



NOTICE

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Fears of 'full-scale war' as Zionist attacks kill 56

World powers voice alarm, UN readies for crisis meeting

OIC slams occupation forces for escalation

RIYADH: The Organization of Islamic Cooperation has condemned Zionist entity and reiterated support for Palestinians, as fatal unrest escalates. The OIC "condemns in the strongest terms the repeated attacks by the occupation authorities against the Palestinian people", the pan-Islamic body based in the Saudi city of Jeddah said in a statement after an emergency session.

It also condemned "the occupation forces' continuation of their colonial programs—building settlements, attempting to confiscate Palestinian properties, forceful eviction of Palestinians from their land". Tensions have soared over Zionist entity's planned eviction of Palestinians from a district in east Jerusalem, which the Jewish state sees as part of its eternal capital but is considered occupied by the United Nations.

The OIC's statement follows strong condemnation of Zionist entity by Saudi Arabia over what it called "blatant attacks carried out by the occupation forces against the sanctity of Al-Aqsa mosque". Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan held talks in the holy city of Makkah with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu on Tuesday. — AFP

JERUSALEM: Relentless rocket fire and rioting in mixed Jewish-Arab towns fueled growing fears yesterday that the violence in Palestine that has claimed 56 lives could spiral into "full-scale war".

Defense Minister for the Zionist forces Benny Gantz vowed more attacks on Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups in Gaza to bring "total, long-term quiet" before considering a ceasefire.

Islamist militants have launched more than 1,000 rockets since Monday, said the occupation army, which has launched hundreds of air strikes on Islamist groups in the crowded coastal enclave of Gaza. Hamas meanwhile confirmed that several of its top commanders were killed in Zionist strikes, including its military chief in Gaza City, Bassem Issa.

The most intense hostilities in seven years have killed at least 48 people in Gaza, including 14 children, three Palestinians in the West Bank. The bloodshed was triggered over the weekend after Jewish settlers tried to steal Palestinian homes and then occupation forces attacked Muslims praying in the sacred Al-Aqsa Mosque.

As world powers voiced growing alarm and the UN Security Council readied for another emergency meeting on the bloody crisis, the UN Middle East envoy Tor Wennesland warned that "we're escalating towards a full-scale war".

Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared a state of emergency in the mixed Jewish-Arab city of Lod, where police said "wide-scale riots erupted among some of the Arab residents".

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GAZA CITY: Mourners recite a prayer over the body of Majd Abu Saadahthe, a Palestinian killed in a Zionist air strike, during his funeral in the town of Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. — AFP



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Local

Kuwait's Amir receives greetings on Eid Al-Fitr from Crown Prince, senior officials

Sheikh Nawaf congratulates Arab, Islamic countries' leaders

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday received a cable of congratulations from His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on the advent of Eid Al-Fitr. His Highness the Amir also received congratulations cables on the dear occasion from the National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, Kuwait National Guard Chief His Highness Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah, His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah. Furthermore, His Highness the Amir received similar cables from the President of the Supreme Judicial Council Counselor Ahmad Al-Ajeel and Kuwait National Guard Deputy Chief retired General Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. In turn, His Highness the Amir thanked them for their kind sentiments.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince received a cable of congratulations



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

from Speaker Ghanem on the advent of Eid Al-Fitr. His Highness the Crown Prince sent a reply cable to Ghanem, thanking him for his sincere sentiments. His Highness the Crown Prince also exchanged greeting cables with His Highness Sheikh Salem Al-Ali, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Abdullah Al-



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

Ahmad Al-Sabah, His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, Justice Ahmad Al-Ajeel, senior state officials, sheikhs, ministers, members of the diplomatic corps, in addition to citizens and residents.

His Highness the Amir also exchanged congratulations cables yesterday with Arab and Islamic countries leaders on the advent of Eid Al-Fitr. In the cables, His Highness the Amir wished many happy returns of the dear occasion for both Arab and Islamic nations. Furthermore, His Highness the Amir received a phone call from Tunisian President Kais Saied, on the near advent of Eid Al-Fitr. His Highness the Amir thanked the President for his sincere sentiments, expressed wishes of welfare and prosperity for the Tunisian people and leadership.

On Tuesday, His Highness the Amir phoned King Abdullah II of Jordan on the advent of Eid Al-Fitr. During the telephone call, His Highness the Amir expressed sincere congratulations to the Jordanian King on the advent of Eid al-Fitr, praying to Allah the Almighty that this occasion will be repeated with further blessings and goodness on the two countries, and Arab and Muslim nations. His Highness the Amir wished the King good health and Jordan

further safety, security and progress. Meanwhile, King Abdullah thanked His Highness the Amir for this call which embodies the deep-rooted relations between the two countries. The King also congratulated His Highness the Amir on the same occasion, wishing him everlasting good health and Kuwait more progress and prosperity under his wise leadership.

