between 0 to 4

years is 309,138, both Kuwaiti and of other nationalities. Around 1,500 Kuwaiti employees work in nurseries, which have 300 owners. If these businesses close, entrepreneurs and employees will have to be transferred to work in the public sector, which will cost the government over KD 13 million annually. Nurseries pay around KD 1,700,000 annually to the government in fees for licenses, work permits, residencies and others. They also pay around KD 2 million for social security.

The debts and financial losses of some nursery owners has reached hundreds of thousands of dinars. Hanan Al-Mudhahka owns two nurseries for disabled children, and estimates her losses have exceeded KD 300,000 already. "I employed a total of 70 employees in both my nurseries. I paid full salaries to my staff for a couple of months after the closure, as well as the rent, till I ran out of resources

and was no longer able to do so. Other nursery owners and I were not compensated by the government, and even banks refuse to give us loans," she told Kuwait Times.

Employees of nurseries are suffering too. "As I had no resources to pay salaries and rent, I was not able to renew the license of the nursery. As a result, I can't renew the residency of the employees, and they are stuck without a job and without residency. They can't work in other places as they don't have residency, and they cannot leave the country as they haven't received their indemnities," explained Mudhahka.

She blames this mess on the illogical decisions of the government. "The government allowed schools to reopen for the new academic year. But they didn't think of the teachers and other employees who are supposed to start working from May. Where will

they leave their kids? Why are nurseries not treated in the same way as schools? Also, the health ministry allowed nurseries for disabled children to reopen, but the ministry of social affairs didn't allow this to happen, which is very weird," she added.

Maryam Fakhrou is another owner of a nursery, whose losses have reached over KD 90,000. "I had 14 employees at my nursery, which opened in January 2017. This closure due to the pandemic hit our business strongly, and I couldn't continue paying salaries. Many of my staff left the nursery, although I paid for their training courses and they got certificates, as well as their residency fees," she noted.

Fakhrou hasn't received any compensation. "The government didn't compensate me for the closure, so I filed a case at the court. Also, the landlord didn't relieve me from paying the rent or at least give a discount.

Continued on Page 2

News in brief

Egypt buries train crash dead

TAHTA, Egypt: Egypt buried the dead yesterday from a train collision that killed at least 19 people and injured 185, according to a revised toll, as investigators probed the country's latest deadly rail crash. Health Minister Hala Zayed told reporters that an initial toll of 32 killed in Friday's crash was revised down, while the number of injured rose from 165. — AFP

5 dead in Cairo bldg collapse

CAIRO: Five people died and 24 were wounded yesterday as a building collapsed in the Egyptian capital. "The governorate's crisis room was informed at 3:00 am of the collapse of a building consisting of a basement, a ground floor and nine (upper) floors," in the Gesr Suez district near Heliopolis in the east of the city, the Cairo governorate said in a statement. — AFP

Saudi oil terminal attacked

RIYADH: A projectile attack sparked a fire at an oil terminal in Saudi Arabia's Jizan province, the country's energy ministry said Friday, strongly condemning the "cowardly attack". On Thursday, the Saudi-led coalition said it intercepted several explosives-laden drones fired towards the kingdom by Yemen's Houthi rebels. — AFP

Manila to go into lockdown

MANILA: The Philippines announced that more than 24 million people in Metro Manila and four surrounding provinces will go into lockdown from tomorrow, as hospitals in the capital struggle to cope with a surge in coronavirus infections. People will have to work from home unless they are considered essential workers and public transport will be halted. All mass gatherings will be banned, night-time curfews from 6:00 pm to 5:00 am will be enforced and non-essential businesses will be shut. — AFP

Lebanon announces 24-hr curfew

BEIRUT: Lebanese authorities on Friday announced a three-day lockdown over the Catholic Easter weekend in April to try to avoid another surge in coronavirus cases. Authorities announced a 24-hour curfew from April 3 until the morning of April 6 to cover the Catholic Easter holiday weekend. The government's coronavirus taskforce warned against "gatherings at home and in closed places... during the upcoming holidays". — AFP

Cables severed during roadworks disrupt Internet

KUWAIT: Internet services in Kuwait were subjected to a severe slowdown yesterday after three cables were severed as a result of road development works in Umm Al-Haiman, Nuwaiseeb, Zour, Jahra and Salmi, which led to the disruption of nearly 60 percent of the country's Internet services. The Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority (CITRA) said emergency teams from the authority's international connections department were present at the sites.

Human error seen in Suez ship grounding

SUEZ: Egypt's Suez Canal chief said yesterday that "technical or human errors" could be behind the grounding of a huge container ship blocking the vital waterway, causing a backlog of over 300 vessels. Osama Rabie, head of the Suez Canal Authority, told reporters in Suez that the ship could possibly be afloat again by today night.

The crisis has crippled global supply chains, forcing companies to consider the expensive option of re-routing vessels around the southern tip of

Africa. Officials had previously blamed 40-knot gusts and a sandstorm that impeded visibility, but Rabie said yesterday that "strong winds and weather factors were not the main reasons for the ship's grounding - there may have been technical or human errors".

But he sounded an optimistic note when asked when the vessel might be freed. "We could finish today or tomorrow (Saturday or Sunday), depending on the ship's responsiveness" to tides, he said. Billions of dollars-worth of cargo are now stalled at either end of the vital shipping lane linking Asia and Europe.

That has forced cargo firms to decide whether to wait it out or take the longer, more expensive route around the Cape of Good Hope - at

Continued on Page 2

Director of the International Connections Department Jamal Sadiq told KUNA that there is joint coordination between the emergency teams, ministry of services and approved contractors to repair the cables as soon as possible. Late yesterday, the authority announced all the cables had been repaired.

Head of CITRA's communication sector Fahad Al-Fahad confirmed in a statement to KUNA that the authority seeks to reform Internet connectivity. A new local cable system will help avoid cuts in the future and reduce pressure on the Internet during peak hours, he added. CITRA, established in 2014, is responsible for overseeing the telecommunications sector, monitoring and protecting the interests of users and service providers and regulating the services of telecommunication networks in the country. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Three Internet cables were severed due to roadworks yesterday.



ISMAILIYA: A farmer harvests grass for cattle in front of the Taiwan-owned MV 'Ever Given' container ship lodged sideways and impeding all traffic across the Suez Canal yesterday. — AFP

Saudis rescue 40 dolphins

RIYADH: More than 40 dolphins beached in northwest Saudi Arabia due to heavy winds and unstable weather have been rescued but seven others died, official news agency SPA said Friday. SPA said they had been driven into shallow waters and ashore this week in Khor al-Thuqba on the Red Sea. Environment ministry staff, border guards, municipality workers, civil defense members and volunteers took part in the rescue, SPA said, guiding and moving the dolphins by hand from white sandy beaches into deeper waters. — AFP



Saudi volunteers guide stranded dolphins by hand to move them from shallow sandy beaches into deeper waters of the Red Sea on Friday. — AFP photos

Local

Preparations continue for resumption of recruitment of Filipino domestic helpers

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Preparations for the imminent resumption of hiring Filipino domestic helpers continues, especially by foreign and local recruitment agencies, to meet the demands of the Philippine Embassy in Kuwait and requirements of the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment. Recruitment agencies are busy refurbishing their offices, as some of them have been out of business for over a year.

"This was the longest ban imposed by the Philippine government, but it was also triggered by the coronavirus outbreak. If not for many uncontrolled events including the pandemic, talks on contracts and other provisions sought by the Philippines would have been resolved. We have been out of business for the last one year and a half. Since late 2019, the Philippine Embassy has suspended the deployment of domestic helpers, while 2020 was out of the question because of the pandemic. Now the first quarter of 2021 is over, and we are hoping we can start recruitment by April," said Mariam Macapudi, President of the Filipino Association of Secretaries of Employment Agencies in Kuwait (Fil-Aseak), a group comprising of 200 licensed recruitment agencies.

More time

Besides Fil-Aseak, another group of agencies recognized by the embassy is the Filipino Clients Relations Officers (FILCRO), with 90 active agencies. Macapudi said the demand of the Philippine Embassy to have decent accommodations for Filipino domestic helpers is being seriously fulfilled, but they are also requesting some more time to comply, since most of the accommodations rented prior to ban were given up. "Our sector has been out of business for the past 1.5 years. Having said that, we are also aware we cannot deploy our workers right away because of too many travel restrictions imposed by our government and also the Kuwaiti government. Newly-hired domestic helpers must also be quarantined, so I don't see the immediate need for accommodations," she said.

The new accommodations must be complete with all necessary amenities, including living rooms, TV, Internet, bathrooms, kitchen utensils and refrigerators and cooking ranges. "The requirements are fair and necessary. In fact, even before this condition was imposed, we already had accommodations for workers. But some agencies relinquished the accommodations during the pandemic because we did not know when we were going to be allowed to hire domestic helpers," Macapudi added.

Macapudi said her group is ready to comply with all the necessary requirements imposed by the Philippine government, including the requirement of accommodations and all the provisions mentioned in the tripartite contract.



KUWAIT: Pictures from inside accommodations prepared for Filipino domestic helpers.

Last week, Philippine Embassy's Labor Attache to Kuwait Nasser Mustafa said he is expecting the start of redeployment of Filipino domestic helpers by April. "Everything has been ironed out except for a few technical issues, like the inspection of accommodations of domestic helpers to be provided by the foreign recruitment offices in Kuwait, and some more briefings with the secretaries of recruitment agencies to explain to them the tripartite contract which we will be using from now onwards," said Mustafa, who is also the Philippine Labor Attache to Saudi Arabia.

Contract provisions

On March 23, the Philippine Labor Office in Kuwait held an online webinar with Philippine-based owners and the secretaries of agencies in Kuwait to explain to them the provisions of new tripartite contract.

"We were briefed and told to strictly comply with all the provisions in the tripartite contract or they will not hesitate to re-impose the ban again. That is why we are all carefully listening to the speakers, because it's a matter of bread

and butter for all of us. We do not want a ban at all. Many of my colleagues in the agency were out of jobs for many months. Some of them transferred to another jobs because we do not know when we are going to restart the business," said a secretary who did not want to be identified.

"One strict rule which they also want to impose is the reporting and monitoring of our deployed workers. They told us every month, they want to hear about the workers deployed. They said we need to call or at least have continuously open lines of communications with them, so that we are able to rescue the workers, with the authorities here, if necessary as soon as possible. So before handing the housemaids over to the sponsors, the sponsors must be briefed on our requirements and about the tripartite contract. If they do not agree, we are not going to provide them workers," she said.

Provisions in the new tri-party contract include providing the housemaid with decent and appropriate housing equipped with all the necessities, providing suitable food and clothing, providing medical treatment in case of sickness



pursuant to the healthcare insurance system of Kuwait, salary must be paid at the end of the month - not less than the designated amount signed by both parties, compensating the housemaid in case of injury while during work, employers must issue a valid residency for the duration of contract, handle all the expenses to bring the housemaid, and in case of death, the employer must also bear the expenses of the deceased body.

The new tripartite contract also mentions that the employer is not allowed to assign the worker outside Kuwait without an agreement from the worker. The housemaid is also allowed to use the phone outside working hours, provided that she maintains the privacy of the household and in a manner consistent with public morals. Working hours must be 12 hours daily and employers must allow the housemaid to rest for eight continuous hours.

They must have a fully-paid weekly day off, annual leave, end-of-service benefit or one full month for every year of service, plus a bonus equivalent to one month's salary annually. The employer is not allowed to keep the passport in their possession. The employer needs to

provide an economy ticket to the worker at the end of her contract, and in case of conflict the case will be referred to the Public Authority of Manpower.

On Jan 3, 2020, the Philippines implemented a ban on sending domestic workers to Kuwait following the killing of a housemaid named Jeanelyn Padernal Villavende on Dec 28, 2019. The ban was lifted a month later after consultations with the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), the filing of appropriate charges against the perpetrators and after Manila and Kuwait City agreed the full implementation of a harmonized employment contract for Filipino domestic workers. On Dec 30, 2020, a death verdict by hanging was handed by the criminal court to a Kuwaiti woman who killed Villavende. The woman's husband was sentenced to four years in jail for covering up and not reporting the crime.

As of June 2020, there were nearly 680,000 domestic workers in Kuwait - 325,000 from India and nearly 150,000 from the Philippines. Local and their international partner agencies are allowed to charge employers up to KD 990 for hiring new domestic helpers.



Kuwait reports 9 deaths, 1,198 cases

KUWAIT: Kuwait yesterday recorded 1,198 new coronavirus infections, taking total cases to 227,178, while nine fatalities over the past 24 hours raised the death toll to 1,279. The number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 currently stands at 14,539, with 250 in intensive care units, according to health ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad.

He revealed some 7,729 swab tests were conducted over the past day, taking total tests to 2,022,843, adding that the positive case to test ratio amounted to 15.5 percent over the past 24 hours. The ministry had earlier reported some 1,336 more people had recovered from the virus over the past day, raising total recoveries to 211,360, while the overall recovery rate stands at 93 percent. — KUNA

Human error seen in Suez...

Continued from Page 1

the cost of up to 12 additional days at sea. Egypt is also losing some \$12-14 million in revenue from the canal for each day it is closed, Rabie said. The MV Ever Given, which is longer than four football fields, has been wedged diagonally across the span of the canal since Tuesday, blocking the waterway in both directions.

The canal chief's timeline echoed comments Friday by the ship's owners, but the parent company of the salvage firm was less optimistic. Yukito Higaki, president of Japanese firm Shoen Kisen which owns the vessel, told local media on Friday that the ship could be freed from the canal bed by late yesterday.

But the executive director of Royal Boskalis, parent company of Smit Salvage which is in charge of the salvage operation, suggested the ship could be afloat again "at the start of next week". "We are already in the process of installing a crane on land," Peter Berdowski told a public television chat-show late Friday. "That will allow us to eventually remove all the containers from the foredeck, which could involve hundreds of containers."

But Nick Sloane, 59, a South African salvage master who was in charge of refloating Italy's Costa Concordia cruise liner, said using a crane to remove containers would take time. "If they have to do that, there's going to be a very long delay," he said. The blockage has caused a huge backlog of ships at both the Red Sea and Mediterranean ends of the 193-km-long canal, causing major delays in the delivery of oil and other products.

Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement (BSM) - the ship's technical manager - said efforts were focused on "dredging to remove sand and mud from around the port side of the vessel's bow". Salvage crews worked through the night, using floodlights and a large dredging machine.



ISMAILIYA: A building is pictured in the northeastern Egyptian city of Ismailiya, in front of the Taiwan-owned MV 'Ever Given' (Evergreen) container ship. — AFP

But the vessel with gross tonnage of 219,000 and deadweight of 199,000 has yet to budge, forcing global shipping giant Maersk and Germany's Hapag-Lloyd to look into re-routing around Africa. "Shipping companies are being forced to confront the specter of taking the far longer route around the Cape of Good Hope to get to Europe or the east coast of North America," said Lloyd's List, a shipping data and news company.

"The first container ship to do this is Evergreen's Ever Greet... a sister ship to Ever Given," it said. Lloyd's List said the blockage was holding up an estimated \$9.6 billion worth of cargo each day between Asia and Europe. The canal authority has said between 15,000 and 20,000 cu m of sand would have to be removed in order to reach a depth of 12-16 m and refloat the ship.

If those efforts fail, salvage teams will look to unload some of the Ever Given's cargo and take advantage of a spring high tide, due to start today night, to move the vessel. Plamen Natzkoff, an expert at VesselsValue, said teams would likely throw even more resources behind their efforts in the coming days to make the most of that opportunity. "If they don't manage to dislodge it during that high tide, the next high tide is not there for another couple of weeks, and that becomes problematic," he said. "The stakes are too high for it to take months." — AFP

Nurseries struggle to stay afloat as...

Continued from Page 1

He rather filed a case demanding payment of the rent for all the months that I stopped paying him," she said.

"I still have hope that I will reopen the nursery and make my business successful to reach my goal of educating kids and taking care of them to improve the entire community. I call upon the officials in charge to allow nurseries to reopen to place children in a suitable environment, which is their right," Fakhrou stressed.

The closure of the nurseries has had a negative psychological effect on children, and even their parents. According to Psychological Educational Counselor Ghadeer Safar, this long closure has destroyed some families. "I encountered a case of divorce caused by the constant presence of young

children at home. As the young child was at home all the time for months, he was bored and cried frequently, which affected the parents, who were always fighting and finally got divorced," she told Kuwait Times.

"The long stay at home has caused psychological problems for some children. We have noticed more cases of mental disorders and domestic violence. We have also registered an increased number of drownings among children due to a lack of activity. Linguistic delays, poor social communication skills and gaining weight are other problems that kids face due to their continuous stay at home, especially if they are living in a small apartment," Safar said.

"Not going to school or nursery caused the routines of most children to change. They stay awake till late at night and sleep till late in the morning, which affects their brains, which grows during the night. This causes physical and psychological health disorders. Also, many kids have become aggressive. Children are also missing out on skills they learn at the nursery, such as different languages. They miss interacting with other kids of their age, all of which affects their mental development," noted Safar.

Local

Kuwait curfew: What you need to know

KUWAIT: Kuwait imposed a one-month partial curfew from 6:00 pm to 5:00 am to help curb the sharp increase in COVID-19 cases registered in recent weeks. During the curfew hours, pharmacies, medical stores, co-operative societies and supermarkets are allowed to continue operation only through delivery services, while restaurants and cafes are allowed to deliver food from 6:00 pm to 10:00 pm every day. Also during the curfew, people are allowed to go to Fajr, Maghreb and Isha prayers at mosques only by walking, and the government later allowed people to practice walking and jogging from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm. The government meanwhile allowed salons and health clubs to reopen during the day after a one-month closure but kept restaurants and cafes closed except for drive-through and delivery services. Meanwhile, taxis are allowed to carry only two passengers.

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

Where to obtain a curfew pass?

