

# Friday Times

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VOLVO

Fajr 03:34  
Shurooq 05:02  
Dhuhr 11:45  
Asr 15:20  
Maghrib 18:28  
Isha 19:53



## COVID fight gets a boost, US backs vaccine patent waiver

See Page 10

## Local

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



Colorful tassels hanging at a shop in Souq Al-Mubarakiya. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## The Other Virus and its Variant

### IN MY VIEW

By Nejouad Al-Yagout

local@kuwaittimes.com



**W**e are in the midst of a pandemic, a pandemic that has yet to go away. 2021 is a whole lot more promising than last year with the vaccine, but we are still facing countless deaths, and we all know people being admitted to the ICU, along with tragic stories of suicides, families separated, loss of jobs, failing businesses and people with no access to oxygen. But there is another virus which, for now, has no cure. It is a virus which is inconspicuous and travels among all of us. At any moment, any of us can become infected with it. The virus is known as fake news-itis (aka FNI). And we can label its mutation as conspiracy-itis (COI). FNI and COI are so pervasive that people can no longer tell truth from lies.

There are symptoms which the two viruses have in common: Both bring with them arrogance, anger, paranoia and can even cause tension among families. In worst case scenarios, the critical care version of Fake News-it is and conspiracy-it is, victims cause pandemonium on the streets in the form of insurgency, violent protests and even death.

There is an inherent obsession with viewing the world as a horror show and we are the ones who can direct it back to a utopia, if people would only listen. And the most assailable symptom of both variants is believing our egos,

our minds. We stop trusting experts or anyone, for that matter. We deny everything unless it comes from our own mind. And we self-appoint our mind as intelligent, aware, and the main source of all our information—even though FNI and COI both originate in the mind. What results is that all reason has been taken over and we become vulnerable to misinformation. What's worse is not only that these two viruses are contagious, but those struck by any of the two variants want to spread it to others.

If we are struck by FNI and COI, everyone is an idiot except us. Scientists have no idea how science works. Only we do. The majority of the medical establishment is fraudulent. If you need medical advice, come to us. Everyone is out to get us, we think, because we are important, and we are dangerous because of the knowledge we contain (self-taught from Internet University and WhatsApp College). And then, when our antibodies or reason are weakened, and we become immune to the vaccine of common sense—we join the cult of us vs. them.

When we are exposed to either FNI or COI, or both, we begin to see ourselves as experts and saviors. Entangled in the web of I-am-free-and-you-are-a-puppet, we begin to convince ourselves and try to convince others that we are the true leaders of humanity, shepherds who have come to wake the world up from its stupor of stupidity. We follow anyone who creates hysteria, and look up to anyone who galvanizes others to dissent. Not for one moment does it cross our minds that maybe, just maybe, we are the ones who are being brainwashed. No, that thought would not occur because we are aware and the rest of the sheeple are not.

Now, under normal circumstances, the illness of fake news and its mutation can be discarded. But in a pandemic,

in a pandemic, let us repeat, it is fatal. It is understandable to be afraid. The whole world has been shaken by this virus. But for us to tell people the virus is not that dangerous or, at worst, doesn't exist, or that the vaccine is unnecessary is downright cruel. To tell people that if they take the vaccine they will become hypnotized by the government and killed off, one by one, is more dangerous than Covid itself. To be an anti-vaxxer is anyone's right.

But to be an anti-vaxxer and tell others not to take the vaccine affects us not just individually, but collectively, as the pandemic has proven. One of the most paradoxical symptoms of FNI and COI is the constant complaint that fear-mongering is everywhere. But let's be honest. What is scarier: Telling people that our government consists of reptilian aliens and they are all out to get us; or telling people that the vaccine assures us that we will not experience severe symptoms or die if we take it? Which is scarier: the notion of a plandemic or the pandemic itself?

This planet is fragile. Sometimes, we feel paranoid, sometimes we are swayed by fake news and conspiracy theories. And that's okay. But what's dangerous is when we begin spreading news without verifying it, when we create panic among communities, and when we endanger the lives of others because we don't believe viruses are real, or we think everyone is out to get us. Whether we like it or not, the virus is here. It's real. If you don't believe it, ask front-line workers. Ask those who are grieving for their loved ones. And, while you're at it, ask about the efficacy of the vaccine.

Perhaps the only cure for someone with FNI or COI is pondering the question, day and night, night and day: What if—just what if—I'm wrong?

# Kuwait Times

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# WASTE NOT, WANT NOT

Kuwaiti charity **Nemati** works with private sector, volunteers to distribute food aid to needy families

By **Shakir Reshamwala**

**F**ood waste is a major problem in Kuwait, and a poor disposal system only compounds it. “Forty percent of food is wasted around the world due to rampant consumerism, enough for three meals a day for 800 million hungry people. We have to manage food to feed everyone,” said Mohammad Yousef Al-Muzaini, Chairman of Mabarrat Al-Birr Al-Khairiyyah, a Kuwaiti charity.

His uncle Ahmad Al-Muzaini founded the society in 1988 to distribute leftover food collected from restaurants and hotels to those in need. Due to health and safety restrictions on the handling of cooked food, the charity later shifted to distributing packaged and frozen foodstuff. Earlier this year, Mohammad

Al-Muzaini, 50, launched the Nemati food bank to collect and distribute nearly-expired (but perfectly edible) foodstuff to needy families.

“Food waste is generated by households, restaurants, hotels, markets and traders. As for the latter, they are obliged to import a certain quantity of foodstuff to retain the dis-

tributorship of the product. For example, they have to import 10 containers even though actual consumption is only of seven containers. Financially, the traders can bear this loss, but a lot of food is wasted,” Muzaini told Kuwait Times.

“Most supermarkets also have a policy to return foodstuff with less

than three months of validity to suppliers. This too generates a lot of waste. Places like the Turkish Market (where near-expiry foodstuff is sold) do not take everything. So we convince companies to give these products to us instead of throwing them away,” he explained.

#### Key partners

Nemati works with eight major food companies, and has distributed 20 tons of foodstuff to thousands of beneficiaries in the past two months. “The private sector works with me as a partner. They have the knowhow and expertise to run operations,” Muzaini said, gesturing to food handling instructions, logistics charts and floor plans pasted on a wall. Muzaini is very meticulous in his work, making sure only those who are really needy receive the rations.



Mohammad Yousef Al-Muzaini

Local



Volunteers pack foodstuff donated by companies at a repurposed marriage hall.

Walk-ins are not entertained — recipients have to first register with Nemat online and take an appointment before they can show up.

The charity operates out of a cavernous marriage hall in Riqqa that has been converted into a warehouse, where a mix of products is packed in boxes that are given away. Outside the hall, two large refrigerated trucks are parked, containing frozen products like whole chicken, mixed vegetables and French fries.

buried in landfills also releases methane gas, which is toxic,” he told Kuwait Times.

But companies are still hesitant to donate foodstuff and actually prefer to discard it due to a variety of reasons including improper storage, logistical problems and potential resale of the products by the beneficiaries. To bring them onboard and convince them to be a part of this charitable cause, Muzaini also buys products from these companies, on the condi-



A steady stream of cars arrives in the parking lot, where volunteers hand the occupants the food boxes, cartons of frozen chicken and bags of frozen produce. Nemat has a few paid employees, but most of the work is done by volunteers, mostly Kuwaiti youths. Muzaini works with two volunteer groups and is impressed by their work ethic and dedication.

**Social cause**

According to Muzaini, there are three main approaches to resolve the problem of food waste — legislation enacted by the authorities, awareness about the waste’s harmful environmental, social and economic effects and field operations by organizations like Nemat. “A lot of money is spent on waste disposal. Food

tion they donate their near-expiry stocks. “So for an invoice of say KD 1,000, I will only pay KD 200 for certain products, with the remaining near-expiry foodstuff given for free.”

The products Muzaini buys are mostly daily staples like rice and oil, as most of the near-expiry food is nutrient-poor — mostly sugar. “We are not giving a food box, but a supply box” to sustain a balanced diet, he said. More than 10,000 families have applied for food aid from Nemat in the past two months, and 1,600 have benefited so far. “We prioritize the neediest ones. If a family has food security, it is calm and satisfied. There is social cohesion. So we are dealing with this issue socially,” he emphasized.

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## Local



Doha intersection



Subbiya

# Kuwait from a different angle

Photos by **Usman Choudhry**



Mutlaa



Jahra



Salmiya

By **Sahar Moussa**

**C**houdhry works as a banker in the morning and an amateur photographer during his free hours. Born in Kuwait but brought up in Pakistan, he moved back to Kuwait in 2008. The 35-year-old Pakistani, who considers Kuwait his second home, started taking photos in 2010. According to Choudhry, this started as a hobby and will remain a hobby.

Since he was not able to travel outside Kuwait amid the COVID pandemic, he decided to rent an SUV and take a road trip to explore Kuwait and portray it from his perspective. What inspires him to take photos is the ability to freeze time, to catch a moment of joy, tragedy or memory, and notice the unnoticed nature. He believes photography is a language to speak with feelings.

Local



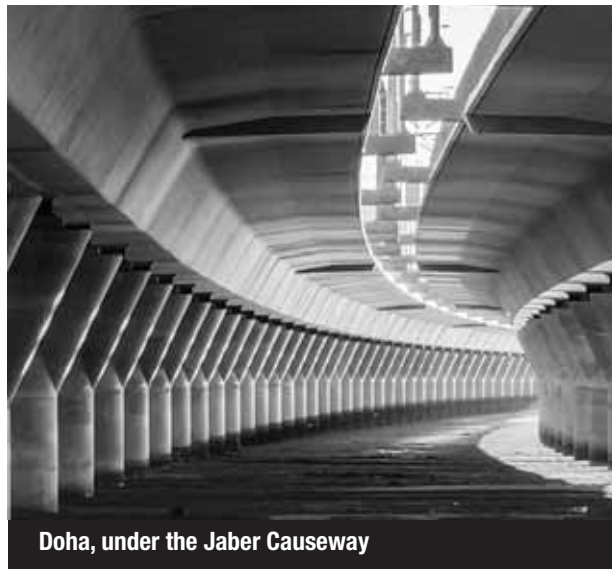
Salmiya



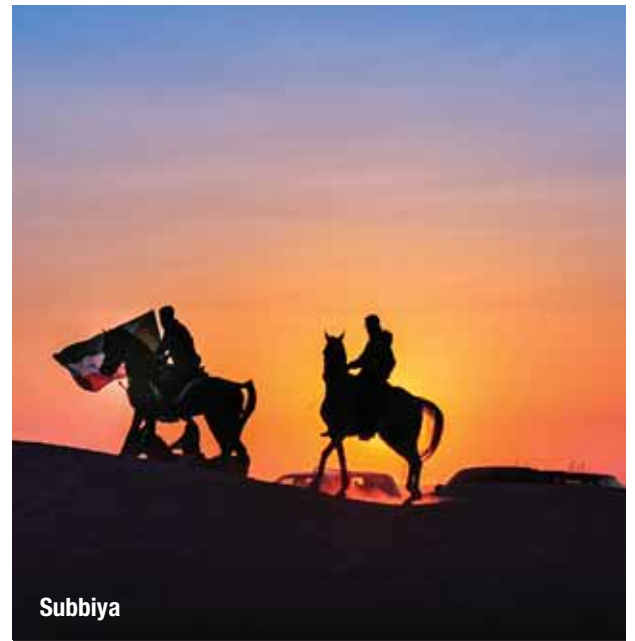
Kuwait City, Taken from Maidan Hawally



Jahra



Doha, under the Jaber Causeway



Subbiya



Salmi



Doha



Al Maghasil

## Local

# MP proposes citizenship to scores of stateless people

## Lawmaker asks about number of those on death row

By B Izzak

**KUWAIT:** MP Hisham Al-Saleh yesterday submitted a draft law calling on authorities to grant thousands of stateless people or bedoons the Kuwaiti citizenship to end decades of sufferings for them.

The draft law stipulates that concerned authorities should within one year of approving this legislation start granting bedoons who or their forefathers have been registered in the 1965 census, the first official census in the country after independence.

The bill also proposes that the government should also naturalize between 1,000 and 3,000 every year of qualified bedoons who were not registered in that census.

The rest of bedoons, the bill proposes, should be given a 10-

year renewable residency granting them free public services provided they reveal their original citizenship.

There are over 100,000 bedoons in Kuwait who claim the right to citizenship. The government acknowledges that only 35,000 of them qualify for consideration for citizenship and the rest are nationals of other countries. But only a few of them have been naturalized.

Kuwaiti authorities claim that a majority of bedoons or their forefathers came to Kuwait decades ago from neighboring countries and damaged their identification documents and passports.

Bedoons however insist that their forefathers had lived in Kuwait before the country issued its first nationality law in 1959 and were denied citizenship due to some administrative work. They insist that the only country they know is Kuwait.

During the past two decades, authorities cracked down on

bedoons to force them to reveal their original identities, depriving them of basic rights to essential services, jobs and even to birth and death certificates. Some of them cannot complete wedding formalities.

In the meantime, MP Abdullah Al-Turaiji yesterday asked Justice Minister Abdullah Al-Roumi about the number of people on death row and have been in jail for years without executing the death sentence.

The lawmaker also asked if the judicial authorities have a plan to speed up the trial of people accused of murders in a bid to stop what Turaiji described as the spread of brutal crimes in the country. Kuwait has rarely carried out the death sentence on people who had received a final death sentence for over a decade. Dozens of people on death row have been waiting to be executed.

## Zain esports launch 2nd season of 'Duwaween Games' championships

**KUWAIT:** Zain's gaming brand, Zain esports, successfully launched the second season of the 'Duwaween Games' virtual championships. The competition kicked-off during the Holy Month of Ramadan with the participation of over 1,600 players.

The Zain esports digital platform opened up new horizons during the second season of the 'Duwaween Games' virtual championships. Zain esports introduced itself as a regional powerhouse in esports and gaming by launching the biggest regional competitions in partnership with EA Sports across the Middle East for EA Sports FIFA 21, as well as the Champions Squad for PUBG Mobile enthusiasts that is certified by Tencnet.

Commenting on the sponsorship, Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Communications and Relations Officer Waleed Al-Khashti said: "Our support to this unique Kuwaiti app came as part of our keenness on supporting outstanding ideas adopted by Kuwait's youth in all areas. This includes e-entertainment apps that have become an integral part of young people's lifestyles recently, especially during the pandemic".

Khashti added: "With the huge interest in esports during the past years, especially with the restrictions of lockdown measures, we saw the importance of launching a number of esports championships via our new Zain esports platform during the Holy Month of Ramadan. This year, the biggest titles in gaming feature in Zain's competitive championships, including the much beloved traditional playing cards games that are popular during the Holy Month".

Khashti concluded: "We were thrilled to learn of the great participation witnessed by the competition this year, and we will always seek to offer and support the most unique entertainment programs to give amateur and professional gamers the opportunity to



Waleed Al-Khashti



Dawood Marafi

win various prizes in a fair and competitive environment. This, of course, is true while creating a safe digital space for all interactions between players".

CEO of Duwaween Games Dawood Marafi commented: "Having Zain at the top of sponsors to support our 13 championships during the Holy Month of Ramadan this year had a great impact on the success of the second season. The number of users of our games has doubled since our launch year".

Marafi added: "The number of registered users has reached 360,000 players, 75,000 of which were active during our launch year of 2020 since we acquired the company back in 2016. The number of players in the second season's championships (Ramadan 2021) was 1,654, and the season was concluded by crowning three winners: baound, liverpool96, and BaBy\_TeaRs".

Marafi concluded: "We promise all our players to continue developing the games and launching new ones in the coming periods. We are set to launch Hand and Balot championships soon, and we also plan to launch new Duwaween games. We always aspire to be the best, and we've always been working hard since the year 2000 with our unforgettable games on koutbo6.com".

Zain sponsored Duwaween Games, an app for playing cards tournaments through which the company offered many valuable prizes during the Holy Month. The app was developed by Kuwaiti entrepreneurs and is considered the first of its kind in the GCC and Arab region. The app reached its climax with more than 360,000 users competing in the paper games of Kout, Balot, and Hand. The app is available on all main smartphone operating systems: iOS, Android, and Huawei.

## ABK contributes towards KRCS food program

**KUWAIT:** As part of the bank's ongoing Ramadan social responsibility program, Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) made a financial contribution to the Kuwait Red Crescent Society towards educational support for students from

needy families, in addition to supporting the distribution of food boxes to help under-privileged families. Fawzy Al-Thunayan, General Manager of Board Affairs at Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait, presented the contribution to Maha Al-Barjas, the Secretary General of the Kuwait Red Crescent Society, who expressed her gratitude and thanks. ABK is proud to be affiliated to the Kuwait Red Crescent Society, and to be able to contribute in a small way towards the numerous areas the society provides assistance and aid to for those in need around the world.



## Incoming British Ambassador's first tweet in Arabic

**KUWAIT:** Prior to having the honor to present her credentials to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis began her work from the ambassador's residence during her quarantine. She has begun her social outreach through her Twitter account "@Belinda\_Lewis1." The Ambassador have Tweeted in Arabic, as she intends to be an active user of the platform and looks forward to engage with Twitter users in Kuwait. In her Tweet, she mentioned that, "I am glad to begin my work in Kuwait (through home quar-

antine) and I look forward to present my credentials to His Highness the Amir. I also look forward to learn more about Kuwait and to strengthen bilateral relations. #Kuwait #Britain."





Local

News in brief

Amir sends letter to Tunisian president

**KUWAIT:** His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah has sent a letter to Tunisian President Kais Saied. In his letter, His Highness the Amir tackled the strong relations between the two brotherly nations and ways to enhance and develop them in all fields to serve both nations. The letter was handed to President Saied on Wednesday by the visiting Kuwaiti Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah. — KUNA

KNG vaccine center open

**KUWAIT:** Deputy Chief of Kuwait's National Guard (KNG) Lieutenant General Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Wednesday affirmed that the KNG is keen on harnessing all human and material capabilities to support all state's bodies in crises and emergencies. This came in a press statement made by Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf while inaugurating the KNG's anti-coronavirus vaccination center, with the aim of backing the state's efforts to control the coronavirus pandemic. The center will contribute to alleviating pressures on the Ministry of Health and accelerating vaccinating both citizens and residents so as to reach the societal immunity, Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf said. — KUNA

Tons of oxygen to India

**NEW DELHI:** Kuwait will send more than 215 metric tons of oxygen and 1,000 oxygen tanks to India as the country is running low on supplies due to the spread of the new mutated strain of the coronavirus. Kuwaiti Ambassador to India Jassem Al-Najem said that the relief campaign is continuing after a ship from the Indian Navy left Shuwaikh port on Tuesday, loaded with 40 metric tons of liquid oxygen and a large number of oxygen tanks. — KUNA

Diwan criticizes ban

**KUWAIT:** The National Diwan for Human Rights urged the government to reconsider its decision to effectively ban people non-vaccinated against COVID-19 from traveling. The decision denies people their basic human right of free movement, and risks violating their legal and constitutional rights especially since there have been delays in vaccine shipments, the Diwan said in a report published by Al-Anbaa Arabic daily yesterday.