Similarly, His Highness the Amir on Tuesday congratulated, via phone, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi on the advent of Eid Al-Fitr. In his call, His Highness the Amir wished many happy returns of the dear occasion for both Arab nations. He also wished President Al-Sisi everlasting wellbeing and for the Egypt greater security and stability. President Sisi thanked His Highness the Amir for the good gesture which mirrors the depth of relations between the two nations. He wished His Highness the Amir everlasting wellbeing and for Kuwait more progress and welfare under his wise leadership. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait Fire Force (KFF) recently celebrated the graduation of 223 non-commissioned officers from the KFF training facility in Kabd.

Doctors voice alarm: 5-fold jump in kids swallowing magnets

PARIS: Doctors from major hospitals in England sounded an alarm yesterday over a fivefold increase in the number of young children requiring medical treatment after swallowing magnets from toys. Nearly half of these kids aged four months and up required surgery to remove the magnets, often followed by complications, they reported in a research letter published in the Archives of Disease in Childhood, a medical journal. From 2016 through 2020, four major hospitals in southeastern England admitted 251 children who had swallowed a foreign object.

Coins accounted for 37 percent of the items ingested, ahead of magnets (21 percent) and button batteries (17 percent). Across all categories, the number of cases increased by more than half over this period. But those involving magnets—mostly brightly colored, matchstick-like pieces found in building sets—jumped five-

fold, they reported.

More than 40 percent of these incidents required surgery for removal. "This was either laparoscopy—also known as 'key-hole' surgery—or open abdominal surgery to retrieve the magnets from the intestine," Hemanshoo Thakkar, a pediatric surgeon at Evelina London Children's Hospital, told AFP.

In half of the cases, there were complications. "As the children suffer from a perforation, their abdomen becomes contaminated and this can result in ongoing infections," Thakkar explained.

"Some children have lost some of their bowel, which has to be removed if unhealthy." The most serious case involved a youngster who underwent several operations, stayed in intensive care for a month, and in hospital for nearly five months.

No deaths were reported. "But left untreated, the injuries caused can be life-threatening," Thakkar said. In Britain, regulations require that all magnetic toys be accompanied by a warning notice, but most manufacturers do not display them prominently enough, the authors wrote. In a case reported earlier this year in the Journal of Emergency Medicine, a three-year old boy in the United States swallowed six magnetized pieces one after the other. Two of them stuck together in his throat, and the rest settled in his abdomen. — AFP

Fears of 'full-scale war' as Zionist...

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There were fears of widening civil unrest as protesters waving Palestinian flags burnt cars and properties, including a synagogue, clashed with police and attacked Jewish motorists in several Jewish-Arab towns.

Zionist forces launched hundreds of air strikes at Gaza, the blockaded strip of two million people that Hamas controls. At least 230 Palestinians have been wounded.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson urged both sides to "step back from the brink". The chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, voiced concern at the escalation and said "crimes" may have been committed. Bensouda

announced in March that she had opened a full investigation into the situation in the occupied territories, infuriating the Zionist regime, which not a member of The Hague-based court. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh threatened to step up its operation.

Violence also flared in the occupied West Bank, where three Palestinians were killed, including two shot in clashes near Nablus and near Hebron. In Gaza City, people sifted through debris after a Zionist air strike destroyed a 12-storey building near the coast. Hamas said the tower block had been a residential building. AFP reporters said it also housed the offices of several Hamas officials.

Five members of a single family were killed by an strike in northern Gaza Tuesday, including young brothers Ibrahim and Marwan, who were filling sacks of straw at the time. "We were laughing and having fun when suddenly they began to bomb us. Everything around us caught fire," their cousin, also called Ibrahim, told AFP. "I saw my cousins set alight and torn to pieces," said the 14-year-old, breaking down in tears. —Agencies

Russia mourns victims of Kazan school shooting

KAZAN, Russia: Mourners gathered yesterday for the funerals of students and staff killed by a teenage gunman at a Russian school, a tragedy that spurred calls for tighter controls on guns and the internet.

After Tuesday's attack left seven students and two staff dead at the school in the central city of Kazan, President Vladimir Putin called on lawmakers to toughen gun control laws and other senior officials demanded stricter regulation of the internet. Flags were flying at half-mast throughout Kazan, the capital of the majority Muslim Russian republic of Tatarstan.

Family members wearing black and students of Elvira Ignatieva — a 26-year-old English teacher who reportedly died while shielding pupils from the gunman — laid flowers and read the holy Quran at her grave during a funeral ceremony. "My niece was like a shining star: she took off, lit up and faded away," her 62-year-old aunt Anna Ignatieva told AFP, crying and wearing a black scarf.

The 19-year-old gunman opened fire on Tuesday at School No. 175 in Kazan, armed with a shotgun and at least one improvised explosive device. He was identified as Ilhaz Galyaviev, a former student at the school.