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

Co-op delivery during curfew hours

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

Omariya Co-op
WhatsApp 6041-0067

Farwaniya Co-op
WhatsApp 6767-8211

Qairawan Co-op
WhatsApp 9000-3749

Jahra Co-op
WhatsApp 5160-2458

Abdulla Al-Mubarak Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-6338

Nuzha Co-op
WhatsApp 9784-5531

Khaitan Co-op
WhatsApp 6777-9745

Ardhiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6902-0779

Rabiya Co-op
WhatsApp 2438-8316

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

Salmiya Co-op
Tel: 22253225

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

Rawdha & Hawally
WhatsApp 9662-2883

Shaab Co-op
WhatsApp 9090-4455

Wafra Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-0539

Keifan Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-1719

Rehab Co-op
WhatsApp 9222-2358

Mishref Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-9900

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

Rumaihiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-0045

Bayan Co-op
WhatsApp 9004-2500

Fahaheel Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-9951

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

Salam Co-op
WhatsApp 9788-7832

Woman dead in Bayan house blaze; fires reported in Hawally, Khaitan



KUWAIT: Fire engines parked outside a Bayan house where a fire was reported Friday morning.

KUWAIT: A Kuwaiti woman died one day after she was saved from a burning house in Bayan, Kuwait Fire Force said yesterday. The victim was left in critical condition after the fire engulfed the ground floor of the building Friday morning. Firefighters had rushed to the scene, arriving four minutes after receiving a distress call about the incident, read a Kuwait Fire Force statement. They managed to rescue a total of six people stranded inside the three-floor home, including the woman, who emergency medical services declared was in "critical condition" at the time. An investigation has been launched into the incident after the blaze was extinguished.

In another case, Hawally and Salmiya firemen put out a blaze in a Hawally apartment Friday evening. The building was evacuated before firemen battled the flames which had engulfed the fourth-floor apartment. Separately, Sabhan and Farwaniya firemen battled a blaze in a Khaitan house Friday evening. The house was evacuated before firemen put the flames under control. No injuries were reported in both cases as investigations went underway to determine the cause of the fires.



Fire engines outside a building in Hawally where a fire was reported Friday evening.

NBK in collaboration with Refood supports low-income families

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is supporting Refood, a local non-profit company, in "Ramadan basket". This initiative is a food solidarity initiative that is launched as part of NBK's Annual Ramadan Program "Do Good Deeds in Ramadan".

The Ramadan Basket initiative aims to support 3000 families during Ramadan. The "Ramadan Basket" Packages are delivered by NBK and Refood volunteers via refrigerated trucks to maintain the quality and safety of products.

Talal Al-Turki, NBK Public Relations Manager, said "NBK in partnership with Refood is pleased to create an initiative that encourages sustainable solutions and reduces food waste. This partnership involves educating the Kuwaiti public about food waste and its dangers."

"At NBK, we are proud of this pioneering Kuwaiti youth in Refood. Hand in hand, we look forward to further enhance and promote the culture of reducing food waste and helping those in need, while at the same time conserving economic resources from waste," he added. On her turn, Refood's Founder Maryam Al-Eisa, said "The main objective of Refood is to bridge the gap between the excess food in the industry and the lack of food within the beneficiary communities."

"Our collaboration with NBK is a step forward.



Together we aim to raise awareness among members of society to prevent food from reaching landfills," she noted. "The excess food should be rechanneled to beneficiaries. This results in building the necessary connection between local suppliers and less fortunate members of society, producing a harmonious movement and balance between food production and consumption."

Refood provides a beneficiary registration service. Families that meet the eligibility requirements can register and subscribe to available Refood programs to benefit from the packages on a regular basis. NBK is committed to supporting promising Kuwaiti initiatives that aim to give back to Kuwait.

NBK has maintained its leadership as a pioneer in adopting initiatives for the benefit of our community. NBK is constantly seeking to further enhance its investments promoting a sustainable future.

It's worth mentioning that, Refood is a non-profit company that aims to reduce waste from the food and consumer goods sector by collecting excess products from local suppliers and manufacturers. These goods are collected and sorted into packages of food and consumer goods and distributed to local registered beneficiaries. Refood collaborates with the industry's largest food suppliers in Kuwait to save the largest possible quantity of products from ending up in landfills.

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News in brief

Kuwait condemns Houthi attacks

KUWAIT: Kuwait has condemned and denounced, in the strongest terms, the Houthi militia's continued attacks on civilians and vital areas in Saudi Arabia. The continuation, and escalation, of these "terrorist attacks," in spite of a globally-backed initiative launched by Riyadh to end the war in Yemen, "reflects the dangers of the Houthi militia's approach and its rejection of peace," read a ministry statement. Kuwait added that this also illustrates the group's refusal of international humanitarian law and its reluctance to end the war in Yemen. The Houthis insist on endangering Saudi Arabia's security and undermining the stability of the region as a whole, threatening global energy supplies and the safety of international maritime navigation, said the ministry. "This requires prompt and decisive international action, to deter and put an end to these actions," it said. Kuwait underlined that it extends its full support to Saudi Arabia and backing of all measures Riyadh takes to preserve security, stability and sovereignty. — KUNA

Oil price down

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti crude oil dropped by 16 cents to reach \$62.80 per barrel on Friday from \$62.96 pb a day prior, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said. Elsewhere, the price of Brent Crude saw a \$2.62 rise to reach \$64.57 pb as did West Texas Intermediate, which increased by \$2.41 to \$60.97 pb. — KUNA

Luxembourg, Kuwait sign agreements to strengthen, expand bilateral relations

LUXEMBOURG: Luxembourg and Kuwait signed two agreements recently, one in the aviation area and the other in the financial sector, that aim to further strengthen bilateral relations between the two countries. The first agreement on air service was signed by Luxembourg's foreign minister Jean Asselborn and on behalf of the State of Kuwait by its ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg, the European Union and NATO, Jassem Al-Budaiwi. The second agreement on the additional protocol to the bilateral tax treaty was signed by Luxembourg's finance minister Pierre Gramegna and Budaiwi. "I am very pleased that we sign this bilateral air service agreement today enhancing the already excellent bilateral relations," said Asselborn in statements to KUNA and Kuwait TV after signing the agreement at Luxembourg's foreign ministry. The agreement will provide a very strong legal framework to our national freight carrier CargoLux which is already flying to Kuwait once a week, he noted.

The additional protocol agreement provides untapped opportunities that exist in the area of financial services including Islamic finance, said Asselborn. He noted that in 2014 Luxembourg set up the first Sukuk listed in the euro currency. "I have good hope that these two agreements will substantially increase trade opportunities between our two countries in future," he said. Asselborn also expressed praise and appreciation for Kuwait's important role in the Gulf region and the Middle East. "Luxembourg appreciates the constructive role Kuwait is playing in the Gulf region and also in the Middle East. We are grateful for Kuwait's leadership in the reconstruction efforts for Iraq and to its humanitarian assistance to UNRWA and for the Syrian people," he said. "Kuwait was always a very, very important mediator and also a very, very important country in the region."

"Bilateral relations between Kuwait and Luxembourg have been excellent and they remain

excellent," he said noting that in recent years the two countries have exchanged high level visits and he hoped that the visit will continue once the pandemic crisis is over. Noting the passing away last year of His Highness the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Asselborn said he had met him several times. "He was a tireless advocate for peace, for dialogue and for humanitarian action," he stressed. "He will be missed by all of us and I am convinced that his legacy lives on thanks to his successor His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah," he added.

Meanwhile, Budaiwi said that these two agreements are a milestone in the relationship between Kuwait and Luxembourg. "We truly believe that both sides will benefit from these two agreements," he said. The additional protocol agreement, Kuwait as one of the major countries in the world that has a Sovereign Fund and depends on foreign investments, he said, provides safety and assurance to its investments outside Kuwait. He noted that Luxembourg is considered to be one of the major and important financial centers in the world. "Also this agreement covers aspects that Luxembourg provides in the sector of Islamic sukuk and in this regard we are very happy and honored to cover this aspect," said Budaiwi. "We look forward to boosting our financial relationship with Luxembourg in many aspects," he said.

On the aviation agreement, the Kuwait ambassador said "it is a very important agreement that provides two important goals for Kuwait." The first one is to boost aviation cooperation between Kuwait and Luxembourg and that it is now regulated and that all sides are benefiting from this aviation relationship. The other goal that Kuwait achieved with this agreement is that it is signed in compliance with EU regulations, he said. Therefore this agreement will provide the basis for Kuwait's future aviation relations with the other 26 EU member states, he clarified. Another important



LUXEMBOURG: Kuwait's ambassador Jassem Al-Budaiwi (left) and foreign minister of Luxembourg Jean Asselborn after signing the aviation agreement. — KUNA

aspect is that Kuwait is now in the process of building its state-of-the-art airport which will finish in the next few years and will serve many airlines and millions of passengers. So today's agreement with Luxembourg and with hopefully with other EU countries in the future will provide with the aspects for Kuwait's airport according to international standards, added Budaiwi.

Pierre Gramegna in statements to KUNA and Kuwait TV, expressed his happiness to have signed this "important agreement" with Kuwait noting that financial services are very important in Luxembourg. "We are in terms of investments funds in the second largest place in the world," he said. "We have more than 120 banks in Luxembourg and we are an important investment partner for Kuwait and the other way round you have huge reserves not only for oil but sovereign fund that is very powerful and could use the expertise of our financial sector," said the Luxembourg finance minister. "Thanks to the agreement that we made today our cooperation is going to be very fruitful," he added. — KUNA

UNHCR, Fiqh Academy sign MoU to alleviate plight of refugees

KUWAIT: UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), an entity of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), signed recently a five-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in efforts to support vulnerable refugees and internally displaced persons worldwide. The MoU was signed by Dr Koutoub



Moustafa Sano, Secretary General of IIFA and UNHCR's Senior Advisor on Islamic Philanthropy and Representative to the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries, Khaled Khalifa.

The partnership between the two entities will provide UNHCR with the necessary scholarly support and jurisprudential advice to further strengthen its activities in the area of Islamic philanthropy. This includes outlining Sharia provisions related to the collection and distribution of Zakat and Sadaqah funds for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) worldwide, in addition to issuing necessary legal rulings, fatwas or statements in relation to humanitarian and displacement emergencies. Furthermore, IIFA will work together with UNHCR to expand its network in OIC countries in order to scale-up humanitarian solutions and help alleviate the plight of the forcibly displaced.

During the virtual signing ceremony, Dr Koutoub Moustafa Sano, stated: "This collaboration is a new opportunity to join the tremendous humanitarian work the UN Refugee agency is doing. This milestone marks the continuity of our work with UNHCR in efforts to support as many vulnerable refugees and displaced families as possible. We will always urge Muslims to support refugees with their Zakat and Sadaqah and remind them of the positive impact of giving on the people in need, themselves, and the entire community. The International Islamic Fiqh Academy will continue, by all means, support-

ing the effort of the UN refugee agency until there isn't a single refugee worldwide."

Khaled Khalifa said: "We at UNHCR would like to express our sincere gratitude for the long-term cooperation of IIFA and its unwavering commitment to support the activities of UNHCR's Refugee Zakat Fund. Zakat and Sadaqah, among other forms of Islamic philanthropy, hold vast potential to help address pressing humanitarian issues, including the refugee crisis, and plays a significant role in the provision of lifesaving support to the most marginalized and vulnerable communities across the globe. We look forward to working together with IIFA to further unlock the power of Islamic philanthropy for the benefit of those who have been forcibly displaced worldwide."

Since 2019, UNHCR's Refugee Zakat Fund has been effectively harnessing the power of Zakat (and Sadaqah) to transform the lives of the world's most vulnerable displaced populations, especially in OIC countries including Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Bangladesh, and Mauritania. The particular provision of cash and goods assistance empowers beneficiaries to address immediate needs including shelter, food, education, healthcare and debt repayment. The fund is backed by more than ten fatwas, one of which was issued by IIFA in late 2020, and is subject to strict governance, ensuring the utmost transparency at every step - from donation to provision of assistance.

ABK receives appreciation from UNHCR

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.



KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador to Kuwait met recently with Minister of Commerce and Industry Dr Abdullah Al-Salman, and they discussed bilateral relations, ways of further enhancing and diversifying bilateral trade and investments, as well as matters of mutual interest.

FRONTLINE HEROES OF KUWAIT

Student Art Competition 2021



It is our pleasure to welcome each and every youngster to our Student Art Competition. We hope that everyone is ready to create beautiful artworks and show support for our heroes of Kuwait! We're searching for great art – so get your paintbrushes, color pencils, crayons and markers ready. Let your talent flow and start painting. Good luck to our young artists!

- The competition is open to students aged 6-18 years with categories (6 - 8 years) (9 - 11 years) (12 - 14 years) (15 -18 years) and special abilities students.
- The competition is open to all schools in Kuwait (government and private).
- Submissions are open from February 14, 2021 till March 31, 2021.
- 5 winners from each category will receive valuable prizes.
- All participants will receive a certificate of appreciation.
- All schools and individuals interested in participating in this competition are welcome.
- Participants in the ages 6 - 8 years may use marker colors only.
- You can use any drawing sheet, but of A3 size.
- All artwork must be hand drawn and not computer generated.
- All paintings should be submitted by email at painting@kuwaittimes.net in PDF format ONLY.
- Participant must include on the bottom of the artwork the following: name, age, email address, phone number and school in legible font.

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New Yorkers patrol after surge in anti-Asian attacks

Myanmar junta puts on show of force as 24 protesters killed



Activists of the Hifazat-e Islam group clash with police in Chittagong on Friday during a demonstration against Indian Prime minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh. (Inset) Modi hands over the Gandhi Peace Prize given posthumously to the late Bangladesh's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to his daughters - Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (center) and Sheikh Rehana - in Dhaka. — AFP



Bangladesh braces for violence

Five shot dead in demonstrations against Modi visit

DHAKA: Hundreds of people demonstrated outside a key mosque in the Bangladesh capital yesterday, as the country braced for violence a day after deadly protests by hardline Islamists against a visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The clashes, which began Friday at the main mosque in the capital Dhaka, spread to several key districts in the Muslim majority nation of 168 million, leaving five people dead and scores injured.

Facebook has been restricted in the country, a company spokesman said, after users complained they could not access the site since late Friday afternoon as images and reports of the violence were shared in social media. A spokesman for the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), which also acts as a reserve paramilitary force to maintain law and order, said it had deployed troops in parts of the country since Friday night.

"With the instructions of the home ministry and in aid of the civil administration, the required number of BGB has been deployed in different districts of the country," Lieutenant Colonel Fayzur Rahman told AFP, without disclosing the numbers involved. Rahman, who is the operations director of the force, said there had been no reports of violence after their

deployment. "Situation is normal," he said.

But defying the security measures, hundreds of Islamists gathered at the Baitul Mukarram Masjid, the country's biggest mosque situated in central Dhaka, to protest police shooting at protesters and Modi's tour to the Muslim majority country. An AFP correspondent at the scene said the protesters belonged to Hefazat-e-Islam, the country's largest hardline Islamist outfit behind Friday's protests in over a dozen places including its heartland in Chittagong. They chanted slogans against Modi, the correspondent said.

Several thousand supporters of Hefazat also staged protests at Hathazari, the rural town outside the country's second largest city, which witnessed the worst violence yesterday when four protesters were shot during demonstrations. Hefazat spokesman Jakaria Noman Foyez told AFP around 10,000 students of Hathazari Madrasa were on the road, blocking a key highway linking the port city with the country's hill districts.

Ruhul Amin, the government administrator of the town, said Hefazat supporters put up makeshift bricks wall and dug up the road as vehicles, preventing vehicles from moving on the roads. "There

is no violence," he said. Mohammad Jahangir, a senior Chittagong police officer, said border guards, police and the elite Rapid Action Battalion have been deployed at the town to tackle any untoward situation.

The disturbances came as Bangladesh marked 50 years of independence with rights groups calling for an end to growing authoritarianism including forced disappearances and extra-judicial killings. Police said four bodies of members of Hefazat were brought to Chittagong Medical College Hospital after violence erupted at Hathazari, where the group's main leaders are based. A supporter of the group was also killed in clashes in the eastern border town of Brahmanbaria, another key bastion of Hefazat.

Strike call

A Hefazat spokesman said tens of thousands of supporters of the group demonstrated on Friday to protest against Modi's two-day tour to Bangladesh. The group had called nationwide demonstrations for yesterday and a strike today to protest against the police's actions and firing on "peaceful" protesters. Hefazat is known for its nationwide network and

large-scale protests demanding Bangladesh introduce blasphemy laws. In 2013 police clashed with tens of thousands of Hefazat supporters in Dhaka, leaving nearly 50 people dead. As well as Hefazat, a diverse range of Bangladeshi groups - including students, leftists and other Islamist outfits - have been staging protests against Modi's visit.

They accuse Modi and his Hindu-nationalist government of stoking religious tensions and inciting anti-Muslim violence including in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002 when 1,000 people died. Modi was Gujarat's chief minister at the time. Modi visited two key Hindu temples in rural districts of southern Bangladesh yesterday.

As protests spread, Facebook users complained they could not access the site. Post and telecommunications minister Mustafa Jabbar said his ministry was not responsible for the stoppage. "This is not our decision," he told AFP, adding it was up to the law enforcement agencies to say what actions they had taken. "We're aware that our services have been restricted in Bangladesh. We're working to understand more and hope to have full access restored as soon as possible," a Facebook spokesperson said. — AFP

One dead, bombs thrown as restive Indian state votes

KOLKATA: One person was killed and bombs were thrown at a polling station yesterday as India's hotbed of political violence West Bengal held elections, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking to unseat one of his fiercest opponents. Victory in the eastern region of 90 million would be a major achievement for Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party as it looks to expand further its power base beyond its Hindi-speaking northern heartlands.