Info minister in Saudi

**JEDDAH:** Kuwait's Minister of Information and Culture Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi has commended the deep-rooted relations with Saudi Arabia. "These excellent relations are further progressing at official and popular levels," said Mutairi, also Minister of State for Youth Affairs. He made the remarks after meeting Saudi Minister of Information Dr Majed Al-Qasabi in Makkah Tuesday night. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, he said, see eye-to-eye global issues and this was due to "constant coordination through official and popular channels." — KUNA

Oil price up

**KUWAIT:** The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by \$1.91 to \$69.11 per barrel Wednesday as oppose to \$67.20 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. The prices of the Brent crude and West Texas Intermediate, globally, went up with the first going up by eight cents to \$68.96 per barrel, while the latter went up by six cents to \$65.63 pb. — KUNA

**Kuwait Times**  
THE LEADING INDEPENDENT DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF

# RAMADAN QUIZ 2021

*Kuwait Times annual Ramadan competition will publish every day throughout the holy month of Ramadan. All thirty coupons containing the correct answer must be sent to the newspaper to become eligible for the raffle draw. All coupons must be received on or before Monday 17 of May 2021. Winners will be announced in Kuwait Times.*

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**Kuwait Times** Ramadan Quiz

**25- How many times is the name of Prophet Hud, may Allah exalt his mention, mentioned in the Noble Quran?**

A. Seven

B. Eight

C. Fifteen

**Kuwait Times** Ramadan Quiz

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# Friday|Times International

FRIDAY, MAY 7, 2021



Taliban capture key Afghan dam as fighting rages after US pullout

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## Drought-hit Jordan 'critical' as water sources dry up



BELGRADE: Patients arrive to receive a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine at a vaccination center in a shopping mall of Belgrade yesterday. —AFP

# US backs vaccine patent waiver

## EU ready to discuss US proposal; India sees record COVID deaths

**WASHINGTON:** The United States threw its weight behind a waiver on patent protections for COVID-19 vaccines as India yesterday posted record deaths and infections from a catastrophic wave swamping the country. Rich nations have faced accusations of hoarding shots while poor countries struggle to get inoculation programs off the ground, with the virus surging across the developing world in contrast to the easing of restrictions in Europe and the United States. Under intense pressure to ease protections for vaccine manufacturers, Washington's Trade Representative Katherine Tai said Wednesday the country "supports the waiver of those protections for COVID-19 vaccines".

"The extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic call for extraordinary measures," she said in a statement. WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus praised the "historic" move and said it marked "a monumental moment in the fight against COVID-19".

Meanwhile, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen—who has previously voiced reluctance to waive patents—said yesterday the bloc was ready to discuss the US proposal to do so. EU governments lined up to weigh in, with French President Emmanuel Macron saying he was "absolutely in favor" of a global waiver, while Germany said it was open to discussing the proposal.

But the move is opposed by a consortium of big pharmaceutical companies, which described the decision as "disappointing" and

warned it could hamper innovation. Shares in Asia-listed vaccine makers—including Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical, CanSino Biologics and JCR Pharmaceutical sinking—tumbled yesterday after the US announcement. The move "probably isn't great news for the vaccine manufacturers who will now face generic copies of their vaccine", said Olivier d'Assier, head of APAC applied research at Qontigo GmbH.

### 'Prepare for new waves'

India has been leading the fight to allow more drugmakers to manufacture the vaccines, as it faces a surge that has seen patients die in streets outside hospitals due to bed and medical oxygen shortages. The country yesterday reported almost 4,000 COVID-19 deaths and more than 412,000 infections—both new records—dashing hopes that the catastrophic recent surge may have been easing following several days of falling case numbers.

A top Indian official Wednesday warned that the worst could still be to come, describing a third wave as "inevitable given the high levels of circulating virus" and saying the country badly needs more oxygen from other countries. "We should prepare for new waves," said K. Vijay Raghavan, the Indian government's principal scientific advisor. Consignments of oxygen and equipment have been arriving from the United States, France, Britain, Russia and other countries

in recent days, but another official said India will need even more to fight the surge until numbers stabilize. "If we could get more oxygen more lives would be saved," the top government official told reporters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

### Global surge

Also seeing rising coronavirus cases is Egypt, which announced a partial shutdown of malls and restaurants and called off festivities for the holiday of Eid to curb the spread.

The country has now recorded nearly 232,000 cases including more than 13,000 deaths, with Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli saying it was in a "third wave". He said about 1.7 million people had been fined in recent months for not wearing face masks and that hundreds of thousands of shishas (water pipes) had been seized from cafes that breached COVID regulations.

Eid celebrations are also due to be disrupted in Muslim-majority Malaysia, where new rules in the capital Kuala Lumpur will see only essential businesses allowed to operate and restaurant dining-in banned after daily cases topped 3,000 in recent days. Authorities were similarly moving to stem a cluster in the Australian city of Sydney yesterday, where two new infections sparked a hunt for the source of its first local COVID-19 cases in more than a month. —AFP

## International

# Iran spells out election terms, potentially bars candidates

## Tough conditions could keep many high-profile figures off election fray

**TEHRAN:** Iran's election-vetting body has spelt out conditions for running in next month's presidential poll, potentially barring several high-profile candidates, local media reported yesterday.

The conservative-dominated Guardian Council complained earlier this week of the "unpleasant situation" that allowed would-be candidates lacking basic requirements to register to run in the election held every four years. Under the Islamic republic's constitution, candidates for the presidency require vague qualifications such as being among "political and religious" figures.

The Guardian Council is tasked with interpreting the constitution, validating parliamentary legislation and monitoring elections. The council has specified that "all nominees must be between 40 and 70 years of age, hold at least a master's degree or its equivalent, have work experience of at least four years in managerial posts... and have no criminal record", according to Iran's state-run Press TV.

It said top military commanders with the rank of major general or higher also qualified to run.

The terms in effect implement a 2016 directive from Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for the council to clarify and "determine" the requirements. According to the council, the amendment has been passed on to the interior ministry, which will receive nominations from May 11-15 before submitting them to the vetting body.

Iran will vote on June 18 for a successor to President Hassan Rouhani, a moderate. The updated requirements would potentially rule out some well-known names, such as Rouhani's telecom minister, Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi, who is 39, or the elite Revolutionary Guards' Saeed Mohammad, whose rank is below major general.

Former candidate Mohammad Gharazi, a 79-year-old ex-minister, would also be ruled out, as well as senior reformist figure Mostafa Tajzadeh, who was jailed during Iran's 2009 protests, because of a conviction the following year. The Guardian Council's move highlighted divisions in Iran's rival political camps.

The reformist press accused the body of violating the constitution, while ultraconservatives hailed its intervention as a much-needed reform. Reformist daily Shargh accused the council of making "not just an amendment, but in effect entering into law-making". The move made "disqualifying candidates tied to major movements easier", it said, because grounds such as "lack of adherence to Islam or link to hostile groups" were increasingly hard to validate. In contrast, the ultraconservative Vatan-e Emrooz said it was "an end to lawbreaking" and Kayhan daily lauded the council for having filled "a legal void". More than 20 public figures have officially announced their intention to run. Rouhani himself is unable to take part as the constitution prohibits the president from running after serving two consecutive terms. —AFP



**TEHRAN:** Iran's Guardian Council spokesman Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei speaks during an interview with AFP at his office in the capital Tehran Wednesday. — AFP

## Ethiopia designates Tigray's former ruling party as terrorists

**ADDIS ABABA:** Ethiopia's parliament yesterday designated the former ruling party of Tigray a terrorist organization, a move critics fear could stoke persecution and frustrate efforts to assist those in the war-hit region.

The resolution, passed overwhelmingly in a parliament dominated by the ruling party, also applied the terrorist designation to the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), an armed group active in other parts of the country. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has scheduled elections for June 5 despite the grinding conflict in Tigray and brutal ethnic violence in other parts of the country, which the OLA is accused of being involved in. The terror designations were approved by Abiy's Council of Ministers over the weekend, and deal a blow to the prospect of peace talks with the TPLF six months after the army entered Tigray to disarm and detain its leaders.

Attorney-General Gedion Timothewos said ordinary civilians would not be affected by the terror listings, and warned external actors against collaborating with the groups in question. The US-based Tigray Center for Information and Communication said the designation would lead to "mass arrests" and provide cover for greater persecution of the minority group. "This step was taken to provide prevalent ethnic profiling of Tigrayans and the crim-

inalization of advocacy regarding the war on Tigray with a legal veneer," the group said in a statement.

Abiy, a Nobel Peace laureate, has come under pressure over the conflict in Tigray, with the international community warning of a growing humanitarian disaster in the northern region. The UN relief agency OCHA said aid provision in Tigray was based on needs, and "engagement with parties-regardless of their national designation-is intended strictly for humanitarian purposes".

"We expect that the humanitarian exceptions are upheld and respected, and that the protections necessary to deliver

humanitarian aid and assistance are extended to all humanitarian actors," OCHA said in a statement to AFP. The OLA, meanwhile, has been accused by the government of massacring civilians in the Oromia and Ahmara regions-allegations the group has denied. Ethiopia announced Wednesday it had replaced the head of the interim administration of its war-hit Tigray region following a performance review. Mulu Nega, a former higher education official, had been in the role since November, shortly after fighting broke out between government troops and forces loyal to the regional ruling party. He is being replaced by Abraham Belay, who had been serving as minister of innovation and technology in the federal government, said Billene Seyoum, spokeswoman for Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. "The appointment is a result of a six-month performance review of the role," Billene told AFP. —AFP



**ADDIS ABABA:** Members of the Parliament raise their hands to vote in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia yesterday. — AFP

## Row in DR Congo as Kabila's brother stripped of office

**LUBUMBASHI, DR Congo:** The younger brother of DR Congo's powerful ex-president Joseph Kabila was sacked yesterday as governor of an eastern province, in a move that sparked an angry response from Kabila loyalists. Zoe Kabila was stripped of his job as governor of Tanganyika in a vote by the province's assembly, officials said. "The 13 deputies who took part in the plenary session voted for Governor Zoe Kabila to be removed from office," the assembly's rapporteur, Cyrille Kimpu, told AFP.

The move marks a further retrenchment for supporters of Kabila, who ruled the Democratic Republic of Congo for 18 years. He left office in January 2019 after paving the way to elections that enabled the DRC's first peaceful handover of power since gaining independence from Belgium in 1960.

But Kabila's long years in power enabled him to build a web of support in politics, business and the military, casting a shadow over his successor Felix Tshisekedi.

In a tussle with the Kabila camp, Tshisekedi this year won over a majority of MPs in the National Assembly in Kinshasa, enabling him to end a coalition government with the pro-Kabila FCC and appoint his own prime minister. Tshisekedi also wields a majority in the Senate and provincial assemblies. The younger Kabila was the last of the 26 governors in the vast DRC not to have declared support for him.

The FCC-the Common Front for Congo (FCC) — reacted furiously to his sacking, saying democratic procedures had been flouted. "The vote took place in Mr. Zoe Kabila's absence," said FCC lawmaker Dominique Bota, who said the younger Kabila had been busy on government business in Kinshasa. Twelve FCC deputies in Tanganyika had also been prevented by the security forces from entering the hall to vote, Bota charged. — AFP

## International

# Drought-hit Jordan 'critical' as water sources dry up

## Drought has taken a heavy toll on many market gardens

**GHOR AL-HADITHA, Jordan:** Ahmad Daoud surveyed his shriveled tomato plants near the Dead Sea in Jordan, where severe drought in what is already one of the world's most water-deficient countries is hitting hard. "Look at how the land thirsts," he said, walking on cracked earth stained with white salt patches, waving at the five hectares (12 acres) of his farm. "Everything I planted... is dead." He inspected a tomato the size of a marble that had dried up before it ripened.

"If there had been water, this tomato would have been as big as my fist," he said. Daoud, 25, rents the land in Ghor Al-Haditha, around 80 kilometres (50 miles) south of the capital Amman. The fertile area is home to many market gardens, but drought has taken a heavy toll. "We usually suffer from a lack of water, but this year, it is much worse," Daoud said. "When it comes, the flow is too low to water our crops or fill our tanks". The salty waters of the nearby Dead Sea are dropping dramatically in height too.

The recent rainy season, which usually runs from October to the end of April, was poor. Rains were massively reduced, totalling just 60 percent of normal fall, said Omar Salameh, head of communications at the water and irrigation ministry. "The situation is critical," he said.

### Worst yet to come?

Experts say Jordan is now in the grip of one of the most severe droughts in its history. But many warn the worst is yet to come. The environment ministry says Jordan is among the world's most water-deficient countries, and fears that a warming planet will make the situation more severe.

"The increased temperatures and lower precipitation resulting from climate change would adversely affect crops and water availability," the ministry says, in its National Climate Change Policy.

Mean annual temperature is expected to increase by two degrees Celsius, and rainfall cut by a fifth by 2050, according to projections used by the World Bank. On a nearby nine-hectare (22-acre) farm, 43-year-old Ibrahim Dgheimat sits in his pickup, overwhelmed by the heat. He watches as several women pick beans. "Normally, I grow peppers, tomatoes, eggplants, zucchini and cabbage," he said.

"But this year, the lack of water destroyed two thirds of my crops". The financial losses have been heavy—as much as \$42,000. "I don't have any way to pay the workers," Dgheimat said. To make matters worse, prices of produce slumped after exports dropped by a fifth last year due to coronavirus-related border closures. The pandemic has also hit big customers like hotels and restaurants hard.

### 'Up in smoke'

Daoud, born in Jordan to Pakistani parents—who like thousands of compatriots arrived in the 1960s onwards, many of them en route to pilgrimage in Mecca in neighboring Saudi Arabia—says all he can do is torch the failed crop. "Five months of work is going to go up in smoke," says Daoud, who works with his brothers and their children. Beyond crop irrigation, the drought could reduce access to drinking water too.

Jordan needs about 1.3 billion cubic metres of water per year, but the quantities available are around 850 to 900 million cubic



Water pours into an agricultural irrigation pool in Ghor Al-Haditha, around 80km (50 miles) south of the Jordanian capital Amman. — AFP

metres, with the shortfall "due to low rainfall, global warming, population growth and successive refugee inflows," Salameh said. This year, the reserves of the three drinking water dams have reached critical levels, now just a third of their normal capacity.

At the same time, household water consumption has surged by 10 percent since the start of the pandemic, as people stay home amid restrictions. In total, the country will be 40 million cubic metres short of water this year, according to Salameh, who urged residents to use as little as they can. —AFP

## 22 Palestinians hurt in clashes with Israeli police

**JERUSALEM:** Twenty-two Palestinians were wounded in overnight clashes with Israeli police in annexed east Jerusalem, the Red Crescent said yesterday, as tensions flare over a controversial land rights case.

Police confirmed 11 arrests in the latest unrest to rock the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood near Jerusalem's walled Old City, where land disputes between Palestinians and Jewish settlers have fuelled hostility for years. Palestinian protests, which began late Wednesday, continued into the early hours. The legal case centres on the homes of four Palestinian families on land claimed by Jews.

Earlier this year, a Jerusalem district court ruled the homes legally belonged to the Jewish families, citing purchases decades ago. The Jewish plaintiffs claimed their families lost the land during the war that accompanied Israel's creation in 1948, a conflict that also saw hundreds of thousands of Palestinians displaced from their homes.

The Palestinian families implicated in the case have provided evidence that their homes were acquired from Jordanian authorities who controlled east Jerusalem from 1948 to 1967.

Amman has intervened in the case, providing documents to support the Palestinian claims. Israel seized east Jerusalem in 1967 and later annexed it, in a move not recognized by most of the international community. The district court ruling infuriated Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah who viewed it as a further step in what they see as a Jewish settler effort to drive Arabs out of east Jerusalem. Weeks of clashes that have seen police use skunk water cannons and deploy anti-riot police on horseback have resulted in several arrests. —AFP

## ICC hands Ugandan LRA commander 25-year jail term

**THE HAGUE:** The International Criminal Court yesterday sentenced Dominic Ongwen, a Ugandan child soldier who became a commander in the notorious Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), to 25 years in jail for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Ongwen, 45 — whose nom de guerre was "White Ant"—was found guilty in February of 61 charges, including murders, rapes and sexual enslavement during a reign of terror in the early 2000s by the LRA, led by the fugitive Joseph Kony.

"In light of the gravity of the crimes that you committed... the Chamber sentences you to a total period of imprisonment of 25 years," presiding judge Bertram Schmitt said yesterday.

The case revived traumatic memories of the rebel group's brutal rampage across East Africa, but also cast light on the plight and moral responsibility of child soldiers. Prosecutors had asked for a 20-year term, saying Ongwen's own past, as a schoolboy abducted by the LRA, justified a lower sentence than the maximum of 30 years to life allowed by the ICC. The defense had sought a 10-year term for Ongwen for attacks by his men on refugee camps in northern Uganda.

Victims of his crimes had asked the court to impose the full life sentence. Schmitt said the court was faced with a "unique situation" with the case, saying Ongwen was both a criminal and a victim.

"The Chamber... is confronted with a perpetrator who willfully brought tremendous suffering upon his victims," he said. "However, it is also confronted with a perpetrator who himself had previously endured extreme suffering himself at the hands of the group of which he later became a prominent leader."

### 'He is going to suffer'

In Ongwen's home district of Amuru in northern Uganda, many said they found the verdict unjust. "He is now going to suffer, and his children too. But where was the state when he was being abducted while a child?" asked Joe Kakanyero, 56, Ongwen's stepmother who has been looking after 12 of his children. "He is suffering alone and no other person is blamed for his predicament," she said.

Ongwen surrendered to US special forces who were hunting Kony in the Central African Republic in early 2015 and he was transferred to the ICC to face trial. "He has been in jail for long and now they are giving him 25 years more. This ends his life on Earth," David Johnson Onelalit, 38, said as he counselled other relatives. "He (Ongwen) called me last week on telephone telling me he has 35 children but some of them are yet to be traced... but I trace them and feed them with what?" he said, throwing his arms in the air in desperation.

The LRA was founded three decades ago by former Catholic altar boy and self-styled prophet Kony, who launched a bloody rebellion in northern Uganda against President Yoweri Museveni. Its brutal campaign to set up a state based on the Bible's Ten Commandments left more than 100,000 people dead and 60,000 children abducted, eventually spreading to Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic. — AFP

## International

# Touchdown! SpaceX lands Starship rocket successfully

## Test flight represents a major win for hard-charging company

WASHINGTON: SpaceX managed to land its prototype Starship rocket at its Texas base without blowing it up on Wednesday, the first time it has succeeded in doing so in five attempts.

The test flight represents a major win for the hard-charging company, which eventually wants to carry crew inside Starship for missions to Mars. “Starship landing nominal!” tweeted founder Elon Musk triumphantly, after the last four tries ended in big explosions.

“Nominal” means normal in the context of spaceflight. The execution wasn’t quite perfect, with a small fire engulfing the base of the 50-meter- (160 feet-) high rocket, dubbed SN15, shortly after landing.

SpaceX webcaster John Insprucker explained this was “not unusual with the methane fuel we’re using,” adding engineers were still working out design issues. The flames were quickly put out with water cannons, footage showed. Earlier, the rocket took off at around 5:25 pm local time (2225 GMT) from the Starbase in Boca Chica in southern Texas, reached an altitude of 10 kilometers (6 miles) and performed a series of maneuvers, including a horizontal descent called a “belly flop.”

SpaceX was facing added pressure to suc-

ceed with Wednesday’s flight after NASA last month announced a version of Starship will be used as a lunar lander when the space agency returns humans to the Moon. But the \$2.9 billion contract is currently suspended after two rival companies, Jeff Bezos’ Blue Origin and Dynetics, lodged a protest.

Nevertheless, if the award is eventually confirmed, it will transform Starship from Musk’s pet project to a major tax payer-funded venture, with all the scrutiny that entails. The first two flight tests of Starship, SN8 and SN9, both crash landed and exploded when they launched in December and February, respectively. The next, SN10, successfully landed then blew up a few minutes later on March 3.

The video feed cut out during the test flight of the fourth, SN11, with Musk later confirming it too had exploded, this time in mid-flight. Eventually, SpaceX plans to combine the Starship spaceship with a Super Heavy rocket, creating a fully reusable system to explore deep into our solar system. This final version will stand 394 feet (120 meters) tall and will be able to carry 100 metric tonnes into Earth orbit—the most powerful launch vehicle ever developed.

Musk wants to use this to help realize his goal



In this photo screengrab made from SpaceX’s live webcast shows the Starship SN15 launching from Boca Chica, Texas, Wednesday. — AFP

of transforming humanity into a multiplanetary species with a colony on Mars. The planned lunar version of Starship would however serve a more modest goal—docking with a future lunar orbital station, collecting astronauts, then setting

them down on the Moon. To get the astronauts to the lunar station in the first place, NASA has a more traditional plan in mind: using its own giant SLS rocket with a crew capsule called Orion affixed on top. — AFP

## Once a stop on smuggling route, Kenya now a heroin hub

NAIROBI: Esther Wanjiru started using heroin at 16 to dull the pain after her baby died, first smoking, and now injecting the opioid which has become increasingly cheap and abundant in Kenya.

