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# Amir hopes for cooperation in today's Assembly session

## Parliament set to meet as boycott bid fails • 3 MPs file to grill PM

By B Izzak and KUNA

**KUWAIT:** HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah expressed yesterday hope for fruitful cooperation between the executive and legislative authorities during today's National Assembly session. HH the Amir also expressed his desire that the session will be held without tensions to enable the Cabinet - headed by HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah - to take oath in accordance with the constitution.

The government must be given the proper time to exercise its authorities and attend to its responsibilities, especially during the current trying times, affirmed HH the Amir. He said cooperation between the executive and legislative branches is important for the country, adding that the law and rulings by the constitutional court are above all.

HH the Amir also stressed that article 50 of the constitution regarding separation of duties among

the authorities and cooperation amongst them is vital for the success of the Kuwaiti democratic process. He expressed confidence that MPs are up to task and will help the government achieve the interests of people and maintain the security and stability of Kuwait.

The National Assembly is now highly expected to hold its meeting today, as 32 opposition lawmakers appear to have failed to sway one more MP to join their camp to have the magical number of 33 necessary to stop the meeting. Three undecided tribal lawmakers, whom the opposition had hoped to win over, yesterday bluntly said they will attend the session after meeting HH the Amir and declaring allegiance to his call.

If the session takes place, Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem is scheduled to announce that the membership of leading opposition MP Bader Al-Dahoum is null and void based on a ruling by the constitutional court, which Dahoum and many legal experts claim

violated an earlier and more important verdict by the court of cassation that allowed him to run for public office.

In the Dec 5 general polls, Dahoum won a seat in the Assembly resoundingly, securing the second highest number of votes in the country. But three voters from his constituency challenged his election and the constitutional court ruled his election was null and void on the basis that he was convicted of insulting HH the Amir in 2014.

Dahoum is a member of the Awazem tribe, the largest bedouin tribe in Kuwait. Dozens of his tribesmen yesterday thronged the residences of a number of other Awazem lawmakers and called on them to boycott the session. Police intervened and asked the angry crowds to disperse because they violated health regulations imposed to combat the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Four of the seven Awazem MPs have said they will attend the session.

Opposition MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri yesterday

lashed out at HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah and the speaker and called on them to step down, saying this will save Kuwait from nonstop political crises. He said opposition MPs planning to boycott the session will gather at the Assembly gate and will not attend the session if it starts. He said even if the prime minister is allowed to take the oath, he will be facing a series of grillings backed by a majority of lawmakers.

Opposition MPs Hasan Jowhar, Muhannad Al-Sayer and Muhalhal Al-Mudhaf yesterday filed to grill the prime minister because the government has not submitted its program for this period and over its failure to fight corruption and safeguard public funds. The grilling will not be debated in today's session if it takes place and will be discussed after two weeks. Opposition lawmakers plan to file another grilling against the prime minister. This is expected to trigger more political crises in the country between the opposition and the government.

### News in brief

#### UAE, China launch vaccine project

**DUBAI:** The UAE and China on Sunday announced a venture to produce the Sinopharm coronavirus vaccine in the Gulf nation. The UAE's Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan said the project adds "value to the international efforts being made in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, which has been taking a toll on everyday lives across the world." — AFP

#### Egypt arrests 8 over train crash

**CAIRO:** Egypt has arrested eight people over a train collision last week, prosecutors said in a statement yesterday that also revised the death toll down to 18 people. "The prosecutor general ordered that the two drivers... their two assistants, the guard of a traffic control tower, the head of traffic control in Assiut and two other guards ... be remanded in custody," the prosecutor said. — AFP

#### Obama's 'granny' dies at 99

**NAIROBI:** Sarah Obama, the grandmother of former US President Barack Obama, has died aged 99 in western Kenya, her daughter said yesterday. Sarah Obama, popularly known as Mama Sarah, had been admitted to the Jaramogi Oginga Odinga Teaching and Referral Hospital in Kisumu. Although not a blood relation, President Obama often referred to Sarah as his "granny". — AFP

#### Philippines locks down economic hub

**MANILA:** More than 24 million people in the Philippines' economic hub entered a lockdown yesterday, as officials warned the weeklong restrictions could be extended if coronavirus infections do not fall. People have been ordered to stay home unless they are essential workers as Metro Manila and four neighboring provinces struggle to curb a surge that has strained hospitals. — AFP (See Page 7)

#### Guardianship rules slammed

**DOHA:** Human Rights Watch yesterday accused Qatar of restricting the lives of its female population through unclear "guardianship" rules requiring adult women to obtain male approval to travel and study abroad and get married. Qatar's government communications office rejected the HRW report as "inaccurate", saying "Qatar is an outspoken advocate for women's rights at home and abroad". — AFP

## Joy as megaship refloated, Suez Canal reopens

**SUEZ, Egypt:** The MV Ever Given was refloated and the Suez Canal reopened to traffic yesterday, sparking relief almost a week after the huge container ship got stuck and blocked a major artery for global trade. Tugboat crews sounded their foghorns in celebration after the Japanese-owned megaship the length of four football fields was fully dislodged from the sandy banks of the Suez.

World oil prices eased on the news of the reopening of the waterway that connects the Mediterranean and Red Sea and through which more than 10 percent of world trade passes. The head of the Suez Canal Authority (SCA), Admiral Osama Rabie, had around 3 pm local time (1300 GMT) "announced the resumption of shipping traffic in the Suez Canal," the authority said.

The SCA cautioned, however, that it will take more than three days to clear the traffic jam of ships stuck at the northern and southern ends of the

Continued on Page 2

## COVID likely spread from bats, not from lab leak, frozen food

**GENEVA:** An international expert mission to Wuhan concluded in a report seen yesterday that COVID-19 likely first passed to humans from a bat through an intermediary animal, with investigators all but ruling out a laboratory leak. The intermediate



ISMAILIA, Egypt: Tugboats yesterday pull the Panama-flagged MV 'Ever Given' that was lodged sideways across the Suez Canal. — AFP

## Pensioners in Lebanon face lost savings

**BEIRUT:** Samir Merhi returned to Lebanon in 2009, hoping the fortune he made abroad would let him retire comfortably at home, but the country's economic crisis has upended his dreams and forced him to leave again. For four decades, Merhi said he made "millions" working in the fashion and construction industries in Britain and the Gulf, but draconian controls imposed by Lebanese banks have

trapped his life savings.

Speaking in a hotel in Beirut's commercial district of Hamra, Merhi said he was planning to fly to the United States, where he will join family, even though he isn't keen on doing so. "I have no choice," said the 72-year-old former businessman wearing a neatly pressed suit. "I have to start over to secure my retirement. If my money was given back to me, I wouldn't need to go to the US," he told AFP. "What will I do there? I don't want to die in America," he said as he waited for a taxi to take him to the airport.

Lebanon is in the grips of its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war, with more than half of its

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BEIRUT: Jean Assaf, an 80-year-old retired police officer, shows old pictures of him in uniform at his home in the capital's Mar Mikhael district on March 24, 2021. — AFP

## Local

# Kuwait Amir receives senior officials at Bayan Palace

## Sheikh Nawaf thanks former cabinet affairs minister



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — Amiri Diwan photos



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah at Bayan Palace yesterday. His Highness the Amir also received National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. Furthermore, His Highness the Amir received Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Integrity Enhancement Abdullah Al-Roumi. His Highness the Amir also received former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh. His Highness the Amir praised Saleh for his efforts and thanked him for his work and duty as a minister, wishing him great success. — KUNA



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Integrity Enhancement Abdullah Al-Roumi.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh.



RAMALLAH: Chinese Ambassador Guo Wei and Palestinian Health Minister Mai Al-Kaila bump elbows during the unloading of a shipment of Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccines donated by the Chinese government yesterday. — AFP

## Palestinians get 100,000 Chinese vaccine doses

RAMALLAH: The Palestinian Authority received 100,000 doses of the Chinese Sinopharm jab yesterday, the largest single batch of coronavirus vaccines yet to reach the Palestinian territories. The PA's vaccination campaign was launched this month after the delivery of thousands of vaccines through the UN's Covax program for poorer nations.

The Palestinian vaccine rollout has lagged well behind that of Israel, which has faced criticism for excluding most Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip from its world-beating vaccination drive. The latest jabs "represent a commitment to the promise China made to put vaccines at the service of the world", Chinese ambassador to the PA, Guo Wei, told reporters in Ramallah in the

Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Palestinian Health Minister Mai Al-Kaila said the delivery would "greatly contribute to accelerating the community vaccination campaign," as the number of infections in the West Bank continues to rise. The PA announced it had started vaccinating the over-75s and some medical patients on March 21 after receiving 60,000 vaccine doses through the UN-backed Covax program for poorer nations.

More than 20,000 of those doses have been transferred to Gaza, which Israel has blockaded since Hamas Islamists seized the coastal strip in 2007. An additional 60,000 doses of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine have been delivered to Gaza from the United Arab Emirates, shipments brokered by a former top PA official currently exiled in Abu Dhabi, Mohammed Dahlan.

Covax has also pledged doses to vaccinate another million Palestinians. Israel has fully inoculated more than half its roughly 9.3 million people. Israel has also vaccinated 105,000 Palestinians with permits to work in Israel or in Jewish settlements in the West Bank. — AFP

## Joy as megaship refloated, Suez...

Continued from Page 1

canal. In the hours before the ship was dislodged, the tailbacks had reached 425 vessels. Maritime data company Lloyd's List said the blockage had held up an estimated \$9.6 billion worth of cargo each day between Asia and Europe.

In the small canal-side village of Manchiyet Al-Rougoula, residents watched in amazement as the immense container ship left the bank. A father and his family climbed to the roof of their red brick house to get a better view as the ship with at least nine levels of containers slowly passed by. "We are happy to see the boat move (and) thank God," said one resident who asked not to be named. A former SCA chairman, Mohab Mamish, expressed pride in the operation, telling AFP: "I am well and truly overjoyed ... We were able to get out of a very tight jam."

On social media too, Egyptians greeted the news with jubilation and shared a flurry of memes, including a video montage of a man representing Egypt triumphantly carrying the ship on his shoulders, to applause from the world. Ahmed Abbas, a Suez Canal employee, shared live footage from the scene on his Facebook account, exclaiming "Praise be to God, the vessel is finally out! Well done to the SCA boys!"

Egypt has lost some \$12-14 million in revenues each day that the ship was stuck, according to the canal authority. Dutch company Boskalis, which played a key role in the rescue operation, said its "team of experts, working in close collaboration with the Suez Canal Authority, successfully refloat-

ed" the ship at 3:05 pm local time. The operation, carried out under time pressure and "the watchful eye of the world", required 13 tug boats and the dredging of some 30,000 cubic meters of sand, said Peter Berdowski, CEO of Boskalis.

The freed vessel was travelling north toward the Great Bitter Lake, through which the canal passes, "for an inspection of its seaworthiness", said the Taiwan company Evergreen which operates the ship. "The outcome of that inspection will determine whether the ship can resume its scheduled service."

The stern of the ship had been dislodged early yesterday, sparking immediate praise from Egypt's President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, even as Boskalis initially warned that the bow would prove more difficult to unedge. "Today, Egyptians have been successful in putting to an end the crisis of the stranded ship in the Suez Canal, despite the enormous complexity surrounding the process," Sisi said.

Salvage crews have been working around the clock ever since the accident which has been blamed on high winds and poor visibility during a sandstorm, although the canal authority also cited the possibility of human error. Rescue teams had focused on efforts to remove sand around the ship, which was dredged up to a depth of 18 m, SCA spokesman George Safwat said Sunday.

The crisis forced companies to choose between waiting or rerouting vessels around Africa, which adds 9,000 km and over a week of travel to the trip between Asia and Europe. In a sign of the knock-on effects from the Suez blockage, authorities in war-ravaged Syria said the crisis had hit its fuel imports from Iran and forced it to ration already scarce supplies. Romania's animal health agency said 11 ships carrying livestock out of the country were also impacted, while the charity Animals International had warned of a potential "tragedy" affecting some 130,000 animals. — AFP

## Pensioners in Lebanon face...

Continued from Page 1

population mired in poverty. The Lebanese pound has lost more than 85 percent of its value against the US dollar on the black market in a devaluation that has eaten away at pensions and salaries. Lebanese banks have limited access to pound deposits and halted all dollar transactions since 2019 to stem a liquidity crunch and shore up dwindling foreign exchange reserves.

Like many in the country, Merhi blames the dire situation on politicians who he accused of being "corrupt from head to toe". "I'm the victim of the biggest financial scam in history," he said. "May God curse them all." Unlike Merhi, who can live elsewhere, many Lebanese pensioners are caught in a bind.

They include more than 108,000 ex-public sector workers who rely on monthly pensions averaging 2.2 million pounds - about \$1,466 at the official exchange rate, but only around \$180 on the volatile black market. Earlier this month, the pound hit an all-time low of 15,000 against the greenback.

Jean Assaf, who was a policeman for 32 years, gets a pension of about \$180, down from \$1,400 before the crisis. "I had hoped to live honorably at the end of my life," said the ex-officer, the walls in his dark living room adorned with old photos, medals, and

embroidered art. "For the remaining years in store for me, I can only count on God," he added, with his children also struggling to cope.

In Mar Mikhael, a district hit hard by a devastating explosion at Beirut's port last year that killed more than 200 people, charities aiding the most vulnerable have expanded relief efforts to include pensioners. Among them is Grassroots, which runs a soup kitchen. "It's mostly retirees," who have been coming recently, said director Mayssa Mansour, standing beside a queue of people waiting for food under pouring rain. "They are ashamed... these are people who have never needed to ask for handouts."

Lining up for soup in Mar Mikhael, former policeman Adib said times are tough. The 69-year-old, who retired in 2004, waits for food for his family every day because his pension is now only worth around \$100. "I used to belong to the middle class," he said. "Now I fall below the poverty line."

Private sector workers are also feeling the pinch, including Sara and Fouad Ammar who used to get a combined pension of around \$6,000. Now, the retired teachers only make about \$600 between them. "Our situation is relatively better than many others," said Sara, 68. "But we didn't expect things to be like this at the end of our life," said the former teacher at a prestigious French school.

Her husband Fouad, 76, said the family has lost more than just savings, with two of their three children having left for Canada because of the crisis. "We are at an age where we want to be around our grandchildren - to play with them and to see them," he said with a forlorn look. — AFP

## COVID likely spread from bats, not from...

Continued from Page 1

translation issues, even as a diplomatic tug-of-war raged in the background over the report's contents. The repeated delays sparked renewed criticism of the UN health agency's slow actions in getting the team to Wuhan in the first place.

The experts tasked with probing COVID-19's origins only arrived there on Jan 14, more than a year after the first cases surfaced in the Chinese city. In the 15 months since the coronavirus emerged, the pandemic has engulfed the planet, killing nearly 2.8 million people and pummeling the global economy.

Vaccines have offered a glimmer of hope and allowed some countries to emerge from more than a year of punishing anti-virus measures. People in Britain rushed to pools and parks yesterday to enjoy newfound freedoms as the government peeled back restrictions there, allowing small groups to gather, or sports activities to resume.

As Britons dipped back into a pre-pandemic life, several experts turned their attention to the origins report. But the highly-anticipated document offered few firm conclusions. It said evidence suggested the COVID-19 outbreak may have begun several months before it was first detected in Wuhan in Dec 2019, and called for COVID antibody testing of samples in Wuhan blood banks from as far back as September that year.

They also said it remained unclear what role the Wuhan market had played in sparking or amplifying the initial outbreak, and presented no clear answer on how the virus first jumped to humans. Dutch virologist and team member Marion Koopmans rejected the focus on the unanswered questions, stressing on Twitter that the experts had presented a huge amount of information. "Not everything answered but surely a good start," she said.

The experts worked to rank a number of hypotheses on the pandemic origins according to

how likely they were. They believe that the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes the Covid-19 disease originally came from bats. One theory examined was that the virus jumped directly from bats to humans. The final report determined that this scenario was "possible to likely".

A more probable scenario, the report found, was that the virus had first jumped from bats to another animal, which in turn infected humans. "Although the closest related viruses have been found in bats, the evolutionary distance between these bat viruses and SARS-CoV-2 is estimated to be several decades, suggesting a missing link," the report said.

"The scenario, including introduction through an intermediary host, was considered to be likely to very likely," it said. The report did not however conclusively identify which animal first allowed the virus to jump to humans, but it named a number of candidates, including mink, pangolins, rabbits and ferret badgers.

A third hypothesis the experts examined was whether the virus may have been imported to Wuhan in frozen food - a favorite theory in Beijing, which has questioned the initial assumption the virus originated in China. The report did not rule out transmission through frozen food, since the virus has been shown to survive on frozen food packages, and listed the theory as "possible". But while it said there was some evidence that people could be infected through handling contaminated frozen products, it was very unlikely that was how the virus was first introduced.

Finally, the report examined the idea of a lab leak from, for instance, the Wuhan Institute of Virology - a theory promoted by former US president Donald Trump's administration. It pointed to the fact that there was no record of any virus resembling SARS-CoV-2 in any laboratory before Dec 2019, and stressed high safety levels at the labs in Wuhan. "A laboratory origin of the pandemic was considered to be extremely unlikely," the report said.

But in Geneva yesterday, WHO boss Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stressed that all origin theories remained on the table. "All hypotheses are open, from what I read from the report... and warrant complete and further studies," he told a press conference. — AFP

Local

## Kuwait curfew: What you need to know

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait imposed a one-month partial curfew from 6:00 pm to 5:00 am starting from March 7, 2021 to help curb the sharp increase in COVID-19 cases registered in recent weeks. During the curfew hours, pharmacies, medical stores, co-operative societies and supermarkets are allowed to continue operation only through delivery services, 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](http://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

# Kuwait's Amir, Saudi Crown Prince discuss Green Initiative

## Prince Mohammed bin Salman talks initiative with Arab leaders

**KUWAIT:** His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday a phone call from Saudi Arabia Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. During the call, discussion focused on the Middle East Green Initiative announced by the Saudi Crown Prince, which aims, in partnership with the countries of the region, to plant 50 billion trees as the largest reforestation program in the world. His Highness Sheikh Nawaf lauded the efforts exerted by the Saudi Crown Prince and appreciated the initiative, expressing Kuwait's readiness to work with the Kingdom to achieve the initiative's goal. His Highness the Amir wished Saudi Arabia further progress and prosperity, under the wise leadership of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud.