In a state where thousands have died since the 1960s, fresh incidents of violence were reported yesterday with police saying a mob threw bombs at one polling station, seriously injuring an officer. The president of the BJP in the state, Dilip Ghosh, said one of their supporters was killed by members of the region's ruling Trinamool Congress party in the early hours. "His body was found in the compound of his mud hut," he said.

Assailants also attacked the vehicles of at least two election candidates, police said. Bank employee Bablu Das, 32, said voting was taking place in his district in the west of the state "in an atmosphere of violence" and that many people were too scared to vote. Because of extra security the election is being held over eight phases concluding on April 29.

The campaign has seen huge rallies despite a sharp rise in coronavirus cases in India in recent weeks, including around 800,000 people attending one Modi event in Kolkata. The northeastern state of Assam also went to the polls yesterday in the first of three phases, while Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry vote on April 6. Results from all are due on May 2.



A paramilitary officer stands guard as voters join a line to cast their vote outside a polling station during Phase 1 of West Bengal's legislative election in Purulia district yesterday. — AFP

Challenge from 'Didi'

West Bengal is the most important with the BJP pushing hard to win power in the largely Bengali-speaking region for the first time. But the party faces a tough opponent in incumbent chief minister Mamata Banerjee, 66, a firebrand nicknamed "Didi" ("Big Sister"), and her Trinamool Congress party.

Activists from both parties have been shot or hacked to death, their bodies sometimes hung from trees. Crude bombs, available on the black market for as little as 100 rupees (\$1.40), have been used to kill, maim or intimidate voters. The mutilated body of one BJP activist, Sukhdev Pramanik, was found face-down in a pond in the village of Chandpara in December. Sumita, the mother of Shoubhik Dolai, a Trinamool activist killed last month, told AFP that "they pumped bullets into him... I got to know when I saw the news on TV".

Anti-Modi front

Arati Jerath, a political analyst, said Banerjee has been at the forefront of trying to form an "anti-Modi opposition

front". "Conquering her would put an end to that kind of challenge," she told AFP. In Assam, the BJP leads an alliance and is hopeful of retaining power against a strong coalition of Congress and smaller regional parties.

The state, home to 32 million people, is polarized along ethnic and religious lines, with immigration from neighboring Bangladesh one of the biggest campaign issues. A "citizenship list" in Assam state in 2019 left off almost two million people unable to prove they were Indian, many of them Muslims, a process many fear the BJP wants to roll out nationwide.

Home minister Amit Shah, Modi's close ally, told a rally in Assam on Friday that the BJP would bring laws against "love jihad" and "land jihad", referring to Muslim men luring Hindu women into marriage and conversion, and Muslims stealing land. Several BJP-run states have introduced laws against "love jihad" although it is an overwhelmingly fictitious phenomenon, with many among India's 200 million Muslims seeing it as Modi's latest assault on their minority community. — AFP

Drone program gives Houthis regional reach

DUBAI: Six years after Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen, booby-trapped drones have made the Houthi rebels a potent threat, enabling them to target distant Saudi cities and heavily guarded oil facilities. While Riyadh has been locked in a hunt for an elusive enemy, the guerrillas have made great strides in developing unmanned aerial vehicles that have become their go-to weapon after long relying on Cold War-era ballistic missiles.

The "Made in Yemen" UAVs have become a complex arsenal that the rebels, famed for their infantry skills in Yemen's rugged mountains, are steadily turning into an air force. Here is a look at the types of drones in Houthi hands and the threats they pose:

Homegrown?

Saudi Arabia and the United States have long accused Iran of supplying

the Houthis with weapons, a charge Tehran denies. However, the rebels possess an array of military equipment, including tanks and Scud missiles bought from the Soviet Union in the 1970s, that they acquired from Yemeni army depots after taking control of the capital Sanaa in 2014.

As for the UAVs, the rebels say they manufacture them domestically, although analysts say they contain smuggled Iranian components. According to a report by the Missile Defense Project of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), components are smuggled from neighboring Oman into Yemen's nominally government-held Mahra province, and then by small boat along the coast.

A UN report in 2019 confirmed that the Houthis "retained access to the critical components, such as engines and guidance systems, from abroad". In September that year, Saudi energy giant Aramco's Abqaiq processing plant and Khurais oilfield were hit by air strikes, halving the kingdom's crude output. The rebels claimed the attack, but Riyadh and Washington accused Iran of carrying it out. — AFP



SANAA: Supporters of Yemen's Houthi rebels attend on Friday a rally marking the sixth anniversary of the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen. — AFP

International

New Yorkers patrol after surge in anti-Asian attacks

Volunteers include spa worker, waiter, mechanic

NEW YORK: Wearing bright safety vests and carrying walkie-talkies, volunteers patrol a Chinese neighborhood in New York to protect Asian Americans against a surge of pandemic-era violence after deadly mass shootings at Asian-owned spas in Atlanta. "We want to show our presence so that any person who wants to commit a crime will think again," says Richard Lee, team leader of Public Safety Patrol (PSP). The men and women from various professions walk the streets of Chinatown in Flushing, Queens nightly in groups of around eight to reassure scared residents and help catch any would-be attackers.

The PSP, which started its walkabouts on Monday, is similar to other civil patrol teams that have mobilized in San Francisco and Oakland in response to the spike in attacks against Asian Americans since the outbreak of coronavirus. Vice president Kenny Li quickly recruited more than 240 volunteers, including waiters, office workers and lawyers through social media and word of mouth. They coordinate their activities via a WhatsApp group and Facebook. The vast majority have no self-defense training, just a desire to help others during their free time.

"Don't have physical contact with anybody," Lee, a 42-year-old retired police officer, instructs them before the three-hour patrol. "You don't know what kind of weapons they might have. Our job is to be the eyes and ears for the (police department)." Each volunteer receives a stack of Chinese-language

leaflets explaining their work, which they distribute on their rounds, and whistles in case they need to catch the attention of police who themselves have upped patrols in Chinese neighborhoods. The volunteers explain to residents that they should call 911 if they witness harassment, even if they don't speak English, because the police will put them through to a Mandarin or Cantonese speaker.

"It's also about educating," says vice president Li. Fifty-two-year-old restaurant worker Mandy Yong says the sight of the squad makes her feel "very safe." "When I see them I feel okay about shopping and helping our community's economy," she tells AFP. Most volunteers are of Asian descent but not all. German Perez, originally from Mexico, joined PSP after passing them on the street. "Our skin may be a different color, our languages may be different but I think we are all equal. Generally we all came to this country for the same reasons," the 47-year-old car mechanic said in Spanish.

Racist stereotypes

Anti-Asian hate crimes almost tripled from 49 to 122 last year across 16 major cities, even as overall hate crime fell seven percent, according to a recent report by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism. Activists say former president Donald Trump and political allies fueled the attacks by calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus" and "China plague" and several of New York's mayoral candidates have joined together to denounce the violence.



NEW YORK: In this photo members of the Public Safety Patrol, a volunteer anti-hate crime group, prepare for a patrol in a car park in the Flushing neighborhood of Queens, New York. — AFP

In New York City, home to more than a million people of Asian descent, this past weekend saw five incidents that police said they are investigating as possible anti-Asian hate crimes. Hua Tong, a beauty spa worker like most of six women of Asian descent killed in Atlanta, signed up because she wanted to dispel racist stereotypes that portray Asian women as meek. "It's up to us to take on the responsibility of protecting ourselves. We have to speak out," said

the 42-year-old in Mandarin via an interpreter.

Stereotypes, including the "model minority myth," have depicted people of East Asian descent as obedient and reluctant to complain. In the wake of the attacks, they are increasingly organizing, campaigning online, raising funds, holding marches and forming groups to escort elderly Asian citizens outside. "We cannot be silenced anymore," said Lee. —AFP

News in brief

Biden expects to run in 2024

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden said Thursday his "expectation" is to run for reelection in 2024, an apparent effort to douse speculation that the oldest person to assume the office will step down after a single term. The Democratic president also attacked Republican efforts to limit voting, describing the actions in dozens of states that would make it more difficult for millions of people to cast ballots as "sick" and "un-American." —AFP

500 charged for COVID fraud

WASHINGTON: Nearly 500 people have been charged in the United States for fraud schemes involving more than half a billion dollars in COVID-19 relief, the Justice Department said Friday. "The Department of Justice has led an historic enforcement initiative to detect and disrupt COVID-19 related fraud schemes," Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a statement. A total of 474 defendants have been charged in cases involving attempts to fraudulently obtain over \$569 million dollars, the department said. Garland said the anti-fraud operation "sends a clear and unmistakable message to those who would exploit a national emergency to steal taxpayer-funded resources from vulnerable individuals and small businesses." —AFP

Salmond launches new party

EDINBURGH: Scotland's former first minister Alex Salmond on Friday announced a shock political comeback, leading the launch of a new pro-independence party to run in pivotal upcoming Scottish parliament elections. The former Scottish National Party (SNP) leader, who was first minister from 2007 to 2014 before stepping down after losing a referendum on independence, said the Alba Party would be a "new political force" complementing the SNP. Salmond added the surprise move, which follows months of clashes with his successor Nicola Sturgeon over her handling of sexual harassment claims against him, would aim to deliver a "supermajority" for independence in the elections. —AFP

Magufuli laid to rest

DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania: Tanzania's late president John Magufuli was laid to rest Friday in his ancestral village in the country's northwest after his sudden death last week from an illness shrouded in mystery. Nicknamed the "Bulldozer" for his leadership style, Magufuli was buried in Chato after nearly a week being mourned by crowds in various cities as his casket was moved around the country. Magufuli died aged 61 from what authorities say was a heart condition, after a mysterious absence of almost three weeks, and questions remain over the true cause of his death which the opposition says was from COVID-19. Tens of thousands of mourners flocked to see his body in state in the cities of Dar es Salaam, Dodoma, Zanzibar, Mwanza and Geita, weeping and throwing petals as it passed in a motorcade. —AFP

On US-Mexico border, a revolving door for migrants

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico: Honduran migrant Fernando Sanchez paid a trafficker \$7,000 to smuggle him to the United States with his three-year-old daughter, but they spent just days on US soil before being deported. For many undocumented migrants, particularly adult men, what they hoped would be an open door thanks to US President Joe Biden has turned out to be a revolving door back to Mexico. Sanchez was deported to the Mexican border city Ciudad Juarez along with dozens of other migrants under a rule known as Title 42 that was introduced a year ago to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Now in debt to friends who loaned him money to pay the trafficker, the 38-year-old still clings to hope that Biden, who he calls "our president," will help him. "I know that Joe Biden, our president, can open the door for us and say 'come in everyone who is suffering,'" he said. Sanchez, now staying with his daughter at a shelter in Ciudad Juarez, asked AFP to change his name to avoid potential problems with the US authorities in the future. While some migrants,

notably unaccompanied minors and women with small children, are now being allowed to stay, men who are caught by US border patrols are usually sent back quickly.

In February, the US Customs and Border Protection agency detained about 100,000 people at the southern border—a 28 percent increase over January. Most came from Central American nations Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, which are wracked by poverty and gang-related violence.

'It wasn't true'

Undocumented migrants—some with children in their arms—cross the Rio Grande river between Mexico and the United States day and night in the hope of obtaining asylum. AFP reporters saw a girl who appeared to be around nine years old quickly splash through the river and wait next to a column on the other side for the border patrol to arrive. In February, more than 9,000 unaccompanied children, mostly from Mexico and Central American, made the crossing. Not all of them make it alive: one nine-year-old was



CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico: Central American asylum-seeker migrants who were airlifted from Brownsville to El Paso, in Texas, to be expelled from the United States, cross the Paso del Norte International Border Bridge into Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua State, Mexico. — AFP

found dead this month on an island in the middle of the river, US authorities said Friday.

Many migrants say they have been filled with hope by Biden's immigration reforms, although the US president has urged them not to come. "They began to come thinking that the border had already been opened but it wasn't true," said Father Francisco Javier Calvillo, head of Casa del Migrante, one of the main shelters in

Ciudad Juarez. Figures from the Mexican authorities underline the rising tide of people heading north. The number of undocumented migrants detected in Mexico has risen 18 percent so far this year—to 31,492 — compared with the same period of 2020, the National Migration Institute said this week. Three-quarters of them were male adults—mainly Hondurans—while 14 percent were women and 11 percent were minors. —AFP



BATA, Equatorial Guinea: This video grab obtained by AFPTV from ASONGA TV shows an aerial view of destroyed houses after accidental blasts at the Nkoa Ntoma military camp in Equatorial Guinea's economic hub Bata. —AFP

E Guinea survivors count their luck and misfortune

BATA, Equatorial Guinea: On the afternoon of March 7, 2021, Sisto Asumu's life was changed in an instant. An enormous blast shook a military camp just a hundred meters from the house where the 26-year-old was living with his uncle and aunt on the outskirts of Bata, Equatorial Guinea's economic capital. Stocks of explosives in the camp had accidentally detonated, obliterating neighboring residential areas, killing 107 people and injuring 615 others. "I was sleeping and suddenly the roof just caved in on me," Asumu recalls, wincing. "Even thunder frightens me now."

But like countless others who survived the blast, three weeks later Asumu and his family are wondering how they will contend with hunger and homelessness. "We sleep in the church because our house is destroyed." Other victims seek refuge with relatives in other villages, stay with friends or pile into makeshift shelters. All are hoping for some kind of aid.

'Nothing left'

A chain of explosions reduced the military camp and surrounding area to piles of rubble that stretch for kilometers. Bulldozers are still clearing wreckage nearly three weeks later. On an empty lot, the shells of

wrecked cars are piled on top of each other. A team of explosives experts from the United States is on site working to defuse any unexploded ordnance. In the disaster's aftermath President Teodoro Obiang Nguema, whose 42-year reign makes him Africa's longest-serving leader, blamed local farmers for allowing stubble-burning to go out of control, soldiers at the camp for "negligence" in storing the explosives.

Soraya, 27, was housed at Nkoa Ntoma with her soldier husband and children when the explosion happened. "I don't know what happened—I just heard 'BOOM', the roof fell and the walls collapsed," she says. "I didn't even know where my three children were—other people took care of them and, thank God, none of them died." Although the official toll of 107 does not specify ages, witnesses tell AFP that many children were among the casualties.

Upon returning to the ruins of her house, Soraya found that someone had stolen her savings. "I had 190,000 CFA francs (285 euros)," she laments, "and there was nothing left." Bata is home to around 800,000 of the 1.4 million total population in Equatorial Guinea, a state that enjoys oil and gas wealth but where most people live below the poverty line. The government says it has released 10 billion CFA francs—about 15 million euros—to help the victims. "I was given 500,000 francs and a mattress," reports Florencia Mbang happily. But many others have seen no sign of help yet, like Luisa Ada, 33. "My name is not on the lists even though my neighborhood officer came and marked us down, my six children and myself," says the widow, "I've had no help and my house is destroyed." —AFP

South Africa's bruising fight for free education

JOHANNESBURG: When South African student Itumeleng Chalele left his home town of Qwaqwa — once a tribal "bantustan" where blacks were contained during apartheid — he was bursting with hope. Armed only with his admission document and money for the registration fees, he set off in 2016 to begin a degree in logistics at the University of Johannesburg. But five years later, the 23-year-old has accrued the equivalent of nearly \$9,000 (7,600 euro) in student debt, despite benefiting from a partial government grant. In January, he was locked out of his honors program. "It has been a difficult experience. Every year has been tough," said Chalele.

Raised by his grandmother in a household of seven, including an unemployed uncle, the aspiration was to clamber out of the poverty that has marked his life. But last week, he joined the hundreds of university students who demonstrated across South Africa demanding free education. They blockaded roads, torched trash bins, forced businesses to pull down their shutters and clashed with police.

'Stressed out'

Sporadic protests began in early January after Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande announced that some students would be excluded from a government-sponsored tuition aid scheme. The scheme was left short of funds after budget cuts in response to revenues undermined by COVID-19's economic impact. In the gravest incident of this year's unrest, a 35-year-old city planner caught between the Johannesburg police and students was shot dead. Amogelo Mabote, a 21-year-old studying quantity surveying at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), joined the protests after running into financial hurdles at re-registration.

"It has been rough. I did not have the 9,000 rand (\$600/500 euro) they were asking for registration. My parents were stressed out," she said, sounding distraught although she did eventually secured readmission into the top-tier university. Finding funding has "been a real struggle," she said—she still owes the university the equivalent of \$2,300. —AFP

International

Myanmar junta puts on show of force as 24 protesters killed

Junta leader warns acts of so-called 'terrorism' are unacceptable

NAYPYIDAW, Myanmar: Myanmar security forces killed at least 24 protesters yesterday, witnesses said, in violent crackdowns on demonstrations across the country as the military regime staged a major show of force for its annual Armed Forces Day parade. The nation has been in turmoil since the generals ousted and detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in February, triggering a major uprising demanding a return to democracy. The country's capital Naypyidaw saw a grand parade of troops and military vehicles in the morning, with a speech by junta leader Min Aung Hlaing warning that acts of so-called "terrorism" were unacceptable.

By afternoon, as protesters continued to come out across Myanmar, AFP verified at least 24 people were killed—though local media put the death toll at far higher. Violence erupted all over the central Mandalay region as security forces opened fire at protesters, killing at least nine in four different cities—one of them a doctor in Wundwin and a 14-year-old girl in Meiktila, according to rescue workers on the ground. "Four men were brought to us dead," an emergency worker from Mandalay city, Myanmar's second largest, told AFP, as she frantically tried to treat dozens of injured. A protester in Myingyan, who witnessed a man killed when he was shot in the neck, said the death toll will likely grow as security forces have continued shooting across his city.

"Today is like a revolution day for us." In the northeastern Shan state, security forces opened fire on university students—killing at least three—while in the tourist city of Bagan, a march through ancient pagodas turned into mayhem when one protesting tour guide was shot dead. Across Yangon, plumes of smoke rose above the former capital which has emerged as a hotspot for unrest in recent weeks. An overnight gathering in front of a police station in the city's south—where demonstrators called for the release of their friends—became violent around midnight, and the shooting only stopped around 4:00 am, said a resident. At least five died, one of them a

20-year-old boy in her neighborhood whose funeral she will attend.