“I am a heavy junkie, I usually need two doses,” said Wanjiru, 22, as she puts the needle to a damaged vein, surrounded by about 60 other addicts in a clearing behind a church in a Nairobi slum. Once just a passing stop on the trafficking route to Europe, Kenya is becoming a major destination in itself for heroin, with addiction rising as tons of powder pass through East Africa.

These days a hit costs as little as 120 shillings (\$1.10/0.90 euros), creating a devastating path to dependence for poor, troubled Kenyans like Wanjiru. Wanjiru says she will do anything—even crime or prostitution—to get hold of the drug. Heroin once reached Europe via the “Balkan Route”: smuggled from the poppy fields of Afghanistan overland through the Middle East to capitals in the west.

But the Syrian conflict and border controls that tightened as waves of migrants sought refuge in Europe forced traffickers to change tack. They turned to the sea to get around the problem. Heroin was put on ships and sailed across the Indian Ocean to the porous eastern coast of Africa, and muled northward to Europe.

### The Kenya connect

Mombasa became the main port of arrival. Kenya, a beacon of security in a volatile region, but rife with corruption and lacking oversight, offered smugglers a reliable place to offload their product. “Narcotraffickers are really identifying Kenya as being one of

the most stable countries in the region,” said Amado De Andres, a former regional director for East Africa at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The lion’s share of the heroin hauled ashore—estimated by UNODC at 42 tons annually—was earmarked for distant markets. But in time, local interest steadily grew. Traffickers kept around five tons aside for regional sale as demand for heroin flourished into a \$150-million (125-million-euro) business, with most buyers in Kenya. “Kenya was formerly a transit route, and has increasingly become a destination for heroin,” said Victor Okioma, the head of the government-run National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA).

In 2018, the Ministry of Health estimated 27,000 people were injecting or smoking heroin in a survey of one-third of Kenya’s counties. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, a Geneva-based NGO, estimated 55,000 injectors alone, pointing to a higher overall figure.

It is now the second-most consumed drug in the country of nearly 50 million behind cannabis, NACADA says. Around 1 percent of teenagers aged 14-18 years had admitted using the highly addictive drug, Okioma said. “Heroin is being consumed even in primary schools,” he said.

### COVID curse

Kenya created a coastguard in 2018, bolstered container checks at Mombasa’s ports, and recently began participating in an Interpol-led drug detection program at its international airport in Nairobi. Seizures of heroin and morphine have increased tenfold in Africa between 2008 and 2018 and the majority were made in East Africa, according to the UNODC. But heroin still finds its way to users like Wanjiru, and others facing hard times. “I can assure you, the number of users is growing also because now of the situation of Covid,” John Kimani, the executive director of KeNPUD, a Kenyan harm reduction program. —AFP

## EU opens ‘military mobility’ project to US, allies

BRUSSELS: EU defense ministers yesterday approved the participation of NATO members the United States, Canada and Norway in a project aimed at speeding up the movement of troops around Europe.

The decision marks the first time the bloc has opened up an initiative from its Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) pact to involvement from outside nations. German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer hailed the move as a “quantum leap in concrete cooperation when it comes to ensuring that troops can be deployed in Europe across national borders”. “This is a very important topic, not only for the European Union, but also for NATO,” she said. The push to facilitate troop transfers around the continent has gathered steam in the face of increased anxiety over Russian aggression since Moscow’s annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the joint project would make the bloc’s “defense more efficient and contribute to strengthen our security”. The EU has designated 1.7 billion euros (\$2 billion) over the next seven years to helping bolster “military mobility” including by upgrading infrastructure like bridges, rail and roads. The Dutch-led project aims to cut bureaucratic waiting times for the cross-border movement of troops. —AFP

## International

# Mozambique town traumatized weeks after deadly jihadist attack

## LNG project workers join exodus from coastal town

**MAPUTO:** Six weeks after it was raided by Islamic State-linked fighters, the northern Mozambican town of Palma remains deeply traumatized and hundreds of its residents flee each day, survivors and aid workers say. The jihadists swooped on the coastal town on March 24, killing dozens of people and triggering an exodus that included workers on a multi-billion-dollar liquefied natural gas (LNG) project.

The raids marked a major intensification in an insurgency that has wreaked havoc across Cabo Delgado province for over three years as the militants seek to establish a caliphate. The violence pushed France's Total to suspend work on the nearby LNG scheme, one of Africa's largest. The dead include several expatriate oil workers. After days of fighting, the government said its forces had driven out the extremists and that calm had returned.

But many people still feel unsafe and are leaving the area. In recent days, hundreds have landed in the provincial capital Pemba on privately-organized rescue boats, a volunteer registering the displaced said. Viaze Juma, 34, a mother of four, arrived on Friday from Afungi, a peninsula near the heavily-guarded gas plant and five kilometers south of Palma, where thousands sought refuge during the attack.

"It's good that now I'm out of Palma. I'm safe but my house was burned down," she said. On the day Juma made it to Pemba, the United Nations announced that the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) had breached the 30,000 mark.

**'Very unstable'**

Four days later, on Tuesday, that number had shot to 36,288 — al-

most half of Palma's 75,000 inhabitants. Further inland, in Mueda and Nangade, up to 40 families arrive each day on foot, aid workers say. The true picture of the security situation in Palma remains obscure.

Although cellphone communications and electricity — cut off on the day of the attack—have been restored, access to the town is still restricted for both the media and humanitarian organizations. But the flight of tens of thousands of civilians in a month-and-a-half — 6,000 of them in less than a week—shows that order has not yet been fully restored. "The situation in Palma is very unstable, (with) shooting at night," said an aid worker in Mueda, around 180 kilometers (110 miles) southwest of Palma. "It's a place where you cannot sleep thinking you are going to wake up with no problems," added the worker, who asked not to be named.

Two weeks ago, a resident who had returned to his home after fleeing the attack was found beheaded, local police said. A Pemba resident, Issa Mohamede, told AFP his relatives in Palma confirmed night time "shootings and (that) some houses were seen burning in Malamba neighborhood" late last month.

"It is clear the situation is volatile" in Palma, said a Pemba-based aid worker, adding that "the reason people are still fleeing is because things are not okay, people are still trying to evacuate."

The number of IDPs "continues to increase by the day," said Mozambique chief of mission for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Laura Tomm-Bonde. IOM global emergency director Jeff Labovitz, who visited Mozambique last week, told AFP that "when people choose to leave their house it's for big reasons, they don't feel secure." —AFP



**PEMBA:** Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi (third right) leaves at the end of the ceremony for the signature of an Emergency Response Plan for the Cabo Delgado area signed in Pemba. —AFP

## Pressure mounts on Colombia as protests resume

**BOGOTA, Colombia:** Thousands of demonstrators poured onto Colombia's streets Wednesday, the eighth straight day of protests despite clashes that have left at least 24 dead and hundreds wounded. Students, unions, indigenous people and other groups assembled in the capital Bogota as well as the cities of Medellin in the northwest and Cali in the southwest. Their frustration was initially triggered by a proposed tax reform—since withdrawn. But the demonstrations have become freighted with anger over the government's policies on health, education and inequality, as well as the violent repression by security forces. According to official figures, at least 24 people have died — 18 of whom were shot—with more than 800 others wounded and 89 people reported missing during the week.

Others have higher tolls. The Temblores NGO reported 37 people dead. Reporters Without Borders meanwhile said that 76 journalists were assaulted, 10 of whom were injured by security forces. Demonstrators staged protests at various points around Bogota on Wednesday, holding banners with slogans calling for President Ivan Duque to resign. Presidential adviser Miguel Ceballos said that the government will meet with demonstrator representatives "next week," while the high courts requested that any conversations include "all parties" from the "peaceful protests and social unrest." Thousands, most wearing face masks to prevent the spread of Covid-19, gathered at the downtown Plaza Bolivar near the presidential headquarters. —AFP

## Serbia to offer cash to those who get COVID vaccine

**BELGRADE:** Serbia's president said on Wednesday his country would pay each citizen who gets a Covid jab before the end of May, in what could be the world's first cash-for-jabs scheme.

The Balkans country bought millions of doses — from Western firms as well as China and Russia — and briefly became a regional vaccine hub when it offered foreigners the chance to be inoculated. However, after 1.5 million of Serbia's seven million population received two vaccine doses, with officials regarding 1.3 million fully immunized, the drive has started to stall.

"All those... who received the vaccine by May 31 will get 3,000

dinars (25 euros, \$30)," President Aleksandar Vucic told local media, adding that he expected three million to be vaccinated by the end of the month. Vucic said the country wanted to "reward people who showed responsibility". But he added that public employees who did not receive a vaccine would not get paid leave if they contracted the virus.

Economy expert and editor of Nova Ekonomija magazine Biljana Stepanovic said that Vucic is "acting like Santa Claus" with taxpayer money, and added it was "illegal" to deprive workers paid leave.

Serbia is hoping to further boost its rollout by offering vaccines in shopping centers and rewarding volunteers with vouchers. "I have not encountered in medical literature anyone being paid for Covid-19 vaccinations," Serbian epidemiologist Zoran Radovanovic told AFP. "So we may be the first not only in Europe, but also the world." However, he warned that stimulating vaccination drives with money could be a double-edged sword. —AFP

## Pandemic, war, climate change fuel food fears

**PARIS:** The economic cost of the global pandemic as well as conflict and climate change are fueling food security fears that in 2020 reached their highest level in five years, according to a report published Wednesday. Last year, 155 million people in 55 countries faced acute food shortages — 20 million more than in 2019, according to a report by the EU, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme, which see the problem as getting steadily worse.

"We must act together to prevent an additional deterioration of the situation," FAO director general Qu Dongyu told a video-conference, describing the New Global Report on Food Crises as a call to

"urgent humanitarian action". He added in a tweet: "We must address the root causes and make agri-food systems more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable." Last year saw the Global Network Against Food Crises, which groups together the three international organizations, identify 28 million people in 28 countries as suffering emergency levels of acute hunger with DR Congo, Yemen and Afghanistan worst affected. A further 133,000 people were judged to be living in the most severe, "catastrophic" phase of food insecurity in Burkina Faso, South Sudan and Yemen. Africa remains the continent worst hit by food shortages with 98 million people affected, or 63 percent of global cases — up from 54 percent in 2019. "For 100 million people confronted by acute food crisis in 2020, the main cause was linked to conflicts and insecurity," compared with 77 million in 2019, Dominique Burgeon, FAO emergencies director, told AFP. Economic crisis was the prime reason for hunger for 40 million, compared with 24 million in 2019. —AFP

## International

# Blinken presses Russia to withdraw troops on solidarity trip to Ukraine

## Biden turns page on Trump, toughens resolve against Moscow

**KIEV, Ukraine:** US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday pressed Russia to pull troops and end its “aggressive” actions in Ukraine on a visit to Kiev in which he vowed to expand US support. The top US diplomat met Ukraine’s leadership and toured a somber memorial with photographs of some of the more than 13,000 people who have died fighting pro-Russian separatists since 2014, when Moscow seized the Crimean peninsula from Kiev. “We stand strongly with you,” Blinken told a joint news conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

“We look to Russia to cease reckless and aggressive actions,” Blinken said.

Russia last month amassed 100,000 troops near the border and in Crimea, its biggest buildup since 2014, but quickly announced a pullback in what many saw as a test for the new US administration of President Joe Biden. But both Blinken and Zelensky said yesterday that the pullout had been limited.

“We’re aware that Russia has withdrawn some forces from the border with Ukraine, but we also see that significant forces remain there,” Blinken said. Zelensky said Ukraine still saw Russia flexing its muscle on the Black Sea and said it had only removed 3,000 to 3,500 troops from Crimea.

But Zelensky said that there had been a decline in sniper fire, which has been a leading cause of casualties. Zelensky welcomed US support but said that Ukraine “desperately” needed more.

“We think that the decrease (of Russian troops near the border) is slow, therefore, perhaps, there still may be a threat. Nobody wants these surprises,” Zelensky said. The United States

has earmarked \$408 million in security aid for Ukraine this fiscal year and Blinken said he spoke in depth with Ukrainian leaders about their needs.

### Turning page on Trump

Biden in his first three months in office has sought to toughen US resolve against Russia after his predecessor Donald Trump’s flirtation with President Vladimir Putin. Trump was notoriously fixated on conspiracy theories about Ukraine, triggering his first impeachment after he held up aid in an unsuccessful bid to pressure Zelensky to dig up dirt on Biden. Likely believing that the new US leadership presents greater opportunities after Trump kept him at arm’s length, the Ukrainian comedian-turned-president said that he had invited Biden to visit Ukraine.

Blinken replied that he would convey the invitation and that Biden hoped to visit eventually.

Biden also has proposed a summit with Putin in a bid to bring stability to the relationship-making it all the more pressing to show solidarity with Ukraine first. Blinken arrived late Thursday from London where he joined other foreign ministers from the Group of Seven wealthy democracies in condemning Russia’s “irresponsible and destabilizing behavior” in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Zelensky has renewed calls to speed up Ukraine’s entry into the NATO alliance in the face of fears about Russia. Western European nations, mindful of Russia’s response, have opposed Ukraine’s accession and the idea has met a cool response in Washington.



KIEV: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) and Ukraine’s Prime Minister Denis Shmygal greet each other prior to their talks in Kiev yesterday. —AFP

Despite vows to support Ukraine, the Biden administration has also pressed Kiev on good governance—long a major concern for Western partners. Ahead of Blinken’s trip, the State Department criticized Ukraine for removing the head of state energy company Naftogaz, Andriy Kobolev, who had reduced Ukraine’s dependence on Russian gas deliveries and introduced reforms that improved the company’s public image. Blinken said the Biden administration would support “the vital work that Ukraine is undertaking to advance reforms, to tackle corruption, to implement a stronger foreign agenda based on our shared democratic values.” —AFP

## Malawi orders thousands of refugees back to camp

**LILONGWE, Malawi:** The Malawian government has ordered thousands of long-integrated refugees to return to its sole but badly overcrowded refugee camp, in a controversial move that many have vowed to resist. The UN estimates there are around 2,000 refugees residing outside the camp at Dzaleka, about 40 kilometers (30 miles) north of the capital Lilongwe.

Many have lived there for years, setting up businesses in the town or marrying Malawians and having children with them. But the government argues they pose a potential danger to national security by living among locals. “We are not chasing them, and we just want them to be where they should be,” Homeland Security Minister Richard Chimwendo told AFP.

“Those who have businesses... will have to operate from Dzaleka.” “If they are married they must apply for permanent residence” instead of “just spreading themselves across the country.” “We are not sending them back to their countries,” he argued. The UN refugee agency UNHCR in Malawi said the directive was in line with the country’s encampment laws, but advised the government to reconsider. It said, according to an official communication it received from the Homeland Security ministry, the decision was also taken in the light of “security concerns in order to protect both refugees and host communities following the volatile situation in Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado area”.

But Chimwendo said the decision to relocate the refugees

was not linked to the insurgency in neighbouring northern Mozambique, where jihadists have wreaked havoc for over three years. With an initial capacity of between 10,000 and 14,000 refugees around 1994, the camp now houses 49,386 people and several hundred continue to arrive each month, according to the UNHCR. The deadline for refugees to return to the camp was April 28, but a last-minute court injunction gave them a brief respite.

### ‘Bear with us’

Jean Minani, a longtime Burundian refugee who resides out of the camp, is among many who object to the order. Speaking in one of Malawi’s main languages, Chichewa, he told AFP he sought asylum in the southern African country 13 years ago, eventually setting up a small retail business, a food store.

Like many asylum seekers, Minani sees a return to Dzaleka as unimaginable for him and his family after their successful integration into a local community. “We are not comfortable” with the idea, Minani said, voicing fears of catching Covid-19 in the over-crowded camp. He also feared the move would disrupt their children’s education while they are facing exams, and he scoffed at the monthly food ration, worth \$5 (four euros). Kanamula John, who represents Rwandan refugees in the camp, is also concerned about congestion at the facility.

“Some of us have married Malawian women and some Malawian men have married refugees. We don’t know what will happen to our children,” John said. The minister admitted there was not enough accommodation at the camp, but vowed “we are looking at how best we can settle that.” Burundian national Ntizo Muheba, who arrived in Malawi in 2005, has returned to the camp but is sleeping rough for lack of accommodation there. —AFP

## Outrage in France over killing of policeman

**PARIS:** French politicians and police unions voiced outrage yesterday over the killing of a police officer during a drugs raid in the southern city of Avignon, which has reignited a debate over President Emmanuel Macron’s record on fighting crime. The 36-year-old officer and father of two was killed on Wednesday evening while investigating a gathering at a spot in central Avignon known for drug-dealing, interior minister Gerald Darmanin said. On arriving at the scene around 6:30 pm the plainclothes officers began to carry out identity checks on those present when a suspect opened fire, a police source told AFP.

The source said the man fired “several times” at the slain officer and that the other officers returned fire but did not manage to apprehend the shooter before he fled on a kick scooter.

Darmanin said that the police and emergency services attempted in vain to save the officer’s life and called it “a terrible tragedy”. The killing caused shock among the police, who had for months been warning that the drug-related violence that has long afflicted Marseille, a key hub in the trans-Mediterranean marijuana and cocaine trade, had spread to other southern cities such as Avignon, Montpellier and Perpignan. A police union official said that the officers involved in Wednesday’s operation were in plainclothes but wearing police armbands. —AFP

## International

# UK votes as independence debate heats up in Scotland

## Regional and local elections to test backing for Johnson

**LONDON:** Voters went to the polls for “Super Thursday” elections that could reshape the UK as pro-independence forces in Scotland bid to break away, in the first major electoral test since Brexit and the coronavirus crisis. The regional and local elections will test backing for Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Conservatives after he led Britain out of the EU and through the pandemic, overseeing Europe’s highest death toll but also its fastest vaccine rollout.

Johnson, who has shrugged off recent scandals, urged high turnout for “a very big day at the polls”.

“It’s the Conservatives who are delivering on your priorities, better taxpayer value, other parties (are) just playing political games,” he said in a Twitter video clip. Any “vaccine bounce” for the Conservatives in key English races would fuel criticism of Keir Starmer, leader of the main opposition Labour party, ahead of the next general election due in 2024.

The Conservatives were hoping to spring an electoral surprise by grabbing the UK parliamentary seat of Hartlepool, in a special election deep in Labour’s once-impregnable heartland of northeast England.

The Hartlepool result is due in the early hours of Friday, and the other outcomes will take shape over the weekend. Social distancing rules for ballot counters are expected to slow down the process. Voting was also underway for local councils in England, regional mayors including in London, and for the devolved assemblies in Wales and Scotland.

Results for the Edinburgh parliament are expected

on Saturday evening, with the Scottish National Party (SNP) seeking a pro-independence majority to put pressure on Johnson to permit another referendum on splitting from the UK.

### ‘Reckless, irresponsible’

Johnson has said Scotland’s 2014 referendum, when 55 percent of people voted “no” to independence, closed the debate for a generation. “This is not the time to have a reckless and I think, irresponsible, referendum,” he said, pushing back against SNP leader and Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who wants another vote once the pandemic subsides. In Glasgow, 60-year-old cleaner Lorna McClure said she was “all for Nicola Sturgeon”. “I think she is really good for Scotland and I want independence,” she told AFP.

But Raghav Jay, a 35-year-old business student said: “I think I would rather Scotland stayed within the UK. So I’d prefer a party which is going to support that.” Latest opinion polls suggest the SNP will gain a slim majority for the first time since 2011, keeping it in power, although other surveys have indicated a coalition is likely.

Most Scots rejected Brexit in the UK’s 2016 referendum on leaving the European Union, which has boosted independence sentiment, although fears of fresh economic upheaval after the pandemic are bolstering support for staying in the UK. “We need strength in unity and to start having new borders... would be madness,” said Alec Telfer, 64, president of



GLASGOW: Member of the Scottish Parliament Patrick Harvie, co-leader of the Scottish Greens, outside a polling station at a school in Scottish Parliament elections in Glasgow yesterday. —AFP

the Blackface Sheep Breeders Association.

The outcome in England will be watched closely to see whether Johnson’s party manages to hold on to gains in the 2019 general election and previous local votes after the Brexit referendum. Starmer replaced the hard-left Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader just over a year ago, and has been trying to rebuild support in the “Red Wall” of northern England that

was breached by the Tories in the previous votes.