The Saudi Crown Prince had also called the leaders of Qatar, Bahrain, Iraq and Sudan to discuss a massive regional tree-planting project, state news agency (SPA) reported early yesterday. "The Middle East Green Initiative aims, in partnership with the countries of the region, to plant 50 billion trees as the largest reforestation program in the world," SPA said. The Saudi Crown Prince unveiled the ambitious campaign on Saturday that sees Saudi Arabia planting 10 billion trees in coming decades and working with other Arab states to plant another

40 billion trees, to reduce carbon emissions and combat pollution and land degradation.

SPA added that initiative also aims "to enhance the efficiency of oil production and increase the contribution of renewable energy, in addition to multiple efforts to preserve the marine and coastal environment, and increase the percentage of natural reserves". The Saudi Green Initiative is part of the prince's Vision



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah



Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud



Planting 40 billion trees in region

2030 plan to reduce its reliance on oil revenues and improve quality of life.

"The kingdom, the region and the world needs to go much further and faster in combating climate change," Prince Mohammed said on Saturday. "We reject the false choice between preserving the economy and protecting the environment." The statement did not elaborate on how the mammoth plan would be executed in a largely desert landscape with

extremely limited renewable water sources. Saudi Arabia currently draws on oil and natural gas to both meet its own fast-growing power demand and desalinate its water - which consumes huge quantities of oil daily. The new initiatives are part of the prince's Vision 2030 plan to diversify the kingdom's oil-reliant economy.

Prince Mohammed said Saudi Arabia and the region face "significant climate challenges", including desertification, which poses an "immediate economic risk". Some \$13 billion is lost annually due to sand storms in the region, while pollution from greenhouse gases has reduced average Saudi life expectancy by 1.5 years, he added. — Agencies

## Kuwait registers 1,251 new COVID cases, 12 deaths

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Ministry of Health (MoH) registered yesterday 1,251 additional COVID-19 cases over a 24-hour span, increasing the total number of infections to 229,550, while 12 fatalities were recorded, raising the death toll to 1,298. Active cases amounted to 14,310 with 254 of them in intensive care units, MoH's Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said. Health authorities conducted 8,104 swab tests, which meant that 15.4 percent of swab tests performed in 24 hours were infectious, he revealed. The total number of swab

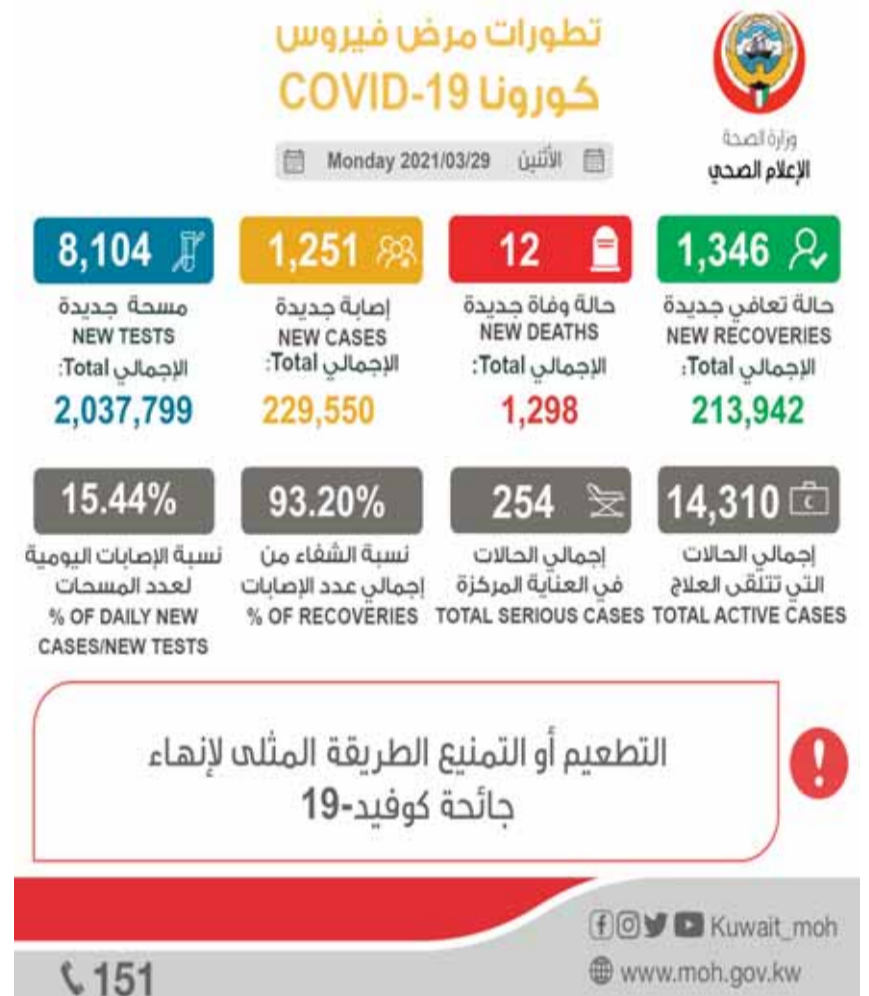
tests taken in Kuwait rose to 2,037,799. Earlier yesterday, the ministry confirmed 1,346 fresh recovery cases, increasing the total to 213,942 cured people so far. Dr Sanad urged everyone in Kuwait to comply with the precautionary measures against the virus and maintain social distancing. He recommends that everyone should visit MoH's official accounts and official authorities in the country to view the instructions, recommendations, and everything that would contribute to overcoming the virus. — KUNA

## Lebanon plant shuts as Kuwait fuel ship stuck

**BEIRUT:** Lebanon's Zahrani power plant has shut down operations after running out of gasoil, the state news agency NNA said quoting a statement by the country's electricity company. The company said there had been a delay offloading a spot cargo that arrived in Lebanon after complications arose as to the method

through which the gasoil should be tested.

The plant, in the south of Lebanon, is one of the four main power generation plants in the country. Another cargo that was due to arrive from Kuwait was stuck in the Suez Canal after the waterway was blocked for nearly a week by a cargo ship. — Agencies



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## Local

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## News in brief

## Amir Mourns Sheikha Nouria

**KUWAIT:** His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Monday sent a cable of condolences to the family of the late Sheikha Nouria Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah. In the cable, His Highness the Amir prayed to Allah Almighty to bless the soul of Sheikha Nouria with mercy in Paradise and to bring solace to Al-Sabah Family. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables. The Amiri Diwan earlier mourned Sheikha Nouria Al-Sabah, widow of Sheikh Sabah Salem Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, who passed away at the age of 96 years old. — KUNA

## Kuwait condemns explosion

**KUWAIT:** The Foreign Ministry of Kuwait strongly condemned and denounced the attack, which occurred in a Church in the city of Makassar, Indonesia, which resulted in the wounding of several people. A press statement by the ministry on Sunday renewed Kuwait's solid stance against violence and terrorism in all shapes and forms, calling for bolstering international efforts to counter this dangerous phenomenon. The statement also expressed Kuwait's solidarity towards the leadership and people of Indonesia, supporting all its efforts to maintain security and stability. — KUNA

## Photo of the Day



**KUWAIT:** In this March 21, 2021 file photo, two kids ride their bicycles in a park before the curfew hours. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

## Bicycle sales on the rise in Kuwait despite walking period ban

**KUWAIT:** Despite the partial curfew that started three weeks ago, and despite the ban on using bicycles and scooters during the two-hour walking period, stores that sell them have been witnessing unprecedented sales during the past few days. Al-Qabas Arabic daily reported yesterday that bicycle and scooter stores in Sharq are crowded and health protocols are not necessarily being observed all the time. A store manager said the coronavirus outbreak and the curfew have increased demand for bicycles. He said international manufacturers no longer can meet the demand and there is difficulty in importing bikes in the present time, while preorders may take a year to deliver.

## Patients in ICUs

Separately, Jahra Hospital Director Dr Ali Al-Mutairi said taking the COVID-19 vaccine while continuously complying with health protocols are the means of emerging from the pandemic. He warned through Al-Rai Arabic daily yesterday against laxity in implementing the measures as infection rates and hospital admittance are rising, which reflects in turn on intensive care admissions.

Mutairi said the vaccine, besides its role in protecting individuals and the society against infection, protects against being in need of intensive care, and this is clear when considering the number of current cases in the ICU, the majority of whom did not get the vaccine. He said there is not a single case in intensive care from among those who completed their vaccination. Mutairi said it is necessary to increase awareness among citizens.

Ministry of Health spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad had announced Sunday 1,121 new COVID-19

cases, seven deaths and 1,236 recoveries registered in the previous 24 hours. The caseload amounted to 228,299, recoveries to 212,596 and death toll to 1,286 as of Sunday. The number of patients in ICUs stood Sunday at 251, while total patients receiving health care reached 14,417, Al-Sanad added.

## Account hacked

In other news, the official Twitter account of Kuwait's Education Ministry was hacked by an unknown person who posted tweets calling for canceling in campus exams for grade 12 students, and instead having students do their finals online. The Center For Government Communication later confirmed on its Twitter that the education ministry's account was hacked, adding that the ministry was working on retrieving it. The education ministry had earlier announced that this year's final exams for grade 12 students will take place in classes under strict health precautions.

## FRONTLINE HEROES OF KUWAIT

## Student Art Competition 2021



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

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

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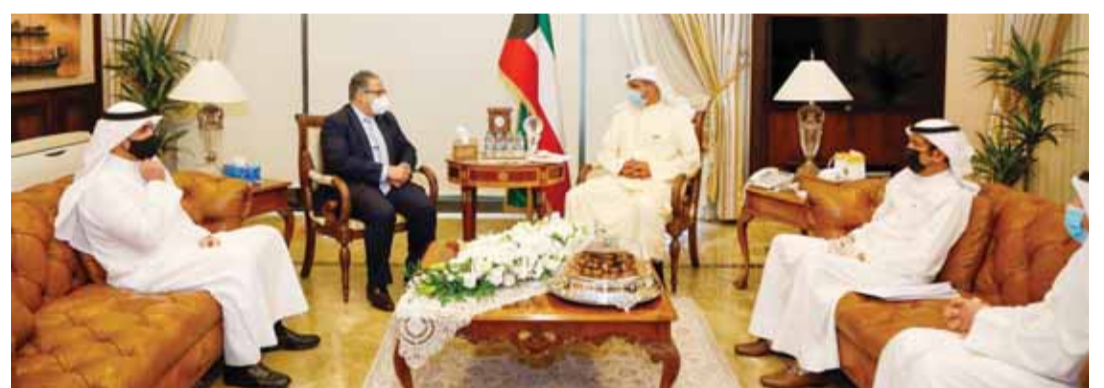
**HUAWEI**



## S African minister to visit Kuwait

**KUWAIT:** The Embassy of the Republic of South Africa in the State of Kuwait wishes to inform that Dr Naledi Pandor, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation of the Republic of South Africa, will lead an Official Delegation on an official visit to the State of Kuwait from tomorrow to April 1, 2021. The purpose of

this official visit is to boost bilateral diplomatic, political, trade and economic relations between the Republic of South Africa and the State of Kuwait. The official visit will witness the signing of bilateral agreements between the governments of the Republic of South Africa and the State of Kuwait. These agreements will further consolidate South Africa-Kuwait relations by providing a strengthened legal framework from which to vigorously pursue trade, economic, political relations and matters of mutual interest to the two countries in the global arena.



**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Majdi Al-Dhafiri met yesterday United Nations Secretary-General Representative and Resident Coordinator in Kuwait Dr Tarek El-Sheikh. During the meeting, they discussed distinguished relations between Kuwait and the UN, as Dr Sheikh expressed appreciation of

Kuwait's support to UN and its mission in the country. Assistant Foreign Minister for Affairs of the Deputy Minister's bureau, Ambassador Ayham Al-Omar and Assistant Foreign Minister for international organizations' affairs Ambassador Nasser Abdullah Al-Hayen attended the meeting. — KUNA

## Italian embassy announces design promotion project

**KUWAIT:** The Italian Ambassador to the State of Kuwait Carlo Baldocci, announced the cultural and academic initiative "SENSITALIANI" (ItalianSenses), with the aim of promoting the Italian design sector. This initiative is organized by the Italian Embassy in the State of Kuwait and in cooperation with the Institute "POLDesign" which was founded by the prestigious Polytechnic University of Milan (Politecnico di Milano).

The initiative consists of 10 months of various activities in the field of design, of which three months are devoted to virtual lectures for 50 participants from the State of Kuwait (including 40 students from various local universities and 10 engineers from private companies), eight evening seminars open to all attendees and to conclude a field tour for six days in Italy for design students and industry professionals in Kuwait who want to know and deepen Italian design and culture.

The Ambassador said that from March to December 2021, SENSITALIANI, the Scientific Department of Professor Anna Barbara, will promote three key moments of activities, targeting those interested in Italian culture, design students and industry professionals in the State of Kuwait. The first part of the program will feature two sessions of online lectures and conferences on design aspects and common interests of both countries, followed

by a study trip to Italy for the participants.

The main theme of the project will be "SENSITALIANI": sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste, through which the beauty of Italian culture is presented, from art to design, and from fashion to theater, cinema, cuisine, nature, sports and more. In fact, the design is not only intended to be a commercial vehicle for companies operating in this sector, but above all as a cultural engine to promote Italy and its identity in its broadest sense: as a cultural, artistic, social, economic and educational form.

This event will be officially opened with a virtual seminar on the Zoom platform tomorrow, and will conclude at the end of the year with a certificate distribution ceremony for students and the presentation of the final works along with materials, interviews, photos and videos filmed during all phases of the project.

POLDesign, together with the School of Design and the Design Department, makes up the design system of the Polytechnic University of Milan, among the best universities in the world, currently included in the (QS World University Rankings) according to the article 2020 in first place in Italy, third in Europe and sixth at the level of the world in the art and design category.

Ambassador Baldocci confirmed that the initiative has received great interest in Kuwait, as Italian design represents a very important part of the interaction between the two countries and further expansion of the Italian-Kuwaiti dialogue and cooperation opportunities is expected. On this occasion, Ambassador Baldocci expressed his appreciation for the keen interest in the initiative by both the College of Architecture at Kuwait University and the American University of the Middle East (AUM) in Kuwait.



'Absolutely outrageous': Biden leads condemnation of Myanmar carnage

On Iraq's borders, a custom-evasion cartel is diverting billions of dollars

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INDRAMAYU, Indonesia: This aerial photo shows the blaze raging on at Balongan refinery in Indramayu, West Java, operated by state oil company Pertamina, yesterday. —AFP

## Massive fire engulfs Indonesian oil refinery

### Operations shut to prevent the fire from spreading

**JAKARTA:** A massive blaze broke out yesterday at one of Indonesia's biggest oil refineries after a huge explosion turned the sprawling complex into a raging inferno. Firefighters battled to contain the fire at the Balongan refinery in West Java, operated by state oil company Pertamina, as towering plumes of black smoke rose into the sky. "There was a very loud sound and I thought it was a hurricane," one local resident, Rumaji, told AFP. "I looked outside and the fire was huge. The flames were shooting into the sky." At least five people were seriously injured and about 1,000 local residents were evacuated from the scene after the fire broke out early yesterday morning at a storage tank and then spread to other containers.

The local disaster agency said one person had died from a heart attack after the explosion. About 15 people were slightly injured and authorities said they were checking on the whereabouts of three others. "To prevent the fire from spreading we've shut down operations... and are putting our efforts into handling the blaze," Pertamina's president director Nicke Widyawati said in a statement.

The cause of the fire was not clear, but the company said the blaze broke out during a lightning storm. By yesterday afternoon, the disaster agency said the blaze had been contained but was yet to be extinguished. Pertamina said it did not expect the fire to cause fuel supply disruptions due to its high volume of stock. "There's more than enough

national supply," said Mulyono, Pertamina's logistics and infrastructure director, who like many Indonesians goes by one name. "So people don't need to panic."

Greenpeace called for a probe into the accident. "These kinds of dangerous incidents have been happening repeatedly in fossil-fuel industries," the environmental group said. "If there's any evidence of negligence or a violation of (health and safety) procedures, the government must file criminal charges to hold Pertamina accountable," it added. The sprawling plant—which opened in the mid-nineties and can refine some 125,000 barrels of oil a day—is about 200 kilometers east of the capital Jakarta.—AFP

## S Africa's rail stations in ruins after COVID lockdown plunder

**JOHANNESBURG:** South Africa's railway infrastructure has been ravaged during coronavirus lockdown, with thieves plundering anything from cables and handrails to bricks and doors. In the strictest months of confinement last year, looters went to work on unguarded stations and railway infrastructure, making off with almost anything that could be ripped off or cut down and carted off. Kliptown, a train station in the famous Johannesburg township of Soweto, lies in ruins, stripped bare of its windows and doors and even its roof.

Signaling and electric cables have been yanked out. Staircase railings have been sawn off. Even the perimeter walls have not been spared, with bricks bashed out and hauled away. "It's like an atomic bomb was thrown here... It's like a tsunami," lamented a community leader, George Mohlala, 37, pointing to the ruined station. When President Cyril Ramaphosa placed the country under a strict lockdown, railway stations were left unguarded. More than 80 percent of the country's train stations have been vandalised, the state-owned rail operator Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA) said. What's left of the ticketing office in the Kliptown station are shards of glass—the only evidence of turnstiles that once functioned here.

### 'Like a war zone'

"It's like a war zone," said a despondent Mohlala, navigating around holes dug on the platform to extract underground cables. "The only thing that is left here is heavy (items) that people cannot lift," he said, pointing to rusty rail tracks, flanked by weeds and grass. Some locals are even illegally tapping

into electricity from the disused stations to their homes. Ironically, the vandalism occurred as the government embarked on an ambitious multi-billion-dollar plan to modernize its urban commuter rail transport network.

Around 50 kilometers east of Johannesburg in the small town of Nigel is a state-of-the-art factory that is manufacturing "people's trains," as they are dubbed. Named Gibela ("Get on board" in the Zulu language), it is run by a consortium of French giant Alstom and South Africa's Ubumbano Rail and has a contract to build a fleet of 3,600 coaches or 600 complete trains—including wagons and engines—by the turn of the decade.