"The conditions on the ground is very scary," she told AFP. A baby playing on the street in a northern Yangon township was hit in the eye with a rubber bullet when police opened fire at nearby protesters. She was rushed to the hospital by her parents. Further north near the notorious Insein prison, a pre-dawn rally—which had protesters wearing bicycle helmets and shielded by sandbag barricades—devolved into chaos when soldiers started shooting.

At least one was killed—a 21-year-old police officer, Chit Lin Thu, who had joined the anti-coup movement. "He was shot in the head and died at home," his father Joseph told AFP. "I am extremely sad for him, but at the same time, I am proud of my son".

'Enemy of democracy'

During a speech at the Armed Forces Day parade, junta leader General Min Aung Hlaing once again defended the coup and pledged to yield power after new elections. But he also issued another threat to the anti-coup movement that has gripped the country since he took charge, warning that acts of "terrorism which can be harmful to state tranquility and security" were unacceptable. "The democracy we desire would be an undisciplined one if they pay no respect to and violate the law," he said.

Armed Forces Day commemorates the start of local resistance to the Japanese occupation during World War II, and usually accompanies a military parade attended by foreign officers and diplomats. The junta announced that eight international delegations attended yesterday's event, including China and Russia—with state media broadcasting Russian deputy defense minister Alexander Fomin in the audience. According to Russian news agency Interfax, the defense ministry announced that Russian-made military equipment—tanks, fighter jets, and helicopters—were included in the parade.



NAYPYIDAW, Myanmar: This screengrab provided via AFPTV and taken from a broadcast by Myawaddy TV in Myanmar yesterday shows an annual parade put on by the military to mark Armed Forces Day in the capital Naypyidaw. —AFP

A group of ousted parliamentarians working underground against the junta—the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the Burmese word for "parliament"—condemned the show of might after a bloody seven weeks. "We should not allow these military generals to celebrate after they killed our brothers and sisters," said its UN special envoy, who goes by the moniker Dr Sasa, during a Facebook live stream of a "Global Virtual Protest". "They are the enemy of democracy... We will never surrender until democracy is achieved, until federal democracy is built, and until freedom comes to our people."

Growing death toll

Yesterday's bloodshed adds to the current toll of

nearly 330 killed in demonstrations against the coup, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group. The day before, a message was broadcast on state television, warning young people not to participate in what it called a "violent movement". "Learn the lesson from those who have brutally died... do not die for nothing," it said.

The protest movement has also included widespread strikes by civil servants, which have brought many basic government functions to a halt. Coming on top of a COVID pandemic that hit Myanmar hard, the events since the coup have also struck the economy. The World Bank has warned the country faces a huge 10 percent slump in GDP in 2021. —AFP

Former US CDC head thinks coronavirus came from Chinese lab

WASHINGTON: The former director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention believes the coronavirus escaped from a laboratory in China, he said in an interview that aired Friday, Robert Redfield, who served in the top public health role under former president Donald Trump, told CNN: "If I was to guess, this virus started transmitting somewhere in September, October, in Wuhan, China."

Stressing he was offering "only an opinion," he added: "I am of the point of view that I still think the most likely etiology of this pathogen in Wuhan was from a laboratory, escaped. "Other people don't believe that. That's fine—science will eventually figure it out. It's not unusual for respiratory pathogens that are being worked on in a laboratory to infect a laboratory worker."

The central Chinese city is home to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which has experimented

extensively with bat coronaviruses. "That's not implying any intentionality, it's my opinion. But I am a virologist, I have spent my life in virology," Redfield added. "I do not believe this somehow came from a bat to a human and, at that moment in time, the virus that came to the human became one of the most infectious viruses that we know in humanity for human-to-human transmission. "Normally when a pathogen goes from a zoonotic to human, it takes a while for it to figure out how to become more and more efficient in human-to-human transmission. I just don't think this makes biological sense."

CNN host Sanjay Gupta asked Redfield if he thought the virus was engineered inside the lab to become more efficient at transmission. The former CDC director replied: "Let's just say I have coronavirus that I'm working on. "Most of us in the lab, we're trying to grow virus. We try to help make it grow better and better... so we can do experiments and figure out about it."

Redfield's views are at odds with the dominant theory among experts that the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which is genetically related to coronaviruses in bats, crossed into humans naturally, probably via an intermediate animal. A large proportion of the ini-

dem. But now the United Nations warns of an even bigger deluge as Myanmar's legal economy tanks, following weeks of nationwide unrest and strike action following the military takeover.

"If past actions are an indicator of what's coming, then we're likely to see another increase in synthetic drug production," said Jeremy Douglas of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. He told AFP that organized crime groups and allied militias across the border were likely working to strengthen their positions while Myanmar was in turmoil. "The best way to make big money fast is the drug trade, and the pieces are in place to scale up," Douglas said. Synthetic drug production is already the number one revenue source for several insurgent groups and militias in lawless pockets of Myanmar close to



WASHINGTON: In this file photo Director of the Centers for Disease Control Robert Redfield speaks during a White House Coronavirus Task Force press briefing in the James S. Brady Briefing Room of the White House in Washington, DC. —AFP

tial cases reported in December 2019 and January 2020 were directly linked to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan City, which sold seafood as well as wild and farmed animal species. It is suspected that the market could have been the source of the outbreak, or played a significant role in amplifying it.—AFP

the borders of Thailand and Laos.

The frontier traversing the three countries makes up the "Golden Triangle" that has for decades been the hub of Southeast Asia's lucrative drug trade. The recent supply glut has kept the street value of a meth pill in Bangkok at rock bottom prices — 50 baht (\$1.66) apiece. Methamphetamine's more potent crystallized form normally gets sent on to wealthier overseas markets such as Australia and Japan, although pandemic transport bottlenecks have disrupted that trade.

Heavier patrols along the Myanmar border have not deterred traffickers, with Thai authorities estimating that around three-quarters of illegal drugs entering their territory are now routed through Laos. —AFP

Thailand faces meth trafficking surge after Myanmar coup

NONG KHAI, Thailand: A village watchman trains his binoculars on a suspicious fishing boat—the first line of defense as Thailand braces for a fresh methamphetamine influx after a coup in neighboring Myanmar. The kingdom's narcotics bureau has already seized more than 80 million "yaba" pills just in the past six months, a record haul partly blamed on a supply glut caused by the coronavirus pan-

Cooperation Organization was held on 8-9 June 2017 in Astana. On the meeting the status of a full member of the Organization was granted to the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

The SCO's main goals are as follows: Strengthening mutual trust and neighborliness among the member states; promoting their effective cooperation in politics, trade, the economy, research, technology and culture, as well as in education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection, and other areas; making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region; and moving towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order.

Proceeding from the Shanghai Spirit, the SCO pursues its internal policy based on the principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity, and a desire for common development, while its external policy is conducted in accordance with the principles of non-alignment, non-targeting any third country, and openness.

The Heads of State Council (HSC) is the supreme decision-making body in the SCO. It meets once a year and adopts decisions and guidelines on all important matters of the organization. The SCO Heads of Government Council (HGC) meets once a year to discuss the organization's multilateral cooperation strategy and priority areas, to resolve current important economic and other cooperation issues, and also to approve the organization's annual budget. The SCO's official languages are Russian and Chinese.

In addition to HSC and HGC meetings, there is also a mechanism of meetings at the level of heads of parliament; secretaries of Security Councils; ministers of foreign affairs, defense, emergency relief, economy, transport, culture, education, and healthcare; heads of law enforcement agencies and supreme and arbitration courts; and prosecutors general. The Council of National Coordinators of SCO Member States (CNC) acts as the SCO coordination mechanism.

The organization has two permanent bodies - the SCO Secretariat based in Beijing and the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-

Terrorist Structure (RATS) based in Tashkent. The SCO Secretary-General and the Director of the Executive Committee of the SCO RATS are appointed by the Council of Heads of State for a term of three years. Rashid Alimov (Tajikistan) and Yevgeny Sysoyev (Russia) have held these positions, respectively, since 1 January 2016.

Thus, currently:

- the SCO comprises eight member states, namely the Republic of India, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan;
- the SCO counts four observer states, namely the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Republic of Belarus, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Mongolia;
- the SCO has six dialogue partners, namely the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Armenia, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, the Republic of Turkey, and the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

—By Tajikistan Embassy

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a permanent intergovernmental international organization, the creation of which was announced on 15 June 2001 in Shanghai (China) by the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan. It was preceded by the Shanghai Five mechanism.

The historical meeting of the Heads of State Council of the Shanghai

News in brief

Indonesia bans Ramadan exodus

JAKARTA: Muslim majority Indonesia on Friday banned an annual exodus that sees millions travel across the vast nation to mark the end of Ramadan over fears of a surge in COVID-19 infections. Travellers pack into airports, train stations and ports across the nearly 5,000-kilometer long archipelago in a mass migration, known as Mudik, that is similar to China's Lunar New Year holiday or Christmas. Many head to hometowns in time for celebrations at the end of Islam's holy fasting month, a festival known as Eid Al-Fitr. Ramadan ends in mid May this year. —AFP

Maharashtra announces curfew

MUMBAI: India's worst-hit state Maharashtra, including its capital Mumbai, will be under a nightly curfew from today following a sharp rise in coronavirus infections, officials said. India as a whole has seen a renewed surge in new infections in recent weeks, dashing hopes at the start of the year that the country of 1.3 billion people had beaten the pandemic. Maharashtra in western India, home to around 110 million people, has seen the biggest rise, recording on Thursday more than 35,000 new infections in 24 hours, the highest yet. Mumbai recorded over 5,500 cases on Friday, almost doubling its highest daily count of last year. —AFP

US university to pay over \$1 bn

LOS ANGELES: A top California university has agreed to pay more than \$1 billion to hundreds of women who accused a former campus gynecologist of sexual abuse, lawyers representing plaintiffs said Thursday. University of Southern California reached agreements totaling \$852 million that were revealed at a Los Angeles court Thursday, on top of \$215 million resulting from an earlier federal class action in 2018. According to lawyer Gloria Allred, it is the "highest single sexual abuse and sexual harassment settlement against a university in civil litigation history." —AFP

Biden taps rapping Vietnam ambassador

WASHINGTON: The US ambassador who made a splash in Vietnam by making a rap video is getting a promotion—as the top diplomat for Asia under President Joe Biden. Daniel Kritenbrink, a career diplomat who speaks Chinese and Japanese, was nominated by Biden to be the assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, a White House statement said. Kritenbrink became an Internet sensation last month during Tet, the Lunar New Year that is Vietnam's most important annual celebration, as he put out his own rap video to send his greetings. —AFP

UN panel struggles to find consensus

UNITED NATIONS: A UN panel ended five weeks of arduous negotiations on Friday with a watered-down declaration on the status of women around the world. European diplomats accused Russia of being obstructionist and undermining the rights of women and girls in the 65th annual proceedings of the Commission on the Status of Women. At the start of the negotiations, delegates examined a draft statement of 50 pages comprising 80 bullet point paragraphs of conclusions on women's issues. In the end they approved a document with 24 pages and 64 paragraphs. Entire sections on sexual harassment, gender equality and the rights of girls were eliminated altogether, AFP observed, comparing the first draft to the final document that was approved. —AFP

Business

SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 2021

Iran, China sign cooperation pact

No details of contents of 25-year agreement have been released

TEHRAN: Iran and China signed a 25-year "strategic cooperation pact" yesterday in the latest expansion of Beijing's flagship trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative as the US rivals move closer together. Negotiations for the deal, launched five years ago, sparked controversy in Iran last year and virtually no details of its contents have been released.

China is Iran's leading trade partner and was one of the biggest buyers of Iranian oil before then US president Donald Trump reimposed sweeping unilateral sanctions in 2018 after abandoning a multilateral nuclear agreement with Tehran. The China-Iran pact, which Tehran said included "political, strategic and economic" components, was signed by the two countries' foreign ministers, Wang Yi and Mohammad Javad Zarif, an AFP correspondent reported.

"We believe this document can be very effective in deepening" Iran-China relations, Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said, recalling that the pact had first been proposed during a visit to Tehran by Chinese President Xi Jinping in Jan 2016. Xi and his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani agreed then to establish a roadmap for "reciprocal investments in the fields of transport, ports, energy, industry and services".

"Iran's government and people are striving as they always have to broaden relations with trustworthy, independent countries like China," supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said at

the time, describing the proposed cooperation agreement as "correct and reasonable". Xi has championed the Belt and Road Initiative, a plan to fund infrastructure projects and increase China's sway overseas.

'Nothing secret'

In July last year, controversy erupted over the proposed deal after former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad charged that negotiations were being held for a "new, 25-year agreement with a foreign country" without the knowledge of the Iranian people. The foreign minister was heckled in parliament when he assured lawmakers there was "nothing secret" in the proposed deal, which he promised would be publicly announced "once it has been finalized".

The government has yet to honor that promise and few details have been made public. Wang's visit to Tehran comes just days after he hosted Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for talks in the Chinese city of Guilin. The three governments all face difficult relations with Washington after President Joe Biden's administration vowed to remain firm in its dealings with them, despite a renewed emphasis on diplomacy.

China and Russia are both parties to the troubled 2015 nuclear accord with Iran that Biden has said he hopes to revive. They were both deeply critical of the unilateral sanctions on Iran imposed by Trump and have backed efforts to revive the agreement. Biden has said he is not



TEHRAN: Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi pose for a picture after signing an agreement yesterday. —AFP

seeking "confrontation" with China, but that there will be intense competition between the rival superpowers. "I told him (Xi) in person on several

occasions we're not looking for confrontation, though we know that there will be steep, steep competition," the US president said. —AFP

WeWork to go public, valued at \$9bn

NEW YORK: WeWork announced Friday it plans to enter public markets through a merger transaction that raises \$1.3 billion for the office-sharing firm. The move comes two years after the former high-flying office-sharing company went into a spectacular tailspin that led to the cancelling of a planned public share offering and a bailout by Japanese investment firm SoftBank.

The transaction with BowX Acquisition Corp. is the latest instance in which a prominent company eschews a traditional initial public offering in favor of combining with an entity like BowX that has been specifically established by investors for such a merger. The move of merging with a so-called "special purpose acquisition company" or SPAC follows a recent trend that streamlines the process of a public listing.

WeWork was given an enterprise value of \$9 billion in the transaction. Once a dazzling "unicorn" valued at \$47 billion, WeWork began to unravel as the firm lost cash and canceled a planned 2019 share offering, with the ex-CEO pushed out - albeit with a generous package. WeWork executives said the company is poised to thrive in the post-pandemic economy.

"SoftBank has always seen the potential in WeWork's core business to disrupt the commercial real estate industry and reimagine the workplace. Today, we take another step towards making that vision a reality," said Marcelo Claure, the SoftBank CEO and executive chairman of WeWork. "The pandemic has fundamentally changed the way we work, and WeWork is incredibly well positioned to springboard into a future propelled by digital technology and a new appreciation of the value of flexible workspace." —AFP

US workers enticed with bonuses, time off to get vaccine

NEW YORK: As COVID-19 vaccination drives get into gear across the United States, some businesses are offering transportation, paid time off and bonuses of up to \$500 to encourage workers to get the job. Labor-intensive industries like slaughterhouses, supermarkets and farms, whose workers are at higher risk of contracting the virus, have taken the lead, with several large grocery chains offering two to four hours paid leave time for employees to get vaccinated.

"Providing accommodations so employees can receive this critical vaccine is one more way we can support them and eliminate the need to choose between earning their wages and protecting their well-being," Jason Hart, CEO of supermarket chain Aldi, said in January. Others have taken advantage of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regulations that allow them to set up their own vaccination centers.

California-based Bolthouse Farms, which sells carrots, smoothies and juices, holds weekly immunization sessions at its main site and pays \$500 to all full-time employees who accept the shot. Meat giant JBS is offering \$100 to vaccinated employees and has distributed materials in several languages to emphasize the safety and effectiveness of immunization. By mid-March, about a third of its 60,000 employees had received a first dose. —AFP

Sanders joins union drive as clashes with Amazon intensify

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama: Senator Bernie Sanders joined the drive Friday to unionize Amazon workers in Alabama as clashes intensified between lawmakers and the e-commerce giant ahead of a deadline for a vote that could lead to the first union on US soil at the massive tech company. The visit by Sanders, joined by actor Danny Glover and rapper "Killer Mike" Render, marks the latest high-profile appearances in the contentious organizing effort for some 5,800 employees at Amazon's warehouse in Bessemer which culminates next week.

"If Amazon workers in Alabama can prevail in forming a union, it can be done all over this country," said Sanders, a former presidential candidate with a loyal following among progressives. The months-long drive led by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union has sparked national attention and intense debate over workplace conditions at Amazon, which has more than 800,000 US employees.

Amazon has argued that most of its workers don't want or need a union, and that it already provides more than most other employers, with a minimum \$15 hourly wage and other benefits. Dave Clark, head of Amazon's consumer business, said the company delivers on the goals of Sanders. "I often say we are

'Green gold': Avocado craze drives crop theft in South Africa

TZANEEN, South Africa: Flashing green-and-white lights illuminated the night as the three private security vehicles rolled into the gated orchard, breaking the dark stillness enveloping the farm in northern South Africa. Long shadows fell over the moonlit tracks as the pickup trucks rolled past hundreds of neatly-lined avocado trees, their branches laden with plump dark-green fruit almost ready for harvesting.

Patrol leader Marius Jacobs squinted over the steering wheel, dragging on a cigarette as he scanned the plantation for thieves. Farmers around the quiet tropical town of Tzaneen are battling a scourge of avocado theft driven by booming global demand for the nutrient-rich fruit. Thousands of tons of avocados have been stolen over the past five years, according to the South African Subtropical Growers' Association.