He has recently sharpened attacks on Johnson’s personal integrity, with the prime minister refusing to answer questions over who initially paid for costly renovations to his Downing Street flat. Multiple investigations are underway into the affair, but Johnson has deflected the “wallpaper-gate” scandal as Westminster gossip. —AFP

## Indonesian power plant landslide toll rises to 10

**MEDEN, Indonesia:** The death toll from a landslide at a hydroelectric dam project on Indonesia’s Sumatra island has risen to 10, an official said yesterday, as authorities called off a week-long search for victims.

A landslide triggered by heavy rains struck the Chinese-backed Batang Toru hydropower plant on Thursday last week, burying an estimated 13 people. Employees were checking on the area over concerns that heavy rains could trigger landslides when the disaster struck.

At least two children are among the victims. The body of a Chinese employee of the plant was identified on Wednesday. Another Chinese employee narrowly escaped as he fled the scene.

Local disaster mitigation agency head Hotmatua Rame told AFP the search for the victims had ended after unearthing 10 bodies. Three victims remain missing. The Batang Toru hydropower project-part of China’s trillion-dollar Belt and Road infrastructure project-has raised opposition as it is built in an area of rainforest that is the only known habitat of the endangered Tapanuli orangutan.

Fatal landslides and flash floods are common across the country during the rainy season. Last month, more than 200 people were killed in a cluster of far-eastern islands and neighboring Timor Leste as Tropical Cyclone Seroja turned small communities into wastelands of mud and uprooted trees. —AFP

## Americans handed life sentences in Italy for cop murder

**ROME:** An Italian court convicted two young Americans Wednesday for the murder of a police officer while they were on a summer holiday in Rome, with both handed life sentences.

Finnegan Lee Elder, 21, had admitted stabbing Mario Cerciello Rega during a late-night encounter in July 2019, while out with his friend Gabriel Natale-Hjorth, 20. Prosecutors cast it as a brutal, unprovoked attack in which Elder, then 19, stabbed Cerciello 11 times with a seven-inch camping knife on a dark street near the Americans’ hotel.

But the defendants claimed self-defense, saying they were jumped from behind by men they thought were thugs following an earlier drug deal gone wrong.

The trial, which lasted more than a year, boiled down to a contest between two diametrically opposed versions of how the attack unfolded, pitting the word of Cerciello’s partner, the central prosecution witness, against that of the young men.

Reading out the verdict, Judge Marina Finiti declared the two guilty of all charges and sentenced them both to life imprisonment-Italy’s stiffest sentence. Their jail time will also include a two-month period of solitary confinement, and they will have to pay the costs of the trial.

Elder, whose lawyer whispered the sentence to him as it was read in Italian, appeared close to fainting and was rushed out of the courtroom by penitentiary police. Natale-Hjorth, who did not handle the murder weapon but helped to hide it, faced the same homicide charge under Italian law.

After the verdict was announced, the policeman’s widow, Rosa Maria Esilio, sobbed audibly and hugged his brother. “It was a long and painful trial,” Esilio said later outside the courtroom through tears. “This won’t bring me back Mario.”

The case, which scandalized Italy while also raising doubts about police conduct, hinged on whether the men from California—who have been in jail since their arrest almost two years ago-knew the officers were police. They said neither officer showed their badges nor identified themselves as police before the 32-second attack, an account refuted by Cerciello’s partner, Andrea Varriale, 27. Defense lawyers said they would appeal. “This sentence is a disgrace for Italy with these judges who don’t want to see what emerged during the trial and the investigation,” Elder’s attorney, Renato Borzone, told reporters.

### Police inconsistencies

The death of Cerciello, who had just returned from his honeymoon when he was killed, aroused an outpouring of public sympathy in Italy, and his funeral was broadcast live on television where he was hailed as a hero. With its verdict after 11 hours of deliberation, the jury appeared to discount a series of blunders and inconsistent statements by police leading up to and after the attack.

Those included Natale-Hjorth’s blindfolding during his police interrogation, a falsified police report and Varriale’s lie that he was armed at the time of the attack.

During closing arguments, the defense sought to show that police failure to follow protocol the night of the attack suggested that Varriale was an unreliable witness. Elder attorney Roberto Capra challenged the jury to consider whether they could “reject the authoritarian idea that law enforcement can be believed at any cost, that they can say whatsoever and be believed because they belong to the police”. The case has sparked comparisons with the high-profile trial of Amanda Knox, a US student convicted and later acquitted of a 2007 murder in Italy. —AFP



## International

# Taleban capture key Afghan dam as fighting rages after US pullout

## Afghan journalist shot dead after Taleban warning

**KANDAHAR:** The Taleban have captured Afghanistan's second-biggest dam after months of fierce fighting in their former bastion of Kandahar, the insurgents and officials said yesterday. Dahla Dam, which provides irrigation to farmers via a network of canals as well as drinking water for the provincial capital, was now under Taliban control, local officials told AFP.

"We have seized the Dahla Dam in Arghandab," Taleban spokesman Qari Yousuf Ahmadi told AFP. Haji Gulbuddin, governor of an adjacent district, confirmed the dam "is now in the control of the Taleban."

"Our security forces... asked for reinforcements but they failed to get it," he said. The dam's capture comes after clashes erupted in neighboring Helmand province this week, just days after the US military formally began withdrawing its remaining troops from Afghanistan.

Kandahar water department chief Tooryalay Mahboobi told AFP the Taleban recently warned Dahla employees not to go to work. Last month the insurgents blew up a bridge that connected the dam to adjacent districts, an AFP correspondent in Kandahar said. Dahla was built by the United States nearly 70 years ago to provide water for irrigating land in about seven districts of Kandahar. In 2019 the Asian Development Bank approved a grant of nearly \$350 million to be used partly to expand the reservoir-style project.

The surrounding district has seen intense fighting in the past six months, but officials announced in April that the area had been cleared. Before retreating, the Taleban planted explosives across the area-including in residential complexes-officials said.

In neighboring Helmand, thousands of people have fled their homes in the face of a massive Taliban offensive against government forces. US warplanes have been providing air support for the Afghan forces despite the drawdown of foreign troops.

The United States was supposed to have pulled all forces out by May 1 under a deal struck with the Taleban last year, but Washington pushed back the date to September 11 — a move that angered the insurgents. The pullout of foreign forces comes even as efforts to hammer out a peace deal between the Afghan government and the Taleban have stalled.

Meanwhile, a high-profile Afghan television journalist was shot dead in southern Kandahar city yesterday, officials said, a day after the Taleban warned against "biased reporting" by the media.

Nemat Rawan was until last month a popular talk show host with the country's leading broadcaster Tolo News, before joining the ministry of finance as a communications specialist. He was "assassinated by unknown gunmen", Kandahar city police spokesman Jamal Nasir Barezai said. "Heartbreaking to hear that a friend and former colleague Nemat Rawan was shot dead in Kandahar city today," Lotfullah Najafizada, head of Tolo News, posted on Twitter. There was no claim of responsibility for the attack, but the Taleban have been blamed for a wave of assassinations targeting journalists in recent months. On Wednesday, a Taleban spokesman warned that media workers who carry out "biased reporting" would be "held responsible".

Abdullah Abdullah, the head of the country's peace council, yesterday condemned the Taleban's threat against the media and "any attempts to silence Afghan journalists". Members of



HERAT: Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers march during a ceremony at a military base in the Guzara district of Herat Wednesday.—AFP

Afghanistan's educated class-including journalists, activists and judges-have for months been the target of bombings and shootings, forcing many to go into hiding or leave the country. The killings have escalated since peace talks began last year between the Afghan government and the Taleban, sparking fears that the insurgents are eliminating perceived opponents as negotiations stall. At least 11 Afghan journalists were killed in 2020, with four more reportedly murdered this year, according to a recent toll from Amnesty International. In early March, three female media workers were gunned down in the eastern city of Jalalabad.—AFP

## Chinese university campus plan faces protest in Budapest

**BUDAPEST:** Standing on the proposed new home in Budapest of a top Chinese university, the local district mayor Krisztina Baranyi is squaring up for a stand-off with powerful Prime Minister Viktor Orban's government. "They want to plant a giga-university without anyone here agreeing to it," Baranyi, a combative independent politician, told AFP at the windswept former industrial site beside the river Danube.

Currently derelict, the area is to house Fudan University's first European campus in a half-million-square-meter (five-million-square-foot) complex by 2024, according to a deal signed between Hungary and the Shanghai-based university's president last week. But the sprawling project has fed growing unease about Hungary's diplomatic tilt from West to East and its soaring indebtedness to China.

Internal documents leaked to investigative journalism website Direkt36 last month revealed that China is expected to give a 1.3-billion-euro (\$1.6-billion) loan to cover most of the estimated 1.5-billion-euro costs. A Chinese construction firm has also already been earmarked as main contractor without a bidding process, according to the documents.

### 'No plan B'

"I was shocked when I found out. Everything is opaque. No one was consulted," Baranyi complained. She plans to let local

residents have their say on whether the municipality should hand over the site to the state in a referendum later this year. "If local people said 'no', it would surely be a step too far, even for the government, to then infringe the district's ownership rights," she said. Details of the referendum are yet to be worked out but Baranyi hopes it could emulate the success of a 2017 petition launched by young activists that led to Hungary dropping its expensive bid to host the 2024 Olympics. Budapest's liberal mayor Gergely Karacsony has also blasted "Chinese influence-buying" in Hungary and urged Orban not to force projects on the capital against its will.

"Until the government fully publishes the contract details, we do not consent to the construction," Karacsony said last week. However, other than backing the district's referendum drive, city officials privately concede that they have limited powers to block the project, whose cost exceeds Hungary's annual higher education budget. The government argues that a prestigious outpost of Fudan University, ranked 100th in the Shanghai Ranking, would permit thousands of Hungarian, Chinese and other international students to acquire high-quality diplomas.

It would also fit in with previously agreed plans to build a 10,000-capacity dormitory for Hungarian students at the site, it says. "There is no plan B," said the government minister in charge of the project Laszlo Palkovics last week, adding the campus would be "good for Hungary, China and the community".

Fudan is the latest landmark in Orban's foreign policy of "Eastern Opening", which analysts describe as a geopolitical balancing act, while critics portray the nationalist premier as China and Russia's "Trojan horse" inside the European Union and NATO. Alone in the EU, Hungary has used Chinese and Russian coronavirus jabs to accelerate its vaccine rollout, one of the fastest in the bloc. —AFP

## Duterte orders arrest of mask violators

**MANILA:** Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has ordered police to arrest anyone not wearing a mask properly, including below the nose, as the country battles to contain surging coronavirus infections. Duterte issued the directive after a meeting with his COVID-19 task force—where everyone except him can be seen wearing the mandatory face covering—an official video released late Wednesday showed. Thousands of people have been punished for violating COVID-19 rules since the end of March, when restrictions were tightened in the capital and surrounding provinces after a spike in cases. The justice secretary and police chief have urged officers to fine offenders or make them do community service instead of arresting them, following the death of a man forced to do a hundred squats as punishment for breaking curfew.

But Duterte said police should get tough on rule breakers and arrest those not wearing a mask properly—including those who leave their nose exposed. "My orders to the police are those who are not wearing their masks properly... arrest them and detain them, investigate why they are doing it," Duterte said.

"It's not for me, it's not for us. It's for the interest of the country so you won't infect and you won't be infected." Duterte last year told security forces to shoot dead anyone causing "trouble" in areas under lockdown, drawing condemnation from rights groups. —AFP

## International

# Convicted HK journalist scoops coveted award for investigation

## Choy prosecuted over investigating attack on democracy supporters

**HONG KONG:** A Hong Kong journalist who was prosecuted over investigating an attack on democracy supporters by government loyalists won a prestigious press prize yesterday, even after her employer backed out of the awards.

Bao Choy, a former producer with Hong Kong's public broadcaster RTHK, was found guilty last month of "knowingly making a false statement" to access number plate ownership records—a conviction that was decried by media groups as an assault on public interest journalism.

Yesterday, Choy and five colleagues won the Chinese-language documentary award at the annual Human Rights Press Awards for their work "Who Owns the Truth?". The awards recognize human rights reporting across Asia and have been running for 25 years.

Judges praised the RTHK documentary for "chasing the smallest clues, interrogating the powerful without fear or favor", and described the 23-minute documentary as "an investigative reporting classic". The July 2019 attack in the district of Yuen Long by a gang of men armed with clubs—and the police's failure to respond quickly enough—was a turning point in the huge and often violent pro-democracy protests that year, further hammering public trust in the police force and city leaders. RTHK used footage from witnesses and security cameras—as well as number plate searches and interviews—to piece together events. It uncovered new details about the alleged attackers, some of whom have links to politically influential rural committees that support Beijing.

It also said that police failed to respond to the build-up of stick-wielding men, ferried into the district by specific vehicles that evening

hours before the attack. Police have rejected any accusation their officers failed the public that night and senior officers have since sought to recast the ambush as an evenly matched melee between two opposing sides.

### Changing news landscape

Hong Kong maintains a publicly accessible license plate database long used by journalists, including pro-Beijing news outlets. But authorities introduced a rule change that meant journalists were no longer allowed to make searches.

Choy, 37, faced up to six months in jail but was ultimately fined HK\$6,000 (\$770). She plans to appeal her conviction. Beijing has made no secret of its desire to see Hong Kong's critical media tamed and the city has slid down press freedom rankings in recent years.

RTHK has found itself a government target. Authorities have ordered an overhaul of the broadcaster, including the recent appointment of a career civil servant as its new head who has since pulled multiple shows for "one-sided views" and "inaccuracies".

RTHK suspended Choy after her November arrest and did not contribute to her legal defense.

It also announced it had withdrawn from all press award entries but many award organizations, including HRP, declined to accept the withdrawal. "During the transition period, RTHK decided not to nominate programs for awards, would also withdraw their entries from those competitions, and would not accept related awards," a spokesperson said yesterday. The station's Twitter account—which has developed an irreverent outspokenness under the new management—



**HONG KONG:** Bao Choy was found guilty last month of "knowingly making a false statement" to access number plate ownership records—a conviction that was decried by media groups as an assault on public interest journalism.

hinted at disquiet within the newsroom. "#RTHK picks up more prizes, despite management's best efforts," the account wrote. "Bao Choy and Nabela Qoser, who've both been given their marching orders, are recognized in this year's Human Rights Press Awards."

Earlier this week, RTHK fired reporter Nabela Qoser who had become famous for her aggressive questioning of officials at press conferences. A report she helped produce on the policing of protests won a commendation in the same category as Choy. —AFP

## China lashes out at G7 rights criticism

**BEIJING:** China yesterday said it "strongly condemns" a statement by the Group of Seven nations accusing Beijing of rights abuses in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, as a schism with Western democracies widens. Foreign ministers from G7 countries Britain, the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Japan urged China to abide by its obligations under international and national law during their first face-to-face meeting in two years in London.

The group said they were "deeply concerned" by alleged human rights violations and abuses against the minority Uyghur Muslim population in China's western Xinjiang region and Tibet.

They also urged an end to the targeting of rights protesters in Hong Kong.

Beijing was quick to hit back, railing against the G7 for making "unfounded accusations against China and openly intervening in China's internal affairs", Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said. He said the group was engaged in the "wanton destruction of the norms of international relations", repeating Beijing's long-held line that those issues were China's own matters.

The G7 statement also said the group supports Taiwan's participation in World Health Organization forums and the World Health Assembly, which prompted China to retort that the island's participation must be handled in line with the one-China principle. —AFP

## China suspends dialogue pact with Australia

**BEIJING:** China yesterday cut off a channel for diplomatic and trade talks with Australia in a largely symbolic act of fury, following clashes over a wide range of issues including human rights, espionage and the origins of COVID-19.

Tensions between the two sides have soared since Canberra called last year for an independent probe into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic and banned telecoms giant Huawei from building Australia's 5G network. China-Australia's biggest trading partner has already imposed tariffs or disrupted more than a dozen key industries, including wine, barley and coal, decimating exports. In the latest volley, the China-Australia Strategic Economic Dialogue was pulled "based on the current attitude" of the Australian government, China's National Development and Reform Commission said in a statement Thursday, blaming some officials of a "Cold War mindset" and "ideological discrimination".

Beijing will "indefinitely suspend all activities under the framework" of the agreement, the statement added. Australia called the decision "disappointing", with Trade Minister Dan Tehan saying the dialogue had provided an important forum for the two countries—though he added that no such talks had taken place since 2017.

The Australian dollar sank 0.6 percent soon after the news before recovering later in the day. It was not immediately clear if the row would impact on a free-trade agreement between the two that came into effect in 2015. Canberra has previously described the avenue for talks—designed to boost trade between both sides and introduce large Chinese investors—as one of the "premier bilateral economic meetings with China". It called the first meeting in 2014 a chance for "closer economic ties" but relations between the two have since sunk into deep freeze.



**CANBERRA:** National flags of China and Australia during a signing ceremony in Canberra. China yesterday suspended an economic agreement with Australia, worsening an already-troubled relationship fractured by spats over the COVID-19 pandemic and human rights abuses. —AFP

### 'Doubling down'

"It's mainly a symbolic move, but still the trend (of) discussion and dialogue being suspended at lower and lower levels is a real concern," said James Laurenceson, director of the Australia-China Relations Institute at University of Technology Sydney.

"Overall, what we're seeing in Canberra and Beijing is both sides doubling down and hardening their stance," he said. Last month, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government scrapped a Belt and Road deal between Beijing and the state of Victoria. Chinese President Xi Jinping's signature initiative is a vast, trillion-dollar plan for a network of investments and infrastructure across Asia and the world. Beijing reacted with anger to the Victoria state move, warning that taking the axe to the deal would cause "serious harm" to relations. But critics have claimed the stand-off between the two sides is cover for China to create geopolitical and financial leverage. —AFP



Muslims perform Tahajjud prayers during the Laylat Al-Qadr (Night of Destiny), which marks the night in which the Holy Quran was first revealed to Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), at the Naif Mosque in Dubai on Wednesday. — AFP

## Japan town builds giant squid statue with COVID grant

See Page 23

# NAPOLEON'S BATH MEETS ITS WATERLOO



A bathtub used by Napoleon in Saint-Helena is on display during the exhibition 'Napoleon: From Waterloo to Saint Helena, birth of the legend', at the Waterloo 1815 memorial in Braine-L'Alleud. —AFP photos

One of the many things Napoleon Bonaparte was famous for was taking long soaks in the bath, during which he read newspapers and held forth to his entourage. It was a habit he carried over to isolated but relatively comfortable exile, reinforced by his doctor recommending it as therapy for chronic skin rashes. Now, the copper bathtub he used in Saint-Helena, his remote island prison in the South Atlantic, is being put on show in perhaps the most famous site associated with the French emperor: Waterloo, in Belgium.

There, inside a museum that is part of the Waterloo Memorial commemorating the close defeat of Napoleon's troops in June 1815, it features alongside other exile memorabilia, including indoor garb and billiard balls. The exhibition, "Napoleon: from Waterloo to Saint-Helena, the birth of the legend", opened on Wednesday and is to run until October.

Letters, games, clothes, tableware and personal items attest to the daily routine Napoleon, once ruler of half of Europe, carried through for the last six years of his life, until his death at age 51. "This daily life in Saint-Helena was the missing chain between his defeat at Waterloo in 1815 that the whole world knows about and the time of his death," the curator of the exhibition, French historian David Chanteranne, told reporters. He noted the mystery that still surrounds the cause of Napoleon's death 200 years on, saying the former emperor's body was subjected to five autopsies.

That, he added, was because the English military guarding Saint-Helena wanted to verify the conclusions reached by Napoleon's personal doctor, Francois Antommarchi. The official verdict was stomach cancer, believed to be the source of the ulcer that long plagued Napoleon.

## A late gardener

But theories blossomed, then as now, that he might have been poisoned or over-medicated for his rashes or intestinal cramping. His remains today are entombed under a vast golden dome at Les Invalides, in the heart of Paris. Chanteranne explained that Napoleon, once used to striding across a continent, ended up be-



Napoleon figurines are sold in the museum shop at the Waterloo 1815 memorial in Braine-L'Alleud.