Since 2018, the factory has produced more than 50 complete trains, of which 16 have been dispatched to Cape Town and Durban. The rest are safely locked away at a storage depot in Pretoria awaiting deployment. The 51-billion-rand (\$3-billion, 2.8-billion-euro) contract is one of the largest in post-apartheid South Africa. After overcoming teething troubles and falling behind schedule, Gibela is ramping up production.

"We will have to deliver 62 trains per year until the end of the project," Gibela factory manager Loic Le Gorrec told AFP. Alstom's Southern Africa regional general manager Bernard Peille, said: "Having this target of producing two cars per day in two years... (Gibela) should be basically one of the fastest production factories in the world, not only in Africa."

Vandalism vow —Transport Minister Fikile Mbalula blamed the looting on "collapse of security" but vowed to crack down on the problem with the help of a scheme to recruit locals as guards backed by police. "We are fixing the infrastructure that is vandalized," he told AFP. "Protecting these assets is a collective responsibility we must all shoulder." Pillaging of rail infrastructure is not new in South Africa with thieves targeting copper cables in the past.

But the vandalism reached shocking new heights

neighborhoods across the country, banging drums and hurling coloured powder at each other.

"We are aware of the pandemic, but we cannot ignore the wishes of the people who want to celebrate the festival of color," TV actor Debdut Ghosh, who is campaigning for an election in West Bengal state, told AFP in Kolkata. Many people also took to the streets in the northern city of Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh state, the country's Hindu heartland of 1.3 billion people.

"Had it not been a festival, I would not have stepped out," septuagenarian B.K. Tiwari told AFP as he carried his color-smudged facemask. The muted celebrations went ahead despite a nationwide surge in coronavirus cases. India reported 68,020 new daily infections yesterday—a significant rise from below 9,000 in early February—taking the total number of cases to more than 12 million. "If the outbreak grows at that pace—about five times in five weeks—that's worrisome," virologist Shahid Jameel told AFP, adding that the lack of mask-wearing



PRETORIA, Gauteng: Workers inspect newly constructed trains at the PRASA Wolmerston depot near Pretoria. —AFP

last year—shacks even sprouted on rail tracks in Cape Town's Langa township. Once stuck for several hours on a train stalled by cable theft, Ramaphosa has described the plunder of rail assets as "the worst form of economic crime." "We obviously don't make trains to be antiques, we don't make them to be in storage or in museums," Gibela CEO Hector Danisa told AFP.

"So when you see infrastructure that is unable to efficiently use our trains it's worrying," he said. "It's abnormal, people stripping an entire station... it's painful." The damage runs into billions of rands, said PRASA board chairman Leonard Mamalalane, admitting it was a mistake to have left the stations unguarded. "We should have done something better to prevent that, but we could not see it coming," he told AFP. Commuters have meanwhile borne the brunt. Food vendor Zodwa Mangena, 40, last took a train over a year ago. "It's messed up," she said referring to the Wonderboom station in Pretoria. "Now we use taxis (privately-run minibuses) and they are expensive," she said. —AFP

and social distancing was fuelling the surge. Mumbai reported more than 6,900 new cases—a record for the city of 20 million and more than double last year's peak.

The western state of Maharashtra, home to Mumbai, is mulling a full lockdown to tackle the spread of the disease after imposing a nightly curfew from Sunday. India—the third-most infected nation—has shied away from harsh restrictions to combat COVID-19, after gradually lifting one of the world's strictest lockdowns last year to revive the devastated economy. Optimism that India's vaccine drive would ease the impact of the virus has also faltered with sluggish inoculation rates.

More than 60 million shots have been administered since mid-January, a far slower pace than needed to reach the ambitious target of vaccinating 300 million people by the end of July. India, home to the world's biggest vaccine manufacturer, has meanwhile slowed its export of shots due to the spike. —AFP

## England eases curbs but Europe reels from surges

**LONDON:** England began to further ease its coronavirus lockdown yesterday, spurred by rapid vaccinations, but governments in the rest of Europe struggled to contain COVID-19 surges. Dramatic infection spikes in Europe have forced a tightening of unpopular restrictions across the continent, with Washington's top pandemic expert warning the United States could suffer a similar surge if curbs are eased too quickly. In sharp contrast, people in England were set for what newspapers dubbed "Happy Monday", with stay-at-home orders relaxed to allow outdoor gatherings of up to six people and the resumption of amateur sports. "But we must remain cautious, with cases rising across Europe and new variants threatening our vaccine rollout," Prime Minister Boris Johnson said, conceding that the European wave could hit Britain.

On Sunday, Britain passed the milestone of giving the first vaccine dose to more than 30 million adults, and the government plans to allow outdoor drinking in pub gardens and non-essential retail such as hairdressers in England from April 12. The other nations in the United Kingdom—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—are following their own schedules. The mood was grim across the English Channel, however. A snowballing of cases in France intensified pressure on health infrastructure, and top officials warned Sunday that Paris hospitals may be forced to turn patients away. "In 10 days, 15 days or three weeks we may be overwhelmed," senior Paris hospital official Remi Salomon told BFM TV, pleading for a new lockdown—including for schools.

And in Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel on Sunday pleaded with state governments to stop straying from agreed pandemic measures, with her government under pressure over a sluggish vaccine rollout and testing delays. Germany's disease control agency has warned of an "exponential" growth in cases. Belgium has also tightened restrictions—all schools and universities was closed from yesterday, effectively extending the Easter holiday to three weeks.

### 'Oil for vaccines'

The pandemic has claimed more than 2.7 million lives globally. Europe's latest wave of infections came after outbreaks were largely brought under control and as nations prepared for mass vaccine rollouts. Top US pandemic advisor Anthony Fauci said the trend served as a warning to the United States. The world's worst-hit nation has recently ramped up its vaccination drive, giving on average more than two million shots daily last week. But Fauci said some US states were easing curbs too prematurely.

When case numbers begin to plateau, he explained on CBS, "you're really in danger of a surge coming up." "We've seen that in our own country, and that's exactly what's happened in Europe... where they plateaued and then started to come back." Despite their struggles, wealthy nations such as the United States have managed to give out the bulk of shots worldwide, and the United Nations Secretary-General criticized them for stockpiling vaccines beyond the needs of their populations.

"I'm very concerned with this very unfair distribution of vaccines in the world," Antonio Guterres said in an interview broadcast Sunday by the Canadian channel CBC. Impoverished Venezuela on Sunday offered "oil for vaccines", as the sanctions-hit nation faced a second wave of infections. —AFP

## India dampens down festival fever as cases pass 12 million

**MUMBAI:** Indian authorities clamped down on one of the country's biggest Hindu festivals yesterday as the country passed 12 million coronavirus cases with financial hub Mumbai recording its highest-ever rise in daily infections. Public celebrations to mark Holi—a popular festival where people smear color on each other—were banned in some states and territories, including the capital Delhi, over fears they could become 'super-spreader' events, with police patrolling streets in Mumbai to prevent large gatherings. Despite the restrictions, revelers still gathered in

## International

# On Iraq's borders, a custom-evasion cartel is diverting billions of dollars

## Probe finds Iran-linked paramilitaries are prime beneficiaries of the revenues

**BAGHDAD:** Along Iraq's borders, a corrupt customs-evasion cartel is diverting billions of dollars away from state coffers to line the pockets of armed groups, political parties and crooked officials. The prime beneficiaries are Iran-linked Shiite paramilitaries that intimidate federal officials who dare obstruct them, sometimes through chillingly specific death threats, a six-month AFP investigation has found. The network is so well-oiled and entrenched that revenues are parceled out among rival groups with remarkably little friction, part of a parallel system that Iraq's finance minister has described as "state plunder". "It's indescribable," said one Iraqi customs worker. "Worse than a jungle. In a jungle, at least animals eat and get full. These guys are never satisfied."

Like most of the government officials, port workers and importers interviewed for this story, this worker cited threats to his life and asked to speak anonymously. The network they described arises from Iraq's glacially slow bureaucracy, fractious politics, limited non-oil industry and endemic corruption that is itself largely a product of years of chaos in the wake of the 2003 US invasion to topple dictator Saddam Hussein. Customs provide one of the few sources of state revenues, and to keep disparate groups and tribes happy, many of them close to Iran, entry points are divided up among them and federal duties largely supplanted by bribes. "There's a kind of collusion between officials, political parties, gangs and corrupt businessmen," Iraq's Finance Minister Ali Allawi said.

### 'Designed to fail'

Iraq imports a vast majority of its goods—from food and electronics to natural gas—mostly from neighbors Iran and Turkey and from China. Officially, the country of 40 million brought in \$21 billion worth of non-oil goods in 2019, the latest year for which full government data is available. Iraq has five official crossings along its 1,600-kilometre (1,000-mile) border with Iran and one on the nearly 370-km frontier with Turkey, while the single



In this file photo taken on July 11, 2020 members of the Hashed Al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization) paramilitary forces stand guard on the Iraqi side of the Mandali crossing on the border with Iran. — AFP

biggest and most lucrative gateway is the port of Umm Qasr in the southern province of Basra. Duties on imports at these points of entry are meant to supplement state revenues from Iraq's huge oil sector—but they don't.

Iraq's import system is infamously outdated and cumbersome, with a 2020 World Bank report citing frustrating delays, high compliance fees and frequent exploitation. "If you want to do it the right way, you end up paying in the four figures for demurrage (docking fees) for a single month" in dollar terms, said an importer based in the region. "It's designed to fail," he said. An informal parallel system rose in its stead, in which parties and paramilitary groups have divided up Iraq's land and sea crossings, said officials, port workers, importers and analysts.

### Paramilitary groups

Many of Iraq's entry points are informally controlled

flights had been suspended to free up space for military operations. Caritas, a Catholic aid agency which is active in the province, also reported new arrivals to Pemba. "Now we await the arrival of people who are most vulnerable so that we can provide assistance," the local head of Caritas, Manuel Nota, told AFP.



## Over 100 people still unaccounted for

### 'Appalling violence'

The militant attack on Palma is the closest yet to the major gas project during a three-year Islamist insurgency across Mozambique's north. Since October 2017, extremist fighters have raided villages and towns in the region, forcing nearly 700,000 to flee their homes.

Although they launched their campaign in 2017, experts say they had begun mobilizing a decade earlier as disgruntled youths starting to practice a different type of Islam, drinking alcohol and entering mosques dressed in shorts and shoes. The violence has now taken root and claimed at least 2,600 people lives, half of them civilians, according to the US-based data-collecting agency Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED). Local media reports said British workers may have been caught up in the Palma attack, and Britain's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office said its embassy in Maputo was in "direct contact with authorities in Cabo Delgado to urgently seek further information on these reports". — AFP



PALMA, Mozambique: Fishermen wait near their boats at the port of Paquitequet near Pemba yesterday. — AFP

"There's no way to possibly describe what you feel when you get news like that," Meryl Knox said. "It's just devastating, body numbing, mind numbing." Martin Ewi, a senior researcher with the Pretoria-based think-tank, the Institute for Security Studies, said that "over 100" people were still unaccounted for since the attack. "That's what we know so far," he said, but added that the situation on the ground was confusing.

### Rescue efforts

On Wednesday, an unknown number of militants began attacking Palma, a town of around 75,000 people in the province of Cabo Delgado that is home to a multi-billion-dollar gas project being built by France's Total and other energy companies. Human Rights Watch said the militants indiscriminately shot civilians in their homes and on the streets. In the last three days, government security forces had prioritized "the rescue of hundreds of citizens, nationals and foreigners", said Saranga, without giving a breakdown of the numbers. Some were temporarily taken to the heavily guarded gas plant located on the Afungi peninsula, on the Indian Ocean coast south of the Tanzanian border, before being moved to Pemba, around 250 kilometers (150 miles) south of Palma. A boat laden with evacuees landed in Pemba on Sunday, according to police patrolling the city port.

According to a source close to the rescue operation, there were "about 1,400" people on board.

Those evacuated included non-essential staff of Total and Palma residents who had sought refuge at the gas plant. Several other small boats packed with displaced people were on their way to Pemba and expected to arrive overnight, according to humanitarian aid agencies. Airport officials in Pemba said humanitarian aid

## Floyd's family demand justice as murder trial to begin

**MINNEAPOLIS, US:** George Floyd must receive justice, his family said ahead of opening arguments yesterday in the trial of the white police officer accused of killing the Black man, whose agonizing death ignited protests against racism and police brutality across the United States and around the world.

"I have a big hole right now in my heart. It can't be patched up ... I need justice for George. We need a conviction," Floyd's brother Philonise told reporters in Minneapolis Sunday. Derek Chauvin, a veteran of the Minneapolis Police Department, faces murder and manslaughter charges for his role in the May 25, 2020 death of the 46-year-old Floyd.

Chauvin, 44, who was fired from the police force along with three other officers, could be sentenced to up to 40 years in prison if convicted of the most serious charge—second-degree murder.

"I have faith that he will get convicted," Philonise Floyd said Sunday. The Minneapolis-based StarTribune newspaper called the trial "a defining moment in America's racial history."

Floyd's cause of death is expected to be the central issue in the case, and a key piece of evidence is likely to be the bystander-filmed video of his death that went viral and triggered a summer of anti-racism protests. Chauvin was seen in the video kneeling on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes while arresting him for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. — AFP

by groups within the Hashed Al-Shaabi, a powerful state-sponsored armed network close to Iran, as well as other armed factions, officials confirmed to AFP. The Hashed's members, their allies or their relatives work as border agents, inspectors or police, and are paid by importers who want to skip the official process entirely or get discounts. "If you want a shortcut, you go to the militias or parties," said an Iraqi intelligence agent who has investigated customs evasion.

He said importers effectively tell themselves: "I'd rather lose \$100,000 (on a bribe) than lose my goods altogether." The Hashed publicly denies the claims. But sources close to its hardline member groups Asaib Ahl Al-Haq and Kataeb Hezbollah acknowledged that customs posts are indeed parcelled out in the manner alleged. They cited specific harbor berths, land crossings and products that matched what customs officials and the intelligence agent said. — AFP



GENEVA: In this file photo, United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions Agnes Callamard answers reporters' questions. — AFP

## Agnes Callamard named new Amnesty chief

**LONDON:** Amnesty International announced yesterday it had appointed global human rights expert Agnes Callamard as its new secretary general with immediate effect. The London-based rights group said it chose Callamard following an extensive global search.

It added that the Frenchwoman, who is in her mid-50s and previously worked for Amnesty from 1995 to 2001, will serve an initial four-year term. "I am honored to take up the post of secretary general and work alongside Amnesty's supporters around the world so that together we defend and demand respect for all human rights for all," she said in a statement.

Callamard's lengthy career has seen her lead human rights investigations in more than 30 countries and her work has been published extensively. She had held the role of director of the Global Freedom of Expression initiative at Columbia University since 2013. In 2017 she was appointed as the United Nations' special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions, and headed the investigation into the killing of Khashoggi. Callamard's report, published in June 2019, concluded there was "credible evidence" that top Saudi officials, including Prince Mohammed, were liable for the killing. — AFP

## UK firefighters give medics a helping hand

**PORTSMOUTH, UK:** Dan Joslin has been a firefighter for 14 years, but for the past six weeks has been helping to lift and turn COVID-19 patients in a hospital intensive care unit. "I never thought I'd be doing this in my career," said the 33-year-old watch manager, one of eight firefighters volunteering at Queen Alexandra Hospital in Portsmouth, a historic port city on England's south coast. Altogether, 27 firefighters in distinctive red medical scrubs have been helping out at four hospitals in Portsmouth and across the county of Hampshire, working 12-hour shifts.

They are the first full-time firefighters to be sent to ICUs, where the most severely ill COVID patients are treated, said station manager Alex Rhodes, from Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service. "I think we're fairly confident it's the first time, (we are) the only fire fighters to do it across the country," he told AFP. "It's a groundbreaking bit of work we've been doing," added Joslin. Now, they hope other regions across Britain will follow their lead, if virus cases peak again, to bring some respite to hard-pushed hospital staff.

### Welcome support

Britain has been one of the worst affected countries in the world by the global health crisis, with more than

### News in brief

#### UAE, China launch vaccine project

**DUBAI:** The United Arab Emirates and China Sunday announced a venture to produce the Sinopharm coronavirus vaccine in the Gulf nation, state media reported. The UAE's Group 42 and China's CNBG "have launched a joint project... to initiate the first COVID-19 vaccine production line in the UAE", said official Emirati news agency Wam. It did not specify when commercial production will begin. The UAE's foreign minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, said the project adds "value to the international efforts being made in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, which has been taking a toll on everyday lives across the world." — AFP

#### Kosovo gets first COVID-19 jobs

**PRISTINA:** Kosovo received its first shipment of Covid-19 jobs on Sunday, through the UN-backed Covax scheme to help poorer nations. The batch of 24,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine was delivered as Kosovo, like the rest of its Balkans neighbors, is fighting a significant surge in the number of coronavirus infections. "Our country is small and poor, so it needs strong support and solidarity, especially from the US and the EU" in fighting the pandemic, Prime Minister Albin Kurti told reporters at the Pristina airport. "This is a small contingent but it raises great hopes for the beginning of saving people's lives." — AFP

#### Swiss German town votes to go French

**GENEVA:** Residents in a small town in northwestern Switzerland voted in a referendum Sunday to leave a German-speaking canton and join a French-speaking one, after years of animosity. In 1978, when Switzerland—a confederation of 26 cantons with four national languages—established the new French-speaking canton of Jura, a number of districts in the area preferred to remain part of German-speaking Bern. The town of Moutier, population 7,500, was one of them. Not any more—Sunday's referendum returned a strong majority to join the French-speaking Jura with 2,114 in favor and 1,740 against. — AFP

#### Venezuela hits back at FB sanction

**CARACAS:** Venezuela hit back at Facebook over "digital totalitarianism" after President Nicolas Maduro's account was frozen for 30 days for spreading disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic. A Facebook spokesman said on Saturday that the social media giant was freezing the account "due to repeated violations of our rules." "We're watching digital totalitarianism, carried out by supranational companies that want to impose their rule on the world's countries," said the communication and information ministry in a statement. — AFP

#### Cuba drive to vaccine hospital staff

**HAVANA:** Maria Ruiz admitted she was "afraid" but the 48-year-old nurse was determined to play her part in helping Cuba's ambitious drive to produce its own COVID-19 vaccine. "It's not the same when I give it to a patient or when I receive it," she said, waiting for her shot of the Soberana 2 vaccine. "Whenever it's good for me and for wider society, I'm there!" Launched a week ago, the initiative aims to vaccinate 150,000 hospital workers, including technicians and maintenance staff, even before it has conducted clinical trials. Cuba wants it to be the first vaccine made in Latin America to combat the deadly global virus. — AFP

126,000 deaths from over 4.3 million positive cases. New, more transmissible variants of coronavirus led to a surge in hospital admissions over the winter months, stretching hospital bed capacity and staff to the limit. Some firefighters have been drafted in to help drive ambulances, as all emergency services have pulled together in the unprecedented response.