The average annual losses in South Africa, one of the continent's top avocado producers, is around 24 million rand (\$1.6 million). "It's getting more and more, and it's bakkie (truck) loads," said Jacobs, 34, popping

US lawmakers, tech CEOs clash over disinformation

WASHINGTON: US lawmakers unleashed a torrent of criticism against social media top executives Thursday, blaming the companies for amplifying false content and calls to violence, while promising new regulations to stem rampant online disinformation. The video hearing attended remotely by top executives of Facebook, Google and Twitter got off

the Bernie Sanders of employers, but that's not quite right because we actually deliver a progressive workplace," Clark tweeted.

Pressure, monitoring

But unions and political leaders have argued that Amazon employees face constant pressure and monitoring, with little job protection, highlighting the need for collective bargaining. RWDSU president Stuart Appelbaum said the struggle is "about the unregulated technologies Amazon uses to monitor every movement of its workers, including the amount of time they spend in the restroom... and, most importantly, about the lack of dignity, respect and just treatment to many Americans experience at work".

Sanders and others say the Amazon battle highlights growing economic inequality at a time when billionaires, such as Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, have seen their wealth increase during the pandemic. "All I want to know is why the richest man in the world, Jeff Bezos, is spending millions trying to prevent workers from organizing a union so they can negotiate for better wages, benefits and working conditions," Sanders tweeted ahead of his visit.

Speaking to reporters after addressing Amazon workers, Sanders said he gave Amazon credit for raising its minimum wage to \$15 an hour. "But right now, they are nervous that if workers here are successful it will spread all across this country," he said. "But everybody here should know that, in Europe, Amazon deals with unions. So they sure as hell can deal with union in the USA," Sanders said.

Tensions have escalated as Amazon has fired back

open a can of energy drink. "This is not because somebody is hungry, this is a syndicate operating," he added. "Avo is green gold."

Faced with increasingly frequent raids, farmers have invested heavily in fencing and private security. Jacobs and his team, backed by dogs, now patrol more than 20 mostly avocado farms per night, complementing over 150 guards manning orchards on foot. Gangs caught red-handed are handed over to the police. "This is where we caught a (minibus) fully loaded with avos," recalled guard manager Manuel Malatjie, 28, pointing to the spot of a recently-thwarted raid. "We are trying our best (but) it's getting bad."

Tons stolen

The sound of clipping filled the air as workers snipped high-hanging avocados with picking sticks, filling as many bags as possible before the midday heat. March marks the start of South Africa's avocado harvest season, and the run-up is a prime time for theft. Farmer Edrean Ernst, 40, forecasts a 250,000 rand (\$17,000) loss in stolen avocados this year, despite spending millions of rand on security and fencing.

The 250 hectares of orchards belonging to the family-run Allesbeste farm are nestled between rolling hills, surrounded by lush forest and other crops. "Because it's very rural, police or security companies

to a stormy start as lawmakers accused them of intentionally making products that get people hooked.

"Big Tech is essentially handing our children a lit cigarette and hoping they stay addicted for life," said congressman Bill Johnson, an Ohio Republican. "Former Facebook executives have admitted that they use the tobacco industry's playbook for addictive products." Congressman Frank Pallone told the executives that it is time for legislation that forces more aggressive action to eliminate disinformation and extremism from online platforms.

Jack Dorsey of Twitter, Sundar Pichai of Google, and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook were bombarded with questions for some six hours by members of Congress who blamed their platforms for drug



BIRMINGHAM, Alabama: Senator Bernie Sanders and Rapper Michael "Killer Mike" Render (left) speak in support of the unionization of Amazon.com, Inc. fulfillment center workers outside the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) on Friday. —AFP

against criticism from lawmakers and others. "If you want to hear about \$15 an hour and healthcare, Senator Sanders will be speaking downtown," Clark tweeted, while pointing out that in Sanders state of Vermont, the minimum hourly wage is just \$11.75. "But if you would like to make at least \$15 an hour and have good health care, Amazon is hiring."

Representative Mark Pocan of Wisconsin responded to Amazon that "Paying workers \$15/hr doesn't make you a 'progressive workplace' when you union-bust & make workers urinate in water bottles." Amazon fired back: "You don't really believe the peeing in bottles thing, do you? If that were true, nobody would work for us." —AFP



TZANEEN: Employees at the Afrupro packaging warehouse work on an avocado packing line on March 8, 2021. —AFP

cannot patrol such a large area effectively," Ernst told AFP. "It plays into the criminals' hands."

Allesbeste, which exports at least 1,500 tons of avocados annually, was targeted no less than 20 times in 2019 and 2020. In a single raid, a truckload of thieves can drive off with a ton of avocados ripped from the trees - a harvest that would take the average farm worker more than 13 hours to pick carefully. Larger-scale operations can snatch up to 30 tons per robbery. —AFP

abuse, teen suicides, hate, political extremism, illegal immigration, vaccine bashing and more. "They didn't mention cancer, but they might as well have because they mentioned everything else," Creative Strategies analyst Carolina Milanese said. "It was sad political theater."

Democrats slammed the platforms for failing to stem misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines and incitement ahead of the Jan 6 Capitol riot. Republicans revived unproven complaints that social networks were biased against conservatives. Republican Representative Bob Latta accused the firms of operating "in a vague and biased manner, with little to no accountability," relying on a law giving them a "shield" against liability for content posted by others. —AFP

Business

Pandemic fuels travel boom - in virtual reality

App developers have created a range of travel experiences

WASHINGTON: Jem Jenkins Jones was stuck at home in Wales for much of the past year amid pandemic lockdowns but managed to fulfill a promise to her 10-year-old daughter to see the northern lights from Iceland and South Africa's game reserves - in virtual reality. "She was amazed," she said, calling the VR travel experiences "a lifesaver for us".

Strict lockdowns and travel limitations during the pandemic have sparked fresh interest in immersive virtual travel experiences, which have become more accessible and affordable with new apps and VR hardware. Even those confined to their homes can take a virtual jaunt to Machu Picchu, the rainforests of Borneo or a road trip across the United States in a convertible.

Data on VR travel usage is limited but developers have seen surging interest since the pandemic hit. "It has been skyrocketing," said Cezara Windrem, creator of the Alcove VR platform at AARP Innovation Labs. "We're getting more adoption every month." Alcove enables users to visit exotic locales such as Australia's coral reef or the island of Malta, while adding a "shared" experience which enables people to interact and even "lead" a family member without the technical

skills to navigate in a VR headset.

"We've heard from a lot of people who discovered Alcove and decided buy a headset for their elderly family members," Windrem said. This allows for shared travel even during a lockdown and other kinds of experiences such as "playing chess with someone on the other side of the planet."

Travel substitute, complement

With the tourism industry largely obliterated by the coronavirus outbreak, virtual reality has emerged as both a substitute for real-world travel and a complement to help people plan their next trip. App developers have created a range of travel experiences: Touring the pyramids of Egypt, the Taj Mahal, the savannahs of Kenya or the Antarctic from a kayak. These come from commercial operators or organizations such as National Geographic or World Wildlife Fund.

Users can opt for hardware from Facebook's Oculus, Sony's PlayStation or the inexpensive Google Cardboard, among others. Some gear costs as little as \$300 and many apps are free. "I have traveled every week since the pandemic, from the comfort of my home," said Rafael Cortes, a San Antonio computer

experiences, while also bridging the gap between digital and offline services.

Users can now browse Al Mulla Automobiles' dealerships, allowing them to explore the full inventory of vehicle stock and reserve models out of operating hours while also shopping for the full choice of add-on and accessories packages available.

Commenting on this occasion, Steve Brown, Director of Al Mulla Automobiles - Mercedes-Benz Kuwait, said: "We are delighted to expand our digital offering and provide convenience to our clients and the public. The Mercedes-Benz e-commerce platform represents Al Mulla Automobiles' commitment to providing the highest level of convenience to our valued customers."

The portal provides an extensive selection of services ranging from browsing our available Mercedes-Benz vehicles for both new and certified pre-owned vehicles, booking their vehicle online and finalizing their secure online payment. This new digital e-commerce shopping experience is conveniently complemented by our additional services that highlight our commitment to always delivering the best in class service to our

professional who uses Alcove and YouTube VR. "I've been to London, the glass bridge in China, Angel Falls in Venezuela, the ancient city of Petra in Jordan, a helicopter tour of New York."

Amy Erdt lives in Portland, Oregon, but with VR, "I like to walk around my sister's town in Wallingford, England, occasionally because I can't be there." Erdt, who administers a Facebook group of VR users, said there are "some great travel experiences" in virtual reality, which can be remarkably realistic. "I once sat at VR poker table at 1 am with a guy in Australia who was eating KFC (chicken), she said. "I could hear his KFC crunch. It was a trip."

Gaming and beyond

Virtual reality's most popular applications are in gaming and fantasy worlds, but travel is seen as a new growth vector. "During the pandemic when everyone is socially isolated it may seem strange to isolate yourself further to transport yourself somewhere else but it does allow us to experience things we can't experience today," said Avi Greengart, analyst with the consultancy Techspontial.

Greengart said VR travel has some advantages but existing and new clients."

Al Mulla Concierge is an expanded service dedicated to Mercedes-Benz customers in Kuwait, in which customers are provided with a dedicated team between 5 pm - 11 pm to provide a variety of services upon request during the current implemented curfew while they are safe in the comfort of their home. Customers can avail this service by contacting Al Mulla Automobiles Call Centers.

The newly launched platform is part of Mercedes-Benz's Best Customer Experience 4.0 goals, which aim to secure 25 per cent of global sales through online platforms by 2025. Mercedes-Benz now provides a seamless customer-only digital service, from purchase to delivery, while also enhancing the physical experience available at its showrooms.

The site's online store function allows potential customers access to the real-time stock offering at dealerships, to review promotional offers and submit car orders as well as the option to reserve vehicles instantly.

Direct customer contact services, such as online live chat, offer swift communication with Al Mulla

can't be compared with the real thing. "With VR travel you're not getting the food unique to the area, you're missing a lot of the sensory experiences and serendipitous meetings with locals," he said. On the other hand, "you can browse a museum and have it all to yourself," which may be impossible in the physical world.

A report by research firm GlobalData shows that virtual and augmented reality had already been gaining momentum from travel operators and tourism boards before the pandemic to enable people to get a taste of a destination before going there. GlobalData analyst Ralph Hollister said the pandemic may be giving the sector a lift that will endure even after the pandemic.

"Spending considerably more time indoors with an abundance of spare time, combined with an urge to travel, has meant that aspiring travelers have been turning to VR to fill a void that travel restrictions have left," Hollister said. Hollister said he sees VR becoming an important part of the process of travelers viewing and selecting a travel destination. "The widespread adoption of VR for this kind of purpose could be the next step for this technology and help it permanently move away from its 'gimmick' label," he said. —AFP

Al Mulla Automobiles launches Mercedes-Benz e-commerce platform

KUWAIT: Customers of Al Mulla Automobiles Co, a member of Al Mulla Group and the authorized distributor of Mercedes-Benz in Kuwait, can now purchase a Mercedes-Benz car directly from the comfort of their own home using the newly launched e-commerce website by Al Mulla Automobiles.

The website allows Al Mulla Automobiles to strengthen relationships with their clients by allowing them to schedule test drives, reserve and purchase vehicles and much more around the clock and at the touch of a button.

The innovative digital platform offers new and returning customers a seamless and fully intuitive online experience with instant access to the full range of Mercedes-Benz models.

Expertly designed to make the entire car search and purchase journey as simple as possible, the website addresses the current shift towards online



Automobiles and easy scheduling of test drive appointments and vehicle handover dates among a range of essential key tasks.

As part of ongoing digitalization efforts, Al Mulla Automobiles is continuously improving the platform further and will be adding more services to enhance the customer experience.

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Business

Gulf Bank holds Annual General Meeting, announces cash dividend of 5 fils per share

Sixth consecutive year in which Gulf Bank has distributed cash dividends

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank concluded its Ordinary Annual General Meeting ("AGM") no. 61 yesterday with a 78.18 percent quorum. The event was held at the Bank's main branch, with the Board of Directors recommending the distribution of 5 percent cash dividends at a (equivalent to 5 fils per share).

Gulf Bank's Chairman Jassim Mustafa Boodai commenced the meeting by welcoming the shareholders and recalling the most prominent economic events and measures taken during 2020, a year which witnessed unprecedented challenges that affected both the economy and society.

On Gulf Bank's financial performance, Jassim Mustafa Boodai said: "Despite the challenges of the past year, and due to its strategic and prudent policies, Gulf Bank was able to achieve a positive net profit of KD 29 million. In appreciation of our shareholders, and in keeping with our cash dividend policy, the Board of Directors is recommending a cash dividend distribution of 5 fils per share, marking the sixth consecutive year in which the Bank has distributed cash dividends, and the fourth consecutive year in which at least 50 percent of the Bank's profits are distributed to shareholders."

In addition, Gulf Bank has also set its strategy for the next five years, which will focus on: Promoting growth in the corporate banking segment by increasing products and focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises; strengthening customer relations, increasing the Bank's market share in the retail banking sector, and targeting youth and affluent client segments; and the development of Gulf Bank's digital banking platforms to increase competitiveness in the banking industry."

An Unprecedented Year

Speaking on the challenges witnessed by the Kuwaiti economy and the subsequent measures taken to combat them, Boodai added: "Locally, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) undertook several preventative measures, including: reducing its discount rate by 125 basis points to reach 1.5 percent, a historical low interest rate, in addition to easing certain capital and liquidity requirements to increase liquidity between the banking and non-banking sectors of the economy, and cutting the REPO rate."

It is also worth recalling how local banks played an especially crucial role, taking the initiative to postpone consumer loan obligations and credit card



GBK Chairman

GBK CEO

payments for all individual customers and small to medium-sized enterprises over a period of six months, in addition to allowing corporate clients the option to postpone loan principal payments for a similar period in an effort to assist clients in overcoming any financial challenges they may have faced as a result of the pandemic."

A Vital Community Role

Boodai continued his speech by discussing the performance of Gulf Bank's various departments and teams during 2020. He added, "In conjunction with local banks, Gulf Bank was quick to contribute to the Central Bank of Kuwait's KD 10 million fund designed to allow local banks to support national efforts in combating the spread of the novel coronavirus."

Gulf Bank also played a key role in raising awareness and community morale during the most difficult aspects of the past year through various initiatives across social media. During the first stages of returning to normal life, Gulf Bank was also keen on applying all the necessary precautionary measures to ensure the regular sterilization of its locations. These measures include the use of thermal imaging cameras, protection barriers, and other procedures that ensured the safety of both the Bank's customers and employees, and encouraged a safe and secure working environment.

Throughout the year, Gulf Bank also achieved excellent accomplishments with digitization, including the swift modernization of its digital platforms, and the conversion of more than 90 percent of customers to online banking services. Gulf Bank also launched 'Visit Gulf Bank,' a mobile application that allows customers to conveniently book branch appointments and reduce wait times."

A Year of Non-Stop Efforts & Accomplishments
Following the opening remarks, Gulf Bank's CEO,



Chairman and CEO at the AGM



From the AGM

Antoine Daher discussed the major key financial highlights of Gulf Bank's performance during 2020. Daher stated, "Throughout the course of the year, Gulf Bank remained profitable with a reported net profit of KD 29 Million in 2020. Earnings per share reached 10 fils, which led to the recommendation of a dividend distribution of 5 fils per share (a 50 percent payout ratio)."

Gulf Bank's portfolio quality remained strong, with a non-performing loan ratio standing at 1.1 percent for year-end 2020, and Total Credit Provisions reported at KD 284 million, exceeding IFRS 9 accounting requirements by KD 112 million. In addition, Gulf Bank's regulatory capital adequacy ratios also remained strong and well above the regulatory minimums, at 18.25 percent. Notably, Gulf Bank maintained its 'A' ratings from the four major credit rating agencies during 2020: Moody's, Fitch Ratings, S&P Global Ratings, and Capital Intelligence."

New Board of Directors

Subsequently, Boodai addressed the rest of the

AGM agenda items, including the approval of Gulf Bank's financial statement as of Dec 31, 2020 and the cash dividend distribution of 5 fils per share.

The shareholders approved all the AGM agenda items, and during the course of the Ordinary Annual General Meeting, both independent and non-independent Board Members were elected for the upcoming three-year period. The newly elected Board of Directors consists of: Chairman - Jassim Mustafa Boodai; Deputy Chairman - Ali Morad Yusuf Behbehani; Board Member - Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi; Board Member - Fawaz Mohammad Alawadhi; Board Member - Omar Hamad Youssef Al-Essa; Board Member - Abdullah Sayer AlSayer; Board Member - Barrak Abdulmohsen Ahmad Al-Asfour; Board Member - Dr Adnan Shihab-Eldin; Independent Board Member - Manaf Abdulaziz Al-Hajeri, Independent Board Member - Ahmad Mohammad Al-Bahar; Board Member - Abdulrahman Mohammad Al-Taweel. Boodai concluded the meeting by thanking the shareholders for their continuous support and trust in Gulf Bank.

Digital banking, SMEs, ESG centre stage at global finance event

KUWAIT: George Richani, Group CEO of Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK), joined fellow industry executives at the Annual Kuwait Banking and Finance Roundtable held on Wednesday. The Governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait Dr Mohammad Al-Hashel was a key participant and the event was moderated by Chris Giarraputo, Chairman of Global Finance.

The virtual event focused on the challenges facing Kuwait's banks, especially in light of lockdowns, movement restrictions and significant changes to customer behaviour precipitated by COVID-19. A number of other key areas were discussed, starting with digital banking in Kuwait and recent calls for the development of a comprehensive post-pandemic economic plan for the country, and the importance of ESG practices as well as SME contribution to the non-oil GDP.