Napoleon's shoe worn in Saint-Helena is on display during the exhibition.



Napoleon's hat is on display during the exhibition.



A shirt and stockings worn by Napoleon in Saint Helena are on display during the exhibition.



A bust of Napoleon I from a model by French sculptor Antoine Denis Chaudet, is on display during the exhibition.



Napoleon's death mask is on display during the exhibition.



A detail of the painting entitled "Napoleon at Fontainebleau, March 31, 1814" by French painter Paul Delaroche (1840) is on display during the exhibition.

coming an artful gardener on Saint-Helena, encouraged by his doctor to get outside and "do exercise".

The gardens around Longwood House, the residence he had on the island, were designed by Napoleon himself. The 16-hectare (40-acre) domain became property of the French government in the middle of the 19th century. Most of the personal articles exhib-

ited at the Waterloo Memorial come from Longwood House, and several have not been presented elsewhere, the organizers said.

The famous bathtub was used by Napoleon "for between an hour and an hour-and-a-half ... each afternoon from 2 pm," one of them said. The water was served "hot, nearly boiling" to treat the rashes, for which mercury ointment and potassium nitrate

were also prescribed. With such a chunk of time spent in the copper tub, Napoleon took to having his entourage stand around him for "endless discussions". The exhibition also has a pair of silk stockings that Napoleon usually wore, as well as a long white shirt and a soft-leather slipper—all of which he slipped into after emerging from the bath. —AFP

## Love letters and the tortured inheritance of the Little Prince

It was a romance that helped inspire one of the great works of 20th-century fiction and a bitter conflict between his heirs, but a new book of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's love letters suggests a reconciliation may finally have been achieved. French aviator, poet and war hero Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's "The Little Prince" is said to have sold more than 200 million copies in 450 different translations since it was first published in 1943. Much of the story hinges around the mysterious star-travelling prince's relationship with a rose—delicate and demanding—that he has been tending on his home planet.

Saint-Exupéry's real-life rose was Consuelo Suncin, a Salvadoran artist who cut a swathe through high society in Latin America and beyond before marrying him in 1930. Now, more than 160 of their letters and telegrams are being published in France on Thursday, adorned with dozens of their sketches, photographs and other mementoes.

### Break-ups and reconciliations

Unsurprisingly for a marriage between a moody, philandering adventurer and an intensely spirited and sharp-tongued artist, it was tempestuous. "Consuelo my dear, you do not understand how much you make me suffer," he writes at one point. "I cry with emotion, I am so afraid of being exiled from your heart," she responds. There were many break-ups and affairs, though just as many reconciliations. "Consuelo had an exuberant temperament, and he was a great depressive. His multiple affairs were not the sign of a Don Juan, but of an emotional failing," biographer Alain Vircondelet told AFP.

But there seems little room for doubt about their underlying feelings in one of Saint-Exupéry's final letters, when he writes: "Consuelo, thank you from the bottom of my heart for being my wife... If I am killed, I have someone to wait for in eternity." Saint-Exupéry, who had joined the French resistance forces from exile in the United States, disappeared shortly after setting off on a reconnaissance flight from Corsica in July 1944. No evidence of the crash was discovered until 1998 when a Marseilles

fisherman pulled up a silver identity bracelet. It bore both their names.

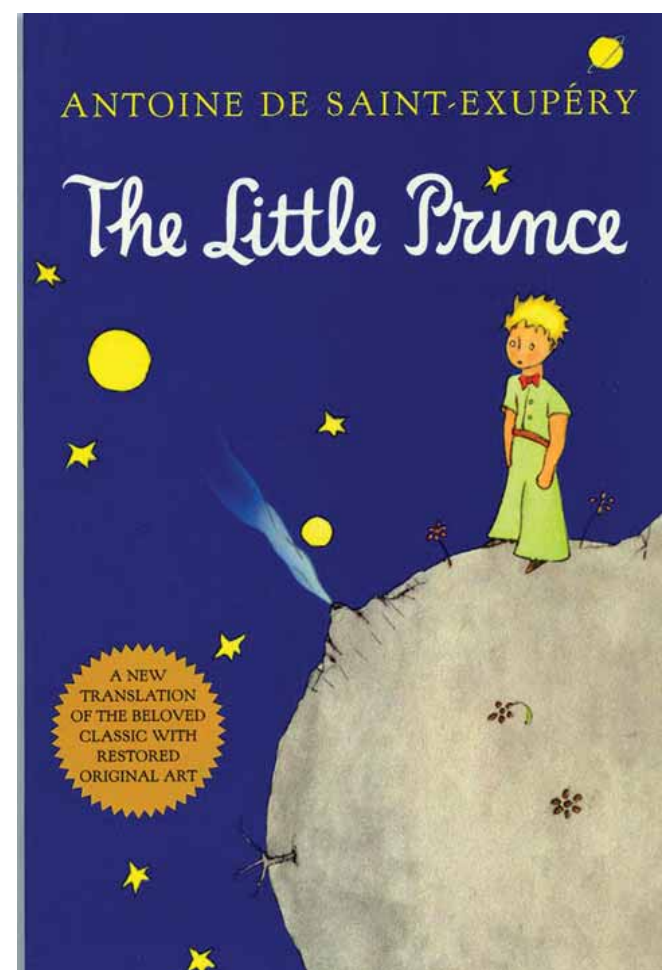
### 'A fruitless war'

Saint-Exupéry's aristocratic family were never keen on Consuelo and after his death all but airbrushed her out of his life story. "Marrying a foreigner was considered worse than marrying a Jew," one member of the family told biographer Paul Webster in the 1990s—giving a clear sense of the family's politics. She took her revenge, in Webster's words, by handing her half of the royalty-rights to her gardener-chauffeur Jose Fructuoso Martinez when she died in 1979, along with a huge haul of the love letters. In 2008 the Saint-Exupéry family successfully sued him after he published a book about Antoine and Consuelo's relationship without their permission. Six years later however he successfully sued them to make them pay him a share of revenues from a cartoon version of the book. The publication of the love letters represents a reconciliation between the rival estates. In a press release last month via French publisher Gallimard, the author's descendants spoke of a "fruitless 18-year legal war" before they agreed to collaborate on the project.

### Unseen 'treasures'

French scholar Alain Vircondelet, an expert on the writer, says much more correspondence remains unseen. It is now held by the gardener's widow, Martine Martinez Fructuoso. "She possesses a colossal treasure on Saint-Exupéry, and every time she tells me about it, I am astonished," Vircondelet told AFP. Still, at the heart of the story is a romance that sparked one of literature's most enduring and popular tales, and its roots can be seen in the very first letter Saint-Exupéry wrote to his future wife.

"I remember a very old story, I'm changing it a little," he writes, shortly after they met in Buenos Aires. "There was a small boy who discovered a treasure. But the treasure was too beautiful for a child whose eyes didn't know how to comprehend it or his arms to hold it. So the child grew sad." —AFP



## Lifestyle | Gossip

# Cox has bad memories of dancing in famous 'Friends' fountain

Courtney Cox has bad memories of dancing in the famous 'Friends' fountain. The famous scenes - which make up the opening credits of the series, which ran until 2004 - might have been one of the most well known for the show but Courtney, who played Monica Geller in the series, admitted it was "not fun" to be constantly dancing in the water. When asked on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* whose idea it was to dance in the fountain, she said: "Well, it definitely wasn't mine. We were in that fountain for a long time. Somebody thought that would just be really fun, and let me tell you what happens - it's not fun to be dancing in a fountain for hours and hours. I remember Matthew Perry saying at one point, and we didn't know each other that well at that point. But I remember, and this is so Matthew, but he was like, 'Can't remember a time that I wasn't in this fountain.'"

Meanwhile, David Schwimmer - who played Ross Geller - teased a surprise element to the 'Friends' reunion, where he will reunite with Jennifer Aniston, Courtney, Lisa Kudrow, Matthew Perry and Matt Le Blanc for the HBO Max special, which was filmed recently. Speaking about the then-upcoming filming, David said: "I'm going to LA to shoot the 'Friends' reunion. I will get to see everyone for the first time in years." Asked if he will be in character as Ross Geller or appear as himself in the reunion, he said: "I'll be David. Nothing is scripted and we are not in character. We are all ourselves, although there is one section of it that I don't want to give away, but we all read something." Adding jokingly: "I should have [studied] up on old episodes, but I just haven't been able to bring myself to catch up on the 236 shows. I guess I need to watch a lot over the next five days!" — Bang Showbiz



## Wahlberg eating 7000 calories a day to put on weight for new role

Mark Wahlberg is eating 7000 calories a day to put on weight for his new role. The 49-year-old actor needs to gain weight for his role in new movie 'Stu' and according to his personal chef, Lawrence Duran, Mark is making a big commitment to his weight gain. Sharing his meal plan, Lawrence said: "So morning usually starts about 3 a.m. and his first breakfast is four eggs - that's the pre-breakfast. Then, he does his workout and then after the workout, which is usually around 5 to 6 o'clock in the morning, we do eight eggs, six strips of bacon, a cup of rice, two tablespoons of olive oil and a protein shake. It's his protein-inspired mass weight-gainer to help build on a little more muscle as well. Then, three hours later, we do some kind of ground beef or ground turkey, whether it's been made into a hamburger patty or a meatloaf, with another cup of rice.



Mark Wahlberg

"And then, three hours later, I usually do half of a roasted chicken, another cup of rice, I'll do about a cup of cooked spinach and a cup of cooked beets as well. Three hours after that, we'll go into either a veal chop or a pork chop - I'll do about eight ounces of that and then a small, four-ounce piece of salmon with another cup of rice, olive oil and beets as well. And then we'll do another meal, which is usually eight ounces of some type of steak, eight ounces of some kind of white fish." And Mark also has one more meal before bed to help him pile on the weight. He told *E! News*: "It's one cup of cooked oatmeal, two tablespoons of apple sauce, two tablespoons of jelly or jam, two tablespoons of almond butter and a tablespoon of molasses. He has to take that down right before he goes to bed. It's just another mass gainer to put on weight during his sleep." — Bang Showbiz



Lori Harvey and Michael B. Jordan

## Harvey tests her beauty products out on B. Jordan

Lori Harvey tests her beauty products on boyfriend Michael B. Jordan. The 24-year-old model - who went public with her romance with the 'Black Panther' star in January - has spilled that she always ends up persuading the men in her life to follow a skincare routine and that's why the 34-year-old actor has had a bit of a glow lately. She told *Vogue's Beauty Secrets*: "I tested all my products, of course, on myself, but I also tested them on my boyfriend. 'I've pretty much gotten all of the men in my life on a skincare regimen, my dad included ... so if you're wondering why his skin looks so good lately, it's because of me.'"

Elsewhere during her tutorial, Lori revealed that her make-up is massively inspired by '90s glam. She said: "I love to look at old '90s glam for inspiration when I'm doing my make-up. I just feel like that was such a timeless era ...and everything was very effortless." Meanwhile, the catwalk beauty recently admitted she would love to rummage through Rihanna's wardrobe. She said: "She definitely has some pieces I am dying to get my hands on."

As for her own style, Lori described it as "definitely a mix between girly and tomboy". The daughter of actor Steve Harvey explained how she always chooses pieces that "accentuate" her body, but since the COVID-19 pandemic, she lives for "comfy" clothes. She continued: "I love collecting vintage pieces and wearing clothes that accentuate my body are a must. I normally like to mix my high and low pieces when I go out, but since the pandemic hit, anything comfy has been my go-to." — Bang Showbiz

## Kendall Jenner suffered from 'very bad panic attacks'

The 'Keeping Up With The Kardashians' star has opened up about her experiences with anxiety, admitting she struggled with heart palpitations and couldn't breathe during the attacks. Speaking in a preview clip ahead of her four-part series with *Vogue* called 'Open Minded', she said: "Two or three years ago I genuinely started having very, very bad panic attacks. I was having frights in the middle of my sleep, literally felt heart palpitations. I couldn't breathe. I was pretty bad." Meanwhile, Kendall previously admitted she has "struggled a bit" with her mental health. She said: "I was really, really young and I remember not being able to-feeling like I couldn't breathe and venting to my mom and being like, 'Mom, I feel like I can't breathe. Something must be wrong.' And she of course took me to a bunch of doctors just to make sure that I was okay physically, and I was.

No one ever told me that I had anxiety." Maybe three or four years ago it came back completely full-on ... I would have crazy panic attacks. I finally kind of got the information that I needed about it." However, once Kendall knew what she was struggling with, she found new ways to cope. She added: "On the days that I don't really have as much going on I tend to get a bit anxious and to calm myself down I'll usually read a book or meditate ... "For me, I have good days and I have some really anxious days, so I'm really off and on ... It is important, now more than ever, that we come together to promote acceptance and inspire hope." — Bang Showbiz



Kendall Jenner

## JAPAN TOWN BUILDS GIANT SQUID STATUE WITH COVID GRANT

A remote Japanese fishing town has sparked debate after spending coronavirus relief funds on a giant squid statue that cost nearly \$250,000 in a controversial bid to boost post-pandemic tourism. The huge pink monument with its tentacles outstretched was unveiled in March by the coastal town of Noto in central Japan as a proud nod to its local delicacy. It cost around 27 million yen (\$247,000) and was mostly paid for with a national tax grant to aid communities hit financially by COVID-19 restrictions.

Despite online debate over the merits of the public spending, local officials said they hoped the installation at a roadside rest stop would pique travellers' interest at home and abroad. "Tourism in our town has been badly damaged by the coronavirus. We wanted to do something to support the local industries," including promoting squid fishing, an

official at Noto town hall told AFP yesterday.

As well as the impact of Japan's border restrictions and calls to limit domestic travel in the past year, the town's economy has also been hurt by recent bad catches, he added. Many people came to see the 13-metre (43-foot) monument this week during a series of public holidays, the official said, with children playing on it and adults taking quirky pictures for social media. But some people online were less delighted by the 10-tentacled statue. "This is too surreal. What is also unclear is why this qualified for the grant," one Twitter user wrote in Japanese.

"It is wrong to spend tax on a non-urgent, unnecessary item. The mayor and local politicians should pay for it," said another. But others were supportive. "My daughter will go there for a picnic in autumn. I hope they will not take it away," one person tweeted. —AFP



This handout photograph shows a giant squid statue, built at a cost of nearly 250,000 USD with a national tax grant to aid communities hit financially by COVID-19 restrictions, in the town of Noto, Ishikawa prefecture. —AFP

## THE ROYAL FAMILY LEAD TRIBUTES TO ARCHIE MOUNTBATTEN-WINDSOR



The Royal Family have led tributes to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex's son on his second birthday. Using their official Twitter account, the Royal Family paid tribute to Archie Harrison Mountbatten-Windsor - who has moved to the United States with his parents - on his second birthday. A post on the official Twitter account shared a picture of Prince Harry and Duchess Meghan with their son, captioning it: "Wishing Archie Mountbatten-Windsor a very happy 2nd birthday today. (sic)" Whilst Kensington Royal - which is run by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's staff - shared a family photo and wrote: "Wishing Archie a very happy 2nd birthday today. (sic)"

Clarence House, the official residence of the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, shared a photograph of

Prince Charles with his son Prince Harry and grandson Archie and captioned the sweet picture: "Happy birthday to Archie, who turns two today. (sic)" The birthday tributes come after The Duchess of Sussex claimed there were "concerns and conversations" about how "dark" her son Archie's skin would be before he was born.

In the couple's bombshell interview, she said: "Those were conversations the family had with him. They didn't want him to be a prince or princess, not knowing what the gender would be, which would be different from protocol, and that he wasn't going to receive security. "In those months when I was pregnant, all around this same time, so we have in tandem the conversation of, 'you won't be given security, not gonna be given a title' and also

concerns and conversations about how dark his skin might be when he's born."

Asked by Oprah Winfrey if there were concerns her child would be "too brown" and it would be a problem, Meghan said: "If that is the assumption you are making, that is a pretty safe one." However, during the interview, the Duchess of Sussex declined to say who had raised concerns. She said: "I think that would be very damaging to them". And Harry admitted he was "a bit shocked" by the discussion, adding: "That conversation, I'm never going to share. But at the time, it was awkward. I was a bit shocked. "That was right at the beginning ... 'What will the kids look like?' There were some real obvious signs before we got married that this was going to be really hard." —Bang Showbiz

VIRGINIE EFIRA

BENEDETTA

## Paul Verhoeven film 'Benedetta' in competition at Cannes

Dutch director Paul Verhoeven, known for garish but smart classics such as "Basic Instinct" and "Starship Troopers", will compete at this year's Cannes Film Festival with "Benedetta", organisers said Wednesday. The film was considered a likely entry at last year's festival, which was ultimately cancelled due to the pandemic. Verhoeven, who has often courted controversy with his graphic depictions of sex and violence, has taken part in several competitions at Cannes but never been awarded.

"Benedetta" certainly seems topical, set in a 15th century Italian convent hit by the plague, focusing on the life of a lesbian nun with miraculous powers. It stars Belgian actress Virginie Efira, who also appeared in Verhoeven's critically acclaimed "Elle" in 2016, as well as British arthouse favourite Charlotte Rampling. It is the second film to be confirmed for this year's festival, which has been postponed to July 6-18 from its usual slot in May. The other is "Annette" starring Marion Cotillard and Adam Driver by French director Leos Carax, which will open the festival. Also hotly tipped for the competition are "The French Dispatch" by Wes Anderson and "Tre Piani" from Italian director Nanni Moretti. The official selection is due to be announced in late May. —AFP



## INSIDE THE CUT-THROAT BATTLE TO BUILD K-POP'S NEXT SUPERSTARS

**T**hirty teenagers, thousands of hours of training, dozens of shattered dreams: it all comes to a head next week when the Blitzers will be launched into the cut-throat K-pop market, hoping to become the next BTS. An all-male septet-like the musical phenomenon that topped the US Billboard charts last year—their three years of training are being distilled into three minutes of music and dancing that will determine whether they are a hit, or just another nowhere band. The routine, always intense, is punishing in the weeks running up to their debut: gym sessions, singing lessons, promotional shoots,

and around 10 hours of dance practice into the early morning.

The program leaves them less than five hours sleep a night in bunk-beds in their shared Seoul house—the empty berths tombs for the hopes of those expelled after failing to make the cut. In a dedicated, mirror-lined rehearsal studio, the seven survivors stood poised for the opening bars of their first single, “Breathe Again”, outnumbered by managers, trainers and choreographers. The moment it came over the speakers they launched into high-energy lockstep moves, spinning each other around with military precision.

“Though I want to hold your hands I can’t come near you/Because I’m stuck unable to move,” sang 17-year-old lead singer Cho Woo-ju as he jumped off a human staircase formed by his bandmates. As the song reached its climax they came together in a line-up, simultaneously throwing trademark K-pop poses. But the response was underwhelming. “It was just a warm up for you guys, right?” said a dance instructor. “Let’s do it for real now.” “Yes!” the boys responded with a unanimous shout. “We practice our dance moves until we synchronize them perfectly,” said backup singer Jang Jun-ho.



K-pop boy band Blitzers member Jang Jun-ho (left) taking a break during a dance practice session at a rehearsal studio in Seoul.



K-pop boy band Blitzers members Jang Jun-ho (left) and Lee Jun-young (right) sitting on bunk-beds after waking up in the band’s shared house in Seoul.





K-pop boy band Blitzers member Jang Jun-ho exercising during a gym session in Seoul.

### 'Only a couple survive'

K-pop is the latest and biggest instance of the so-called Korean Wave, as the South's popular culture gains overseas recognition—epitomized by the global success of boy band BTS. The phenomenon earns billions of dollars for the world's 12th largest economy and scores of groups are assembled and launched each year by record labels trying to capture a slice of the pie. The Blitzers were put together by Wuzo Entertainment, a nascent Seoul management agency.

The firm has invested around one billion won (\$900,000) in the band—its first—and is effectively betting its existence on their suc-

cess. The potential returns are huge—the agency behind BTS, Big Hit Entertainment, since renamed Hybe, floated on the Korean stock exchange last year and now has a market capitalization of more than \$7 billion. But the odds are stacked against the Blitzers, whose six-track debut mini-album will be released on Wednesday.