Across the country they have also been helping in vaccination centers, as Britain rolls out its mass inoculation program under the guidance of the National Health Service (NHS). Cate Leighton, a senior clinical administrator at Portsmouth Hospitals University NHS Trust, said the support was welcome. "The critical care team and wider Trust are incredibly grateful for the enthusiasm and dedication of the firefighters who have volunteered to work with us and our patients," she said. — AFP



PORTSMOUTH: Firefighters Tom Ventress (left) and Matt Smither (right) prepare to start work alongside critical care nurses in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at Queen Alexandra Hospital in Portsmouth, southern England. — AFP

## International

# 'Absolutely outrageous': Biden leads condemnation of Myanmar carnage

## Junta slays more than 100 over weekend

YANGON: US President Joe Biden led global condemnation of an "absolutely outrageous" crackdown by Myanmar's junta that killed more than 100 people over the weekend, as funerals were held yesterday for the victims. Soldiers and police have killed hundreds in a brutal campaign against mass anti-coup protests demanding a restoration of democracy and the release of detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. At least 107 more people—including seven children—were killed on Saturday, the United Nations said, as the regime staged a major show of might for Armed Forces Day—an annual parade showcasing Myanmar's military prowess.

"It's absolutely outrageous and based on the reporting I've gotten, an awful lot of people have been killed totally unnecessarily," Biden told reporters. European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the junta's celebration of its armed forces had been blighted by "a day of horror and of shame". The death toll from crackdowns since the February 1 coup has climbed to at least 459, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) monitoring group. Saturday was by far the deadliest day of violence since the coup and AAPP said a further 13 people were killed on Sunday. Despite the weekend violence, protesters turned out at dawn in Kachin state, while students hit the streets in Monywa in the northwest and Mawlamyik city in Mon state, according to local media.

Hundreds also paraded through the town of Plate, in Mandalay region, with banners saying: "The people will never be defeated". Monday saw funerals for some of those killed over the weekend. In Sagaing region, hundreds of mourners lined the street to pay tribute to 20-year-old nursing student Thinzar Hein, who was shot dead while helping rescue workers provide first aid to injured protesters.

As child casualties mount, 60 youngsters in a town in eastern Karen state staged their own protest parade accompanied by their mothers, local media reported. In Yangon, a one-year-old girl is recovering from surgery after being shot in the eye with a rubber bullet while playing near her house on Saturday, which was also her birthday. "She is stable, but full recovery for her eye will take time," a friend of the family told AFP.



This handout from Kawkaek Open News taken and released yesterday shows children taking part in a demonstration against the military coup in Kawkaek township in Myanmar's Karen state. — AFP

### 'Shameful, cowardly, brutal'

"The shameful, cowardly, brutal actions of the military and police—who have been filmed shooting at protesters as they flee, and who have not even spared young children—must be halted immediately," UN envoys Alice Wairimu Nderitu and Michelle Bachelet said in a joint statement. Military-run broadcaster Myawaddy TV gave Saturday's death toll as 45 and said the crackdown was necessary because protesters had used guns and bombs against security forces.

The weekend's events brought a fresh chorus of international condemnation after weeks of so far unheeded pleas for military restraint from around the world. There was a highly unusual joint statement from the defense chiefs of the United States, Britain, Japan and nine other countries denouncing the Myanmar military's actions. Junta leader General Min Aung Hlaing had issued a threat to the anti-coup movement on Saturday, warning that acts of "terrorism" were unacceptable. On Monday, the British foreign ministry advised its nation-

als in Myanmar to leave as soon as possible, following "a significant increase in the level of recent violence".

### Air strikes in Karen state

An estimated 3,000 people fled through the jungle to seek safety across the border in Thailand Sunday evening following targeted aerial assaults in eastern Myanmar's Karen state, the Karen Women's Organization civil society group said. Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha told reporters in Bangkok Monday the military was preparing for further arrivals. According to Hsa Moo, an ethnic Karen and human rights activist, the weekend airstrikes—the first in the state in 20 years—killed four people and left nine injured. "They did not have shelter... there were many children with them," Hsa Moo said. The airstrikes targeted the Karen National Union (KNU), one of the country's largest non-state armed groups. There are fears that the Myanmar military may launch a major operation against Karen rebels, which could force more people to flee their homes. — AFP

## Philippines locks down economic hub to fight virus surge

MANILA: More than 24 million people in the Philippines' economic hub entered a lockdown yesterday, as officials warned the week-long restrictions could be extended if coronavirus infections do not fall. People have been ordered to stay home unless they are essential workers as Metro Manila—the national capital region—and four neighboring provinces struggle to curb a surge that has strained hospitals. Only hours into the latest lockdown imposed on the region—which accounts for around half of the country's economic activity—the health department's epidemiology chief Alethea de Guzman warned it could be prolonged to bring about a "sustained" drop.

"All options are open," said Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, who chairs the government's Covid-19 task force. More contagious variants of the virus have been blamed for the record spike that has taken the country's caseload to more than 720,000.

Traffic was backed up for hundreds of meters at checkpoints on major avenues in the capital Manila early Monday as police tried to ensure only essential workers were travelling. But AFP reporters saw officers periodically open up the roads to ease congestion. "It's difficult since it's no work, no pay," said July Calma, as she walked home after trying to pay her water bill but finding the office closed.

"We don't (have savings) because we spend it every day." The tighter restrictions affect a fifth of the country's population. Church services and other mass gatherings are banned, a 6 pm to 5 am curfew is in force and public transport has been reduced.

Supermarkets, pharmacies and other essential businesses are allowed to operate, and outdoor exercise is permitted. The lockdown was announced Saturday by presidential spokesman Harry Roque, who initially suggested public transport would be halted. A previous months-long lockdown crippled the Philippine economy, cost millions of jobs and left many households hungry. Roque said the decision to tighten restrictions again was "very delicate" and acknowledged extending the lockdown could lead to more people dying from hunger and non-coronavirus illnesses. Budget Secretary Wendel Avisado said assistance would be available for nearly 23 million people under lockdown—almost everyone affected—but did not offer details. A growing number of hospitals in the capital are reporting that their COVID-19 beds are full. Several health workers have told AFP in recent days that a shortage of beds and nurses was forcing some facilities to turn away patients. "We now know how to treat them (COVID-19 patients). Bed capacity is the problem," said anesthesiologist Grace Quiambao. — AFP



MANILA: Residents caught by police breaking quarantine health protocols sit in a police vehicle in Manila yesterday on day one of government's imposing stricter lockdown, as hospitals in the capital struggle to cope with a surge in coronavirus infections. — AFP

off an improvised explosive device known as a pressure-cooker bomb, police said.

Yesterday, Indonesian authorities said the pair had been married for about six months and that the man was in his mid-twenties. They were identified only by their initials. "The investigation is ongoing including looking at whether there were others involved," National Police spokesman Argo Yuwono said. Counter-terror units raided the couple's home and other locations in Makassar, a port city of about 1.5 million, as well as in the capital Jakarta, as they searched for bombs, weapons and other evidence, police said.

A local resident said the male suspect was a street food seller who lived in a rented home near his parents' residence. "As a kid he was nice... But as he grew older he didn't really socialise around here," Nuraini, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, said. Police said the couple were members of Jamaah

Ansharut Daulah (JAD), an extremist group blamed for series of attacks, including 2018 suicide bombings in Indonesia's second-biggest city Surabaya.

On Monday, officials said 15 people remained in hospital, although the extent of their wounds remained unclear. Four had been discharged, they added. Sunday's explosion at the main Catholic cathedral in Makassar happened just after congregants finished celebrating Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week, which commemorates Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

It comes a week before Easter. JAD was also implicated in a 2019 cathedral suicide bombing in the Philippines committed by a married Indonesian couple.

That attack killed worshippers and security forces. Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim majority nation, has long struggled with attacks by Islamist extremists, including the 2002 Bali bombings which killed more than 200, mostly foreign tourists. — AFP

## 129th Canton Fair will be held online from April 15 to 24

The 129th China Import and Export Fair will be held online between April 15 and 24. Continuing to hold the 129th session online will consolidate the gains in the prevention and control of the COVID-19 epidemic, as well as social and economic development. The Fair will further play its role as a platform for all-round opening-up, and help maintain the smooth operation of the industrial and supply chains of foreign trade.

### News in brief

#### Czech billionaire dies in crash

PRAGUE: Petr Kellner, the Czech Republic's wealthiest person with a fortune topping \$13 billion, died aged 56 in a helicopter crash in Alaska, his spokeswoman said yesterday. Kellner, who meticulously guarded his privacy, owned the financial, telecommunications, engineering and insurance PPF Group, which employs 94,000 people worldwide. "With deep regret we announce that PPF Group founder and majority shareholder Mr Petr Kellner died tragically in a helicopter crash in the Alaska Range on Saturday," PPF Group spokeswoman Jitka Tkadlecova said. "The causes of the accident, in which five people died in total, are being investigated," she added. Czech media said Kellner was on a heli-skiing trip. — AFP



#### Chile president wants to delay vote

SANTIAGO: Chilean President Sebastian Pinera on Sunday proposed delaying elections that will choose a commission to rewrite the country's dictatorship-era constitution, due to a surge in Covid-19 infections. Pinera said that for "the health of all the inhabitants of Chile" he would present a proposal—which would need Congress approval—to postpone the April election until May. Chile has been registering record numbers of coronavirus infections. With new virus variants, believed to be more contagious, spreading across Latin America, cases have been soaring in Chile despite the country's impressive vaccination drive. — AFP

#### Vancouver stabbings suspect charged

VANCOUVER, Canada: A 28-year-old suspect was charged with murder Sunday, a day after allegedly stabbing and killing one woman and wounding six others at a library in the Canadian city of Vancouver. Yannick Bandaogo, who was arrested at the scene, is accused of carrying out the attack at the Lynn Valley library in which one woman in her late 20s died. "His background, history in BC (British Columbia) and relationship to the victims, if any, is still being determined," police said in a statement, adding he had undergone surgery for self-inflicted wounds. The stabbings took place in the afternoon in a quiet, upscale neighborhood of the Pacific coast city, causing national shock in Canada. — AFP

#### 185 tortoises found in suitcase

QUITO: Staff at an airport on the Galapagos Islands found 185 tortoises in a suitcase that was heading for Ecuador's mainland, environment authorities said on Sunday. The discovery was made "during a routine inspection," the environment ministry said on Twitter, adding that police were investigating. Trafficking fauna off the Galapagos Islands is a crime punishable by between one and three years in prison. The islands are a protected wildlife area and home to unique species of flora and fauna. They lie 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) west of Ecuador. On Twitter, Environment Minister Marcelo Mata blasted "these crimes against Ecuadorans' wild fauna and natural heritage." — AFP

#### Fauci against easing of curbs

WASHINGTON: A recent plateau in new COVID-19 infections in the United States was likely linked to the "premature" easing of anti-virus efforts, top pandemic advisor Anthony Fauci said Sunday. While the emergence of coronavirus variants is part of the problem, so are states that are "pulling back on the mitigation" too soon, he told CBS's "Face the Nation." When case numbers begin to plateau, he said, "you're really in danger of a surge coming up." "We've seen that in our own country, and that's exactly what's happened in Europe in several of the countries in the European Union, where they plateaued and then started to come back." — AFP



Australia's attorney general Christian Porter (left) and Australia's defense minister Linda Reynolds (right). — AFP

## Two Australian ministers demoted after rape scandals

SYDNEY: Two Australian ministers were demoted from top cabinet posts yesterday as the ruling conservative party tried to draw a line under dual rape scandals that have convulsed national politics. Linda Reynolds was removed as defense minister and Christian Porter as attorney-general, as embattled Prime Minister Scott Morrison bowed to weeks of mounting public pressure.

Porter—the government's top legal officer and a former state prosecutor—is accused of raping a 16-year-old fellow student in 1988, an allegation he denies. The woman died last June, reportedly by suicide. Reynolds was accused of mishandling an investigation into the alleged rape of a young staffer in her parliamentary office, and referring to the woman as a "lying cow."

Both ministers have been on leave for weeks, with Morrison previously insisting they would return to their jobs. Now, both will remain in government but manage the less coveted portfolios of government services for Reynolds, and industry, science and technology for Porter. The allegations against Porter and Reynolds spurred protests across Australia, with tens of thousands of women taking to the streets to call for gender equality and an end to sexual violence.

A Morrison media blitz aimed at showing his empathy with women has only added to the furor through a series of missteps. During the reshuffle Morrison also announced a series of promotions for women, saying it was "the strongest ever female representation in an Australian cabinet." — AFP

## Indonesia church suicide bombers were newlyweds

JAKARTA: Two suicide bombers who blew themselves up at an Indonesian cathedral on Palm Sunday were newlyweds who belonged to a pro-Islamic State extremist group, police said yesterday, as they raided the couple's home. About 20 people were wounded in the powerful explosion outside the church in Makassar city on Sulawesi island while worshippers celebrated the start of Holy Week. Both suspects were killed instantly when they rode a motorbike into the compound of the church, setting

# Business

TUESDAY, MARCH 30, 2021

## US not yet ready to lift tariffs on Chinese imports: Trade rep

### Australia threatens WTO action as China hikes duty on wine

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden's new trade negotiator has said the United States is not yet ready to lift tariffs on Chinese imports, but could be open to talks with Beijing. US Trade Representative Katherine Tai, whose appointment was confirmed earlier this month, told The Wall Street Journal she understood the levies were hitting some American companies and consumers, but they can also protect businesses.

In January 2020, then-president Donald Trump signed an accord between Beijing and Washington after a bruising trade battle that saw tariffs imposed by both sides. "I have heard people say, 'Please just take these tariffs off,'" the 47-year-old Tai told the WSJ in an interview published Sunday.

But the former trade lawyer-whose parents were born in China-warned that suddenly axing the levies could harm the US economy unless a policy reversal is "communicated in a way so that the actors in the economy can make adjustments." She said it was essential for "companies, traders, manufacturers or their workers" to be able to plan for the future.

Tai told the Journal that while she recognized the tariffs were taking a toll on some US businesses, they had been imposed "to remedy an unbalanced and unfair trade situation."

She also cited tactical reasons for holding firm. "No negotiator walks away from leverage, right?" she said. "Every good negotiator is going to keep all of their options open."

Tai has already discussed Beijing's trade practices in calls with Japanese ministers, and in her confirmation hearings said she supported a "holistic review on China."

#### Australia treat

Meanwhile, Australia's trade minister threatened to take China to the World Trade Organization over its "unjustifiable" decision to hike duties on Australian wine imports for up to five years. In the latest salvo between Beijing and Canberra, China's commerce ministry announced levies ranging from 116.2 percent to 218.4 percent would be slapped on Australian wine imports from Sunday.

Trade Minister Dan Tehan said the tariffs meant it was "basically impossible" for Australian wine to be competitive in the Chinese market. "This decision which has been taken by the Chinese government is extremely disappointing and completely unjustifiable," Tehan told reporters in Melbourne.

"We will be looking at next steps, and those next steps will include looking at taking this matter to the World Trade Organization." On Friday, the Chinese commerce ministry said it was imposing the duties after an investigation found "dumping and subsidies on imported wines" from Australia impacted the Chinese market. Wine exports to China hit a record \$1.3 billion (\$900 million) in 2019, according to Australian government data, making it the biggest market by value for the product.

Late last year, Australia also called for the WTO to investigate Chinese tariffs on barley imports, following a series of economic sanctions or disruptions to Australian products to China's vast market.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries have reached their lowest since the deadly 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Many see the



SHANGHAI: People walk past a shop for Italian sportswear company Fila in Shanghai. —AFP

sanctions as retribution for Australia blocking Chinese investment in sensitive areas and publicly calling for an investigation into the origins of the coronavirus. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, speaking in Sydney, accused Beijing of using the tariffs as "retaliation". Morrison also said Australia stood with British Prime Minister

Boris Johnson after China imposed sanctions on several people in the UK and EU over their vocal support for the Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang, where Beijing is accused of abuses.

"So Boris-well done, mate-we stand with you and thank you for standing with Australia as well." —AFP

## CBK urges public not to damage banknotes

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) stressed users must avoid damaging all denominations of the Kuwaiti Dinar banknote. The Dinar banknote is an important national symbol of the State of Kuwait that reflects its identity, history and legacy. Respectful handling of the bill is therefore tied to respecting this national symbol.

A CBK statement on this issue reiterated that writing, stapling, shredding or tearing, burning and applying adhesives are the most common forms of abuse of banknotes in general. Using banknotes as a decorative element, or manipulating and folding it is also considered inappropriate usage, the Bank pointed out. Any damage to the banknote leads to ending its circulation cycle prematurely, and new banknotes have to be printed and put into circulation instead. Such abuse and damage also causes ATMs to fail to accept deposit of the bills.

Members of the public are, therefore, urged to handle banknotes with due care and awareness and avoid any damaging acts. The Kuwaiti banknote is a sovereign symbol of Kuwait, and as such must be handled with due respect and regard, the statement reiterated.



## Lebanon approves crisis funding to avert power cut

BEIRUT: Lebanon's parliament approved \$200 million in emergency funding yesterday to stave off a national power cut the energy minister warned would otherwise hit by the end of March. Caretaker energy minister Raymond Ghajar said three weeks ago that the country would plunge into "total darkness" if no money was secured to buy fuel for power stations. The state-run Electricity of Lebanon (EDL) faces dire cash shortages, as the country grapples with its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war.

Yesterday, "parliament approved... a \$200 million advance" for EDL, the National News Agency reported. The decision came a day after one of the country's largest power plants, Zahran in south Lebanon, stopped operating because it ran out of fuel. EDL said the closure was caused because a fuel ship could not be immediately offloaded because of logistical problems. Meanwhile, another cargo ship scheduled to arrive from Kuwait has been held up due to the stuck container ship blocking the Suez Canal, it added. —AFP

## Deliveroo trims value of London IPO on volatility

LONDON: App-driven meals delivery firm Deliveroo yesterday trimmed the anticipated value of this week's planned London stock market flotation, citing global markets volatility.