Panic spread throughout the building, with some students jumping from windows to escape, and the gunman was detained within about an hour. Galyaviev, who was recently dismissed from a local technical college for poor grades, was shown in interrogation footage leaked online claiming he was God and that he had "a monster" inside him. He was due to make a first court appearance yesterday.

All the children killed were in Ignatieva's eighth-grade class, so between the ages of 13 and 14. The second staff member killed was a teaching assistant for younger students. At least 18 children were also

wounded in the attack, including some who sustained injuries while attempting to escape the school building, the RIA Novosti news agency reported yesterday, citing health officials. The agency said that eight students were being treated for gunshot wounds and that two were in a critical condition, with a total of 21 people in hospital.

Dozens of mourners carrying flowers and soft toys congregated outside the school yesterday to commemorate the dead. "This is a huge and unexpected loss," Irina Krasnikova, 42, told AFP.

"We live in such a nice city. It's hard to believe this happened to us... It didn't happen to my children, but it is so painful, it's hard to speak." Putin after the attack offered condolences to the families of the victims and urged lawmakers to make the process of legally obtaining a firearm more strict.

The shooting also prompted calls among Kremlin-friendly lawmakers for even tighter regulation on the internet, which opposition figures in Russia say authorities use to suppress political dissent. The speaker of the lower house of parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin, called on lawmakers to discuss the possibility of removing internet-anonymity, requiring users to identify themselves to be allowed online.

Officials have claimed that young Russians are being increasingly exposed to negative influences online, especially from the West. Russia has relatively few school shootings due to normally tight security in education facilities. Buying firearms legally is also not easy, although it is possible to register hunting rifles.

Officials noted that Galyaviev had undergone security and psychological tests to gain a licence for the weapon. Public shootings are rare in Russia in comparison with the United States, but Tuesday's attack follows some similar incidents in recent years. In November 2019, a 19-year-old student in the far eastern town of Blagoveshchensk opened fire at his college, killing one classmate and injuring three other people before shooting himself dead. One year previous, another teenage gunman — reportedly using the same weapon as Galyaviev — killed 20 people at the Kerch technical college in Crimea, the peninsula Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014. — AFP

Local

Kuwait rebuffs Zionist settlement schemes in occupied Palestine

Arab ministers urge ICC to probe crimes against Palestinians

KUWAIT: The State of Kuwait on Tuesday reaffirmed its rejection of the Zionist entity's settlement schemes in occupied Palestinian territories noting that UN resolutions consider them as illegitimate. The official Kuwaiti stance was expressed by Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah in the State of Kuwait address to the virtual emergency Arab ministerial meeting on events in Jerusalem.

Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser renewed the State of Kuwait's rejection of all illegal settlement schemes in the occupied Palestinian territories including East Jerusalem, noting that the international law and resolutions of the UN Security Council consider these settlements as illegitimate. He stated, "The State of Kuwait has condemned with the fiercest terms the Zionist occupation authorities' continuous practices, the relocation (of Palestinians), the construction of settlements on the Palestinian territories particularly in Jerusalem and Sheikh Jarrah district." These schemes aim to alter the facts in the occupied territories and constitute illegal and illegitimate violations, as well as blatant breaches of the relevant international resolutions and references. These resolutions consider these schemes as "invalid and groundless; they neither exist in reality nor lead to commitments."

The occupation forces' storming of Al-Aqsa compound on Friday night targeting the unarmed Palestinians is another evidence of the lack of desire of the Zionist entity — the force based on occupation — of reaching a comprehensive and just agreement, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser stated. The occupation Zionist forces alongside the illegitimate settlers, before the eyes of the whole international community, are targeting children, seizing properties, attacking unarmed civilians in flagrant provocation of the whole humanity senses. These acts are a new addition to the record of a chain of crimes and breaches perpetrated by the Zionist entity — the force based on occupation — of the Security Council resolutions 242, 338, 476, 478 and 2334 and other international resolutions that affirm the special sanctity of Jerusalem and invalidate any measure designed to alter its nature, the Kuwaiti foreign minister said.

Explicit breach

Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser continued, saying that driving residents of Sheikh Jarrah district out of their houses is a crime and explicit breach of the international law: for Jerusalem remains part of the occupied Palestinian territories subject to the 1949 Fourth Geneva convention, therefore the occupation-based force, the Zionist entity, must respect its commitments, maintain and abstain from expropriating private properties in the occupied territories. "We are facing a dangerous phase that may jeopardize any just and comprehensive solution to the central cause .. we are facing rapidly developing schemes designed not only to increase the illegal settlements and seize Palestinian lands and properties but also aim to continue Judaization of East Jerusalem namely the old sector to evacuate these districts of the Palestinian residents," he said. The State of Kuwait affirms anew its rejection of all illegal settlement schemes on the occupied



GAZA CITY: A Palestinian man looks at a destroyed building in Gaza City, following a series of Zionist airstrikes on the Gaza Strip early yesterday. — AFP photos

Palestinian territories including East Jerusalem. These settlements "are groundless and invalidated," according to the international law and relevant Security Council resolutions. He called for effective measures to alleviate hardships of "our brothers in Palestine" by calling upon the UN namely the Security Council to shoulder the responsibilities in this regard to ensure that the occupation Zionist authorities abstain from carrying out these hateful schemes and impose a de facto policy.