Richani elaborated on the positives as well as the challenges that come with digitization, such as the need for attracting and retaining technical key staff such as data scientists, software architects and designers, shifting the operating models in banks from waterfall approach to being more agile, ensuring that processes are automated using for example Robotic Process Automation to reduce human error and contain cost.

He highlighted the importance of ensuring that society at large understands banking products well and that clients' full awareness of cyber security is reached. He also acknowledged that the Central Bank of Kuwait's aggressive and swift actions early on helped banks, clients and the economy to endure the pandemic.

Participants eagerly debated the issue of how to effectively support Kuwait's small & medium enterprises (SMEs). As Kuwait accelerates efforts to localise its workforce, the majori-

ty of new jobs are expected to be created in the SME sector. These growing companies have traditionally found it difficult, however, to access the funds and expertise they need to grow.

Richani further commented on SMEs saying: "SMEs are very important to spur growth and create employment in any country, but more so in Kuwait, because it dovetails with the need to diversify away from depending on one hydrocarbon commodity. He added that almost 85 percent of the registered companies in Kuwait are SMEs if measured by turnover of less than KD 2 million or less than 20 staff. While Kuwait boasts a rising start-up scene supported by corporates, less than 5 percent of the banking sector funding goes to SMEs.

"As such, there are many SMEs in Kuwait, but the contribution of SMEs to non-oil GDP in Kuwait falls short at a mere 6 percent, compared to the likes of the UAE at 80 percent, KSA at 33 percent, Bahrain at 35 percent and Europe at 50 percent. Contribution of SMEs in Kuwait to total employment is only around 23 percent in Kuwait compared to Saudi Arabia's 60 percent, UAE's 86 percent and Bahrain's 57 percent. There is certainly room for improvement since Kuwaitis in general have entrepreneurship tendencies. That said, regulations do not make it easy, and the ease of doing business in Kuwait as measured by the world index is not impressive, and hence much is to be done on this front."

The speakers went on to discuss M&A as well as job creation and the government's plan - Vision 2035. The event was closed with a comment from the governor, thanking all participants for their contribution followed by the closing statement of Chris Giarraputo, Chairman of Global Finance & moderator of the event.



George Richani

NBK Economic Update

Current account surplus remained large in 3Q20

KUWAIT: Kuwait's current account recorded another large surplus in 3Q20, though the surplus fell to KD 2.5 billion (31 percent of GDP) from a revised KD 4.2 billion (66 percent of GDP) in the previous quarter. While the trade balance improved from Q2 helped by higher oil prices, this was more than offset by a drop in net investment income that nevertheless remained very high by historical standards.

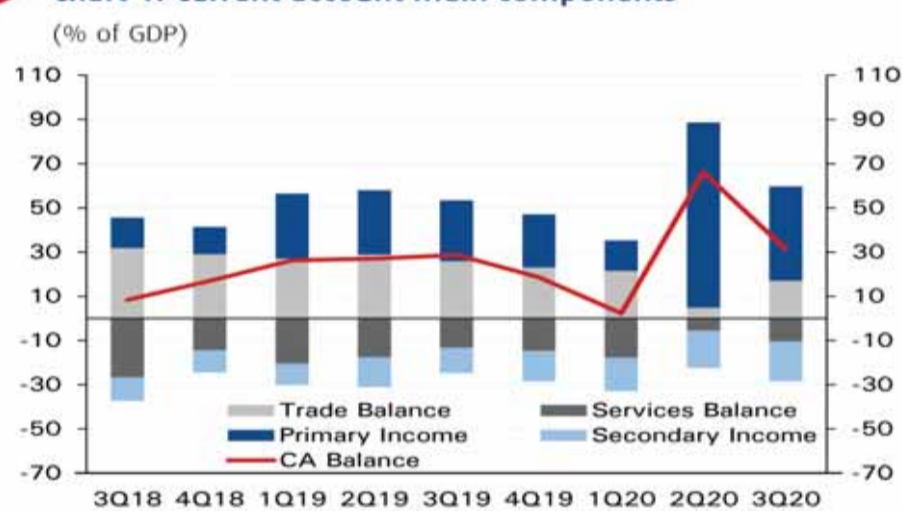
The reasons for higher investment income in recent quarters are not entirely clear, though we note that this covers a period of large reported returns from the Public Institution for Social Security (PIFSS) following a revamp of its operations to reduce its cash holdings. In addition, the FGF investment income is estimated to improve in 3Q20 as the financial markets started to regain some of their momentum from March. Meanwhile, the financial account registered a net outflow of KD 3.4 billion, relatively similar to the previous quarter.

Oil price rebound boosts goods exports

The surplus in goods trade increased in 3Q20 reaching KD 1.4 billion, up from KD 0.3 billion in the previous quarter. Oil exports, which constituted around 89 percent of total exports increased to KD 2.8 billion due to the jump in the Kuwait Export Crude price (KEC) by 69 percent q/q to \$43.5/bbl, while oil production fell 9.3 percent to a multi-year low of 2.2mb/d due to OPEC supply cuts, but on a year-on-year basis, oil exports remain far below its level in 3Q19. On the other hand, non-oil exports (worth 11 percent of total exports) witnessed a notable rise of 59 percent, though were still well down year-on-year (-28 percent y/y).

On the other side, imports recovered by 6.5 percent q/q following a 17.3 percent decline in 2Q20, though still down by 19 percent y/y. This improvement can be attributed to the ease of pandemic-related trade and business disruptions through the quarter. The rise in imports came due to the ease in consumption goods decline (around half of all imports). Moreover, the services account registered a higher deficit in 3Q20 at KD 0.8 billion (10 percent of GDP) due to a significant rise in travel payments to KD 0.5 billion from KD 0.1 billion in Q2, but remain far below their historical trends due to the pandemic and inability and unwillingness for people to travel during that period. The services deficit as a whole remained also well below its historic norms.

Chart 1: Current account main components



Source: Central Bank of Kuwait, CSB, NBK estimates

Investment income dipped, but remained very large

Meanwhile, the primary income surplus, which includes investment returns on Kuwait's huge stock of financial assets abroad, remained very large and well above earlier quarters but witnessed a drop to KD 3.3 billion (42.5 percent of GDP), down from KD 5.3 billion in the previous quarter.

The fall was partially attributed to a decline in direct and portfolio investment income, the reasons for which are not clear but may have to do with the change investment strategy by PIFSS which has reportedly (according to media reports) resulted in higher returns during the last two quarters of \$4.7 billion (+611 percent y/y) in 3Q20 and \$7.3 billion in 2Q20. In addition, FGF investments returns are likely to have improved during 2Q20 and 3Q20 as the stock market bounced back from the March-2020 plunge when pandemic-related lockdowns and restrictions virtually shut down the economy.

The secondary income deficit, which reflects flows of foreign aid and workers' remittances, increased KD 0.3 billion to KD1.4 billion as workers' remittances rose 33 percent q/q.

Declining financial flows

The financial account, which covers financial claims on or liabilities to non-residents, registered net outflows of KD 3.4 (43 percent of GDP) billion, slightly higher than in the previous quarter. The small rise in net outflows was due to several factors, including the increase in portfolio equity investment abroad by KD 3.0 billion in 3Q20 compared with a much smaller rise of KD 0.7 billion in 2Q20. In addition, Kuwaiti direct investments abroad rose to KD 0.2 billion, up from less than KD 0.1 billion in 2Q20. Moreover, the ease in non-resident deposits at Kuwaiti banks (by KD 0.3 billion in 3Q20, down from KD 1.3 billion in the previous quarter), lowered net inflows.

The small rise in net outflows was due to several factors, including the increase in portfolio equity investment abroad by KD 3.0 billion in 3Q20 compared with a much smaller rise of KD 0.7 billion in 2Q20. In addition, Kuwaiti direct investments abroad increased to KD 0.2 billion, up from less than KD 0.1 billion in the previous quarter. Moreover, the ease in non-resident deposits at Kuwaiti banks (by KD 0.3 billion in 3Q20, down from KD 1.3 billion in the previous quarter), lowered net inflows.

Adequate level of reserve assets

The Central Bank of Kuwait's (CBK) gross international reserves increased by KD 0.7 billion in 3Q20 to KD 14.7 billion by the end of September, which constituted around 42 percent of GDP or more than 12 months of imports of goods and services. CBK data for December 2020 showed that reserves were relatively stable at KD14.6 billion.

Source: CBK, NBK estimates Larger than expected surplus seen for 2020 as a whole

The preliminary data for the first three quarters of 2020 shows that the current account surplus declined to KD 6.8 billion compared with KD 8.3 billion in the same period of 2019. Despite the decline, this is a stronger performance than we had initially expected, mostly reflecting a larger surplus on investment income. Assuming no revisions or major surprises in the fourth quarter, the full-year surplus is likely to come in much larger than our previous forecast of a KD 1.3 billion surplus. This showcases the resilience of Kuwait's external sector even in the face of the dramatic drop in oil prices seen early last year. For 2021 we would expect the surplus to rise still further based on the recent climb in oil prices back to pre-pandemic levels of above \$60/bbl - though the improvement will be tempered by a rise in imports as the economy recovers.

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YOUNG, RICH AND RACY: SOUTH KOREA'S LIVESTREAMERS



This picture shows Joshua Ahn, CEO of South Korean production company Starfish Entertainment, posing during an interview with AFP at his home in Seoul.



Joshua Ahn, CEO of South Korean production company Starfish Entertainment, posing during an interview with AFP at his home in Seoul.



South Korean gamer Kim Min-kyo streaming computer games at his home near Anyang south of Seoul.



South Korean gamer Kim Min-kyo posing for a photo at his home near Anyang south of Seoul. —AFP photos

From a converted storeroom on the roof of his mother's Seoul apartment, Kim Min-kyo plays video games for up to 15 hours a day—and makes a fortune from the thousands of fans watching him. The cramped studio is an unlikely home for a budding millionaire, but the 24-year-old's gaming prowess—mixed with quick-witted commentary and high-school-level humor—has seen his income climb to about \$50,000 a month. That puts him well into the top one percent of earners in South Korea, but has not affected his lifestyle.

"I'm not really into cars or spending lots of money," said Kim, who eats, sleeps, washes and works in the small space. "My mum manages all my income so I never have a lot of money on me," he told AFP. Livestreamers, known as "Broadcast Jockeys" or BJs in South Korea, are hard-wired to the digital infrastructure of youth culture. They entertain for hours with an interactive mishmash of chat, gaming, dance, music, eating, getting drunk or even just sleeping. Top livestreamers enjoy subculture celebrity among teens and 20-somethings, who consider them more relatable than traditional media stars.

A few can earn over \$100,000 in a good month from broadcasting live on homegrown platform AfreecaTV, and uploading edited content to YouTube. Kim, who often

streams himself playing online battle game League of Legends in his pyjamas, builds on his content with conversations that flirt with the country's social boundaries. "Maybe sometimes you need to do something absurd to attract followers," he acknowledged. He makes money from fan donations, sponsorship—sometimes consuming local energy drinks midstream—and advertising on YouTube, where he has more than 400,000 subscribers.

There is regular controversy in South Korea over a lack of regulation on livestreaming, from undisclosed product promotion to "lewd" behavior—a bar set relatively low in a conservative culture. Some livestreamers have been called out for misogynist commentary and violent behavior. And at any given hour it is easy to find scantily-clad women on AfreecaTV willing to "talk cute", "dance sexy" or send a private video for the right price.

Pandemic surge

For livestreamers, the coronavirus has been good for business. Over the first four months of last year, as the South urged people to stay at home to control the outbreak's first wave, time watching videos on smartphones surged, according to the Korea Communications Commission. YouTube said it saw huge spikes in

global viewership last year, including in South Korea. AfreecaTV, which now hosts about 17,000 livestreamers, sells "starballoons" to viewers for 110 won (\$0.10) each.

The audience can donate them while interacting with a livestreamer, who converts it back to cash with the platform taking a cut. Donations on it climbed by more than 20 percent to 41.5 billion won in the third quarter of last year. "Even though it's said that COVID-19 has happened, it would be a lie to say that it hasn't helped BJs grow," said Joshua Ahn, who heads local production company Starfish Entertainment. The 44-year-old Maserati-driving media entrepreneur manages dozens of top livestreamers, and produces variety shows for some of the country's biggest TV stations. Only a small fraction of streamers make significant sums, but Ahn said the stars who were already earning tens of thousands of dollars a month have seen their takings "double or even triple" during the pandemic.

'Anyone can have a channel'

The hyper-wired South is often at the forefront of technological change—it launched the world's first nationwide 5G networks in 2019, two years after internet television subscriptions overtook cable TV. Mobile advertising revenue tripled between 2015 and 2019 to 4.56 trillion

won, according to regulators, overtaking broadcast advertising along the way, which fell by almost a quarter.

"Conventional media is at an important crossroads," said Ahn, whose business activities straddle both traditional and new media. "Now with YouTube, anyone can have their own channel." Some livestreamers have moved into the mainstream, including appearances on TV variety shows and sports commentating. Meanwhile minor celebrities, financial analysts and even some politicians have turned to livestreaming to boost their profiles. And in a country that has long stressed academic qualifications, "content creator" ranked fourth in a survey of primary schoolchildren's most desired jobs last year.

South Korea's best-known contribution to the global livestreaming phenomenon has been "mukbang", where the host commutes while eating huge plates of food. Some broadcast activities are more controversial, such as scantily-clad suggestive conversation, or even criminal, for instance threats of violence against rivals. "The reason why the content of these BJs is getting more sexual and violent is because they seek more attention," said California State University Monterey Bay researcher Hojin Song. "The more audience that they can draw in, the better chance they get at making better money." —AFP



Female municipal police traffic officer, Cristina Corbucci directs traffic on the historic platform on Piazza Venezia in central Rome amid restrictions of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. —AFP photos

Iconic Roman square gets first female traffic cop

Rome's iconic gesticulating traffic cops have made a comeback, and a woman has joined their ranks for the first time. Cristina Corbucci, 43, could be seen Friday waving theatrically at cars and buses from a raised platform in the central Piazza Venezia. "It's bit like conducting an orchestra," one of her bosses, Maurizio Maggi, told the Rome-based *Il Messaggero* newspaper.

Corbucci, a political science graduate, became a traffic warden three years ago. She started her new position this week and told *Il Messaggero* she loved it. "Up there, you really feel like in the center of the center of Rome," she said, adding that "people smile" while she is on the job. Piazza

Venezia is a busy roundabout in the heart of the city, dominated by the huge Victor Emmanuel National Monument, known to locals as "the wedding cake".

Rome's historic shopping street, the Via del Corso, leads to it, and it is close to landmarks like the Capitoline Hill, the Roman Forum and the Colosseum. Its raised traffic police platform, electrically operated, went back into service this month, with Mayor Virginia Raggi calling it "a symbol of Rome". Loved by tourists and locals alike, the podium features in Woody Allen's "To Rome with Love," as well as in the classic children's illustrated book "This is Rome". —AFP



Female municipal police traffic officer, Cristina Corbucci directs traffic on the historic platform on Piazza Venezia.

SAKURA SELFIES: TOKYO ENJOYS CHERRY BLOSSOMS DESPITE VIRUS WARNING



People take pictures of cherry blossoms in full bloom along the Meguro river in Tokyo. —AFP photos

People in Tokyo flocked to admire cherry blossoms in full bloom at parks, shrines and rivers on Friday, despite coronavirus warnings against holding traditional parties under the delicate flowers. Annual festivals have been cancelled, fluorescent tape used to cordon off picnic spots, and signs put up urging people to "refrain from gathering to enjoy the cherry blossoms". But many people, mostly wearing masks, decided to make the most of Friday's clear blue skies to snap "sakura" selfies, stroll down blossom-lined paths or take boat rides under the pink-and-white blooms.

Despite a third wave of COVID-19 infections over the winter, Japan has had a comparatively small outbreak overall with around 9,000 deaths and has not imposed the blanket lockdowns seen in other countries. The Japanese government this week lifted a virus state of emergency in the Tokyo area but city governor Yuriko Koike has warned residents to "avoid cherry blossom viewing parties" to prevent a resurgence of the disease.

The number of coronavirus cases in Tokyo is gradually rising, with 394 new infections recorded on Thursday. "We fear there may be a sudden spread of infections—bigger than the third wave—if the number of people going out increases, as it does each year with cherry blossom viewing, welcome parties (for new employees and students) and graduation trips," said Norio Ohmagari, direc-



A woman takes a selfie with cherry blossoms in full bloom along the Meguro river in Tokyo.

tor of Japan's Disease Control and Prevention Center, on Thursday. Japan's sakura or cherry blossom season is feverishly anticipated by locals and visitors alike, although this year foreign tourists have been kept away by virus border restrictions.

Cherry blossoms symbolize the fragility of life in Japanese culture as full blooms only last about a week before the petals start falling off trees. It is traditionally celebrated with hanami, or viewing parties, with picnics—and sometimes boozy festivities—organized beneath the trees. The season is also considered one of change as it marks the start of the new business year, with many university graduates starting their first full-time jobs and older colleagues shifting to new positions. —AFP



This photo shows people viewing cherry blossoms in Nanjing in China's eastern Jiangsu province.



People viewing cherry blossoms in Nanjing in China's eastern Jiangsu province.

Lifestyle | Gossip



CAMILA MENDES AND GRAYSON VAUGHN SPLIT UP

The 'Riverdale' actress and her photographer boyfriend have called time on their relationship after around a year of dating but insiders insist they will remain friends. A source told E! News: "There was no drama at all, and they are still friends. Their relationship just ran its course." The pair reportedly split about a month ago and Camila has deleted all pictures of her ex from her Instagram feed and has stopped following him. However, Grayson is still following the 26-year-old actress on the social media platform. Camila and Grayson's relationship reportedly fell apart due to distance. Camila returned to Canada in

September 2020 to resume filming her role as Veronica Lodge in Riverdale. The source explained: "Camila has been shooting in Canada and travel has been banned, so the pandemic didn't make it easy to see each other." Camila previously dated her co-star Charles Melton, who plays Reggie Mantle. They started dating in August 2018 and split in 2019. A source said at the time: "Cami and Charles have been separated for a few months now. They are taking a break from their relationship. Their relationship escalated very quickly and they are taking time now to focus on their work and themselves."