The British group's market capitalization was eyed at between £7.6 billion and £7.85 billion (\$10.5 billion-\$10.8 billion, 8.9 billion euros-9.2 billion euros), Deliveroo said in a statement. The eight-year old company, which launches its initial public offering on Wednesday, previously gave a figure of up to £8.8 billion.

"Given volatile global market conditions for IPOs, Deliveroo is choosing to price responsibly," a com-

pany spokesman said Monday, noting it had however received "very significant demand".

The offer price range has been narrowed to between £3.90 and £4.10 per share. That contrasted with the previous range, given last week, of between £3.90 and £4.60. Over the past week, market conditions have deteriorated somewhat for technology company IPOs, particularly in the United States. The Amazon-backed company, in line with other home-delivery firms, says it has seen orders soar in the past year as locked-down households called in food.

Deliveroo's listing is meanwhile seen as a major boost to London's financial sector, which has been hit by Brexit turmoil. Since its London launch in 2013, Deliveroo has expanded into mainland Europe, Asia, Australia and the Middle East. Last year, more than six million people ordered food and drink every month via its app from 115,000 cafes, restaurants and stores.

However, its business model has come under scrutiny, including in Britain, France and Spain, as its



LONDON: A Deliveroo bag and bike are parked near Victoria Station in central London. The meal delivery platform Deliveroo is bracing for strikes and other social actions by disgruntled riders as it gears up for a major London stock listing. —AFP

freelance delivery riders complain about working conditions. —AFP

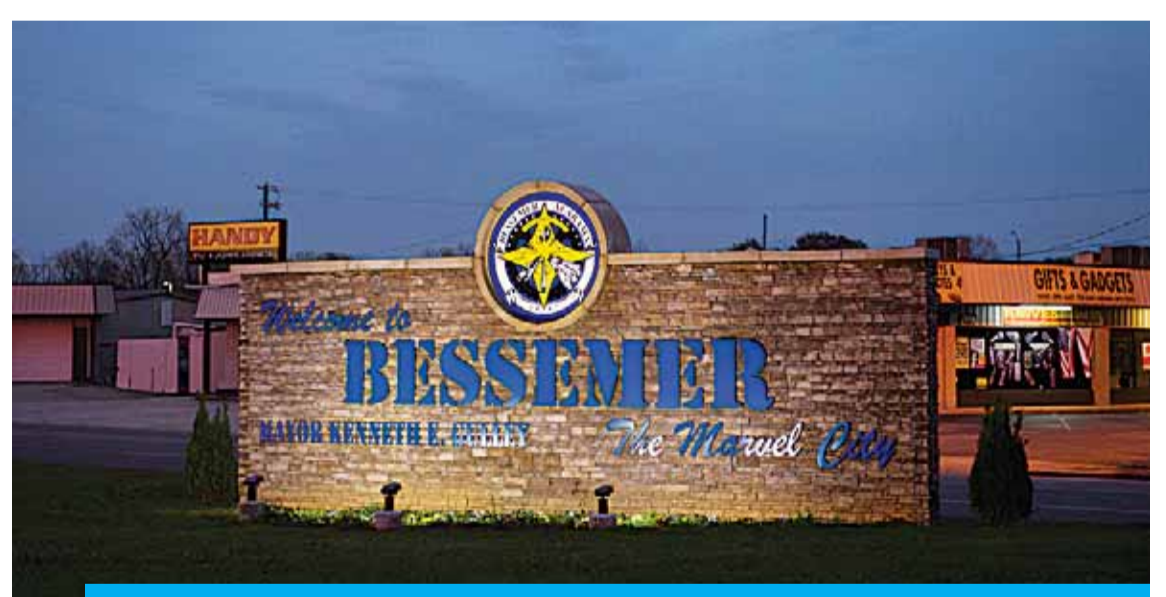
## Vote count in Amazon union drive today

BESSEMER, US: Votes are set to be counted today on whether to create the first Amazon union in the United States, at a warehouse in Alabama, after a historic, five months-long David vs Goliath campaign. "I'm proud of the workers at Amazon for standing up and saying enough," said Joshua Brewer, the local president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union.

The RWDSU will represent the Bessemer warehouse's 5,800 employees if they choose to unionize in the vote that ended yesterday. The months-long unionizing battle has sparked national attention and intense debate over workplace conditions at the online retail behemoth, which has more than 800,000 US employees. "Amazon's biggest fear already happened: 3,000 of their own employees said we cannot work in these conditions ... It exposed a systemic problem in Amazon's warehouses," Brewer told AFP.

Coming at a time when the White House occupant, Joe Biden, has promised to be the country's "most pro-union president," the Bessemer warehouse effort could open the floodgates to unionization drives at other Amazon sites, as well as at other firms. Unions and political leaders have argued that Amazon employees face constant pressure and monitoring, with little job protection, highlighting the need for collective bargaining. 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.

For five months, union organizers in Bessemer have been posted at the intersection between a busy interstate highway and several hulking industrial buildings to make their case. "We need safe working conditions. We need to be treated with respect and equality," said Amazon employee Jennifer Bates. "We're not getting paid



BESSEMER: A sign welcomes people to Bessemer, the location of an Amazon.com, Inc fulfillment center on Sunday. —AFP

what we deserve to get paid."

Another employee, Lafonda Townsend, said she was initially happy with her pay. "But then that was before I got in there," she said, describing having to eat fast on breaks "like a prisoner ... because if you're one minute late, there's an hour unpaid time that they're taking away from you." Amazon went on a hiring spree in 2020 and nearly doubled its net profit to \$21 billion, thanks to the explosion in demand during the pandemic. But the second-largest US employer is embroiled in a bitter communications battle.

#### 'Maintain power'

Its spokespersons recently attacked left-wing politician Bernie Sanders, who supports the union, on Twitter. They also insisted that no worker had been reduced to urinating in plastic bottles because of a lack of time to go to the bathroom, contrary to media reports. On site, the company uses all sorts of tactics to dissuade would-be unionists, from text messages touting existing benefits to posters in the toilets. Many observers say the issue is less about finances,

and more about control.

"Amazon is like most US employers, it wants to maintain power over everything and make sure that workers do not have the ability to negotiate over any aspect of their jobs," said Rebecca Givan, a professor of labor relations at Rutgers University. "Big tech companies, like other employers, will spend an almost unlimited amount of money in persuading workers not to unionize," she said.

Dawn Hoag, a warehouse quality manager, believes employees don't need representatives to voice their needs. "If ... all these stories were all true, then there are 5,800 idiots working inside the building where I work, and I don't work with a single idiot, and I'm not an idiot," she told AFP.

But Darryl Richardson, the 51-year-old employee who first called in the RWDSU, said it was time to "take a stand". "I need job security. I need to be able to retire one day," he said.

Richardson's call has already opened the floodgates, Brewer added. "We have received over 1,000 different inquiries from about 50 different warehouses so far," he said. —AFP



## Business

# 'I don't have money!': Iraq's graft-busting budget baroness

## Taif Al-Sami, a bulwark against pervasive state corruption in Iraq

**BAGHDADA:** Suitcases of spreadsheets are wheeled into her office, as infuriated MPs storm out. Her unmistakable voice booms down the finance ministry hallways. Meet Taif Al-Sami, Iraq's budget baroness. Detractors say she's an old-fashioned micromanager, while fans praise her as a bulwark against pervasive state corruption in Iraq—and an independent, vocal woman in a male-dominated bureaucracy. But they agree that the 57-year-old head of the ministry's budget department knows her stuff.

"She stuck out because she filled a gap. She has good administrative abilities and very good financial knowledge," Finance Minister Ali Allawi said. Sami has the last word on individual budget disbursements, meaning parliamentarians and ministry officials need her to green-light funds for projects, promotions or other payments. She often spots irregularities, including an attempt by a government ministry in 2018 to score a bigger annual budget by artificially increasing its employees' pay grades and introducing "ghost employees"—workers that exist on the payroll but not in real life. "It would have cost the Iraqi state billions of dinars," said Sami, or at least hundreds of thousands of US dollars out of a \$100-billion budget.

It's a classic graft scheme in Iraq: that same year, parliament discovered that some \$450 billion in public funds had been embezzled since 2003, including in similar ghost employee schemes. "She has a major role in stopping budget corruption," said a top Iraqi official who worked with Sami. "The country would have dis-



**BAGHDAD:** The head of Iraq's Finance Ministry's budget department Taif Al-Sami, is pictured at her office.— AFP

integrated without her," said the official, who did not want to be named.

### A living archive

At the ministry, her multi-tasking is admired. "Her left eye can read a document while her right eye works on something else," one employee said. "With one

look, she can tell you if a request is legal or not." Managing the state budget, however, was not what Sami dreamed of doing when she graduated from Baghdad University. She had wanted to become a diplomat. Instead, under the former socialist system, she was assigned to the finance ministry's budget office, where she has remained ever since.

Throughout Iraq's 1980-1988 war with Iran, international sanctions following Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the 2003 US-led invasion and the bloody aftermath, Sami worked her way up to heading the office. "The vast majority of our team was run by women then, because the men were going to war," she recalled. By 6:30 am, she is in the office, usually dressed in dark colors with a black veil wrapped tight around her head. She answered AFP's questions between signing stacks of paper and responding to text messages on budget protocols.

When an assistant told Sami that a prominent MP was in the waiting room, she replied: "Tell him I'm gone for today." Sami heads home at around 5 pm to eat, pray and then keep working. "Sleep? I wish I could sleep even four hours!" she said. "This brain keeps working, thinking of paperwork to do."

### 'Honey, you don't understand'

Sami is regularly criticized in Iraqi media as the "secret hand" behind hiring freezes and other unpopular austerity measures. "As if the budget is in my pocket!" she scoffed. This "unbearable pressure (is)

because I'm a woman and I don't belong to a political party," she added. Her independence comes at a cost, she said, and however unpopular her decisions may be, she always stands her ground. She said that she once requested well-connected finance ministry couriers be changed after finding out they were only sending correspondence if they received a bribe.

Within hours, men in SUVs with tinted windows surrounded her home, demanding the couriers be reinstated. "Another time, I refused a request from a provincial official and the person involved threatened to drag me and throw me out the window," Sami recalled. "If I belonged to a party, I'd be untouchable." Her directness is somewhat legendary. The official who worked with her said she once interrupted Iraq's former premier Adel Abdel Mahdi during a cabinet meeting on the budget, telling him: "Honey, you don't understand." "She shouts, 'I don't have money!' to everyone who comes into her office. They're all afraid of her," said the official. Explaining Iraq's budgetary minutiae to AFP, Sami grew agitated, speaking louder and faster as she slammed her hand on the desk. "They say I'm loud, aggressive. No, this is just how I talk. I get excited when I explain!" she said. Critics accuse her of procuring political cover by doing small accounting "favors", though nothing illegal.

Others complain that she is a relic of a paper-pushing bureaucracy that prevents Iraq from modernizing to an electronic financing system. But even they acknowledge her longevity. —AFP

## UK's stately homes struggle to survive with COVID curbs

**BURY ST EDMUNDS, United Kingdom:** The sprawling redbrick house and grounds of Kentwell Hall, built in the time when the Tudors ruled England, are, like so many of Britain's stately homes, facing an existential threat during the pandemic. The turreted house near Bury St Edmunds in eastern England has survived over 450 years of tumultuous history but is in need of critical repairs it cannot afford after closing its doors to visitors at the start of the outbreak.



### The building survived over 450 years

In the face of mounting financial woes, owners of historic houses like Patrick Phillips, who bought Kentwell in 1971, are calling on the government to allow them to reopen faster. The former senior lawyer, who has been restoring the house for decades said he has had to "cut back everything to the bone" after its £1.5-million (\$2-million, 1.75-million-euro) turnover in 2019 fell by 90 percent in 2020.

"It is hugely, hugely burdensome for us to try and operate this place without income," he told AFP.

Most of the money generated came from events and visitors. But lack of funds in the last 12 months has meant halting critical work to an 800-yard (meter) moat around the house. Phillips said trying to repair the moat, which has collapsed at a sensitive point, was "an absolute disaster" without access to funds.

"This particular section supports an early building, a 15th-century building," he said. "But until we can get in and look at it, we don't know how serious it is." The stately home owner was unequivocal in his criticism of the government's plans to reopen the economy and said they were "following the wrong track".

He compared stately homes to businesses in the

hospitality industry and said "we are all suffering unnecessarily".

### Jobs under threat

The British government unveiled in February what Prime Minister Boris Johnson characterized as a "cautious but irreversible" plan to exit a third national lockdown. However, stately homes as well and other sectors are demanding answers as to why they have to wait until May to open parts of their businesses and until June to reopen entirely when non-essential retail is scheduled to reopen on April 12. Historic Houses, which represents 1,500 privately owned homes around Britain, wants the government to ensure it is keeping to scientific advice and not unnecessarily burdening struggling stately homes. "They're vital businesses and they've got vital contributions to make," said James Probert, the organization's director of marketing and development. "We haven't said you must allow these businesses to open on 12th April. But we have said, can you just consider that and make sure that it's all in the light of sensible scientific advice?" Historic Houses' members had £1.4 billion of outstanding repairs to make in 2019, £400 million of which were urgent—an amount Probert said he expected had "shot up" during the pandemic.

He said stately homes were looking at a "stored up crisis" with rot and damp that had permeated many houses. "These are in very, very important listed buildings that are ultimately part of our national patrimony and open to the public," he added. The cost has been harsh, not just for the homes but for the 34,400 employed by houses with ticketed visitors or for weddings and conferences. Around 3,000 people face redundancy because of COVID, despite a national furlough scheme.

### 'Almost crisis time'

The family of Charles Courtenay, the 19th Earl of Devon, have lived at Powderham Castle in southwest England for over 600 years. While the COVID-19 pandemic might not compare directly to the damage it suffered in the 17th century during the English Civil War, Courtenay said water damage to the roof of the castle had reached a point where it was "almost crisis time". Funds like those from Historic England, a national heritage body, that funded repairs over the winter months, have helped stately homes during the pandemic and meant costs for work at the castle did not continue to spiral. Courtenay said Powderham would be reopening its gardens "as soon as we can", explaining that very few stately homes run a surplus. —AFP



**The turreted house near Bury St Edmunds in eastern England has survived over 450 years of tumultuous history but is in need of critical repairs it cannot afford after closing its doors to visitors at the start of the outbreak. —AFP**

## US transport secretary mulls mileage tax for infrastructure

**WASHINGTON:** The White House is mulling a tax on vehicles' mileage to pay for a revamp of the nation's infrastructure it is expected to propose the coming days, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said on Friday. In an interview with CNBC, Buttigieg said a tax on miles driven "shows a lot of promise," as President Joe Biden's administration faces pressure to find ways

to fund infrastructure improvements, a goal that has eluded the past two presidential administrations. "The gas tax used to be the obvious way to do it. It's not anymore, so a so-called vehicle miles traveled tax or mileage tax, whatever you want to call it, could be a way to do it."

Levies on gasoline and diesel sales pay for improvements to roads and mass transit in the United States, but if more drivers shift towards electric vehicles that revenue stream will become less reliable, Buttigieg said. "We know that it can't be the answer forever, because we're going to be using less and less gas. We're trying to electrify the vehicle fleet," the secretary said.

"So, if there's a way to do it that doesn't increase the burden on the middle class, we can look at it, but if



**HONG KONG:** Video streaming site Bilibili sank on its first day trading on Hong Kong's stock exchange on Monday as investors fret over a global sell-off in Chinese tech shares.

## Chinese streaming site Bilibili sinks on HK IPO

**HONG KONG:** Video streaming site Bilibili sank on its first day trading on Hong Kong's stock exchange yesterday as investors fret over a global sell-off in Chinese tech shares. Bilibili's opening price fell just over 6 percent in early trade after the firm raised around \$2.6 billion in a secondary listing on Hong Kong's bourse. Over the past 18 months Hong Kong has seen a flurry of Chinese tech firms hold initial public offerings in the city, part of a drive to list closer to home as relations between Beijing and Washington sour. Last year Hong Kong raked in an impressive \$49 billion in IPOs with hugely popular second listings by the likes of JD.com and NetEase.

The Chinese tech homecomings have continued into 2021 but with less investor enthusiasm. A Hong Kong debut by Chinese search engine Baidu last week raised \$3.1 billion through its IPO but its shares finished flat on the opening day and have since sunk some 15 percent. US-China tensions remain at the forefront of investor jitters. Last week American regulators announced plans to force Chinese firms to adhere more strictly to its auditing rules, sparking concerns over potential delistings in the US and a global sell-off in Chinese tech shares.

Bilibili is already listed in New York. It is a fast growing video streaming site with around 200 million mostly young Chinese users. Often dubbed "China's YouTube", it allows users to upload and share videos with voiceovers and music added and hosts a significant amount of user generated content. Founded in 2009 by a then 20-year-old college student Xu Yi, it began primarily as a place for fans of gaming and anime to gather and share content but has since spread among Gen Z Chinese users.

Bilibili chief executive Chen Rui played down short term market price drops, billing his company as a website primed to tap into China's nearly one billion internet users. "We wouldn't care too much about short-term performance in the stock market," the 43-year-

old billionaire told Bloomberg Television in what the network said was his first interview with international media. "Nobody will remember whether your stock went up or down on the debut in 10 years' time."

Chen has been seen as the real driver of Bilibili's success in recent years, persuading Chinese tech rivals Tencent and Alibaba to come on board as early investors as well as Sony. Videos "will be a major trend for the internet industry over the next three to five years," Chen told Bloomberg. "The market will be in ultra-high-speed growth for the next several years. Popular video platforms, like us, will all have great opportunities." —AFP

old billionaire told Bloomberg Television in what the network said was his first interview with international media. "Nobody will remember whether your stock went up or down on the debut in 10 years' time."

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## Vietnam Q1 growth picks up as virus is contained

**HANOI:** Vietnam's economy continued to expand in the first three months of the year, officials said yesterday, thanks to the government's success in containing the worst of the coronavirus. And while the 4.48 percent rate given by the General Statistics Office was below forecasts in a Bloomberg survey, it was better than the same period last year and the government said it hoped to chalk up annual growth of 6.5 percent for 2021.