These Zionist schemes disregard the main references that had been agreed upon to end the conflict and the two states principle that has always been basis for the international community stance for reaching a settlement and rejecting a solution based on a single state. The State of Kuwait affirms its standing on side of the Palestinian people, renews its adherence to the Arab stance that affirms that peace is the strategic option, the minister said. He further reaffirmed Kuwait's advocacy of the two states' settlement according to the agreed upon references, namely relevant Security Council resolutions, the land for peace principle, the road map, the Arab peace initiative so that the Palestinian people may attain their full legitimate rights and establish their independent state on their territories with East Jerusalem as the capital.

War crimes

The Arab foreign ministers asked the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate Zionist war crimes committed in Palestinian territories, including the eviction of Palestinians from homes in a flashpoint Jerusalem neighborhood at the heart of recent unrest. The Arab ministers denounced the crimes inflicted by



A Palestinian man holds an injured girl awaiting medical care at Al-Shifa hospital, after a Zionist air strike in Gaza City, on Tuesday.

Zionist forces on Palestinian worshippers in Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque, which have escalated dangerously during the holy month of Ramadan, according to a statement issued after the emergency meeting for the Arab foreign ministers on the situation in the Palestinian territories. These crimes include the use of "disproportionate and indiscriminate" force by Zionist police to prevent peaceful worship across holy sites, in

addition to the potential forced evictions of Palestinian families in the occupied East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, added the statement. The ministers called on the international community to "immediately stop the Zionist aggression" against the Palestinian people, emphasizing that ensuring the Palestinians' "protection and right to worship safely" was both a legal and humanitarian obligation. — KUNA

Farah Akbar's murder suspect pleads not guilty

KUWAIT: The trial of the suspect in the murder of Farah Akbar turned into a solidarity gathering by the victim's family and human rights and women activists, who gathered before the start of the trial at the Palace of Justice demanding capital punishment against the suspect. The courtroom was crowded by lawyers and political and human rights activists under very tight security, Al-Qabas Arabic daily reported yesterday. The suspect arrived in a central prison bus early in the morning. The court decided to postpone the trial until May 25 to summon the case officer. The suspect's two lawyers asked for the postponement, while the suspect pled not guilty. The suspect denied kidnapping, threatening or killing the victim, denying all charges. He told the judge he worked for military intelligence and studied psychology at university. The suspect's defense asked for more time, while the victim's lawyer demanded a temporary civil compensation of KD 5,001 and capital punishment against the suspect. The victim's family and activists expressed confidence in Kuwait's judiciary to serve justice to Akbar.

Kuwait logs 1,153 COVID-19 cases

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Health has announced Tuesday recording 1,153 new coronavirus infections and eight related deaths in the previous 24 hours. The new figures took the total cases in the country up to 287,199 and deaths to 1,660 respectively, noted the ministry's spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad. He pointed out that some 1,240 more people had been cured of the virus over the same period, raising the total of those who have overcome the disease to 272,123.

He added that the number of people hospitalized with the virus stood at 13,416 as of Tuesday, with 198 of them in intensive care units. Dr Sanad revealed that some 9,274 swab tests were conducted over the same period, bringing the total to 2,421,22.

In other news, Kuwait has secured a shipment of medicine for cancer patients that is set to arrive to the country in the next 48 hours, the health ministry said yesterday in response to complaints about shortages. The ministry further explained that some delays happened after a number of manufacturing countries stopped imports due to COVID-19 complications. —KUNA

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News in brief

Minor earthquake detected in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Kuwait National Earthquake Monitoring Network recorded yesterday an earthquake measuring 3.0 on the Richter scale in southwest Kuwait. The earthquake occurred at 10:12am at a depth of 8 kilometers.

Technical problem halts output

KUWAIT: The Kuwait National Petroleum Company announced Tuesday suspending production at some units of the Mina Al-Abdullah refinery due to the stoppage of steam generating units. The company teams are racing against the time to resume operation at these units and restore the full capacity of the refinery as soon as possible, the company's deputy CEO for administrative and commercial affairs and official spokesman Ahd Al-Khurayif said. He, however, noted that the exportation operations are undergoing as planned and had not been affected by the emergency suspension of production of these units.