TURNER FELL IN LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT WITH BACH

Tina Turner felt love at first sight when she met her husband, Erwin Bach. The 81-year-old music icon met the former music executive, 65, in Germany over 30 years ago and said she immediately felt her heart beating faster when she laid eyes on him, and knew straight away he was the one for her.

Speaking in HBO's upcoming 'Tina' documentary, Erwin - who eventually married Tina in 2013 - said: "We met at Cologne [Bonn] Airport - actually it was Dusseldorf Airport [in Germany], and her manager Roger [Davies] asked me to pick up Tina." And Tina added: "He was [16 years] younger [than me]. He was 30 years old at the time and had the prettiest face. I mean, you cannot [describe] it. It was like insane. [I thought], 'Where did he

come from?' He was really so good-looking. My heart [was beating fast] and it means that a soul has met, and my hands were shaking. "So [my manager] Roger said to me, 'Tina, you ride with Erwin,' and I wanted to go. 'Yay!' Erwin then explained he wasn't 'nervous' to drive Tina to her destination, but 'enjoyed' being in the car with her. He said: "We enjoyed the ride. I enjoyed driving the artist, actually a superstar. You're normally a little nervous, but I wasn't nervous either. I was just doing the job." Meanwhile, a previously released clip of the documentary saw the 'Proud Mary' hitmaker claim the "good" in her life has not outweighed the bad. She said: "It wasn't a good life. The good did not balance the bad. I had an abusive life, there's no other way to tell the story. It's a reality. It's the truth. That's what you've got, so you have to accept it. Some people say the life that I lived and the performances that I gave, the appreciation, is blasting with the people. And yeah, I should be proud of that. I am. But when do you stop being proud? I mean, when do you, how do you bow out slowly?" And now Tina wants a chance to say goodbye and have "closure" with her superstar life. Erwin added: "She said, 'I'm going to America to say goodbye to my American fans and I'll wrap it up.' And I think this documentary and the play, this is it - it's a closure."



THIEVES STEAL 1 MILLION WORTH OF VALUABLES FROM BEYONCE

Thieves have stolen over \$1 million worth of valuables from Beyonce. Los Angeles storage units containing items belonging to the 39-year-old singer were targeted twice this month and thieves stole a number of handbags and dresses belonging to Beyonce. TMZ reports that the units were being rented by her production company, Parkwood Entertainment and all of the items from the first robbery belonged to Beyonce. The second robbery targeted "handbags, kids toys and photos belonging to one of Beyonce's stylists".



The Los Angeles Police Department is investigating the burglaries but there have been no arrests yet. Meanwhile, Beyonce recently became the most decorated female artist in Grammy Awards history following this year's awards ceremony earlier this month. The 39-year-old star received four awards - Best R&B Performance for 'Black Parade', Best Rap Song and Best Rap Performance for 'Savage' with Megan Thee Stallion, and Best Music Video for 'Brown Skin Girl' - during the main event and the pre-telecast ceremony, which took her total to 28 over the years, surpassing the record previously held by Alison Krauss, with 27 wins. Accepting Best R&B Performance and breaking the record, she said: "I'm so excited. As an artist, I believe it's my job and all of our jobs to reflect the times, and it's been such a difficult time. So I wanted to uplift and encourage all of the Black queens and kings. "I can't believe this happened, it's such a magical night."

KELLY ROWLAND 'LOOKED LIKE A DINOSAUR' WHEN SHE WAS PREGNANT

The 40-year-old singer - who has sons Titan, six, and Noah, two months, with husband Tim Weatherspoon - has a "really good time" playing with her oldest child and indulging in his interests, but she admitted some of her moves have proven to be too much for the youngster. She told Grazia magazine: "My son Titan greets me at the door when I get home. He's six and loves dinosaurs, reptiles and cars. "He's very much into pranking right now. The other day when I walked in, he'd put a toy snake in the middle of the floor. "Or he'll try to scare me with a Velociraptor head he's obsessed with. I have a dinosaur costume, so I'll dress up in that and make all the sounds. "When I was pregnant, my body looked like a dinosaur, but I made me dinosaur twerk and Titan was like, 'Mommy, please stop.' We have a really good time playing - we have as much fun as we possibly can." The former 'Destiny's Child' star also loved winding down with Titan at the end of the day and thinks it's important for him to be able to speak openly to her and Tim. She said: "We have fun with bedtime stories. "We try to wind everything down and make sure Titan's in bed by 7.30pm. "We read him stories - sometimes we'll make them up, or other times Titan tells them. "We have a good time, talking to him about his day, asking him about his highs and lows, his favorite part, and what goal he has for the week. "Then he tells us what he wants for breakfast in the morning. "We try to keep the lines of communication open, intelligently and emotionally. It's important to us as parents."



DION SET TO RECEIVE HONORARY DEGREE FROM BERKLEE COLLEGE

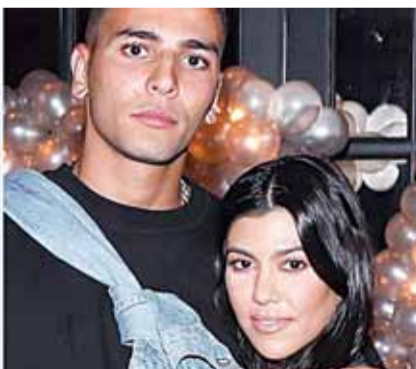
Celine Dion is set to receive an honorary Doctor of Music degree from Berklee College's School of Music. The 'My Heart Will Go On' hitmaker will join Pharrell Williams, Donald Harrison, and Chad Hugo in picking up honorary doctorates from the prestigious music school later this year, whilst Chita Rivera and André Watts will receive Doctor of Arts degrees. Berklee College tweeted on Friday: "Celine Dion, Donald Harrison, and Chad Hugo, and Pharrell Williams of the Neptunes will receive honorary Doctor of Music degrees from the College, and Chita Rivera and Andre Watts will receive honorary Doctor of Arts degrees from the Conservatory. (sic)" In response, Celine quoted the tweet and said she was "honoured and humbled" to be named as a recipient for the degree. She wrote: "I'm honored and humbled to be receiving an honorary doctorate from the highly esteemed @BerkleeCollege School of Music. I feel privileged to be considered in the same company as the incredibly talented Artists who have also received this distinction over the years. - Celine (sic)" Berklee's College of Music commencement ceremony is set to stream on May 8, whilst a virtual ensemble will perform a tribute to this year's honourees on May 7. Meanwhile, Celine recently said she has developed a new "independence" after battling a tough few years, including her husband Rene Angelil losing his battle with cancer in 2016, her brother passing away and her mother's death in January 2020. She said: "I feel good these days. It's no secret that I've gone through some tough times, obviously losing my husband and my brother a few years ago, and my mother very recently. "Life presents challenges to us and we try to find ways to move on. "Music can be a healing force, and the songs on my new album have helped me find new strength in my life... and perhaps a bit more independence, because I'm the head of the household now. "I've got sole responsibility for my children, and you find out more things about yourself when you're in that situation."



PANETTIERE IN A 'WONDERFUL HEADSPACE'

Hayden Panettiere is in a "wonderful headspace" right now. The 'Heroes' actress spoke out last year to accuse her ex-boyfriend Brian Hickerson of being abusive toward her in incidents which took place between May 2019 and January 2020. And almost a year after she spoke out, Hayden is now said to be in a much better place mentally than she was this time last year. A source said: "Hayden is in a wonderful headspace. Things are so much better and she's really excited about her future. She's got a few projects in the works." The 31-year-old actress is also spending more time with her six-year-old daughter Kaya, whom she has with her ex-fiance Vladimir Klitschko. The insider added to People magazine: "And she's spending time with her daughter. She has an amazing relationship with Wlad. Things are going really well." Brian was first arrested in 2019 on a charge of domestic violence

against Hayden, but the case was dismissed when the actress wouldn't testify. In February 2020, Brian was charged with domestic battery and interference with police in Jackson, Wyoming, after he allegedly punched Hayden, and he pleaded not guilty. After the former 'Nashville' star told authorities in California that he had been violent towards her, Hickerson was arrested on July 16 in Los Angeles on eight charges alleging abusive incidents from May 2019 to January 2020, all of which Hickerson has denied. In a statement at the time, Hayden said: "I am coming forward with the truth about what happened to me with the hope that my story will empower others in abusive relationships to get the help they need and deserve. I am prepared to do my part to make sure this man never hurts anyone again. I'm grateful for my support system, which helped me find the courage to regain my voice and my life."



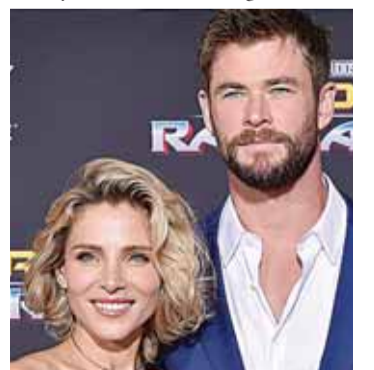
KHLOE SHADES KOURTNEY'S EX-BOYFRIEND BENDJIMA: 'HE WAS SO TOXIC'

Khloe Kardashian has blasted her sister Kourtney's former boyfriend Younes Bendjima as "toxic". Kourtney, 41 - who is currently dating Travis Barker - previously had an on/off relationship with Bendjima, 27, but her sibling is not a fan of the toyboy. She tweeted: "He was soooooo toxic and negative for Kourt #KUWTK." Khloe also referred to him as "what's his name" during a recent episode of 'Keeping Up With The Kardashians', and asked Kourtney if she had found him negative. She said: "Do you look back and think he might have been a bit negative for you?" and Kourtney replied: "Yeah. He will text me once in a while," but insisted she doesn't think about him anymore. Meanwhile, Travis, 45, recently paid tribute to Kourtney - who has kids Mason, 11,

Penelope, eight, and Reign, six, with her ex-partner Scott Disick - explaining that he loved dating someone who understands what it's like to be a parent. He said: "Up until now, I would date girls who didn't have kids, and I find it kind of hard, because I think they would have trouble understanding, like, why don't you want to go to dinner every night with me? Or why don't you want to see me every night?" "And now, I'm spending time with a woman who's a great mom, who's a great friend, and you don't have to worry about any of those things. It just comes natural." Travis has children Landon and Alabama with his former wife Shanna Moakler and he has remained close to his stepdaughter, Atiana Cecilia De La Hoya, who is Shanna's daughter with ex-fiance, boxer Oscar De La Hoya.

PATAKY ADVISES FRIENDS ON PARENTHOOD

Elsa Pataky advises her friends to "think long and hard" before having children. The 44-year-old actress - who has daughter India, eight, and seven-year-old twins Sacha and Tristan with husband Chris Hemsworth - admitted her children haven't got any less "demanding" as they've got older, and she wants her pals to give parenthood serious thought. She told HELLO! magazine: "They are a little older, but they are no less demanding! "I always tell my friends, 'Think long and hard before you have children, because children are forever.'" The Spanish star and her husband have just celebrated their 10th wedding anniversary and couldn't be happier together. She said: "We're very happy. We're working, we've got the kids, we're surrounded by friends. I couldn't ask for more... "I was spot on when I decided [Chris] was the man I should spend the rest of my life with. "We have a great sense of humor: we like to tease each other. We love being together and with our friends." The family are currently living in Sydney while Elsa shoots her new movie 'Interceptor' and Chris works on 'Thor: Love and Thunder' and she admitted she was worried her kids would find it hard to adjust to going to school there - because they have to wear shoes. She added: "We've put the kids in school here in Sydney and they have adapted really well, although it is very different from the school in Byron Bay. "It's the first time they have had to wear shoes to school, and uniforms! "I thought it was going to be really hard for them but they love it. "Also, on weekends, we get to go home so they can see their friends." —Bang Showbiz



Sports

Photo of the day



Nikolas Plytas performs in Pertouli, Greece. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Rashford, Saka out of England qualifiers

LONDON: Marcus Rashford and Bukayo Saka have both been ruled out of England's World Cup qualifiers against Albania and Poland, the Football Association announced Friday. England launched their bid to play in the finals of Qatar 2022 with a comprehensive 5-0 thrashing of minnows San Marino at Wembley on Thursday.

Rashford and Saka both missed that match and the FA have now confirmed the pair will miss England's other two qualifying matches this month. England travel to Tirana today and face Poland at Wembley on Wednesday - their last fixture before manager Gareth Southgate names his squad for this year's Covid-delayed European Championships.

"Marcus Rashford and Bukayo Saka will play no part in England's forthcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup qualifiers," the FA said in a statement. "Rashford reported to St George's Park with an injury that ruled him out of the 5-0 win against San Marino and, following further assessment, it has been decided he will continue his rehabilitation with Manchester United. "Saka had remained at Arsenal for further assessment on an ongoing issue with the hope of joining up with the Three Lions but will not be available for the fixtures against Albania and Poland."

Arsenal teenager Saka made his England debut against Wales in October and has since won a further three caps. Rashford only appeared in two of England's eight fixtures in 2020 and has now been ruled out with a foot injury that made him miss Manchester United's FA Cup quarter-final defeat at Leicester.

"Well, they're both doubtful (for this triple-header)," Southgate said on Wednesday. "I'd say Marcus is more doubtful than Bukayo at the moment but we're going to assess them. Marcus has been very keen to be with us. He obviously wasn't with us so much in the autumn so I think he's been keen to be part of the group and get with us." —AFP

Wales win Six Nations as Scotland upset 'disappointed' France

PARIS: Wales won the Six Nations on Friday after Scotland beat a "disappointed" France 27-23 for their first victory in Paris since 1999. Les Bleus needed to score four tries or more and win by at least 21 points to stop Wales claiming the title but lost when Scottish winger Duhan van der Merwe scored five minutes into additional time.

Both sides finished with 14 men after Scotland fly-half Finn Russell was sent off with 10 minutes to play and French substitute Baptiste Serin collected a yellow card three minutes later. "It's a huge disappointment. We gave a lot over nine weeks," home captain Charles Ollivon told France Televisions.

"We'll continue to work, we know where we've come from, we're going to get back to work. It will help us grow," he added. Scotland coach Gregor Townsend was without a host of English-based players with the game outside the Test window and lost No 8 Matt Fagerson on the eve of the game with an ankle injury. "I'm so proud of the team. They came here with a bit of adversity with not our full squad, an injury to one of our starters, a yellow card, a red card, we had to come back against a very good side," Townsend told the BBC.

"But they showed courage, effort, togetherness, and skill to win. A great end to a really promising season for us," he added. The match had been rescheduled after a COVID-19 outbreak in the French camp caused a postponement in February.

As the rain fell at the Stade de France, Brice Dulin showed his side's intent by taking a quick lineout inside his own five metres within 60 seconds. After nine minutes Romain Ntamack opened the scoring with a penalty but the away side dominated the following quarter of an hour. The visitors' control and patience was rewarded after 15 minutes as van der Merwe snuck over after two previous pick and goes.

Hogg off

Russell converted before adding a penalty for a 10-3 lead after 20 minutes as Townsend's men intelligently controlled territory with delicate kicks while France made five early handling errors in greasy conditions.

When the downpour briefly stopped, Gathie's men took a stranglehold. Ntamack closed the gap to four points with a penalty before the hosts took the lead. After a fourth scrum inside Scotland territory, Antoine Dupont found Damian Penaud on the right wing. He passed inside to Dulin who slid over.

Ntamack slotted the additional points to make it 13-



SAINT-DENIS: France's wing Gael Fickou (center) is tackled by Scotland's flanker Jamie Ritchie (right) and Scotland's scrum-half Ali Price (left) during the Six Nations rugby union tournament match between France and Scotland on Friday, at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis, outside Paris. —AFP

10 before things worsened for Scotland when captain Stuart Hogg was shown a yellow card for a ruck infringement. France started the second half superbly and made the most of the extra man as the rain stopped again.

Their pressure paid after 46 minutes as Penaud scored a fine individual effort after a chip and chase and a lovely Virimi Vakatawa offload. Hogg returned as Russell closed the gap to five points with a penalty after 53 minutes before the visitors camped inside France territory with the clock ticking towards a Wales title win.

Les Bleus hopes of a title took a blow with a quarter of the match left as replacement hooker Dave Cherry dived over from a rolling maul for a third try in five Tests. Russell was successful with a difficult conversion and Scotland led 20-18 before momentum swung back in France's favor.

Ntamack found touch deep in Scottish territory before Swan Rebbadj opened his international account, driving over from tight phase play. Ntamack missed the conversion making it 23-20 to the home side with a quarter of an hour left.

They still needed a fourth try and 18 points in the final 10 minutes but seemed to have been given a hand when Russell, who plays his club rugby with Paris' Racing 92, shoved his elbow into Dulin's neck trying to fend off the French fullback and received a red card.

But France were also reduced to 14 men shortly after when replacement scrum-half Serin was shown a yellow card two minutes after coming on. Scotland finished the strongest and capped off a gutsy display with van der Merwe claiming his second try sending his side fourth in the table. —AFP

Aurier stars as Ivory Coast overwhelm Niger to qualify

JOHANNESBURG: Tottenham Hotspur full-back Serge Aurier scored once and created the other two goals as the Ivory Coast swept aside Niger 3-0 Friday to secure 2021 Africa Cup of Nations qualification. Morocco also booked a place at the tournament in Cameroon next January, raising to 16 the number of confirmed qualifiers for the 24-team event.

Aurier was among four Premier League stars in the Ivorian line-up and he put the two-time African champions ahead on 25 minutes in a Niamey stadium empty because of the coronavirus pandemic. The defender then set up Max Gradel to double the lead nine minutes later and killed off any hopes of a Nigerien comeback with the assist as Wilfried Kanon netted on the hour.