Vietnam has long been one of the best performing economies in Asia and was one of the few in the world to expand last year owing to strict pandemic measures including massive contact tracing and mandatory quarantine. So far it has recorded only around 2,600 infections and 35 deaths among its population of 98 million. The results showed Vietnam "has realized effectively the double objective of fighting the pandemic while developing its economy", the statistics office said in a statement, adding that the 6.5 percent target was a "huge challenge for the government and the people". —AFP

to help consumers and businesses after the COVID-19 pandemic caused a massive economic downturn.

Those outlays pushed up the US debt and budget deficit to record levels in 2020, upping pressure from Congress for Biden to find ways to pay for his future spending proposals. Addressing potential opposition from Republicans, who form a large minority in both the House and the Senate and have expressed hostility to tax increases, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday Biden "certainly believes there's been a history of support for investing in infrastructure." He has had bipartisan meetings in the White House, getting with Democrats and Republicans on he's, ... steps taken in the past, and he's hopeful that there's an agreement on that moving forward." —AFP

# Saudi growth to rebound after a better-than-expected 2020

## Fiscal deficit expected to shrink remarkably in 2021

**KUWAIT:** The Saudi non-oil economy contracted by 2.3 percent in 2020, which is less than originally expected and a smaller drop than its GCC peers. In our view, the relatively limited contraction was due to 1) a timely and well-targeted fiscal/monetary stimulus, 2) relatively robust performance by the non-oil government sector, which contracted by a limited 0.5 percent versus 3.1 percent for the private sector and 3) generally successful control of the COVID-19 spread. Given the movement and travel restrictions that were imposed in 2020, the transport sector was the hardest hit (-6 percent), while the financial sector, including banks, was the most resilient, as it expanded by 0.8 percent supported by mortgages.

For 2021, the recovery is expected to be gradual given ongoing uncertainty regarding the pandemic and when the full normalcy of business activities will be resumed. The vaccination campaign in KSA has picked up recently with more than 4.1 million (12 percent of the population) inoculations administered. After the pandemic-related government spending overshoot in 2020, we forecast a decrease in spending in 2021, due to fiscal consolidation needs, putting some pressure on non-oil growth.

Given all that, we expect that it may take until the first half of 2022 for all the lost private-sector

output in 2020 to be recouped, with non-oil growth estimated at 2.2 percent in 2021 then strengthening to an average of 2.9 percent in 2022-23. Important reforms and PIF's commitment to invest at least SAR 150 billion annually in 2021-2025 (versus an estimated average of SAR 77 billion in 2019-2020) in the local economy underpin this accelerating growth.

As for the oil sector, KSA is playing a leading role within OPEC+ and is shouldering a lot of the burden to rebalance the market, cutting its production voluntarily to prevent a sharp fall in oil prices. As such, the oil sector in 2019 and 2020 contracted 3.6 percent and 6.7 percent, respectively, and is expected to contract again in 2021, given KSA's additional 1mb/d voluntary production cut. Annual oil production may start increasing in 2022 and we forecast oil GDP to grow by an average of 4 percent in 2022-23 after a 0.7 percent drop in 2021. All in all, total GDP is expected to grow by an average of 3.4 percent in 2022-23, after a 1.1 percent projected expansion in 2021, which is held back by the oil production cuts.

Following the tripling of VAT in July 2020, inflation increased to 3.4 percent in 2020, and will likely decelerate to 2.8 percent this year, before normalizing to 2 percent in 2022-2023. As for credit, growth accelerated to 15 percent in 2020, almost

double the 2019 expansion, supported by soaring mortgage lending (+59 percent). Growth in corporate and personal non-mortgage credit also picked up nicely in 2020 to stand at 6.9 percent and 8.8 percent, respectively. Driven by project awards, rebounding non-oil growth, and ongoing solid mortgage expansion, we expect credit growth to remain strong at 11 percent in 2021, softening to an average of 9 percent in 2022-2023.

### Fiscal deficit

The fiscal position came under pressure in 2020 given lower oil prices and production, as well as higher pandemic-related spending, resulting in a deficit of 11.2 percent of GDP. However, the deficit would have been much wider had it not been for the following important factors. First, the government tripled the VAT and rationalized spending allocations, including discontinuing the cost of living allowances and cutting capital spending. Second, while oil exports decreased considerably due to drop in both prices and production, there was a material increase in the transfer ratio (fiscal oil revenues/oil exports), reaching 90.6 percent in 2020 (79 percent in 2019), mainly due to Aramco's \$75 billion annual dividend pledge. Third, material non-oil revenue one-offs were recorded (including SAR 15-25 billion dividend from the PIF). Going

forward, given the increase in oil prices and the government's unwavering commitment to continue expanding non-oil revenues (including VAT's full-year impact) and rationalizing spending in line with Vision 2030, we forecast a steep improvement in the deficit to around 4 percent of GDP in 2021, shrinking further to 2.5 percent by 2023. Accordingly, and supported also by higher nominal GDP, we see only a limited increase in the debt/GDP ratio going forward, reaching 34 percent by 2023, way below the 50 percent self-imposed cap.

The current account is forecast to have turned negative (-2 percent) in 2020, improving modestly thereafter driven by higher exports. Finally, the reform momentum is very positive and is a main reason for the country's favorable outlook. The ongoing economic/structural reforms (including labor, legal, and business environment) have the potential to unlock significant growth in non-oil output and revenue, thereby diversifying the economy away from oil, a main pillar of Vision 2030. Reforms are expected to improve efficiency, boost productivity, attract FDI, and increase employment. However, safeguarding the oil market's balance until the non-oil sector contributes significantly to economic activity remains a key challenge to the outlook.

## Unique banking experience via AUB ATMs

**KUWAIT:** Towards further leadership in providing the best banking services by enhancing the customer experience through various digital channels, Ahli United Bank (AUB) announced that it has evolved its services via ATMs by adding more features and enhancing the way customers complete their request within current services, to provide an exceptional, convenient and flexible experience during carrying out the transactions via AUB's ATMs. AUB has enabled "Save Language" feature to allow the user to store their preferred language via its ATMs. This feature also provides the ability to change the preferred language at any time.

AUB has also enabled a feature to save the amount the customer used to withdraw each time, and present it to the customer to be used alternatively in an easy and spontaneous manner that saves customers more time. Moreover, in light of the interactive services that was made available to customers around the clock, AUB has introduced a new service for its customers to activate their debit cards.

The plan to advance AUB's ATMs in the earlier phase included a range of qualitative services whereby customers can perform "Cash Withdrawal" using the Civil ID or mobile number, "Cash Deposit" using their Civil ID, activate their credit cards, or to stop their credit and prepaid cards in case they are lost or stolen. Nevertheless, customers can make transfers to other beneficiaries, whether to another AUB customers, local banks or international banks. This range of new services also includes presenting information regarding existing standing orders, finances, credit and prepaid cards, as well as performing payment services for these cards. Customers can also pay their mobile phone bills and donate to charitable organizations as well as, update their mobile phone and e-mail information and much more other new services that AUB has presented to meet customer needs around the clock.

Previously, AUB has added a unique, convenient and easy experience for implementing services that customers used to carry out, such as print a brief statement, balance inquiry, cheque book request, cash or cheque deposit, transfer of funds within own accounts, update Civil ID information, as well as other various services that bring further convenience to the Bank's customers.

Commenting on these new services, Huda Al-Madani, General Manager of Digital Transformation & Innovation at AUB said: "In light of the current circumstances that increased customers need for digital services, we are pleased to launch this release of enhancements to our ATMs. This step embodies AUB's determination to provide the best services to customers, and facilitate access to products that meet their requirements wherever they are in Kuwait. This is also in conjunction with the Bank's continuous efforts to witness more success in the journey of Digital Transformation."

Al-Madani added: "For AUB, it is a top priority to enrich the banking experience of our customers to guarantee providing them with the highest level of convenience. This development of AUB ATMs is part of our strategy to increase Digital Transformation in alignment with the latest technological developments in the world ensuring our clients comfort and satisfaction."

## Gulf Bank switches off its lights in honor of Earth Hour

**KUWAIT:** On Saturday evening, Gulf Bank participated in "Earth Hour," an annual global initiative in which individuals and communities are encouraged to turn off non-essential lights and electronics for a period of one hour from 8.30 pm to 9.30 pm on the last Saturday of March. The initiative is held with the aim of reducing energy consumption and raising awareness about the dangers of climate change.

As part of its commitment to achieve environmental sustainability, Gulf Bank participated in Earth Hour by turning off all non-essential lights and elevators at its Head Office in the heart of Kuwait City, for a full hour. By taking part in the initiative, Gulf Bank aims to send a message to

communities in the region about the threat of climate change and the collective role of both individuals and institutions in reducing energy consumption in order to ensure a more sustainable world.

Regarding this initiative, Lujain Al-Qenaie, Assistant Manager for Corporate Communications at Gulf Bank, said: "At Gulf Bank, we are always actively working toward the sustainability of our resources in each of the sectors in which we operate, taking advantage of all available means to communicate with and benefit our customers. Our ongoing commitment to benefiting our communities has placed us at the forefront of banks that have made it a priority to spearhead impactful social responsibility initiatives. In light of the exceptional circumstances that challenged our global commitment to community and environmental sustainability, now more than ever, it is imperative for all parties to cooperate to address the environmental challenges that affect every inhabitant on earth, including climate change. We hope that by participating in Earth Hour, we will encourage more individuals and institutions to be more mindful of their energy consumption, and to raise awareness about environmental change. Moreover, we hope that by taking action together, we can do



our collective part in achieving environmental sustainability to its fullest extent."

It is worth noting that Earth Hour is one of the initiatives that Gulf Bank regularly encourages and participates in due to its important role in raising environmental awareness. The initiative is also prioritized due to its impact on both environmental and economic sustainability, which Gulf Bank strives to maintain within its social responsibility programs and initiatives throughout the year.

Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining a robust sustainability program at the community, economic,

and environmental levels through sustainability initiatives that are strategically selected to benefit both the country and the Bank. Throughout the year, Gulf Bank's social responsibility initiatives also went hand in hand with international efforts, aligning with the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Also known as the Global Goals, the SDGs were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030.

## Ooredoo announces 'Ooredoo Treasure' Grand Prize winner

**KUWAIT:** Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, with the support of Ministry of Commerce and Industry, has announced the winner for the long-awaited grand prize draw of "Ooredoo Treasure" in cooperation with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. In which Talal Najjar Al-Mutairi, was the lucky winner to receive the keys of the brand new GMC Yukon SLT, while taking into consideration all the health guidelines requirements for social distancing and prevention set by the official authorities.

The winner of the "Ooredoo Surprises" contest was announced on Q8 Pulse 88.8 FM, in "Diwanyat Al-Yaqout & Al-Ansari" program, which was broadcast live from the company's headquarters, Ooredoo Tower, in Kuwait City. During the draw event, Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain, Ooredoo Kuwait's Chief Executive Officer, praised the efforts and hard work by the company in raising public awareness about the importance of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine.

Thus, Ooredoo was again proactive in taking another bold step and an effective role in protecting society. Lately, Ooredoo launched an encouraging campaign urging everyone to receive the COVID-19 Vaccine, in which all Ooredoo customers - with post-paid subscriptions- who have had the COVID-19 vaccine, can enjoy three months free of charge.

Commenting on the draw event, Sundos Al-Shatti, Ooredoo Kuwait's Director Digital Services, said: "Ooredoo Treasure is actually another manifestation of Ooredoo's unremitting commitment to delivering on its promise of enriching people's lives through world-class networks, unrivalled digital experiences and significant CSR engagements that focus on empowering individuals (youths) and helping them to live their dreams." "The "Ooredoo Treasure" Competition, with its extravagant rewards, was basically conceptualized as a customer appreciation program aiming at rewarding our customers' loyalty and also as a platform to increase brand awareness, foster Ooredoo's interaction with its customers throughout the year and encourage others to come to subscribe with us" Al-Shatti added.

"Ooredoo Treasure Competition gives abundant opportunities for our



customers to enjoy quality daily content and play exciting quiz to gain more chances by sending yes to 1010. Users get more points for every correct answers." Al-Shatti concluded Naser Al-Abdullah, Manager, Advertising and Marketing Communications, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "Ooredoo's successes continue in all aspects of the telecommunications sector, including providing an exceptional customer experience with every product or service we launch."

"The month of giving is around the

## Burgan Bank rewards with 'The Pet Lobby'

**KUWAIT:** Burgan Bank continuous to reward its customers with a special offer in partnership with

"The Pet Lobby", a leading pet store for dogs and cats in Kuwait.

Burgan Bank customers can now enjoy 15 percent discount on all supplies and services when using any of Burgan Bank cards. Dana Al-Nesef, Manager- Product and Segments at Burgan Bank said: "Burgan Bank always seeks to support and encourage local businesses and motivate young entrepreneurs, and will continue to provide the

best in class services and offers that suits the customers daily lifestyle" The Pet Lobby is a locally started business and is a one stop shop for boarding, grooming, training, and all your pet needs.



Dana Al-Nesef

# CLINIC PAGE



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## Lifestyle | Features



An undated recent handout image shows a stray dog rescued by a volunteer after suffering from a broken leg and several gunshot wounds, in Qatar's capital Doha.— AFP photos



A combination of undated recent handout images shows (from left to right) an animal rescuer with his hand on a stray dog that died after being shot several times, and a rescuer holding a pellet found on the body of the stray dog, in the Qatar's capital Doha.

## ANIMAL ABUSE SURGES IN QATAR AS STRAYS DISPLACED

Freya the dog was found with "half her face blown off", Bernie was stabbed and badly burnt, Diana is struggling to raise her puppies after being riddled with pellets: strays in Qatar are facing a spike in abuse. The Gulf nation has long struggled with animals abandoned by departing expatriates, and the number of strays has surged with dogs and cats acquired during coronavirus lockdowns being ditched as normality returns. Rescuers now say the completion of building projects ahead of the 2022 World Cup has forced more strays into residential areas where many fall victim to abuse. "The suffering we see is terrible and it's getting worse," said one rescuer, who receives calls almost weekly to save dogs who have been shot or deliberately run over.



A handout photo shows stray dog Freya, found in Doha with half her face blown off after abuse and mistreatment on the Qatari capital's streets.

spaces for abandoned animals, seek to save as many as possible but they are pressed for funds. And on top of those challenges, shelters have struggled for legal recognition in the absolute monarchy, where criticism of authorities and civil society lobbying are rare. Their lack of status complicates the shelters' work and fundraising efforts. "We have corporate sponsors willing to donate but we can't accept their money," said the shelter manager.

### 'A good solution'?

Close to the newly built Al-Thumama World Cup stadium, rescuers and a veterinarian trapped a dog that had strayed



An undated recent handout image shows stray dog Bernie, found in Doha stabbed and burnt, receiving treatment in the Qatari capital.

into a street of upmarket villas, disturbing homeowners. Rescuers try to intervene in such cases before the police, so they can ensure the animals are resettled safely. A recent government scheme to clear stray dogs from Qatar's streets prompted a rare public outcry. Animal rescue groups challenged authorities to explain how their strategy would improve the situation.

Uniformed officers posed alongside dogs caught by "Operation Pity", local media showed, but rescuers complained of an information vacuum. Hundreds of Qataris and residents posted online comments demanding proof the animals would be treated humanely, and stories

were widely shared in Facebook groups dedicated to animal welfare. One Western embassy said it has tried to engage with Qatar on animal welfare, but received little response.

Rescuers have voiced fears that government-run facilities could quickly fill up and resort to euthanizing dogs. They also warn that Qatar's response is unlikely to adequately address the plight of the country's strays, estimated at some 50,000. The government insisted in a statement that "no dogs caught during the initiative have or will be euthanized." But rescuers question what will be done with the sick dogs and the ones who are very aggressive?" asked expat animal rescuer Alison Caldwell.

The government said all captured dogs "receive the necessary medical care and are neutered, vaccinated and rehabilitated before being placed for adoption". It added that two facilities held animals awaiting resettlement, but the rescue community say images of the sites suggest they are inadequate. "It doesn't look to me like a good solution, they are holding pens for livestock," Caldwell said. "That is exactly the sort of thing that will spread disease, fighting and pregnancies." — AFP

## MEGAN THEE STALLION PAYS TRIBUTE TO VICTIMS OF SPA SHOOTINGS

Megan Thee Stallion is helping donate \$50,000 in honor of the victims of the Atlanta spa shootings. The 'Savage' hitmaker has teamed up with Fashion Nova and activist May Lee to make a donation to Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Atlanta - the only non-profit legal advocacy firm dedicated to protecting the civil rights of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in the South East of America - after being left "heartbroken" by the deaths of eight people, six of whom were women of Asian descent, when a gunman opened fire at three spas on 16 March.

Megan announced on Instagram: "I am heartbroken by the loss of eight individuals taken from their families on March 16 in a senseless, violent attack against Asian Americans. To honor the memory of these victims, @FashionNova and I have partnered with the journalist and Asian activist @mayleeshow on a \$50,000 donation to @advancing\_justice\_atl who work tirelessly to protect the civil and human rights of Asian Americans in Georgia and the Southeast. "We stand in solidarity with all Asian Americans in saying that enough is enough. #StopAsianHate #StandWithAANHPICommunity (sic)" Following the shootings, police arrested 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long and charged him with eight counts of murder.



Megan's generosity came a few weeks after she joined forces with US Representative Sheila Jackson Lee and the National Association of Christian Churches Disaster Services on the Hotties Helping Houston fundraiser, which will foot the bill for the repair costs of the homes of senior citizens and single parents who had their houses destroyed in the Texas freeze. The treacherous snow storms left many Americans without power, heat, and some, clean water, and Megan's home state Texas was hit the hardest, with widespread blackouts across the state. The 'WAP' hitmaker announced that with the help of a number of major donors, including brands Mielie, Revlon, Fashion Nova, Dolce and Gabbana, and her label 300 Entertainment, the Hotties Helping Houston fund will provide monetary support for the next two years. — Bang Showbiz

## In troubled Sahel, memories of a cinematic golden age

The wall of a house in Torokorobougou, a district in the Malian capital Bamako, suddenly lights up as a black-and-white film starts to roll. The audience falls silent as the title of the documentary, "Sigui", flashes up on the screen. It's one of French director Jean Rouch's seminal films, charting a secret ceremony of central Mali's Dogon ethnic group which is held once every 60 years. Rouch, who died aged 86 in a road accident in Niger, is the only person to have ever recorded it. He shot around 140 films over his long career, including many in West Africa and particularly the Sahel state of Niger.