Kuwaiti oil price down

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went down by \$1.21 to \$66.92 per barrel Tuesday as oppose to \$68.13 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 23 cents to \$68.55 per barrel, while the latter went up by 36 cents to \$65.28 pb.

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: The desert, the overcast skies, the open air, the bounty, the man and the traditional clothes. They all make a wonderful view of what the Bedouin life looked like. (Source: A collection of commemorative printed images by the Ministry of Information. Prepared by Mahmoud Zakaria Abu Alella, heritage researcher at the Ministry of Information)

Farewell, Ramadan

By Dr Teresa Leshar

Although the hardship of Ramadan is about to end and festivities of Eid are about to begin, there will be sadness in every devout Muslim's heart that Ramadan has passed. Barely having had their last breakfast at sunset, they will immediately start looking forward to the next Ramadan and counting the months and weeks until it comes again. They will begin to greet one another with the phrase "Aasakom min awadah" which means, "May you repeat it."

Some people may tilt their head in confusion and wonder why would anyone look forward to a month of daily 16-hour fasts in 45 degree temperatures? What is so special about Ramadan?

First of all, Ramadan is an opportunity to express your devotion to Allah. Everything on the earth was created for us, according to many verses in the Quran (eg. 2:29). Many use their time and the earth's resources to satisfy themselves through acquiring things, entertaining themselves and seeking sensual pleasures. Doing so is not necessarily forbidden but it shouldn't be the goal of one's life. So why were we created? Allah gave us life and He hopes that we will voluntarily give it back to him through worship and submission to His will. Almost everything we do in life has some sort of return for us, even if it is done purely for Allah's sake. For example, when we give charity, others benefit and we feel their happiness too. But fasting in Ramadan is a chance to show our devotion to our Lord, because nobody benefits from the fast. Nobody even knows if you are fasting, so this expression of faith is purely for Allah.

Another reason many people are sad to bid Ramadan farewell is because the atmosphere of intensified worship and charity will pass, and mundane duties and distractions will creep back into our lives. We will miss Ramadan for the brotherhood and sisterhood that is so apparent as Muslims join together in one great project, which is fasting for a month while striving to accomplish the most good and expressing our gratitude and reliance through frequent prayer

and supplication. Everyone will miss this immense opportunity to draw closer to Allah.

I will miss Ramadan and all the lessons it teaches me. I have learned so much about myself - about how my body can adjust to extreme circumstances, and about how dedicated I can be when I am striving to accomplish something important. I will miss the feeling of lightness when my stomach is empty and my head is clear - when I am naturally drawn to thoughts of God and His abundant blessings. I will miss the joy of breaking fast, and the camaraderie of fellow fasters who gathered for the meal. I will miss the extra attention to the Quran, and joining other worshippers in the night to pray. The moments of Ramadan have slipped away quickly, and the opportunity to demonstrate such devotion in solidarity with all Muslims worldwide has passed.

Farewell, Ramadan, we will miss you. As we start counting the days until your return, stay in our memories and inspire us to carry on with our worship through fasting, reading Quran and praying late at night. Be with us, Ramadan, throughout the coming year.

- Courtesy of TIES: TIES is among the projects funded and managed by Kuwaiti Society for Cultural Dialogue, TIES aims at empowering Kuwait's expats through social and educational services that promote a positive and productive role in society, and to facilitate opportunities for intra- and interfaith interactions that promote social solidarity. For more information, please call 25231015/6 or 94079426 or e-mail: info@ties-center.net.

Christians and Muslims: Witnesses of hope

Dear Muslim brothers and sisters,

We at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue are glad to offer you our fraternal good wishes for a month rich in divine blessings and spiritual advancement. Fasting, along with prayer, almsgiving and other pious practices, brings us closer to God our Creator and to all those with whom we live and work, and helps us to continue walking together on the path of fraternity.

During these long months of suffering, anguish and sorrow, especially during the lockdown periods, we sensed our need for divine assistance, but also for expressions and gestures of fraternal solidarity: a telephone call, a message of support and comfort, a prayer, help in buying medicines or food, advice, and to put it simply, the security of knowing that someone is always there for us in times of necessity.

The divine assistance that we need and seek, especially in circumstances like those of the current pandemic, is manifold: God's mercy, pardon, providence and other spiritual and material gifts. Yet, what we need most in these times, is hope. At this time, then, we think it fitting to share with you some reflections on this virtue.

As we are aware, hope, while certainly includes optimism, goes beyond it. While optimism is a human attitude, hope has its basis in something religious: God loves us, and therefore cares for us through his providence. He does this in his own mysterious ways, which are not always comprehensible to us. In these situations, we are like children who are certain of the loving care of their parents, but are not yet able to comprehend its full extent.

Hope arises from our belief that all our problems and trials have a meaning, a value and a purpose, however difficult or impossible it may be for us to understand the reason for them or to find a way out of them.