"Every year more than 50 idol groups launch into the market," said Kim Jin-hyung, the label's co-chief executive. "Only a couple of them survive." If Blitzers succeed the company succeeds," he told AFP. "If they fail, it's almost certain we'll have to shut down our business."



K-pop boy band Blitzers member Choi Gyeong-seok having his make-up done at a beauty salon in Seoul ahead of a promotional shoot.



This picture shows members of the K-pop boy band Blitzers posing for a photo at a rehearsal studio in Seoul.



Members of the K-pop boy band Blitzers waving during a promotional shoot at a rehearsal studio in Seoul.

### 'I felt a sense of guilt'

The Blitzers are all aged 17 to 19 and were mostly recruited while still in school, some of them initially training part-time after class. A rigorous testing process whittled them down, until 12 of them moved into the shared house for the final stage, with the seven group members chosen in November. Even the winners were left with mixed feelings. Leader Choi Jin-hwa, 19, said that altogether he saw around 20 of his fellow trainees dismissed, but he "never got used to it".

"Regardless of how long they had been with us, they had all practiced all day long with me ever since joining," he told AFP. "Even though I had done nothing wrong, I felt a sense of guilt." The discipline is relentless, with Wuzo determining when they get up, when and what they eat, when they wear make-up and when they go to bed. Weight control is constant. "We ban them from eating night time snacks," said manager Oh Chang-seok, who lives with the band, combining the roles of caregiver and enforcer.

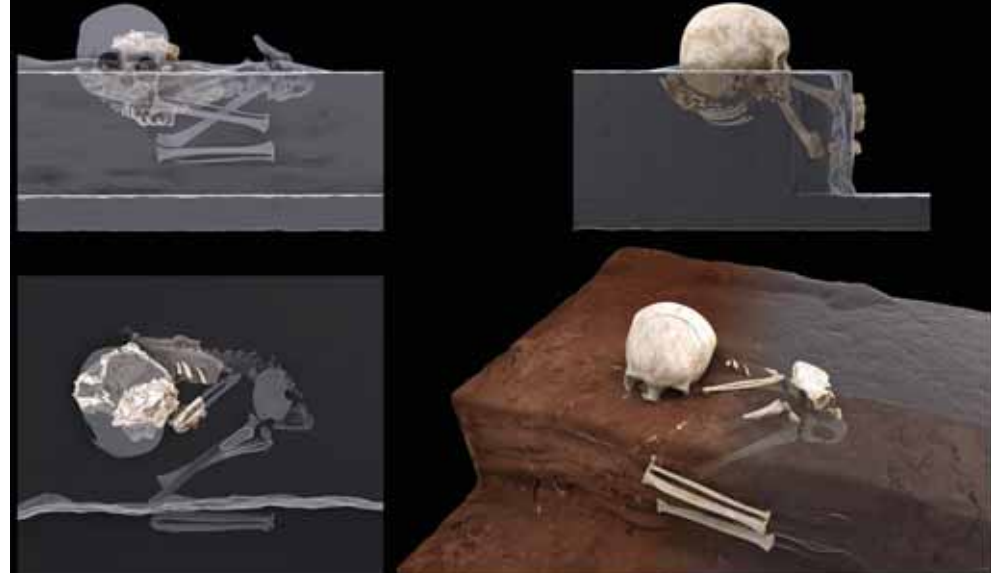
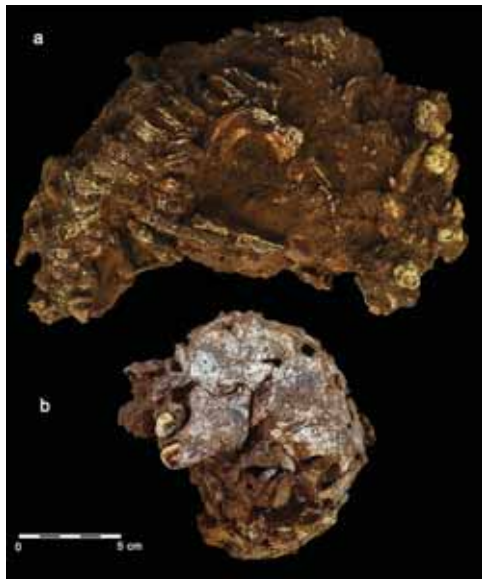
"It's inevitable," he explained. "They have to be ready at any time" if a promotional opportunity arises.

The K-pop industry is accused of consuming young hopefuls with only a tiny minority surviving to stardom, with former Nine Muses idol Ryu Sera last year likening it to a "factory-like mass-production system" in an interview with AFP. Wuzo's Kim rejects such criticism as "one-sided". "We as a company give trainees an opportunity to pursue and realize their

dreams and they give us an opportunity to grow as a company," he said. "We are all in this together." And manager Oh is realistic about cast-off former trainees. "We can't help those who were given an opportunity for self-improvement but couldn't keep up with the others," he said. "We need to present the public with the best ones." — AFP



Members of the K-pop boy band Blitzers performing during their dance practice session at a rehearsal studio in Seoul.



These handout computer-generated images show the remains of a 3-year-old child named by the scientists "Mtoto".

## Three-year old Mtoto, Africa's earliest known human burial

A child no older than three laid to rest sideways in an earthen grave 78,000 years ago, legs carefully tucked up against its tiny chest, is the earliest known human burial in Africa, researchers reported Wednesday. The sunken pit, in a cave complex along the coast of Kenya, was bereft of ornaments, offerings or ochre-coloured clay carvings found in the region's more recent Stone Age graves, they detailed in the journal *Nature*. But "Mtoto"—Swahili for "child"—had been wrapped in a shroud with her or his head resting on what was probably a pillow, "indicating that the community may have undertaken some form of funerary rite", said lead author Maria Martinon-Torres, director of the National Research Centre on Human Evolution, in Burgos, Spain.

The extraordinary find highlights the emergence of both complex social behavior among *Homo sapiens*, and cultural differences across populations of modern humans in Africa and beyond. Fragments of the child's bones were dug up at the Panga ya Saidi caves in 2013, but it wasn't until five years later that the shallow, circular grave—three meters below the cave floor—was fully exposed, revealing a tight cluster and decomposed bones. "At this point, we weren't sure what we had found," said Emmanuel Ndiema of the National Museum of Kenya. "The bones were just too delicate to study in the field."

Archaeologists stabilized and plastered them into a bundle and transported them, first to the museum and then to the research center in Spain. "We started uncovering parts of the skull and face," Martinon-Torres said. "The articulation of the spine and the ribs was also astonishingly well preserved, even conserving the curvature of the thorax cage." Subsequent microscopic analysis and luminescence dating confirmed that Mtoto's tiny body had been carefully



This handout picture shows the Panga Ya Saidi site, north of Mombasa, Kenya, where the remains of a 3-year-old child named by the scientists "Mtoto" and buried inside a deliberately dug pit, were discovered by archaeologists. — AFP photos

covered with dirt from around the pit, and had rested undisturbed for nearly 80,000 years.

### 'Culturally embedded'

*Homo sapiens* originated in Africa, but little is known about mortuary practices on the continent compared to Europe and the Middle East, where even older human burial sites have been unearthed, including one in Israel thought to be 120,000 years old. Intriguingly, infant and child burials make up nearly half of all known interments from that time until the end of the Middle Stone Age, about 30,000 years ago. The same holds for our genetic cousins the Neanderthals, whose ritual burials in Eurasia go back at least a half-a-million years.

"Burials where the body is in a flexed position are very common, it's difficult to know exactly why," said Martinon-Torres. "Some researchers

have argued that it is for practical reasons, to put the bodies in a smaller space, but one can also see it as putting the child in a sleeping position," she continued. "Being wrapped, while lying in this foetal position, could be somehow a way to transfer some human warmth in such a cold moment."

The limited number of known early human burial sites in Africa could reflect the relative paucity of archaeological research, experts say. Or environmental conditions: the ones located so far are bunched in the dry north and temperate southern Africa, climates more favorable to preservation.

Stone Age burial sites often reveal the beginnings of culture, especially when they point to "a departure from purely practical motivations toward a more meaningful treatment of the dead", noted Louse Humphrey, a researcher at

the Centre for Human Evolution at the Natural History Museum in London. "Such actions include careful placement of the corpse in the grave to achieve a desired body position or orientation, the wrapping or binding of the body for reasons other than to aid transportation, or the deliberate incorporation of items of value in the grave," she wrote in a commentary, also in *Nature*.


Mtoto's final resting place fulfilled the first two of these criteria, and possibly the third. The new finding, along with a child burial site in South Africa dating back nearly as far, "suggest that a tradition of symbolically significant burials, at least for the very young, might have been culturally embedded in parts of Africa in the later part of the Middle Stone Age," she wrote. — AFP

Word Search

**Bike Riding**  
Word Search

**DIRECTIONS:**  
Find and circle the vocabulary words in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.

BASKET	GEARSHIFT	SHORTS
BRAKES	HANDLEBAR	SNACK
CHAIN	HELMET	SPEED
COUNTRYSIDE	KICKSTAND	SPOKE
DOWNHILL	MAP	TANDEM
EXERCISE	PEDAL	TIRE
FENDER	PUMP	UPHILL
FLAT	RIM	WATER
FORK	SEAT	WHEEL



Word Search Grid:

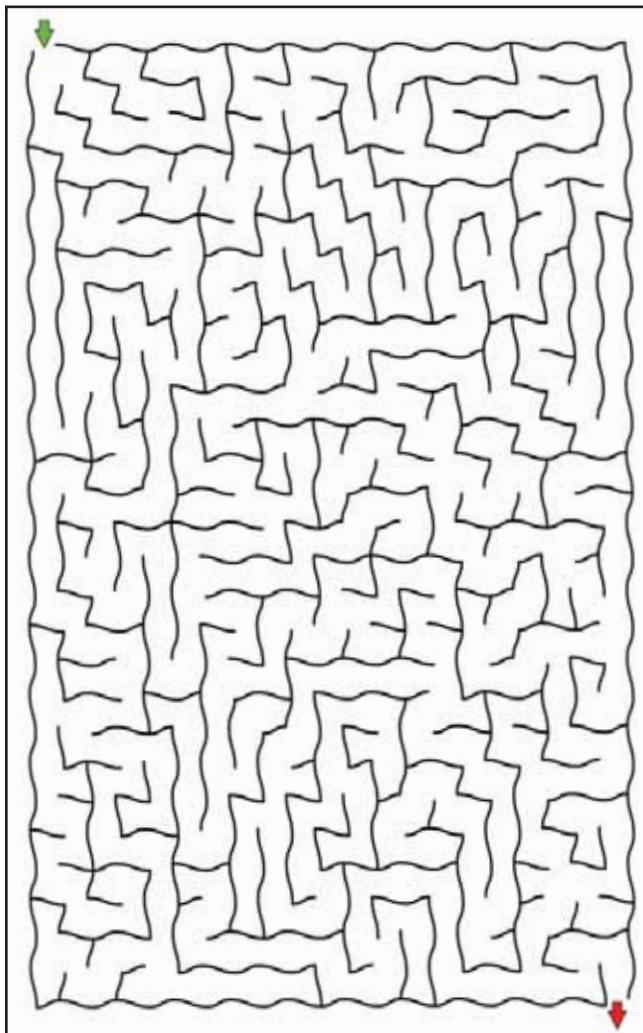
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K A J U P D O K O G A H W H E E L T J
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N A T I O M O W Z P I F M Z E N X T G
A M A Z X W O X A P I R I T S L I A M
E R C B E K E M O H O B W B A U I L T
M V T E K S A B S Z H W X D S M S F A
C P U M P P C R C V Q Q E H P C I Q R
K W I M U M A R G N Y P Q K E K Z K S
C R R R L E F V Z Z P Q A D E E I X E
G H O Z G W H M N E K O P S D A T D P
R V A F X B E D O W N H I L L M I X T
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G K I C K S T A N D V P T N E C L F E
M M P O G L E R K C A N S M E F I A K
F E N D E R I T Z A U O U S C E H V A
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G T H E S I C R E X E P P N U P B
    
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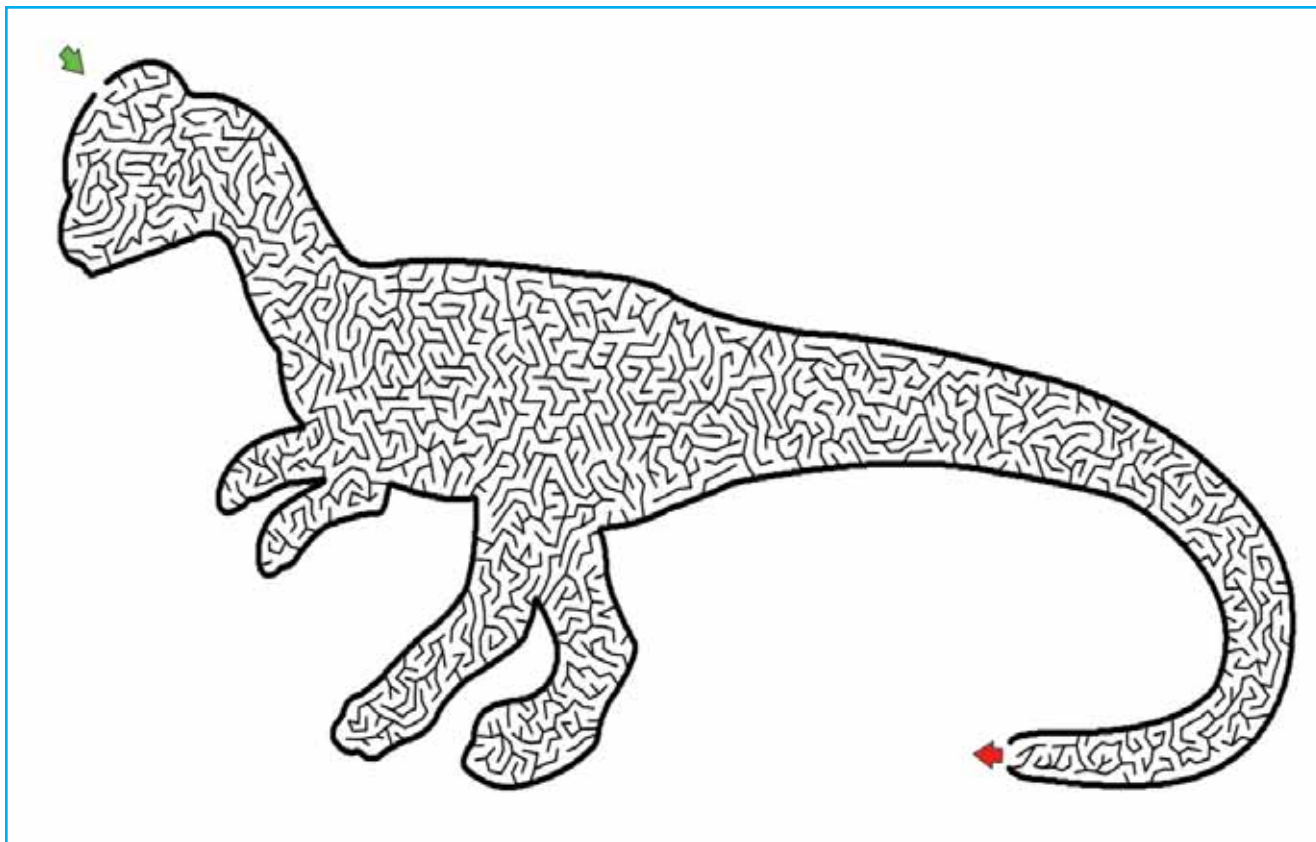
Color It



Kids Mazes



### Find the way



### Word Scramble

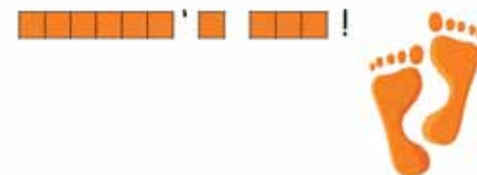


#### Summer Days Word Scramble

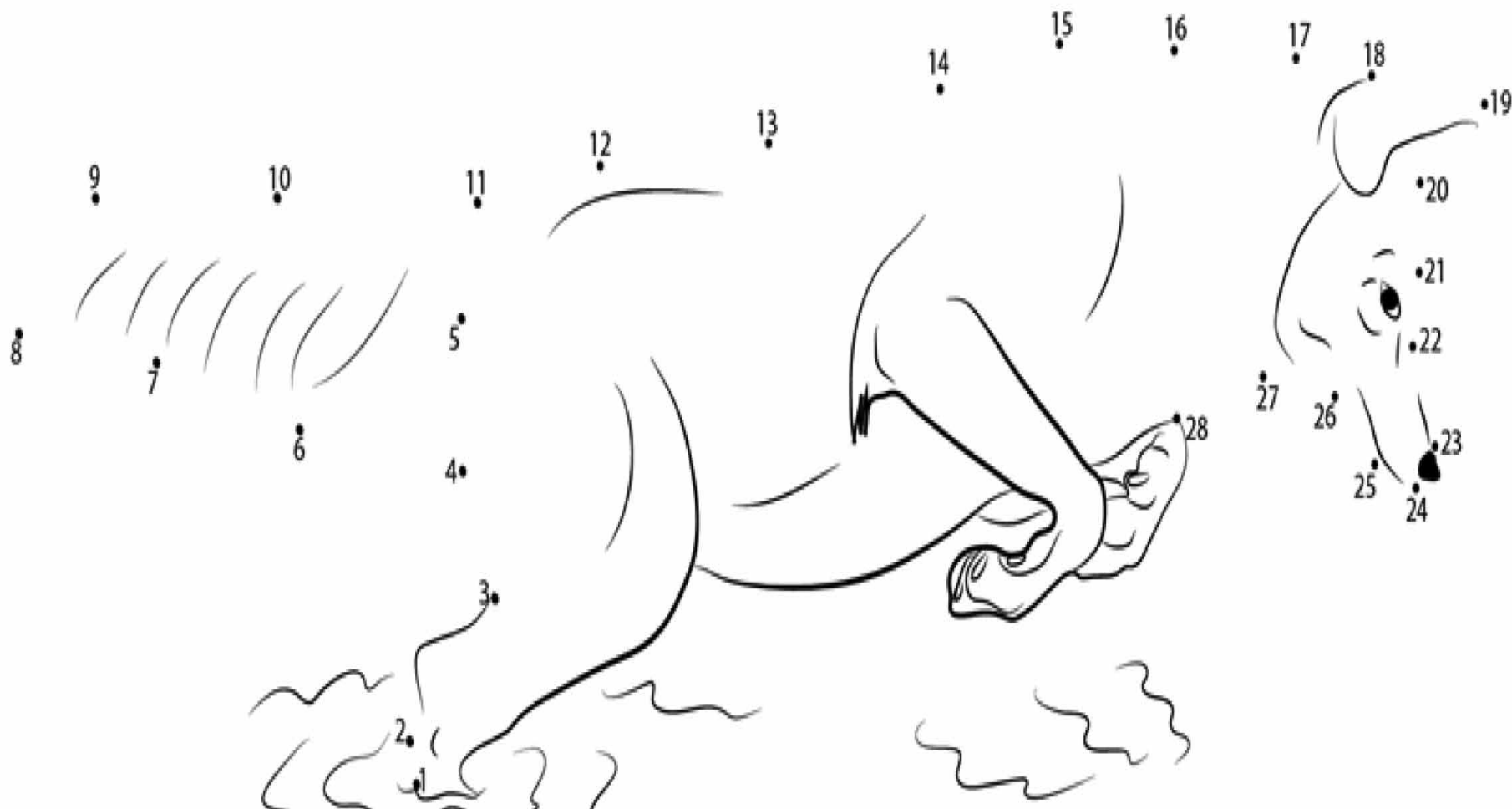
Unscramble the words, then use the highlighted letters to figure out the secret message.

Hint: The secret message is scrambled too.

- cheab
- ensrsecun
- esbablal
- oplo
- iacnotva
- rbueecba
- reamwntelo



### Join the dots



# CLINIC PAGE



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# 1.5C warming cap could 'halve' sea level rise

**PARIS:** Limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius could halve how much sea levels rise due to melting ice sheets this century, according to a major new study modelling how Earth's frozen spaces will respond to ever-increasing greenhouse gas emissions.