Securing maximum points in the heart of west Africa assured the Ivory Coast a top-two finish in Group K, leaving Ethiopia and Madagascar to fight for the other place. Ethiopia hold a two-point advantage over surprise 2019 quarter-finalists Madagascar but have a tough last fixture, away to the Ivorians, while their rivals host Niger.

Morocco, whose lone Cup of Nations triumph came 45 years ago, were assured of qualification before drawing 0-0 with Mauritania in Nouakchott after Burundi and the Central African Republic drew 2-2 in Bujumbura.

While the Moroccans can celebrate, Mauritania (six points), Burundi (five) and the C.A.R. (four) are in contention to finish as Group E runners-up. If the C.A.R. can beat Mauritania in Bangui they will join the Comoros and the Gambia as first-time qualifiers, unless Burundi pull off a shock victory in Morocco.

Burundi hit back

C.A.R. looked set for all three points when Louis Mafouta scored in each half before a Burundian comeback climaxed on 80 minutes when Christophe Nduwarugira equalized. Guinea-Bissau stayed in contention to accompany Senegal from Group I with a 3-1 victory over Eswatini in Manzini, where 'Pele' — the nickname of Judilson Gomes — was among the goals for the winners.

Success lifted Guinea-Bissau to six points, two fewer than Congo Brazzaville, but they will enjoy home advantage when the teams meet next week. Congo did well to contain Liverpool star Sadio Mane in Brazzaville, but needed a win to qualify, rather than the 0-0 draw they had to settle for.

Cameroon failed to defend an early lead given to them by Pierre Kunde and suffered a first loss in Group F as Cape Verde stormed back to win 3-1 in Praia and rise to second. Guaranteed a place at the finals as hosts, the Cameroonians were included in the group stage to gain competitive match practice.

Despite the loss, the Indomitable Lions are likely to retain first place after hosting Rwanda, while Cape Verde take a three-point lead over Mozambique to Maputo for a match to decide second. Apart from Cameroon, the qualifiers to date are defending champions Algeria, Burkina Faso, Comoros, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia and Zimbabwe. —AFP

Shcherbakova leads Russian world figure skating sweep

STOCKHOLM: Anna Shcherbakova, just 16, clinched the women's world figure skating title on Friday, leading a Russian podium sweep only a year from the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. With a total of 233.17 points, Shcherbakova, who also led after the short program, edged compatriots Elizaveta Tuktamysheva, the 2015 world champion (220.46 points), and fellow 16-year-old Alexandra Trusova (217.20).

All was not perfect, however, for Shcherbakova, who fell on her only attempt at a quadruple jump. The rest of her free program was impressively smooth. "I really don't know what to say. I tried to do my best, I struggled on every element, so I'm not really happy with my performance," said the champion who turns 17 today. "But I am first: that was my goal. It was really a struggle. From the first element, it did not go as I wanted, and after, on each element, I said to myself 'I must try to do better and not to lose any points.'"

Trusova, a pupil of former superstar Evgeni Plushenko, had struggled in 12th place in the short program but staged an impressive recovery to make the podium on Friday. Japan's Rika Kihira had been second going into the final, but she slumped to finish seventh (205.70 points). The 18-year-old put in a performance without a quadruple jump, a triple Axel that turned into a double and which ended in a fall.

Meanwhile, Russia's Victoria Sinitsina and Nikita Katsalopov made the most of the absence of four-time



STOCKHOLM: (From left) Russia's Elizaveta Tuktamysheva, Russia's Anna Shcherbakova and Russia's Alexandra Trusova stand on the podium of the ladies' free event at the ISU World Figure Skating Championships in Stockholm on Friday. —AFP

winner Gabriella Papadakis and Guillaume Cizeron to take the rhythm dance programme of the ice dancing competition. The European gold medalists scored 88.15 points skating to "Singin' in the Rain".

"We are quite satisfied with our performance, we were well prepared. In general, we showed what we can do, everything was clean enough, with our soul, easy enough," said Katsalopov. "We need to have a good rest

today, sleep well, have a good training session, check again if everything is in place, the whole program, and go out and skate (in free dance) with pleasure."

Americans Madison Hubbell and Zachary Donohue (86.05 points) and Madison Chock and Evan Bates (85.15) filled out the top three. Papadakis and Cizeron opted out of the championships to focus on their preparations for the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. —AFP

Sports

As Italian football moves on-line, TV rights bonanza may be waning

Streaming platform to broadcast bulk of Serie A matches next season

ROME: The broadcast deal between the Italian league and streaming platform DAZN announced on Friday may represent a small revolution, but it also continues a trend of the value of TV rights stagnating or falling. AFP Sport rounds up the financial state of play in Europe's big five leagues, as even the English Premier League struggles to maintain the level of its deals.

England

The Premier League still has the world's biggest football contracts, but the market is looking less healthy. Despite the entry of Amazon, which bought 20 matches a season, the original contract for 2019-2022 of £5 billion (5.85 billion euros) represented a slight drop on 2016-2019, which was £5.1 billion. But with the COVID-19 pandemic, the league is giving viewers more games for less money. After the interruption to last season by the pandemic, the league agreed to pay broadcasters at home and abroad rebates worth a reported £330 million. However the biggest slice of that, £170 million to Sky, is deferred. The original domestic contracts covered 180 of the 380 matches a season. With stadiums empty, the league attempted to launch a pay-

per-view service for the balance, but fans refused to buy. Humiliated, the league caved in and "gifted" the remaining matches to rights holders at no extra cost, including a handful of matches on the BBC, the first games on the free-to-air national station in Premier league history. And the bidding on the next round of TV rights has started with indications that the value of domestic deals could drop further.

Italy

A small revolution will take place from next season in Italy, with the bulk of the league's matches being streamed by the DAZN platform, which on Friday outbid historic broadcaster Sky by agreeing to pay 2.52 billion euros for the main package of rights over the next three seasons. From 2018 to this season, Sky and DAZN have shared the domestic TV rights to Serie A in deals worth 973 million euros a year. For 2021-24, DAZN will pay around 840m euros a year to broadcast all ten matches each week, but it will have to share three of those with another broadcaster. The sale of those matches is still under negotiation with Sky, among others. The Italian league is hoping the final deals are as close as possible to the current total.

Germany

The German Bundesliga found itself negotiating the new TV deals for its two divisions last summer at the height of the pandemic. The domestic four-year deal, with Sky Deutschland and DAZN, of 4.4 billion euros, or 1.1 billion euros a season, represented a slight drop on the record previous contract. Sky will show Saturday matches and DAZN games on Fridays, which are unpopular with fans, and Sundays. Bundesliga boss Christian Seifert said the deal: "Gives us the greatest possible stability in times of uncertainty".

Spain

In Spain, La Liga awarded the 2019-22 TV rights for the its league to the duo Telefonica (which owns the Movistar TV channel, La Liga's main broadcaster) and Mediapro, for 3.421 billion euros, or an average of 1.14 billion euros a season. Comparison with previous deals is difficult, because before 2016 clubs sold their rights individually. The pandemic has forced a drop in the value of the deals, in particular La Liga had to renegotiate its 460m-euro contract with Mediapro for the rights to broadcast matches in Spanish bars, badly hit by the pandemic.



TURIN: In this file photo taken on July 04, 2020 a television cameraman prepares to broadcast the Italian Serie A football match Juventus vs Torino played behind closed doors at the Juventus stadium in Turin. — AFP

France

Chinese-Spanish broadcaster Mediapro was less successful in persuading the French league to renegotiate the record 1.217 billion euro annual deal for the bulk of the rights to Ligue 1 and Ligue 2 matches for 2020-24. Instead the leagues tore up

the deal in December. In its place, the leagues signed a deal worth around 683 million euros for this season with old partner Canal+, representing a drop of almost 50 percent in anticipated revenues. After this season, the TV picture is fuzzy: the rights have yet to be negotiated. — AFP

Ibra feeling 'good' after winning Sweden return

PARIS: Zlatan Ibrahimovic made a winning return to international football with Sweden on Thursday after nearly five years away as Germany came out for human rights in their opening qualifier for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Ibrahimovic set up Viktor Claesson's 35th-minute winner in the 1-0 win over Georgia at the Friends Arena just outside Stockholm in his 117th appearance for his national team, his first since Euro 2016.

The AC Milan forward had to hold back the tears as he spoke to reporters on Monday about his international comeback, and he was in good spirits after a win that puts Sweden top of Group B. "It felt good. It felt like it was my first international match. It was a lot of adrenaline," Ibrahimovic told Sverige Radio.

Sweden lead their group two points ahead of Greece and Spain, who played out a surprising 1-1 draw in Granada. Alvaro Morata opened the scoring with a superb control and finish from Koke's clipped pass in the 33rd minute.

But the Greeks leveled through their only shot of the entire match, Anastasios Bakasetas' penalty in the 57th minute after Inigo Martinez fouled Giorgios Masouras. "I don't like the result and we weren't inspired either... Whenever we got near the Greek penalty area we lacked sharpness and efficacy," said Spain coach Luis Enrique.

Germans join 'rights' protest

Germany lined up with T-shirts that spelled out "human rights" ahead of their 3-0 Group J win over Iceland amid concerns over alleged human rights abuses in Qatar, the hosts of next year's finals. "We have the World Cup coming up and there will be discussions about it... we wanted to



SOLNA: Sweden's forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic (center) and his teammates celebrate the first goal during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification football match Sweden v Georgia in Solna, near Stockholm on Thursday. — AFP

show we are not ignoring that," goalscorer Leon Goretzka told broadcaster RTL. "We have a large reach — and we can use it to set an example for the values we want to stand for. That was clear."

Once on the pitch Joachim Loew's side got off to a rapid start, with Goretzka and Kai Havertz firing the hosts into a two-goal lead inside seven minutes. Manchester City's Ilkay Gundogan continued his fine recent goalscoring form, collecting the ball 10 minutes after the break and drilling home a low shot.

Italy enjoy comeback

First-half goals from Domenico Berardi and Ciro Immobile were enough for Italy to ease past the Northern Ireland 2-0 in their first World Cup match since their humiliating failure to qualify for the 2018 tournament in Russia. Berardi scored his fourth goal in five internationals after racing through to meet Alessandro Florenzi's defense-splitting pass before lashing the opener past Bailey Peacock-Farrell from a tight angle.

Immobile doubled the hosts' lead in

Parma by ending a rapid counter-attack with a near-post shot that squeezed home, and despite an improved second-half performance from the away side Italy easily held on for the win. They sit second in Group C, level on points with Switzerland who beat Bulgaria 3-1.

James Ward-Prowse and Ollie Watkins scored their first international goals as England thumped San Marino 5-0, with Dominic Calvert-Lewin hitting a brace and stand-in captain Raheem Sterling also netting in a comfortable win.

Robert Lewandowski struck with seven minutes remaining in Budapest to earn Poland a late point in a thrilling 3-3 draw with Hungary. The visitors had already come back once from two goals down to level when Willi Orban put the hosts ahead again in the 78th minute.

But Bayern striker Lewandowski lashed home his side's second leveler five minutes later to earn a point. John McGinn's stunning overhead kick five minutes from time rescued Scotland from a losing start to their campaign in an entertaining 2-2 draw with Austria. — AFP

Pressure on Sagnol to revive Georgian football

TBILISI: Zlatan Ibrahimovic was not the only man making a return to international football on Thursday night. As the 39-year-old set up the Viktor Claesson goal that saw Sweden edge Georgia 1-0 in their opening World Cup qualifier, Willy Sagnol got a glimpse of the huge task he let himself in for when he agreed last month to take over as Georgia coach.

The 44-year-old former right-back played 58 times for France including the 2006 World Cup final defeat to Italy, and began his managerial career in 2013 with the France under-20 team. He then failed at Bordeaux and has not been seen in a management role since 2017, when he was Bayern Munich's interim boss. Now, Sagnol is facing the double challenge of not only creating a competitive team but of convincing the Georgian football public that he is the man for the job.

"Sagnol's appointment astonished everyone in Georgia," football journalist Bidzina Baratashvili told AFP. "He was a good footballer but has a limited experience as a coach and has not been professionally active for several years." Sagnol had cited "family reasons" behind his decision to retire temporarily from football, but said he was "now fully concentrated on the mission in Georgia".

The Frenchman told AFP that he chose to take the job after the Georgian football federation made clear their "real desire" to have him on board. "When you feel so much desire, it motivates you even more," Sagnol told AFP. "And I also think



SOLNA: Georgia's head coach Willy Sagnol gives a press conference after the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification football match Sweden v Georgia in Solna, near Stockholm on Thursday. — AFP

that the development project implemented in the Georgian federation for several years now is really worth a shot."

'Minimum objective'

Sagnol faces a monumental task in the World Cup qualifiers as, apart from Zlatan's Sweden, his team is also grouped with Greece, Kosovo and next opponents Spain. Only the group winners qualify automatically.

"We are in a tough group," Sagnol said, adding that Georgia's football federation "has not given me a specific objective for this qualifying group. It is a federation which wants to continue to grow, to continue to progress. We must have positive developments compared to recent years."

That appraisal, however, does not quite chime with the words coming from the federation whose vice-president Alexandre Iashvili told AFP that "the minimum objective (in the group) is third place". "The next objective is to win in Group C of the Nations League and then to play in the European Championship," said Iashvili. — AFP

Classifieds

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Chest Hospital	24849400	Shamiya	24848913
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Shuwaikh	24814507
Adan Hospital	23940620	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Nuzha	22526804
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
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NOTICE
March 21, 2021

Mr. Sai Varghese, son of Mr. Varghese Thaliakuzhy Paulose, resident of Thaliakuzhy House, Angamaly South PO, Ms. Princy Thomas, daughter of House, 16 Acre, Kulathupuzha Nazareth Nagar, Ernakulam, Kerala 683573 and Mr. Prince Kunjachen Thomas, resident of Kurikattil PO, Kallam, Kerala 691310 both Indian nationals presently residing in Kuwait, have given notice of intended marriage between them under the Foreign Marriage Act, 1969. If anyone has any objection to the proposed marriage, he/she may file the same with the undersigned according to the procedure laid down under the Act/Rule within thirty days from the date of publication of this notice. Communications in this regard can be made by Email (cw2.kuwait@mea.gov.in) / letters/ telephonic calls (00965 - 22550171, 00965 - 22533125).

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'MVP' Harden hits 44 to spark Nets

Celtics beat Bucks, Powell scores 22 in Blazers debut

WASHINGTON: James Harden delivered game highs of 44 points, 14 rebounds and eight assists Friday to power the Brooklyn Nets over Detroit 113-111 while Boston ended Milwaukee's eight-game NBA win streak. Harden missed Wednesday's loss at Utah with neck soreness but returned with a vengeance at Detroit, hitting 14-of-30 from the floor, 4-of-11 3-pointers, and 12-of-14 free throws.

It was Harden's highest-scoring performance since joining the Nets from Houston, helping Brooklyn improve to 31-15 and making a case for himself as the NBA Most Valuable Player. "I feel like I am the MVP. It's just that simple," Harden said. "Let's leave it at that."

Harden scored 12 of Brooklyn's 15 points in a key stretch that ended early in the fourth quarter and turned a one-point deficit into a 10-point Nets lead. "I just try to go out there and give my teammates every single thing I can bring to the game," Harden said. "I just take what the defense gives me, just play the game the right way and try to be efficient."

With Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving missing from the Nets' lineup, Harden has raised his game. Also inspired was reserve Blake Griffin, who added 17 points in his return after leaving Detroit for the Nets. Jeff Green sank a late 3-pointer and Joe Harris added a free throw with 5.3 seconds to hold off the Pistons.

Boston's Jayson Tatum scored 34 points and Marcus Smart added 23 to spark the Celtics over host Milwaukee 122-114 after losing 10 of their prior 11 road contests. "We played with good purpose, good connectivity," Celtics coach Brad Stevens said. "I

thought everybody that played gave us a good lift."

Milwaukee fell to 29-15, falling a game behind Brooklyn into third in the Eastern Conference, while Boston improved to 22-23. Khris Middleton had 19 points and Giannis Antetokounmpo added 16 despite being benched in the fourth quarter. "They were excellent and we didn't play our best. We weren't as good as them tonight," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said. "We didn't play good enough."

Bahamian big man Deandre Ayton and Chris Paul each scored 19 points and Devin Booker added 16 to spark Phoenix over Toronto 104-100 for a 10th win in 13 contests, the Suns improving to second in the Western Conference at 30-14. It takes a lot of pressure off," Booker said of his teammates' effort. "You don't have to perform at the highest, highest level every night to win games."

Jazz win fourth in row

Serbian Nikola Jokic scored 37 points and Michael Porter Jr added 25 to lead the Denver Nuggets to a 113-108 win over the host New Orleans Pelicans despite 39 points by Zion Williamson, who sank 16-of-19 from the floor and 6-of-7 from the free throw line.

Utah's Donovan Mitchell scored 35 points and French big man Rudy Gobert added 25 points and nine rebounds in a 117-114 home triumph over Memphis. Grizzlies star Ja Morant scored 32 points in a losing cause as the Jazz improved the NBA's best record to 33-11 with a fourth straight victory.

Norman Powell scored 22 points in his first game with Portland since being






DETROIT: James Harden of the Brooklyn Nets shoots the ball during the game against the Detroit Pistons on Friday at Little Caesars Arena in Detroit, Michigan. — AFP

traded on Thursday to power the Blazers over host Orlando 112-105. CJ McCollum scored 22 as well for the visitors. Meanwhile, Domantas Sabonis and Malcolm Brogdon each scored 22 points

to lead Indiana over host Dallas 109-94. Karl-Anthony Towns had 29 points and 16 rebounds for Minnesota in a 107-101 home victory over Houston. He had 14 points in a game-ending 22-0

run for the Timberwolves after Houston led by 16. Charlotte's Malik Monk came off the bench to score a game-high 32 points and lead the Hornets over visiting Miami 110-105. — AFP



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