Hope also carries with it belief in the goodness present in the heart of every person. Many times,

in situations of difficulty and despair, help, and the hope it brings, can come from those whom we least expect.

Human fraternity, in its numerous manifestations, thus becomes a source of hope for all, especially for those in any kind of need. Thanks be to God our Creator, and to our fellow men and women, for the quick response and generous solidarity shown by believers and also persons of good will with no religious affiliation in times of disaster, whether natural or man-made, like conflicts and wars. All these persons and their goodness remind us believers that the spirit of fraternity is universal, and that it transcends, all boundaries: ethnic, religious, social and economic. In adopting this spirit, we imitate God, who looks benevolently upon the humanity He created, upon all other creatures and upon the entire universe. This is why the growing care and concern for the planet, our "common home", is, according to Pope Francis, yet another sign of hope.

We are also aware that hope has its enemies: lack of faith in God's love and care; loss of trust in our brothers and sisters; pessimism; despair and its opposite, unfounded presumption; unfair generalizations based on one's own negative experiences, and so forth. These harmful thoughts, attitudes and reactions must be effectively countered, so as to strengthen hope in God and trust in all our brothers and sisters.

In his recent Encyclical Letter Fratelli tutti, Pope Francis speaks frequently of hope. There he tells us: "I invite everyone to renewed hope, 'for hope speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning. Hope speaks to us of a thirst, and aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfillment, a desire to achieve great things, things that fill our heart and lift our spirit to lofty realities like truth, goodness and beauty, justice and love...and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile' (cf. Gaudium et spes, 1). Let us continue, then, to advance along the paths of hope" (No. 55).

We, Christians and Muslims, are called to be bearers of hope, for the present life and for the life to come, and to be witnesses, restorers and builders of this hope, especially for those experiencing difficulties and despair. As a sign of our spiritual fraternity, we assure you of our prayer, and we send best wishes for a peaceful and fruitful Ramadan, and for a joyful Eid Al-Fitr.

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Taliban seize district on outskirts of Afghan capital

Iran's Ahmadinejad submits name for presidential poll

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Palestinians decry social media 'censorship'

Accounts deleted on Twitter, content blocked on Instagram

DUBAI: With accounts deleted on Twitter and content blocked on Instagram, Palestinian social media users say they have been censored from showing the reality of the unrest in Jerusalem. The eastern part of the holy city has been hit with the worst violence since 2017, with clashes centered around the Al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam, since Friday.

The tensions have since spiraled into a full-scale military confrontation after Zionist forces fired rockets and stun grenades on targets in the coastal enclave of Gaza. The tensions, which the United Nations has warned is heading towards "a full-scale war", were triggered by the looming evictions of Palestinian families to make way for the settlers in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah.

On social media, Palestinians have widely shared photos and videos of occupation forces facing off with residents, in what Amnesty International has denounced as an "illegal and abusive use of force" against "largely peaceful" protesters.

Social media remains an important tool for Palestinians, many of whom believe traditional media coverage does not sufficiently capture the reality of the crisis. Sada Social, a platform designed to protect content shared by Palestinians online, recorded 200 restrictions in the past week on matters related to Sheikh Jarrah and East Jerusalem. "This includes the closure of accounts on Twitter or Instagram or the blocking of features on Instagram, such as streaming live videos, or restricting access to content related to Sheikh Jarrah, Gaza or Jerusalem," said director Eyad Rifai.

'Technical bug'

A spokesperson for Twitter said it was reversing action against accounts that were targeted "in error by an automated spam filter". "Defending and respecting the voices of the people who use our service is one of our core values at Twitter," said the statement sent to AFP. "We use a combination of technology and human review to enforce the Twitter Rules across the service. In this case, our automated systems took enforcement action on a number of accounts in error". Instagram meanwhile blamed a "technical bug which impacted



GAZA: Palestinians stand on the rubble of an apartment destroyed in air strikes by Zionist forces in Gaza Tuesday. — AFP

millions of people's stories, highlights and archives globally" including Palestinians who saw their content "disappear".

Likewise, the Arabic hashtag Al-Aqsa was "mistakenly restricted" in an action which has since been "lifted", said a spokesperson for Facebook, which owns the platform. "We sincerely apologize for both issues, and to all those, including our Palestinian community, who felt like their ability to have an open discussion around important matters was affected in any way".

Digital rights

But Palestinian internet users still report restrictions, said Marwa Fatafta, Middle East and North Africa manager at digital activist group Access Now. "On Friday evening, during the Zionist assault on wor-

shippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque, Facebook restricted the 'Al-Aqsa' hashtag and the streaming of live videos on Instagram was disrupted or blocked for many users," Fatafta said. She added that Twitter also suspended dozens of accounts, including that of Palestinian journalist Mariam Barghouti, "as she covered a violent crackdown on protesters near Ramallah" in the occupied West Bank.