Since 1993, melting land ice has contributed to at least half of global sea level rise and scientists have previously warned that the vast ice sheets of Antarctica were disappearing faster than worst-case scenarios. An international team of more than 50 climate scientists combined hundreds of melt simulations of the Antarctica and Greenland ice sheets, which contain enough frozen water to raise the world's seas some 65

meters (213 feet). They also included melt modeling from Earth's more than 220,000 glaciers, which make up only one percent of ice on the planet but contribute as much as a fifth of sea level rise.

The team analyzed the models to come up with probability estimates of how much melting ice would raise oceans under a variety of emissions pathways. They found that if mankind successfully limits warming to 1.5C—the goal set down in the Paris climate deal—it could halve ice's contribution to sea level rise by 2100.

This is compared with the roughly 3C of warming Earth would undergo if countries' current emissions-cutting pledges played

out. "Global sea level is going to continue to rise," said lead study author Tamsin Edwards, from King's College London's department of geography.

"But we could halve that contribution from ice melting if we limit warming to 1.5C degrees, relative to current pledges."

The study, published in the journal Nature, found that the average contribution to sea level rise from melting ice at 1.5C was 13 centimeters (five inches) by 2100, compared to the 25 centimeters currently projected. The analysis showed that sea level rise attributed to the Greenland ice sheet would fall 70 percent if the 1.5-C target was met, and land-based glaciers' contribution would roughly halve.

contribution would roughly halve.

However the projections were less clear and varied widely when it came to Antarctica. Co-author Sophie Nowicki, from the NASA Goddard Flight Center, said the uncertainty in the models was largely down to what extent increased snowfall across a warming continent would offset melting from the ice shelves.

"Greenland is really sensitive to atmospheric changes, and so in a warmer world you get more melting on the surface of the ice sheets," said Nowicki. "In Antarctica it is very complex. A warmer world could mean more snowfall, but it could also mean more melt at the side of the icesheet." — AFP

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# Classifieds

## CHANGE OF NAME

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Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

## Clinics

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Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khalidiya	24848075
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Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
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Dasmah	22532265
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Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

## Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

**BY DAY:** Hot with light to moderate freshening at times south westerly wind to south easterly wind with speed of 10 - 40 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

**BY NIGHT:** Rather hot to fair and relatively humid over coastal areas with light to moderate south easterly wind to south westerly wind with speed of 12 - 35 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

WEATHER WARNING	No Current Warnings	
STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.
KUWAIT CITY	40 °C	29 °C
KUWAIT AIRPORT	41 °C	23 °C
ABDALY	42 °C	27 °C
BUBYAN	- °C	- °C
JAHRA	42 °C	26 °C
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C
SALMIYAH	36 °C	26 °C
AHMADI	38 °C	29 °C
NUWAISIB	44 °C	22 °C
WAFRA	41 °C	26 °C
SALMY	40 °C	24 °C

SFC. CHART	06/05/2021 0000 UTC
MSL Analysis (hPa) Valid 0000 UTC 06 MAY 2021	

## 4 DAYS FORECAST

DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Friday	05/07	Hot and Partly cloudy and Relatively humid specially over coastal areas	40 °C	23 °C	SE	12 - 42 km/h
Saturday	05/08	Hot	39 °C	22 °C	NW	12 - 35 km/h
Sunday	05/09	Hot	39 °C	23 °C	NW-VRB	08 - 30 km/h
Monday	05/10	Hot	41 °C	24 °C	NW-VRB	08 - 28 km/h

## PRAYER TIMES

Fajr	03:35
Sunrise	05:02
Zuhr	11:45
Asr	15:20
Sunset	18:26
Isha	19:51

## RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

MAX. Temp.	39 °C
MIN. Temp.	20 °C
MAX. RH	53 %
MIN. RH	09 %
MAX. Wind	S 36 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm



## Business

FRIDAY, MAY 7, 2021

**34** KFH made KD 50.0 million in net profits for Q1 2021: Al-Marzouq**35** US service sector sees relief as virus-hit economy rebounds**36** BoE sees stronger growth recovery from pandemic

# UK, France send ships to Jersey

## Tensions spiral between two neighbors over post-Brexit fishing rights

**SAINT HELIER, UK:** Britain and France sent navy and coastal patrol ships to waters near the Channel island of Jersey yesterday as tensions spiraled between the two neighbors over post-Brexit fishing rights. The posturing by the historic rivals was sparked by a protest by 50-70 French fishing boats, which gathered outside Jersey's main port yesterday morning, raising fears of a blockade.

That prompted British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to send two royal navy gunboats to the area, with France following suit with two of its own coast patrol vessels. "We won't be intimidated by these manoeuvres," French Europe Minister Clement Beaune told AFP.

The latest flare-up has been caused by a dispute over fishing rights and licensing following Britain's departure from the European Union. At dawn, French trawlers could be seen massed in front of the Saint Helier port on Jersey, a self-governing territory that is dependent on Britain for defense.

Jersey lies just off France's northern coast and its rich fishing waters were previously open to French boats. "It's incredible to have succeeded in getting everyone together," fisherman Camille Lecureuil told AFP onboard his boat from the port of Carteret on the French coast. Ludovic Lazaro, a French fisherman from Granville, told AFP that "we're not really blocking. We're all outside the port." But the departure of a cargo ship in Saint Helier was being held up, he said.

"The port captain in Jersey doesn't want to let the cargo ship out if everyone is around here. He wants everyone to leave," he said. The British navy vessels HMS Severn and HMS Tamar arrived in Jersey's waters to "monitor the situation," the UK government said yesterday, while a French military source said "the situation is very calm overall". Johnson spoke to Jersey Chief Minister John Le Fondre on Wednesday, when the pair "stressed the urgent need for a de-escalation in tensions," according to a statement.

### Electric threat

In the run up to yesterday protest, French fishermen had been loudly complaining about new licensing requirements announced by Jersey authorities. They view the paperwork as deliberately obstructing them—the same charge made by other French boat owners who have denounced delays in the licensing process for access to UK waters elsewhere.

At the end of last month, more than a hundred French fishermen briefly blocked trucks carrying British fish to processing plants in the port of Boulogne-sur-Mer.

French Maritime Minister Annick Girardin escalated tensions on Tuesday by warning that France could cut electricity supplies to Jersey in retaliation, a threat condemned by the British govern-



A flare is lit as French fishing boats protest in front of the port of Saint Helier off the British island of Jersey to draw attention to what they see as unfair restrictions on their ability to fish in UK waters after Brexit, yesterday. — AFP

ment as "unacceptable." But Beaune accused Britain of being to blame for failing to implement a Brexit deal that came into force on January 1 which should have guaranteed French fishermen the right to continue working in British waters.

"Our wish is not to have tensions, but to have a quick and full application of the deal," he told AFP. "That's the case for Jersey and that's the case for the licenses we are waiting for in the Hauts de France" region. One of the French patrol boats deployed to the area belongs to the gendarme military police force, the other is a coastal security vessel operated by the maritime ministry.

### Old rivalry

The escalating tensions landed on the front pages of most British newspapers. "Boris sends gunboats into Jersey," read a Daily Mail headline, while The Daily Telegraph said Johnson had sent the navy to the island to "face the French". On social media, some pointed out that the confrontation was taking place just a

day after the 200th anniversary of the death of Napoleon, whose rivalry with the UK crown was legendary.

The ITV news channel in Britain posted footage online of a man firing off a blank-firing musket from the Jersey port in the direction of the French vessels.

Don Thompson, president of the Jersey Fishermen's Association, said local sentiment on the Channel Island was firmly against the French. "The French fishermen out there want conditions removed from their licenses so that they can fish with no constraints in our waters, whilst our boats are subject to all sorts of conditions," he told the Good Morning Britain TV show. The scenes in Jersey stirred memories of the so-called "Cod Wars" of the 1960s and 1970s between Britain and Iceland which saw London deploy navy vessels to protect British trawlers. In October 2018, dozens of French scallop fishermen confronted a handful of British rivals off the French coast, with a few vessels ramming others amid stone-throwing and smoke-bombs. — AFP

## Business

# KFH made KD 50.0 million in net profits for Q1 2021: Al-Marzouq

## Net finance income for Q1 this year reached KD 153.6 million; an increase of 5.3%

**KUWAIT:** Chairman of Kuwait Finance House (KFH) Hamad Abdulmohsen Al-Marzouq said that KFH has, by the grace of Allah, reported net profit of KD 50.0 million for the first quarter of 2021 for KFH shareholders; an increase of 12.9 percent compared to the same period last year.

Earnings per share for the first quarter of 2021 reached 5.97 fils; an increase of 12.6 percent compared to the same period last year. Net financing income for the first quarter of the year reached KD 153.6 million; an increase of 5.3 percent compared to the same period last year.

Total operating expenses for the first quarter of the year dropped by 6.5 percent compared to the same period last year. Net operating income decreased to reach KD 127.6 million or 8.2 percent compared to the same period last year, affected by the decrease in investment income by 86.6 percent compared to the same period last year. Financing receivables as of the end of the first quarter of 2021 reached KD 10.870 billion, i.e. an increase of KD 122 million or 1.1 percent compared to end of year 2020. Investment in Sukuk as of the end of the first quarter of 2021 reached KD 2.717 billion; a decrease of KD 25 million or 0.9 percent compared to end of year 2020.

Total assets as of the end of the first quarter of 2021 reached KD 21.218 billion i.e., decrease of KD 284 million or 1.3 percent compared to end of year 2020. Depositors' accounts stabilized at KD 15.309 billion i.e., decrease of KD 8 million or 0.1 percent compared to end of year 2020.

Shareholders' equity as of the end of the first quarter of 2021 reached KD 1.866 billion i.e., decrease of KD 70 million or 3.6 percent compared to end of year 2020. In addition, the capital adequacy ratio reached 16.98 percent which is above the minimum limit required by regulators. This ratio confirms the solid financial position of KFH.

### Positive financial indicators

Al-Marzouq explained that the Q1 results are positive and reflect the strong foundations of KFH to maintain a solid financial position, high quality assets, strong capital base and sustainable growth, offering shareholders and customers good profitability ratios despite the economic consequences of the pandemic. Pointing out that the growth of KFH's profits was a result of lower provisions due to lower cost and non-performing financings (NPFs), Al-Marzouq expressed optimism about the recovery signs of the local and global economy and a reversal of the spread of the pandemic due to the acceleration

of vaccination campaigns across the world.

He affirmed KFH's healthy financial indicators as reflected in the growth of net operating income, financing portfolio, and stability of total assets and depositors' accounts. This demonstrates the balanced and solid performance of KFH and emphasizes prudence in managing risks and the ability to deal with variables.

### Leadership in economy and society

"Along with supporting small and medium enterprises, financing mega projects in different vital sectors and contributing to the development plans and projects in Kuwait and the region, KFH continues its leading national role in the economy and society as part of its sustainable development strategy,"

- Finance portfolio reached KD 10.9 billion; an increase of 1.1%
- Depositors' accounts at KD 15.3 billion
- Good profitability ratios despite the economic consequences of pandemic
- Solid financial position, high quality assets and strong capital base
- Ongoing leading national role in supporting the society and economy
- Prominent contributions to the growth of Islamic finance markets where KFH operates
- Wide experience in Sukuk issuance for banks, corporates and governments
- Proactive approach to adopt innovation and technology and focus on better customer experience
- Building and qualifying national staff according to the global standards as key development factor

Al-Marzouq said, "In addition to its track record of contributions to the growth of Islamic finance industry where it operates, KFH has a wide experience in Sukuk issuances for banks, corporates and governments as well as financing mega infrastructure development projects, which contribute to economic progress and development of many financial products", He explained.

Al-Marzouq said that, as part of its keenness to promote social responsibility, KFH launched an initiative to pay over KD 20 million in debts to release approximately 10,000 defaulting debtors. He also stressed the importance of the continuous leadership of KFH in social responsibility and its pursuit of sustainability as a comprehensive development concept.

### Proactive approach

Al-Marzouq emphasized the digital transformation strategy of KFH and its proactive approach to adopt technology and innovation and reinforce customer experience through delivering the best innovative banking solutions. He added that KFH keeps focusing on developing the services and products it provides to its customers, and is keen to continue adopting banking digitization in collaboration with FinTechs, employing AI and robots, and keeping pace with developments in the global banking industry.

Al-Marzouq said that the digital services offered by KFH witnessed big boom through launching a series of innovative digital banking solutions. These solutions include for example and not limited to: "opening bank



Hamad Al-Marzouq

Kuwaitization ratio as citizens made up 97 percent- 99 percent of new hires in recent years, most of them fresh graduates. Moreover, KFH ranked first among banks and private sector as a top Kuwaitization destination as it hires the largest number of Kuwaiti employees. This reflects its leadership in nationalization efforts.

### Global recognition

Al-Marzouq said that KFH won prestigious awards from international magazines and institutions such as the "World's Best Islamic Bank 2021" award and "Best Treasury and Cash Management Bank in Kuwait" award 2021 from Global Finance Magazine in recognition of the high position KFH enjoys in treasury and cash management. Also, KFH won "Best Islamic Bank in the Middle East" award, "Best Islamic Bank in Kuwait" award, and "Best Bank in Kuwait" award EMEA Finance Magazine. KFH won these awards on the basis of its financial performance, quality of its services, excellence in banking sector, as well as market share, products expansion, profitability, innovation, the ability to adapt to changing market conditions and the quality of its business strategy based on professional standards and recommendations of experts and analysts.

### Appreciation

Al-Marzouq extended his thanks to the shareholders and customers for their support and trust in KFH Group, and to the regulatory authorities. He also commended the executive management and staff for their efforts. He emphasized maintaining the ideal approach of KFH's vision and strategy in serving customers systemically, promoting digital innovative products and services, and leading the global development of the Islamic finance industry.

### Building local staff

Al-Marzouq said that while building and qualifying national competencies according to global standards are key elements in the Kuwait development plan, KFH confirmed the success of its strategy of acquiring and developing local talents and excellence in terms of local labor and

## Business

# US service sector sees relief as virus-hit economy rebounds

**NEW YORK:** After a year of layoffs and uncertainty, data released showed the US service sector adding jobs and expanding in April, as the world's largest economy bounces back from the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Payroll services firm ADP reported the private sector added 742,000 jobs last month, the overwhelming majority of which were in the services sector and in particular leisure and hospitality, one of the industries' worst-affected by business restrictions meant to stop the virus. The Institute for Supply Management (ISM) said its index of service sector activity was at 62.7 percent in April, well into expansionary territory but slightly lower than the month before as firms navigated supply chains that had grown overwhelmed by demand as major economies reopen.

The data bodes well for the United States, which is expected to see rapid growth this year as Covid-19 vaccinations allow businesses to return to normal after the pandemic caused widespread layoffs and business closures in 2020. "The labor market is recovering and job growth is set to accelerate over coming months as the economy con-

tinues to move closer to a broader reopening," Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics said of the ADP data. There were, however, signs of weakness in both reports: analysts had expected stronger private sector hiring in April, as well as an acceleration in the service sector, rather than the slight throttle back blamed on firms waiting for orders and searching for employees. "Supply chain and hiring challenges within services, as well as ripple effects from the goods sector, will drag on growth," Oren Klachkin of Oxford Economics said of the ISM report. "However, these issues won't pose a lasting drag as the economy returns to full health." The ADP report is the first in a series of data releases over the coming days that will provide updates on the status of the American workforce. The Labor Department on Thursday will release its weekly report on new jobless claim filings, which have declined for the past three weeks.

On Friday, its closely watched monthly employment report is released, which will update the unemployment rate and say how many jobs the economy added in April. The ADP data showed last month's hiring was almost equally spread across firms of all sizes, but the serv-

ices sector saw the lion's share of hiring with 636,000 positions added, compared to the 106,000 added by goods-producing firms. Restaurants, hotels and other businesses that make up the leisure and hospitality sector added 237,000 jobs, the most of any industry, while trade, transportation and utilities added 155,000. The information sector saw a small decline of 3,000 jobs.

Supply chains worldwide have grown stressed by renewed demand as economies reopen after months of restrictions, leading to shortages of goods and delayed shipments. The US economy was no exception, and ISM reported a more-than-five-point increase in the supplier deliveries index indicating slower deliveries, as well as 2.8-point increase in prices to 76.8 percent last month.

"Production-capacity constraints, material shortages, weather and challenges in logistics and human resources continue to affect deliveries, which has resulted in a reduction of inventories," the survey's chair Anthony Nieves said in a statement. Farooqi called the supply issues a "headwind," but said in an analysis they wouldn't be enough to hold the sector's recovery back. —AFP

Praise be to Allah

بيت التمويل الكويتي  
Kuwait Finance House



## Financial Results for Q1 of 2021

		31/03/2021	31/03/2020	%
<b>Net Profit for Shareholders</b>	"KD Million"	50.0	44.3	12.9
<b>Earnings per Share</b>	"Fils"	5.97	5.30	12.6
<b>Net Financing Income</b>	"KD Million"	153.6	145.8	5.3
<b>Net Operating Income</b>	"KD Million"	127.6	139.1	(8.2)
		<b>31/03/2021</b>	<b>31/12/2020</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Financing Receivables</b>	"KD Million"	10,870	10,748	1.1
<b>Total Assets</b>	"KD Million"	21,218	21,502	(1.3)
<b>Depositors' Accounts</b>	"KD Million"	15,309	15,317	(0.1)
<b>Total Shareholders' Equity</b>	"KD Million"	1,866	1,936	(3.6)

## Business

# BoE sees stronger growth recovery from pandemic

## Country eases its coronavirus lockdowns

**LONDON:** The Bank of England said yesterday the UK economy will enjoy a stronger than expected recovery this year as the country eases its coronavirus pandemic lockdowns quicker than earlier anticipated. The improved outlook comes as the BoE kept its main interest rate at a record-low 0.1 percent following a regular policy meeting this week.

The UK economy is expected to rebound by 7.25 percent this year thanks to “the slightly earlier easing of restrictions”, the central bank said in a statement as it upgraded its prior guidance of a 5.0-percent expansion. The UK economy tanked by 9.8 percent last year, Britain’s biggest slump in three centuries—and the worst G7 performance—on the back of COVID-19 lockdowns.

Activity is now expected to rebound this year after England’s latest COVID-19 lockdown, which was implemented in early January, was partially eased last month following rapid progress in the national vaccination drive. “The outlook for the economy... continues to depend on the evolution of the pandemic, measures taken to protect public health, and how households, businesses and financial markets respond to these developments,” the BoE said in a statement.

The BoE also voted at its Wednesday meeting to maintain the vast amount of stimulus

pumping around the UK economy. As the pandemic erupted in March 2020, the BoE slashed its key interest rate to a record-low 0.1 percent, where it has remained. It also began pumping huge sums of new cash into the economy.

The bank has created £450 billion (\$626 billion, 522 billion euros) under its quantitative easing stimulus program since March last year, when COVID-19 prompted Britain’s first coronavirus lockdown. Prior to this it had pumped hundreds of billions of pounds worth of QE into the UK economy over a decade in the wake of the 2008-09 global financial crisis and Brexit. The central bank’s total QE package stands at £895 billion.

### ‘Unusually uncertain outlook’

The BoE yesterday said “developments in global GDP growth have been a little stronger than anticipated, and the substantial new US fiscal stimulus package should provide significant additional support to the outlook”. But it cautioned that “the outlook for the economy, and particularly the relative movement in demand and supply during the recovery from the pandemic, remains unusually uncertain”.

Alongside the BoE support, Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Conservative government has



spent £352 billion in emergency measures since the outbreak of COVID-19. A large part has gone on a jobs furlough scheme that has paid the bulk of private sector wages for millions of

workers across the UK. The state’s emergency pandemic support measures have meanwhile sent UK annual borrowing rocketing to the highest level since World War II. — AFP

## Ooredoo obtains MSSP and Integrator Expert Level

**KUWAIT:** Ooredoo Kuwait, the trusted technology partner for business solutions yesterday announced that it has become a MSSP and integrator Expert level partner within Fortinet’s Engage Partner Program.