While his work has faced criticism for reflecting the condescending colonial attitudes of the time, the film-maker-cum-ethnographer was a prime mover in the Sahel's cinematic tradition and a champion of local directors. But memories of Rouch's work are fading, while the once-flourishing movie scene in the semi-arid

African region has been battered by a lack of funding. "He is the grandfather of cinema in Niger," said Moussa Hamidou, the country's first sound producer, who worked on all of Rouch's films. The Frenchman gave many of Niger's prominent cultural figures their start such as director Oumarou Ganda who in 1969 became the first African to present a film at the Cannes festival.

### Cock-a-Doodle-Do! Mr. Chicken

Hamidou talks cheerfully in his home in Niger's capital Niamey about the artistic milieu that once thrived in the city. "It was a good time for West Africa," he said, explaining that directors had access to funding. But the Sahel's cinematic heyday of the 60s and 70s is a now distant memory, with funding having mostly dried up. Governments across the Sahel are more focused on combatting the brutal jihadist insurgency, which first emerged in 2012, than cultural pursuits.

In Niamey, film enthusiasts have to rummage through the archives of the Institute for Research in Human Sciences Research (IRSH) to find traces of this cultural golden age. Rouch himself directed the institute between 1959 and 1969, where many of his old film reels are stored. One, for example, is his famed "Cock-a-Doodle-Do! Mr. Chicken," a comedy about a chicken salesman travelling Niger in his Citroen 2 CV. Seyni Moumouni, current director of the IRSH, said few are interested in the reels. "They're gathering dust because young people now prefer cas-



A man shows archives in the late French ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Rouch's editing room at the Institute for Research in Human Sciences (IRSH).

settes and DVDs," he told AFP.

### 'Like insects'

Despite his successes, Rouch also came in for fierce criticism for his depictions of African traditions, which many saw as eroticizing and patronizing. "You look at us like insects," Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene told him in 1965. Rouch responded that he was "trapped between two colliding worlds", referring to his native France, and the Sahel countries it colonized. A film expert in Mali's capital Bamako, who declined to be named, recognized that Rouch helped local film-makers, but said he was still a "product of his time".

However, Malian director Cheick

Oumar Sissoko argued Rouch had made an important contribution simply by capturing what he did on film. "The image itself is an extraordinary language which constitutes memory," Sissoko said.

### Secret ceremony

At the film screening in Bamako, ethnic Dogons in attendance watched in awe. The Sigui ceremony celebrates the regeneration of the life cycle and is one of the most important events in the Dogon calendar. Festivities involving elaborate masks last for years. But the 60-year span between each Sigui meant that few in the audience had seen the ceremony themselves. None said they had seen Rouch's film before either, a sign of his dwindling cachet.

Ali Dolo, a mayor from central Mali who fled to Bamako because of the conflict, cried out in recognition during one scene. "That's my home," he said, telling AFP later that not much had changed since Rouch filmed it. But for many, what has changed is the conflict, and a sudden lack of cultural funding. "It's impossible to make films without help," said Djingarey Maiga, a Malian-Nigerien director. He reflected on a time when Sahel directors would gather in a studio in the Musee de l'Homme, in Paris, which Rouch and other ethnographers had set aside for them. "We film-makers from Niger and Africa used to go there to edit and mix our films," he said. — AFP



Mario Lopez and Elizabeth Berkley

## LOPEZ 'GOT INTO A LITTLE FIGHT' WITH BERKLEY AT THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE AWARDS

Mario Lopez "got into a little fight" with Elizabeth Berkley at the People's Choice Awards. The 'Saved by the Bell' co-stars presented together at the ceremony in November 2020 and the 47-year-old presenter revealed that, shortly before they were due on stage, he and his friends exchanged words over who got to stand on the left of the stage. Interviewing Elizabeth as guest host of 'The Ellen DeGeneres Show' in an episode aired yesterday, Mario recalled: "The last time we saw each other in person was at the People's Choice Awards, and we got into a little fight backstage before."

With an image of them on stage shown on screen, he added: "As you can see, I want to point out to our viewers, you're on the left side-you're standing on the left side-which is usually the side I like to stand on, purely for superstitious reasons. It's like a good luck thing. You like to do it because you rock your hair a certain way, and because of the part, correct?" The 48-year-old actress insisted their row was just "playful banter". She quipped: "No, no, no! Superstitious, or you like that side?" "No, we didn't get into like a real fight. It was our playful banter, but like brother-sister." Mario agreed: "No, we're always laughing and teasing each other." — Bang Showbiz



A man sits in the late French ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Rouch's editing room at the Institute for Research in Human Sciences (IRSH) in Niamey. — AFP photos



A man shows a camera case in the late French ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Rouch's editing room.

Lifestyle | Features



This picture shows bodybuilder A. Arokiasamy posing for pictures after training at his gymnasium in Teluk Intan in Malaysia's Perak state. — AFP photos



Bodybuilder A. Arokiasamy lifting a barbell at his gymnasium.

# Mr Muscles: Malaysian bodybuilder still going strong at 72

Working out with ageing equipment in his modest gym, 72-year-old Malaysian bodybuilder A. Arokiasamy bench presses two dumbbells and then flexes his muscular arms. Despite his advancing years, the champion still pumps iron every day, and believes staying healthy with a vigorous routine is the best defense against the coronavirus. Arokiasamy got into bodybuilding after dropping out of school. He went on to represent Malaysia in several editions of Mr Universe and win gold in the 1981 Southeast Asian Games in the Philippines. Arokiasamy-whose hero is Arnold Schwarzenegger, the movie star and former Mr Universe — started coaching aspiring bodybuilders in lifting weights and opened his gym in his hometown of Teluk Intan.



Bodybuilder A. Arokiasamy lifting dumbbells at his gymnasium.



Bodybuilder A. Arokiasamy during a training session at his gymnasium.

"Weightlifting and exercise can slow down ageing and keep you healthy," Arokiasamy, who has seven children and five grandchildren, told AFP. "The deadly coronavirus pandemic is threatening us—we can fight it by lifting weights to stay fit." While bodybuilding may not be commonly associated with the elderly, some research suggests it does have health benefits for those getting on in life. A 2016 US study found that when people aged 65 and older did strength training at least twice a

week, their life-expectancy improved substantially. The study, led by researchers from Penn State College of Medicine, looked at 15 years of data from more than 30,000 elderly people in the United States.

**'A simple life'**

The gym run by Arokiasamy, a member of multi-ethnic Malaysia's Indian minority, is a small building next to his home that is open to the public, charging the equivalent of just one dollar a day. It is filled with

battered weights and an array of other gear, some of it made from scrap metal, and is constantly busy with men pumping iron and getting tips from the veteran bodybuilder. Arokiasamy had a tough upbringing, leaving school aged 11 to work and support his poor family. He tried various sports—hockey, badminton and football—but did not make it onto any teams. However, he built up his strength by chopping firewood, and hit on the idea of trying bodybuilding. "I headed to a gym

near my house and began to build up my muscles," he said.

He had his first success in 1968, winning the gold medal in a competition in his home state of Perak, and went on to compete in Malaysia and internationally for many years. Even though he was a successful athlete, he still had a day job as a school gardener, and now works as a security guard. As well as regularly working out, Arokiasamy says he has managed to maintain his health by eating well. "I live

a simple life and strive for a balanced diet... I grow my own vegetables," he said.

"I avoid sugar and junk food, and a big no to drugs and steroids." And despite his triumphs, he does have some regrets. The biggest of these are "not meeting Arnold (Schwarzenegger) in person, and failing to make it into the final round of the Mr Universe tournament after five attempts", he said.— AFP



Bodybuilder A. Arokiasamy posing for pictures outside his gymnasium.



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## NEW HONG KONG MUSEUM WILL NOT SHOW AI WEIWEI'S TIANANMEN PHOTO

A picture of Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei flipping a middle finger in Tiananmen Square will not be shown at the opening of a prestigious new museum in Hong Kong, an official said yesterday. Newly built on Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor, the M+ Museum aims to rival Western contemporary heavyweights such as London's Tate Modern and New York's Museum of Modern Art. The 60,000-square-metre (646,000-square-foot) venue has gathered perhaps the finest collection of modern Chinese art in the world thanks in part to a massive donation by Swiss collector Uli Sigg, and is finally set to open later this year after multiple delays.

But its future has been clouded by Beijing's crackdown on critics in Hong Kong, including a powerful new national security law that criminalizes much dissent. Henry Tang, the government official in charge of the cultural park where the museum is located, confirmed yesterday that no artwork deemed to breach the law will be displayed. "If there are any works that the national security department thinks... (have) violated the law, we will act according to the law," he told reporters. And Tang said he welcomed vetting by

the police's new national security unit. Earlier this month, a group of pro-Beijing politicians accused M+ of breaking the new security law and "spreading hatred against the country".

The cause of their ire was a media preview that ignited discussion of works by Ai Weiwei, including his series "Study of Perspectives". The series shows Ai showing the middle finger to institutions around the world including the White House,

media earlier this month there would be "no problem" showing works by dissident artists like Ai. The museum also has photographs by Liu Heung-shing of Beijing's deadly 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen. It is now unclear whether controversial and provocative works will be displayed. The broad wording of the security law includes anything deemed to undermine China's government or provoke hatred of authorities.



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Germany's Reichstag and Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Tang confirmed that the photo will not be displayed when M+ opens but denied any censorship. "We have never planned for that photograph to be included in the opening exhibition, so there is no question that we have retracted it or we have succumbed to pressures and have changed it," he told reporters.

**Protest documentary pulled**  
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Many of the more than 100 people arrested under the law so far have been for speech offences. Even the whiff of a national security allegation is enough to shut down art. Earlier this month, two cinemas pulled the debut of a documentary about Hong Kong's democracy protests after Chinese state media warned that screening the film could break the security law. — AFP

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"It was purely a commercial decision that we decided not to pursue the Oscars this year," a TVB spokesperson told AFP. The decision comes after Bloomberg News reported earlier this month that China's Communist Party propaganda department has ordered its state-controlled media to play down the awards and not show the ceremony live. The cause is believed to be the nomination of "Do Not Split", a short documentary on Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests, as well as the four nods for Chinese-born US director Chloe Zhao for "Nomadland".

State media have since run articles critical of the documentary while nationalists online have pounced on Zhao over comments she made years back that were perceived as being critical of China. State

broadcaster CCTV, which has aired previous Oscar ceremonies, has yet to confirm if it will show this year's event. All media is strictly censored in mainland China. Semi-autonomous Hong Kong maintains more freedoms under a model dubbed "One country, two systems". But the atmosphere is changing quickly. After huge and often violent democracy protests in 2019,



In this file photo US-China director Chloe Zhao poses during a photocall to present the movie "Songs My Brothers Taught Me" in the French northwestern sea resort of Deauville, during the 41th Deauville US Film Festival. — AFP

Beijing has moved to stamp out opposition, including imposing a sweeping national security law on the city.

The pro-democracy opposition has been flattened, but the law has also seeped into the city's cultural scene. In recent weeks, cinemas have pulled a protest documentary, a university cancelled a press photography exhibition while a soon-to-open contemporary art museum has said it will allow security officials to vet its collection. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



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## Sports

# India edge England in ODI decider despite Curran heroics

## England had already lost Test and Twenty20 series

PUNE: India beat England by seven runs on Sunday to clinch the one-day international series 2-1 despite a courageous unbeaten 95 from Sam Curran. England, who had already lost the Test and Twenty20 series, bowled out India for 329 with 10 balls to spare in Pune.

England looked on the ropes at 200 for seven, but Curran equaled the highest ODI score by a batsman coming in at number eight or lower. England sent out the order that Curran was to be given the strike as much as possible for the closing overs as they hoped for an unlikely win.

But, needing 14 to win off the final six balls, Curran came up against a disciplined effort from T. Natarajan who gave away just one boundary. England's top order failed to build partnerships. Kumar sent back openers Jason Roy, for 14, and Jonny Bairstow, for one, in the first three overs.

Ben Stokes, who survived a dropped catch by Hardik Pandya on 15, fell to Natarajan for 35 and Thakur trapped Buttler lbw for 15. Dawid Malan and Liam Livingstone put on 50 for the fifth wicket but Thakur had Livingstone caught and bowled for 36.

"We're disappointed, we came here and we wanted to win, but there have been great learnings throughout the whole process," said Buttler, who praised Curran as one of the new generation making their mark in the England side. "Sam keeps showing what a match-winner he is. He is still only 22 and the scope of where he can take his game to is massive so we are all very excited for him."

Curran put on 57 for the eighth wicket with Adil Rashid, who was superbly caught by Virat Kohli in the covers, and then 60 for the ninth wicket with Mark Wood, who made 14 before being run out in the final over. The left-hander, who was dropped on 22 and 87, hit nine fours and three sixes in his 83-ball knock.

### Positive India attack with bat

India started strongly with a 103-run opening stand between Rohit Sharma, who scored 37, and Shikhar Dhawan, who hit 67, before Rashid's leg-spin removed both. Moeen Ali rattled the stumps of Kohli, playing his 200th international as captain, but who has struggled against spin at times during England's tour of India.

The home side were then indebted to Rishabh Pant (78) and Hardik Pandya (64) who put on 99 for the fifth wicket. Left-hander Pant swatted a six off Rashid to bring up his second successive half-century. Thakur hit 30 off 21 balls but India lost their final four wickets for eight runs as Wood claimed three wickets, including two in one over.



PUNE: Members of Indian cricket team pose with the trophy after winning the one-day international (ODI) series against England at the end of their third and final ODI cricket match at the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Pune on Sunday. — AFP

Kohli said he was "surprised" that Thakur was not named man-of-the-match instead of Curran after his four wickets and 30 runs. "And Bhuvu (Kumar) another contender for man-of-the-series. These guys were the difference in the middle overs and powerplay."

England's Jonny Bairstow was named man-of-the-series for his 219 runs in three matches including a match-winning 124 in England's chase of 337 in the second ODI. Kohli's India outplayed England in the four Tests 3-1 and then edged out the tourists 3-2 in the Twenty20 series. — AFP

## Team Kout emerges victorious

KUWAIT: After the exciting official PUBG Mobile Red Bull MEO East World Finals, none other than Kuwait's Kout Team emerged victorious in an exhilarating tournament competing against 10 other countries.

Red Bull MEO is an e-sport competition, giving participants the opportunity in a PUBG Mobile tournament. A local qualifier was conducted in Kuwait in 2020 in which Kout Team emerged as the winners. On March 22, 2021 Kout Team participated in the virtual PUBG Mobile East World Finals competing against the winning teams from 10 other countries.

Ultimately Kout Team took home the win and were crowned winners of the global tournament.

Over 22,000 competitors from around the world signed up to do battle in the third iteration of Red Bull MEO, and after a compelling 11 months the competition was finally drawn to an action-packed conclusion.

Team Kout fired their way to victory after 6 grueling rounds against 15 teams. These teams were Rise on Glory (Chile), What a Squad and SD Gaming (Hong Kong), Morph Team, RUBIC FXN and Boom Esports (Indonesia), Blue Bees (Japan), OPMF Esports (Maldives), SWAT69 (Oman), rxnPakistan and OnLy TiTans (Pakistan), STP X (Singapore), KHK Esports (South Africa), and WG B2R and MAX LND-Legends (Sri Lanka).

Team Kout was able to secure their win by securing a total of 32 kills and



2 1st place wins in Rounds 1, 2 and 3, creating for themselves a comfortable lead. Morph began closing the gap in Rounds 4 and 5, ending it with a total of 94 points vs. 100 with Team Kout. Things came down to the wire in the 6th and final round where ultimately Team Kout took home the win with

109 points leading the way by 11 points vs. second place winners, Morph. Catch up on the action packed final on @RedBull on Twitch. Commentating on the final were esports experts IMPERIUM\_1 and Maxman30. For more information visit the Red Bull MEO site on redbull.com.

## Lakers hang on for narrow win over Magic, Booker powers Suns

LOS ANGELES: Dennis Schroder scored 24 points Sunday as the injury-depleted Los Angeles Lakers held on late for a much-needed 96-93 NBA victory over the Orlando Magic. The reigning NBA champion Lakers won their second straight game after dropping four in a row since superstar LeBron James suffered a high right ankle sprain, joining star big man Anthony Davis on the sidelines.

Kyle Kuzma added 21 points for the Lakers, who rallied from five points down with 7:19 remaining in the fourth quarter against the second-worst team in the Eastern Conference. A 12-1 scoring run helped the Lakers take a seven-point lead with 2:56 to play. But amid a stream of missed shots by the Lakers, the Magic sliced the deficit to three.

Orlando's Otto Porter Jr had a chance to tie it on the final possession, but his three-point attempt bounced off the back of the rim, to the relief of the increasingly desperate-looking Lakers. "We made some mistakes at the end, couldn't really get shots to fall, but we got the win and on to the next," said Lakers forward Markieff Morris. "It certainly wasn't

pretty," said Lakers coach Frank Vogel, "but we executed well."

"We got high quality shots," Vogel said before adding with a laugh: "We couldn't throw it in the ocean. I think it's a good win for our guys," he concluded. "I'm proud of how they competed." The Lakers are due to get reinforcements, with the signing of free agent center Andre Drummond confirmed shortly before tip-off.

"Andre Drummond gives us powerful, anchor-point skills on both ends of the court," Lakers general manager Rob Pelinka said. "We feel extremely fortunate to add a player of his caliber and magnitude to our core group at this stage of our journey to defend the NBA title."

### OT win for Phoenix

In Charlotte, Phoenix's Devin Booker scored 35 points and Chris Paul added 16 while both made key overtime plays to spark the Suns over the Hornets 101-97. Mikal Bridges added 13 points and a career-high six steals while 22-year-old Bahamas big man Deandre Ayton had 14 points and 14 rebounds as the Suns improved to 31-14, second in the Western Conference.

The host Hornets had 30 points from Devonte Graham and 22 from Terry Rozier in a losing cause. Graham's late 8-0 run, a layup and back-to-back 3-pointers, deadlocked the game at 90-90 to force overtime. Bridges lifted the Suns ahead to stay at 95-92 on a 3-pointer with 3:09 remaining in the extra session and Paul added two free throws with

83 seconds to play.