"These arbitrary 'technical errors' tend to happen in peak times when activists are sharing information and documenting the aggression," said Fatafta, who called for transparency and an investigation.

Barghouti's Twitter account, with over 50,000 followers, has since been restored. Rifai, from Sada Social, accused the Zionist entity of having forged partnerships with major social networks to "crack

down on Palestinian digital content", but said this is the first time that restrictions have become widespread. "It is a very serious situation which prevents us, as Palestinians, from enjoying our digital rights like other users of these sites around the world," he said.

Rifai said that some deleted accounts have been restored on Twitter, but that the process is "still ongoing". In a statement released on Sunday, Instagram said that the same restrictions had affected content related to protests in Colombia and the rights of indigenous communities in Canada and the United States. The social network said it has solved the problem but Hind Khoudary, a Palestinian journalist with more than 18,000 followers on Instagram, said she is "still censored". "I have lost stories. And my stories on Instagram cannot be seen," she said. — AFP

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International

Iran's Ahmadinejad submits name for presidential poll

Supporters cheer populist ex-president as he arrives to file nomination

TEHRAN: Iranian ultra-conservative ex-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad put his name forward yesterday as a candidate to succeed moderate President Hassan Rouhani in elections next month.

The 64-year-old populist was applauded by several dozen supporters as he arrived at the interior ministry to submit his application. "Millions of people across the country have invited me to stand for election, and even ordered me to come here to register, placing a heavy responsibility on my shoulders," Ahmadinejad said. The build-up to June 18 polls comes as Iran and world powers wrangle over reviving a 2015 nuclear accord, from which the US withdrew unilaterally in 2018, reimposing crippling sanctions.

Hopefuls have until Saturday to register, and will then be vetted by the conservative-dominated Guardian Council before a list of approved candidates is published by May 27, after which campaigning begins. But Iranian media considers Ahmadinejad's chance of being approved are close to zero.

He said that if he is not approved, he will "not participate" in the election, either by backing a candidate or voting. Ahmadinejad claimed, as he has often done in recent years, that the Iranian people have lost confidence in the country's authorities.

He added that he considered the upcoming election "perhaps the last chance" to save the Islamic republic in the face of "very sensitive" challenges, both domestic and international.

Fiery rhetoric

Iran's president from 2005 to 2013, Ahmadinejad



TEHRAN: Supporters of Iran's former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gather outside the Interior Ministry headquarters in the capital Tehran yesterday as Ahmadinejad arrives to register his candidacy to run again for president in the elections scheduled for June. — AFP

had to stand down at the end of two consecutive terms as per the constitution. His successor Rouhani will face the same obligation in June. Ahmadinejad's presidency was marked by fiery rhetoric against Israel and deep tensions with the West, notably over Iran's nuclear program which he enthusiastically championed.

Reinforced by UN Security Council sanctions,

punitive measures cost Iran's economy billions in vital oil revenues and foreign investment, leaving the country struggling with raging inflation, high unemployment and a depreciated currency.

Hailed by Iran's poor as their champion but viewed as a bogeyman by the West, he was blamed by some analysts for the country's economic problems. His hotly

restraint". "The UK is deeply concerned by the growing violence and civilian casualties and we want to see an urgent de-escalation of tensions," he said on Twitter.

EU

European Union chief Charles Michel called on occupation forces and Palestinians to halt fighting and avoid civilian casualties, after speaking with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin. "Very worried by the recent upsurge of violence and indiscriminate targeting. Priority should be de-escalation and prevention of the loss of innocent civilian lives on both sides," European Council President Michel said on Twitter yesterday.

ICC

The chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court voiced concern at the escalation of violence between Zionist forces and the Palestinians and said "crimes" may have been committed. "I note with great concern the escalation of violence in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as well as in and around Gaza, and the possible commission of crimes under the Rome Statute," which founded the ICC, Fatou Bensouda said on Twitter yesterday.

United States

The United States urged both Zionist entity and the Palestinians to avoid "deeply lamentable" civilian deaths, calling for "calm" after days of violence. "We don't want to see provocations. The provocations we have seen have resulted in a deeply lamentable loss of life," he said. "We continue to call for calm, continue to call on all sides to de-escalate and to exercise restraint in their actions." — AFP

World powers call for de-escalation in Jerusalem, Gaza

PARIS: Calls grew yesterday for a de-escalation of violence after intense hostilities between Zionist forces and the Palestinians that have left at least 50 dead and hundreds injured. The occupation army has launched hundreds of air strikes on the Gaza Strip since Monday, while Palestinian militants have launched rockets in some of the worst violence in seven years. Calls for calm emerged from around the world, here is a roundup of reactions:

Russia, Turkey

President Vladimir Putin yesterday urged Zionist entity and the Palestinians to halt fighting in a call with Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who said the world needs to give the Zionist entity a "strong" lesson. "Serious concern was expressed about the continuing clashes and the growing number of people killed and wounded," the Kremlin said in a statement. It added that Putin had "called on the parties to de-escalate tensions and peacefully resolve the emerging issues".