These achievements demonstrate Ooredoo Kuwait’s continued efforts in having employees certified as Fortinet experts to manage the most complex deployments as well as delivering the Fortinet Security Fabric’s solutions portfolio, both to its customers on-premises or through managed security services.

As an Expert Integrator and MSSP level partner, Fortinet recognizes Ooredoo Kuwait as a key partner with a broad range of expertise and the ability to best serve their customers’ needs by implementing Fortinet’s industry-leading solutions on-premises or through their managed security services.

Zainab Al-Shammari, Manager, Strategic Marketing & Business Planning, B2B/B2B Marketing, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: “This level of partnership highlights Ooredoo Kuwait’s ability to deliver superior business solutions to meet ever-changing technology needs, as well as our expertise across Fortinet’s offerings. Our partnership with Fortinet strengthens our strategic vision to combat growing security challenges and ensure businesses are better protected.”

Organizations that join the Fortinet Engage Partner Program are part of an elite group that has achieved the certification and specialization requirements to aid customers on their digital innovation journey and help bridge the cybersecurity skills gap, while focusing on an exceptional customer experience. Fortinet



works with its partners to address the most critical security challenges, whether in networking, application, cloud, or mobile environments, enabling them to build a profitable and highly-differentiated security practice that leverages the industry’s best solutions to drive customer success.

## Microsoft pledges to store European cloud data in EU

**PARIS:** US tech giant Microsoft pledged yesterday to process and store all European cloud-based client data in the European Union amid unease in the region over the reach of US legislation on personal data collection. Microsoft’s European clients have long been concerned over the legal status of data they store with US companies in the cloud and the extent to which they could be scrutinized by US authorities.

Those worries came to a head last July when the European Court of Justice struck down the EU-US Privacy Shield, a framework allowing firms to transfer personal data to the United States in compliance with Brussels’ General Data Protection Regulation. The court found the mechanism did not adequately protect EU data from US authorities over which Europe has neither control nor right of redress.

In a blog post on Thursday, Microsoft president Brad Smith said: “If you are a commercial or public sector customer in the EU, we will go beyond our existing data storage commitments and enable you to process and store all your data in the EU.” Smith said the commitment would apply across all of Microsoft’s core cloud services—Azure, Microsoft 365, and Dynamics 365 — and would take effect by the end of next year.

The initiative is dubbed the EU Data Boundary for the Microsoft Cloud. Smith stated Microsoft cloud services “already comply with or exceed EU guidelines even before the plan we’re announcing today”. “We defend our customers’ data from improper access by any government in the world,” he added. — AFP

## Sports

# Pfizer/BioNTech to supply vaccines for Olympic athletes

**BRUSSELS:** US drugs giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech yesterday announced a deal with the International Olympics Committee to provide vaccines to competitors and staff at the Tokyo games. In a statement, the firms said they would coordinate with national sporting bodies to make sure that coronavirus vaccines are available to anyone who needs one before travelling to Japan.

"Delivery of initial doses to participating delegations is expected to begin at the end of May where possible with the aim to ensure participating delegations receive second doses ahead of arrivals in Tokyo," they said. The agreement was welcomed by IOC president Thomas Bach, who has already seen the Tokyo Games postponed from last year because of the pandemic.

"We are inviting the athletes and participating delegations of the upcoming Olympic and Paralympic Games to lead by example and accept the vaccine where and when possible," Bach said. There are expected to be more than 11,000 athletes at the games, which will run from July 23 to August 8, but many have already secured vaccines in their home countries.

The IOC has been promising for months that the Olympics would be safe even without widespread vaccination, thanks to a battery of health precautions. The IOC has already said it will offer national delegations COVID-19 vaccines bought from China.

But the agreement with Pfizer is seen as important as Tokyo and several Japanese regions are once again under a state of alert due to the increase in cases of COVID-19, amid lingering doubts about the wisdom of holding the games.

Japan has already decided to ban spectators from abroad and the president of the organizing committee, Seiko Hashimoto, told AFP last Friday that the Olympics could be held behind closed doors for the first time in their history.

With Japan's hospital system already under intense pressure, Tokyo 2020 has been criticized for asking Japanese medical staff to work on the event, and Hashimoto said the absence of spectators could ease the pressure. In an attempt to appease the skepticism of the Japanese public, organizers last week tightened the anti-virus measures imposed on both Olympic delegations and the media. Albert Bourla, chairman and CEO of Pfizer and Ugur Sahin of BioNTech said their firms were proud to supply the vaccine — already the mainstay of Europe's inoculation effort — to the Games. "The return of the Olympic and Paralympic Games represents a monumental moment of world unity and peace after a grueling year of isolation and devastation," Bourla said. The firms noted that it would be a decision of individual countries' government whether to permit or require the vaccines be used, but added that the jab has been authorized by the EU, US, UK, Canada and other countries. — AFP



**PORTIMAO:** Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton and Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen (back) compete during the Portuguese Formula One Grand Prix race at the Algarve International Circuit in Portimao on May 2, 2021. — AFP

## Hamilton pursues 100th pole as 'nip and tuck' title battle arrives in Spain

**BARCELONA:** The Formula One circus pitches up in Barcelona this weekend for the Spanish Grand Prix with Red Bull's tantalizing tilt at prizing the spotlight away from showstoppers Mercedes topping the bill. Three races in and against pre-season predictions it is Lewis Hamilton who leads Max Verstappen by eight points arriving at the fourth leg of the championship.

Wins last Sunday in Portugal and in the opener in Bahrain leave the seven-time champion in his customary habitat at the top of the F1 drivers' tree. Barcelona is a track the teams know intimately as the usual venue for pre-season testing, and with its reputation as a circuit where overtaking opportunities are few and far between the onus will be on tomorrow's qualifying to command a prime front row seat on Sunday's grid.

Hamilton is seeking his fifth consecutive win in Catalonia, with three of his last four victories delivered from pole. Should he top the time sheets tomorrow he will celebrate his 100th pole position, after being denied that honor by his teammate Valtteri Bottas last weekend in Portimao. Verstappen and Red Bull's emergence as serious title contenders not only has F1 fans gripping their sofas' arm rests or smart phones — Mercedes chief Toto Wolff says he's enjoying the same sensation he felt at the first signs Mercedes could muscle in on the then Red Bull roadshow seven years ago.

"When we were behind in testing and in Bahrain, it's a buzz that I have not felt in the team since 2013 when we had that first sniff that we could be there," said Wolff. "The whole place is excited and continues to be excited. I'd like to be happy after Abu Dhabi at the end of the season but for the time being, we'll take it one step at a time."

While the 2021 Hamilton continues to display all the hallmarks that have turned him into a serial champion — often flawless race craft, consummate professionalism and steely focus, Verstappen this season has changed. The Dutch driver seems to have his eye on the bigger picture, as F1's managing director Ross Brawn pointed out.

"It's clear that Max Verstappen is approaching this championship in a different way because he finally has a title-winning car," said Brawn. "And it had to change because when you're a title contender, the focus has to be on consolidating when you're not the fastest and when opportunities such as a mechanical issue for a rival or a Safety Car present themselves, you must be in a position to strike." Verstappen's boss at Red Bull Christian Horner is like his Mercedes counterpart Wolff lapping up the first proper inter-team title battle for some time. "The picture is starting to clarify. Red Bull and Mercedes are the two standout teams, and Lewis and Max are the two standout drivers. It's incredibly tight. The biggest winner for that is Formula 1 — and if it goes like this for 23 races, it's going to be nip and tuck."

One driver who has special reason to approach this weekend's race with a spring in his step is Fernando Alonso. The two-time champion is finally finding his feet with Alpine, formerly Renault, after his return to F1, scoring points for the second straight race in the Algarve sunshine.

"It was good, it was fun," said the veteran Spaniard ahead of his home grand prix. "We were fighting with one McLaren, one Ferrari — things that were unthinkable in Imola or Bahrain. So I think we made a big step forward in terms of the car performance." —AFP



**TOKYO:** This file photograph taken on April 28, 2021, shows a general view of the Olympic rings lit up at dusk on the Odaiba waterfront in Tokyo. — AFP

## Sports

# Jazz regain top spot in the West, reserves help Hawks down Suns

**LOS ANGELES:** Jordan Clarkson scored a team high of 30 points as the NBA-leading Utah Jazz won their third straight with a 126-94 NBA victory over the San Antonio Spurs on Wednesday in Salt Lake City. Bojan Bogdanovic finished with 24 points for the Jazz, who cruised to victory despite being without their one-two guard punch of Donovan Mitchell and Mike Conley.

The Jazz improved to 48-18 on the season and the win — combined with the Atlanta Hawks 135-103 victory over the Phoenix Suns — allowed them to reclaim first place in the NBA and top spot in the Western Conference.

“Finding our rhythm, it’s great. Right now we are trying to figure out how to play without Donovan and Mike we are trying to run more. So it’s good for me to get my confidence back and be ready for the playoffs,” said Bogdanovic, who has averaged 25.8 points in his last five contests.

Utah is a game ahead of Phoenix in the West standings with six games left in the regular season. Luka Samanic scored 15 points for the Spurs, who are in tenth spot in the West and trying to hold onto that last position for the play-in tournament.

“You go through adversity sometimes,” Spurs player DeMar DeRozan said. “You can’t let it diminish your confidence. We still got six games left. Still six opportunities for us to be able to put ourselves in a position to keep playing.”

Utah recorded their second straight double-digit victory over the Spurs in three days as they shot 55 percent from the floor. Jakob Poeltl scored early in the contest to give San Antonio a 10-8 lead but it was the only time the Spurs would be on top all game.

Elsewhere, the Hawks bench scored a com-

bined 74 points as Atlanta continued its domination over Phoenix with a 135-103 rout. Reserves Lou Williams and Danilo Gallinari scored 16 points each for the Hawks, who have won seven consecutive home games. “We definitely needed to bring the energy and intensity for 48 minutes playing against the best team in the league,” said Gallinari. “It was a great challenge and I thought we did a great job.”

Clint Capela finished with 18 points and 10 rebounds and Trae Young chipped in 16 points and 12 assists in the win. Devin Booker scored 30 points to record his sixth game out of the last seven with 30 or more points. Mikal Bridges delivered 18 points for the Suns, who had their five-game win streak snapped. The Hawks went on a 16-0 run in the fourth quarter as the Suns didn’t score their first field goal of the quarter until there was 2:33 left in regulation time.

#### Fourth-quarter blitz

Atlanta extended their lead to 25 points — 113-88 — when Onyeka Okongwu finished off an alley-oop pass. Okongwu finished with 14 points. The win gave Atlanta a split of the season series. Also, Nikola Jokic had 32 points and 12 rebounds, Austin Rivers scored 25 points against his former team, and the Denver Nuggets beat the New York Knicks 113-97.

“Some games I don’t score in the first half and then I score a lot in the second half,” Jokic said. “The team was finding me, I was making shots. It just happened like that.” Michael Porter scored 17 points and Facu Campazzo had 16 points, nine rebounds for Denver, who improved to 44-22. The Nuggets are tied with the Los Angeles Clippers for third in the Western Conference. — AFP



**NEW YORK:** The game between the Washington Capitals and the New York Rangers starts with a line brawl one second into play at Madison Square Garden on Wednesday in New York City. — AFP

## Oshie nets hat trick as Capitals-Rangers brawl from opening bell

**LOS ANGELES:** An emotional TJ Oshie scored a hat trick Wednesday as the Washington Capitals defeated the New York Rangers 4-2 in a fight-filled clash that featured fireworks from the opening faceoff. The two East Division rivals combined for a total of 141 penalty minutes in their second game in just three nights as there were six fights in the first 4:14 of play, including three off the opening faceoff.

Immediately after the win, Capitals forward Nicklas Backstrom embraced teammate Oshie, who was playing his first game since the death of his father. “I felt like he needed a hug,” Backstrom said. “I told him ‘You are the strongest person I know.’ First of all it is impressive that he actually played today.”

But Oshie’s heroics were overshadowed by the bad blood between the two rivals that had spilled over from the Capitals’ 6-3 Monday win. That’s when Washington’s enforcer Tom Wilson drew four penalties and was later slapped with a \$5,000 fine by the league.

Wilson punched Ranger forward Pavel Buchnevich in the back of the head while the Russian was face down on the ice. Wilson also went after the smaller Artemi Panarin, ripping off his helmet and throwing him to the ice.

The Rangers felt Wilson got off lightly with just a fine and publicly called for the removal of the NHL’s discipline chief George Parros, setting the stage for Wednesday night’s explosive opening with Wilson at the center of the storm.

Adding to the tension among the Rangers, the club also on Wednesday abruptly fired president John Davidson and general manager Jeff Gorton

with three games left in the season. Chris Drury was named president and GM.

It was not immediately clear if the front office shakeup had any connection to Monday’s dustup but the timing raised questions. “It’s obviously a crazy day. You add in the anxiety or anticipation all day from our group, and then waking up from a pregame nap with the whole set of news,” Rangers forward Ryan Strome said.

One second after the opening faceoff Wednesday, three forwards each from both teams squared off at center ice. Washington’s Nic Dowd, Carl Hagelin and Garnet Hathaway traded punches with Rangers forwards Kevin Rooney, Colin Blackwell and Phillip Di Giuseppe in front of the pandemic-limited crowd of 1,800 at Madison Square Garden. No sooner had the officials broken those fights up and sent the players to the penalty box then Wilson came out for his first shift of the game. He was immediately challenged by Rangers tough guy Brendan Smith. There would be two more fights before the period was out, leading to a total of 100 penalty minutes in the first period alone. “We were just trying to stick up for our teammate,” Smith said. “It was a good response for sure.”

Referees TJ Luxmore and Ian Walsh did a good job of keeping a lid on the penalties after initial fights by handing out 10 minute misconducts to Capitals Zdeno Chara and Wilson, and a five minute major and game misconduct to Buchnevich after he highsticked Washington’s Anthony Mantha in the face in the second period. Buchnevich will likely be suspended for his crosscheck.—AFP



**SALT LAKE CITY:** Jordan Clarkson #00 of the Utah Jazz high fives Bojan Bogdanovic #44 of the Utah Jazz during the game against the San Antonio Spurs on Wednesday at vivint.SmartHome Arena in Salt Lake City, Utah. — AFP

## Sports

# Chelsea dominate Real Madrid to set up all-English Champions League final

**LONDON:** Chelsea set up an all-English Champions League final against Manchester City as goals from Timo Werner and Mason Mount beat Real Madrid 2-0 in a dominant display on Wednesday to seal a 3-1 aggregate victory at Stamford Bridge.

If anything, the scoreline flattered Madrid as the 13-time European champions had no response to Chelsea's greater strength and speed. The Blues should have ran out far more convincing winners as they toyed with the tired visitors in the second half.

However, Werner's cushioned header into an empty net on 28 minutes after Kai Havertz's initial effort came back off the crossbar and Mount's tap-in five minutes from time were enough to seal their place in Istanbul on May 29.

"To never lose the concentration, focus and positive energy on the pitch — it was a huge performance and well deserved," said Chelsea manager Thomas Tuchel, who has masterminded a huge turnaround in Chelsea's season since replacing the sacked Frank Lampard in January.

Backed by Russian billionaire owner Roman Abramovich, Chelsea's £220 million spending spree last summer has been rewarded with a first Champions League final since they lifted the trophy for the only time in 2012.

"We never lost the hunger, the desire to defend," added Tuchel. "In the second half we had even better structure to defend and it was a fantastic performance. We could have scored so much earlier and more to be safe, but it's no time for criticism now. It's a fantastic achievement and big congratulations to the team."

## Real Madrid outclassed by Chelsea as defeat raises fresh doubts around old guard

**MADRID:** Real Madrid were not just beaten but outplayed, their defeat by Chelsea on Wednesday clear enough to spell the end of a team that has gone on and on but can no longer match the best in Europe. After a historic run that has seen Zinedine Zidane's grandees win three consecutive Champions League titles and four in eight years, Real Madrid can be under no illusions.

This is the third year they have failed to reach the final and the second in a row they have faced elite English opposition and been found wanting. "Chelsea were the better team," said midfielder Casemiro. "We have no excuses."

Madrid were outclassed by Manchester City last season in the round of 16 and while the 3-1 aggregate score against Chelsea made the tie look competitive, they were fortunate to escape a thrashing. The second leg could have been comparable to Barcelona's humiliation by Bayern Munich, if only Chelsea were less wasteful with the string of golden opportunities they created.

Barca were thrown into crisis by that 8-2 loss in Lisbon last season, jolted to begin a painful transition that required unpopular decisions about some



**BIRMINGHAM:** Manchester City's English midfielder Phil Foden (left) is fouled by Aston Villa's English defender Matty Cash during the English Premier League football match at Villa Park on Wednesday. — AFP

Madrid boss Zinedine Zidane welcomed back captain Sergio Ramos for the first time in six weeks, while Eden Hazard was handed a rare start in an injury-hit season on his return to Stamford Bridge. But the Belgian was again a peripheral figure as Madrid's over-reliance on Karim Benzema to provide a goal threat was exposed. "We needed to be better going forward," said Zidane. "We didn't have any clear

chances. They made a number of them and that's football. "We fought and tried but they deserved to win and go through."

### Missed chances

Madrid's only serious threat came from a quick turn and shot from the edge of the box from Benzema that Edouard Mendy did brilliantly to turn behind midway through the first half.



**LONDON:** Real Madrid's French coach Zinedine Zidane reacts during the UEFA Champions League second leg semi-final football match between Chelsea and Real Madrid at Stamford Bridge in London on Wednesday. — AFP

ing feature. Yet increasingly the level needed to win in Spain appears significantly lower than what is required in Europe, where Paris Saint-Germain were too good for Barca and Chelsea have shown themselves superior to both Real and Atletico Madrid.

If any of La Liga's top three had come up against either Bayern or City, it is hard to imagine a different result. Madrid's reduced status is not

Moments later they were behind as Werner scored just his fourth goal in his last 39 games.

N'Golo Kante and Havertz did the hard work as the French midfielder fed Havertz, whose audacious chip over Thibaut Courtois bounced invitingly off the crossbar for Werner to head into an empty net. Chelsea have now kept 18 clean sheets in 24 games since the appointment of Tuchel turned their season around.

However, a failure to take their chances at the other end means they are still far from guaranteed a place in the Champions League next season. That lack of a killer touch was exposed after the break as Havertz saw a free header come back off the bar before Mount blasted over with just Courtois to beat.

The former Chelsea 'keeper, who controversially forced a move back to Spain in the summer of 2018, kept his current employers in the tie as he then saved one-on-ones with Havertz and Kante, with the Blues' speed on the break too much for Madrid's ageing midfield to cope with.

Tuchel was growing increasingly frustrated with his side's inability to put the tie to bed, but could finally relax five minutes from time. Substitute Christian Pulisic left Courtois on the floor and from his cut-back, Mount slid in to finish from close range. Fired by Paris Saint-Germain on Christmas Eve after leading the French champions to their first ever final in this competition last season, Tuchel is headed back to the Champions League showpiece match for a second consecutive season, unlike his former club, who were beaten 4-1 on aggregate by City in the other semi-final. — AFP

lost on the club's president Florentino Perez, whose passion for a European Super League is driven in part by desperation to prevent the gap getting bigger.

Perez said without the millions on offer from the breakaway, Madrid cannot afford the likes of Kylian Mbappe this summer, the kind of statement signing to launch a new cycle in one-fell swoop. But there is change that could be slower and smarter, that does not involve buying only the best players in the world at the very highest price.

Sergio Ramos and Luka Modric are both out of contract this summer, with the future of Ramos particularly uncertain. Yet it is the role of Zidane that could now come into sharp focus, not so much around his proven capabilities with this current team, but his suitability for ushering in a new one.

Some higher up the club have been frustrated by Zidane's reluctance to nurture younger talents. Martin Odegaard was sidelined and allowed to leave, while Fede Valverde has succumbed to the regular midfield trio and Vinicius Junior and Rodrygo have only delivered in fits and starts. Zidane's contract expires in 2022 but he has repeatedly refused to address questions regarding his future. "I do not look beyond the day to day, I don't plan anything," he said in February. The French national team is often mentioned as a natural next step, particularly as he has never envisaged a long managerial career. —AFP



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