Graham answered on a 3-pointer with 45.8 seconds remaining and responded to two Booker free throws and two of his own to pull Charlotte within 99-97 with 8.3 seconds remaining. Graham stole the ball but Paul stole it back from Rozier and sank two final free throws with 3.2 seconds remaining to produce the final margin.

Despite the defeat, the Hornets finished the day half a game ahead of Atlanta in fifth place in the East, after the Hawks fell 126-102 to the Denver Nuggets. Aaron Gordon scored 13 points in his debut with Denver, who acquired him at the trade deadline last week. Nikola Jokic finished with 16 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists, and JaMychal Green added 20 points off the bench for Denver.

### Blazers hold off Raptors

CJ McCollum starred late for Portland, scoring seven of his 23 points in the last two minutes as the Trail Blazers beat the Toronto Raptors 122-117. Damian Lillard scored 22 points and handed out 11 assists for the Blazers, who held the Raptors to 10 points in the third quarter to take charge of the contest.

Pascal Siakam led the Raptors with 26 points and Fred VanVleet added 20 with eight assists, but the Raptors lost for the 11th time in 12 games. The contest came days after the trade that sent Norman Powell from the Raptors to Portland for Gary Trent and Rodney Hood. Powell scored 13 points against his old team. — AFP

## Father's day as Vinales wins Qatar MotoGP

DOHA: Dad-to-be Maverick Vinales won the season-opening Qatar MotoGP on a Yamaha on Sunday pushing France's Ducati rider Johann Zarco into second despite windy, sandy conditions. Italy's Francesco Bagnaia, on another Ducati, came third on his first ride in the factory team after starting on pole, beating reigning champion Joan Mir of Suzuki back into fourth in the final moments of the race.

"I felt the potential, I was taking everything calmly," Vinales, 26, said after his win. "I tried to be very smart, very calm... finally I opened a gap and I was trying to get the power. I can say nothing more other than to say thank you to my family, especially my close family."

"You know my wife and I are waiting for a baby," added Vinales, who

married girlfriend Raquel and announced earlier this month that the couple are expecting their first child. Vinales overcame a slow start in which he and the other Yamahas were left standing by the Ducatis, before gradually advancing on the Italian bikes. He took the lead with eight laps to go, seeing off Bagnaia while Mir made up six places with four laps remaining after starting in 10th place.

### 'Seriously impressed'

Despite his best efforts, Fabio Quartararo could not match Vinales' tenacity on his debut as a Yamaha factory rider. Spaniards Alex Rins (Suzuki), Aleix Espargaro (Aprilia) and Pol Espargaro (Honda), Australian Jack Miller (Ducati) and eye-catching rookie Enea Bastianini (Ducati-Avintia), last year's Moto2 champion, completed the top 10.

With one lap left, Vinales had a comfortable lead of more than a second and a half, more than enough for victory, while Zarco, Bagnaia and Mir fought for the podium. "I'm really happy — it's been a good race and a long race, the end was quite difficult,"



LUSAIL: Monster Energy Yamaha MotoGP's Spanish rider Maverick Vinales (center) drives during the Moto GP Qatar Grand Prix at the Losail International Circuit, in the city of Lusail on Sunday. — AFP

said Zarco. "I felt I can still have some space to follow (Vinales). I tried to catch Vinales... thanks to my engine I could only save second position."

Yamaha team chief Lin Jarvis said Vinales had a "fabulous" race and was "seriously impressed," sentiments echoed by the entire paddock. Miller, who dominated pre-season tests on the same Losail circuit and then free prac-

tice on Friday and Saturday, has good reason to be disappointed. However, the Australian will have the opportunity for revenge next week when Qatar stages the Doha MotoGP. The renewed season is taking place amid strict coronavirus prevention measures that have included a bio bubble for participants and the offer of vaccines to anyone in the paddock. — AFP

## Medvedev toils into Miami Open fourth round

MIAMI: Top-seeded Daniil Medvedev hobbled into the fourth round of the Miami Open on Sunday, defying crippling leg cramps to beat Australian Alexei Popyrin 7-6 (7/3), 6-7 (7/9), 6-4. World number two Medvedev, increasingly hampered as the third set wore on in the heat and humidity of South Florida, nevertheless mastered the only service break of the third set on the way to a dramatic victory over 86th-ranked Popyrin in the ATP Masters and WTA hardcourt tournament. "It's probably one of the sweetest victories in my career, because I was cramping like hell in the third set," Medvedev said.

"It was really painful," Medvedev said. "A few moments during rallies, I felt like my legs were not following me anymore. The only thing I was thinking about was not to fall down because if I fell down, I don't think I'd be able to get up. There were moments where I just wanted to lie down and say, 'OK, it's over,' but I couldn't accept that."

Medvedev had appeared to be cruising to the finish line when he seized a 5-2 lead in the second set. Popyrin held serve for 5-3, but since Medvedev hadn't faced a break point in the match another hold seemed a mere formality. Instead, Medvedev was broken to love in a game that featured a double fault and three superb forehand winners from Popyrin — including a stinging cross-court return on break point.

Popyrin promptly fell to 0-40 in the next game but an ace, a service winner and a forehand long from Medvedev erased three match points. Medvedev saved two set points in the tiebreak before Popyrin, who won his first ATP title at Singapore in February, leveled the match with a forehand winner on his third set point.

The Russian, runner-up to Novak Djokovic at the Australian Open in February, will next face unseeded American Frances Tiafoe, who beat 16th-seeded Dusan Lajovic of Serbia 1-6, 7-5, 6-3. John Isner, the 2018 champion and 2019 runner-up, booked a fourth-round spot with a 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/5) victory over 11th-seeded Canadian Felix Auger-Aliassime.

The match was a near-carbon copy of Isner's two-tiebreak win over Auger-Aliassime in the 2019 semi-finals. The US veteran, 35, next faces another familiar foe in Roberto Bautista Agut. The seventh-seeded Spaniard beat Germany's Jan-Lennard Struff 4-6, 6-3, 6-2 to book a chance to avenge his 2019 quarter-final Miami loss to Isner. — AFP



MIAMI GARDENS: Daniil Medvedev of Russia returns a shot during his men's singles third round match against Alexei Popyrin of Australia on Day 7 of the 2021 Miami Open presented by Itaú at Hard Rock Stadium on Sunday in Miami Gardens, Florida. — AFP

Sports

# Olmo rescues Spain in World Cup qualifying, Danes make statement

## England, Italy, Germany win in the Balkans

PARIS: Dani Olmo's injury-time strike saved Spain in a 2-1 win against Georgia on Sunday, while France also rebounded from an opening draw in World Cup qualifying by beating Kazakhstan. Elsewhere, England, Italy and Germany all had to work hard in the Balkans to gain their second victories in two matches.

Denmark also stayed perfect as they made a double statement, protesting the treatment of migrant workers in Qatar before putting eight goals past Moldova, while Switzerland eked out a victory over Lithuania in a game delayed because one of the goals was too big.

Spain, who had been held to an embarrassing home draw by Greece in their opening game in Group B, fell behind to a goal by Khvicha Kvaratskhelia just before half-time. Ferran Torres of Manchester City leveled in the 56th minute with his fifth goal from just six starts.

Spain's second-half pressure finally paid off in injury time. Olmo's rasping strike from 25 meters flew into the top corner. "It was perhaps one of the games where I suffered the most, but, for the joy at the end, it was worth it," said Spain coach Luis Enrique. "I'll sign to suffer if in the end we win but we saw the spectre of qualification getting very complicated."

In Tirana, Kane ended his six-game England goal drought as he inspired a 2-0 win in Albania in Group I. Gareth Southgate's side struggled to break down the well-organized underdogs until the Tottenham striker netted late in the first half.

It was the England captain's first international goal since he scored against Kosovo 500 days ago in November 2019. He set up England's second for Mason Mount in the second period. "As a striker

you go through spells where things don't go your way," Kane told British broadcaster ITV. "You have to stay focused on doing your job for the team and we're grateful to get the three points."

Serge Gnabry gave Germany the lead against Romania in Bucharest after 17 minutes. The visitors dominated much of the game, but had three narrow escapes in the closing minutes before winning 1-0. "We should have scored the second goal, so we would not have been in danger of losing two points," said German goalkeeper Manuel Neuer, in remarks reported by FIFA. "We are lacking coolness, cleverness, maybe a bit of will inside the box." Italy kept their campaign on track with a 2-0 win over Bulgaria.

### 'Getting chills'

Andrea Belotti scored the first goal from the penalty spot just before the break with Manuel Locatelli sealing the win with his first 'Azzurri' goal with eight minutes to go. "My first Italy goal, it's incredible, I'm still getting chills," said Locatelli.

In Copenhagen, Denmark cemented their grip on first place in Group F by thrashing Moldova 8-0, with Kasper Dolberg and Mikkel Damsgaard both scoring twice. The victory was preceded by the Danish team joining other European national sides in protesting the treatment of migrant workers in Qatar, host of the 2022 World Cup. Danish players wore jerseys with the slogan "Football supports CHANGE" as they lined up for a photograph before the game. The Danish Football Union said the shirts would be put up for sale and the money given to migrant workers in the Gulf state.

Kick-off in Switzerland's home game against Lithuania in St Gallen was delayed by 15 minutes on



Tbilisi: Spain's forward Daniel Olmo celebrates after scoring the team's second goal during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification football match Georgia v Spain in Tbilisi on Sunday. — AFP

Sunday because one of the goals was too big. When played started, Xherdan Shaqiri scored after just two minutes as the hosts on 1-0. Ousmane Dembele scored the opening goal as holders France won 2-0 in Kazakhstan to claim their first victory in Group D after drawing at home to Ukraine in their opener. Sergei Malin put through his own net for France's

second goal before half-time but Kylian Mbappe had a second-half penalty saved after coming off the bench. "People might have thought Kazakhstan would let us score five goals but no, they played well," Paul Pogba, who returned to the starting lineup, told broadcaster TF1. "We got the result and we can be happy." — AFP

## Reyna, Pulisic fire US to friendly win in Northern Ireland

BELFAST: Giovanni Reyna and Christian Pulisic scored as the United States won 2-1 in their friendly against Northern Ireland in Belfast on Sunday. Borussia Dortmund's Reyna, born in England while his father Claudio played for Sunderland, opened the scoring with a deflected strike at Windsor Park.

Chelsea winger Pulisic doubled the lead with a controversial second-half penalty. A superb strike from Niall McGinn gave Northern Ireland late hope but, as Wednesday's vital World Cup qualifier against Bulgaria looms, their winless run under Ian Baraclough continued.

Baraclough had paid lip service to the importance of the friendly, but his team-sheet told a different story as he made 10 changes from Thursday's 2-0 World Cup qualifying defeat by Italy. The US fielded a stronger side, with Pulisic captaining a line-up that included Barcelona full-back Sergino Dest and Manchester City goalkeeper Zack Steffen.

Reyna, 18, is regarded as one of the brightest young stars in the Bundesliga and he struck after half an hour when his



BELFAST: US midfielder Giovanni Reyna (left) celebrates with US defender Sergino Dest after scoring the opening goal of the international friendly football match between Northern Ireland and the United States at Windsor Park in Belfast on Sunday. — AFP

shot deflected off Ciaran Brown to leave Conor Hazard wrong-footed. Shayne Lavery tried to respond as he forced a smart save from Steffen, but the Americans ended the half on top as Daniel Ballard made an important block on Jordan Siebatcheu's shot.

Dest was withdrawn at the break, with Roma's Bryan Reynolds on to earn his first cap. When Pulisic went down under a

are yet to officially disband but struggling backers Suning, the conglomerate who also own Inter Milan, have failed to find new investors to take over the ailing club.

The club's demise underlines the wider financial problems coursing through Chinese football, which just a few years ago had a reputation for splashing money on star foreign players such as Brazilians Oscar, Hulk and Paulinho. Earlier this month, Jiangsu withdrew from the Asian Champions League.

Yesterday the Chinese Football Association released the names of six

challenge from Ballard, the Northern Ireland defender appeared to get a touch on the ball. But the penalty was awarded and Pulisic fired his spot-kick past Hazard.

McGinn's 88th-minute strike was eye-catching, but it came too late to change the result. Baraclough's only success in his 10 games in charge remains the penalty shoot-out win over Bosnia and Herzegovina back in October. — AFP

professional teams who have not been approved to contest the new season. Jiangsu will be replaced in the CSL by Cangzhou Mighty Lions. The other five teams pulled from the league are in the second or third divisions.

Tianjin Tigers — another club reportedly in dire financial trouble — are listed among the 16 CSL teams who will kick the new season off next month. On February 28, Nanjing-based Jiangsu FC threw Chinese football into turmoil, saying that it had "ceased operations". In November the club won the domestic league title for the first time. — AFP

## Injured Lewandowski to miss England clash

WARSAW: Robert Lewandowski will miss Poland's 2022 World Cup qualifier against England with a right knee injury, the Polish Football Association said yesterday. The Bayern Munich forward suffered the injury during Sunday's 3-0 win over Andorra in Warsaw in which he scored two goals but had to leave the field in the 63rd minute. "Healing from this type of injury usually takes between five and 10 days. Therefore Robert Lewandowski will return to the club where he will undergo further rehabilitation," the statement said.

Lewandowski's absence is a blow to Poland, who will have been counting on their star striker lining up against England in what is the toughest match of their qualifying campaign. Poland are currently third in Group I on four points, two behind Gareth Southgate's leaders and level with second-placed Hungary following a 3-3 draw in Budapest and Sunday's win.

Lewandowski has scored three times in those two matches, twice against Andorra and a stunning late leveler against Hungary. Bayern had initially said that the 32-year-old would not be released to play in Wednesday's match at Wembley but changed its mind due to a change in Germany's COVID-19 travel restrictions.

The reigning European champions will be hoping that he will be back in time for the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final with Paris Saint-Germain,



WARSAW: Poland's forward Robert Lewandowski plays the ball during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification football match Poland vs Andorra in Warsaw on Sunday. — AFP

which will be played at Bayern's Allianz Arena on April 7.

Lewandowski is also hoping to break Gerd Mueller's Bundesliga record of 40 goals in a single season, as he sits on a total of 35 with eight league games still to play. The Polish side has already been hit by coronavirus infections. Two players, midfielder Mateusz Klich and backup goalkeeper Lukasz Skorupski, have tested positive in the past few days. — AFP

# Classifieds

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| Chest Hospital            | 24849400   |
| Farwaniya Hospital        | 24892010   |
| Adan Hospital             | 23940620   |
| Ibn Sina Hospital         | 24840300   |
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| Physiotherapy Hospital    | 24874330/9 |

## Clinics

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| Khaldiya            | 24848075 |
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## Hamilton wins thrilling season-opener

### Defending champ outspeeds charging Verstappen to claim Bahrain Grand Prix

**SAKHIR:** Lewis Hamilton produced another stunning demonstration of his supreme racing talent on Sunday to resist a charging Max Verstappen and win a thrilling 'cliff-hanger' season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix. The defending seven-time champion defended with great skill over the closing laps in his Mercedes to hold off the Red Bull driver and claim a record-increasing 96th Formula One victory.

Hamilton came home seven-tenths of a second ahead of the Dutchman, who was forced to hand back the race lead in the closing laps after passing him with a move that had taken him off the track. As expected, the champion and his heir apparent delivered an exhilarating exhibition of racing as they raced to the flag - the pair leaving third-placed Valtteri Bottas, in the second Mercedes, to finish adrift by 37 seconds.

It was Hamilton's first season-opening triumph since 2015 and surprised many observers after Red Bull had dominated pre-season testing and two days of practice and qualifying ahead of the race. "Firstly, can I just say it's the first time I've seen fans in a long time!" said a delighted Hamilton. "What a difficult race that was - stopping early we knew it was going to be tough, but we had to cover Max and it was always going to take something pretty special to do it."

A disappointed Verstappen said: "Of course, it's a shame, but you also have to see the positives. We're putting the fight on to them so it's great to start the year like that." Lando Norris was fourth for McLaren ahead of Sergio Perez, who had started from the pit lane in the sec-

ond Red Bull, Charles Leclerc of Ferrari and Daniel Ricciardo, of McLaren.

Carlos Sainz was eighth for Ferrari ahead of Japanese rookie Yuki Tsunoda of AlphaTauri and Aston Martin's Lance Stroll. Starting from his fourth pole position, Verstappen advanced smoothly and held the lead ahead of Hamilton as the lights went out, but the opening lap was soon halted when Russian rookie Nikita Mazepin of Haas speared into the barriers at Turn Three.

#### 'Leave me to it'

The crash revived memories of a similar first lap accident at the same corner last season, when his predecessor Frenchman Romain Grosjean escaped from his blazing car after going into the barriers. Mazepin escaped unhurt, but the race was paused for a Safety Car intervention for two laps.

On the re-start, AlphaTauri's Pierre Gasly lost his front wing after a clash with McLaren new boy Daniel Ricciardo while rookie Mick Schumacher spun off in his Haas at Turn Four - and a Virtual Safety Car (VSC) was deployed briefly.

Hamilton stayed within two seconds of Verstappen until lap 14 when he pitted as Mercedes went for an 'undercut' to switch him from mediums to a new set of hards. Verstappen, complaining about differential problems, came in and took mediums as Hamilton swept into the lead for the first time.

By lap 23, Hamilton's lead was 3.8 seconds on the Red Bull man, but it was soon reduced to one. Sensing Verstappen closing in, Hamilton pitted again for more hards on lap 29, rejoining




**SAKHIR:** Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton celebrates after winning the Bahrain Formula One Grand Prix at the Bahrain International Circuit in the city of Sakhir on Sunday. — AFP

20 seconds adrift of the Dutchman. Verstappen pitted again on lap 40. He rejoined second, eight seconds behind the champion to set up a chase for a grandstand finish. An immediate fastest lap trimmed the gap to six seconds. "Make sure you've got enough tyres to

challenge him at the end," warned his engineer Gianpiero Lambiase.

By lap 49, the lead was two seconds. "Leave me to it, Bono," snapped Hamilton when his engineer advised him Verstappen was on his tail. The tension was palpable. With five laps to go, the

champion ran wide at Turn 10, enabling Verstappen to close up. He squeezed by at Turn Four, on lap 53, but having gone off circuit had to hand the position back. Hamilton continued to resist, Verstappen began sliding for grip and the champion hung on. — AFP






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