Britain

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday urged Zionist entity and the Palestinians to "step back from the brink", calling for both sides to "show



NEW YORK: Protesters demanding an end to aggression by the Zionist forces against Palestine march in the street in Midtown Manhattan on Tuesday in New York City. — AFP

Egypt releases men accused of gang rape in luxury hotel

CAIRO: Egypt's prosecutor-general on Tuesday ordered the release of a group of young men accused of raping a woman in a Cairo luxury hotel in 2014 in after allegations surfaced online last year. The alleged assault which took place at the Fairmont Hotel, a five-star Cairo hotel, involved a group of young men hailing from wealthy families said to have drugged and raped a young woman, according to social media accounts which were investigated by public prosecutors.

"There is insufficient evidence against the defendants to proceed with a criminal case. The release of those temporarily detained has been ordered," the

prosecutor-general said in a late statement. The public prosecution explained how it pursued the alleged perpetrators by instituting travel bans and issuing international arrest warrants for the extradition of three of them from Lebanon. It also said it questioned the victim, a witness who was in the hotel suite and 39 other witnesses who viewed footage of a video clip which circulated showing the alleged rape. Police investigating the alleged incident and forensic doctors were also questioned, the prosecutor added.

Other reasons cited for the closing of the investigation were that "contradictions appeared in the testimonies of witnesses about key facts of the incident".

However, it noted the investigation could be reopened again if further evidence came to light. Egypt's #Metoo movement has picked up momentum since last year with many women coming forward to share testimonies of sexual misconduct. United Nations surveys say most women in the deeply conservative country have been subject to harassment ranging from catcalling, to pinching, groping and rape. — AFP

Libya's latest unity government faces uphill battle

TUNIS: A new unity government in Libya had raised hopes the war-ravaged North African nation had turned a corner towards peace—but analysts warn that major stumbling blocks remain. Thousands of foreign mercenaries are still on the ground, political factions remain deeply divided, and the promise of elections in December seems to be slipping away. "The honeymoon period of Libya's GNU (Government of National Unity) is now long gone," said analyst Emadeddin Badi. The toppling and killing of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a 2011 NATO-backed uprising plunged Libya into a bloody, decade-long struggle for power. After a grim, year-long battle for the western capital of Tripoli, in which rival camps were backed by foreign powers, a truce last summer finally led to a formal UN-mediated ceasefire in October.

That was followed in March by the establishment of a new unity government to replace rival administrations in east and west. Interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah's administration is charged with unifying Libya's institutions and preparing for elections on December 24. But despite the rare wave of optimism, Libya's deep rivalries are beginning to resurface. "After an unprecedented breakthrough over the past two months, we have entered a new phase of doubt—and a resurgence of divisions between east and west," noted analyst Imad Jalloul.

Last week, dozens of gunmen staged a show of force at a hotel used as a headquarters by Libya's presidential council in Tripoli. That came after interim Foreign Minister Najla Al-Mangoush, from eastern Libya, angered many in the west by demanding that Turkey withdraw troops it had deployed during the civil war. Ankara's support is widely credited with western Libyan forces' victory last June over eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar, who had waged a year-long offensive on Tripoli with the backing of Russia and the United Arab Emirates.

The UN Security Council has since called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops and mercenaries, estimated to number as many as 20,000. The foreign fighters are a mixed bunch: Russians from the private Kremlin-linked Wagner Group, Chadians and Sudanese, along with Ankara-backed Syrians and Turkish soldiers deployed under a bilateral agreement with the previous government in Tripoli.—AFP

Middle East strife drags in reluctant Biden

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden entered the White House hoping to avoid entanglement in the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. But, like US presidents before him, a crisis is dragging him in sooner than he would have liked. The flare-up in violence is putting Biden on a tightrope not only diplomatically but also at home, where progressives in his Democratic Party are increasingly vocal in criticism of Zionist entity, which enjoyed zealous support from former president Donald Trump.

"You can appreciate that the Biden administration looks at this as a low-value, low-return enterprise fraught with political risk," said Aaron David Miller, a longtime US negotiator on the Middle East. "There are no prospects of any success at all on this issue. You don't have leaders on either side who are willing to make decisions," said Miller, now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"The absolute best that the Biden administration could achieve in this conflict would be tamping down the violence," he said. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan since last week have been looking to restore calm as tensions soared over Zionist entity's potential eviction of Palestinians from east Jerusalem, which the Jewish

disputed re-election victory over key challenger Mir Hossein Mousavi in 2009 triggered one of Iran's worst political crises.

Deadly protests swept Tehran after the vote, which the opposition says was rigged. Ahmadinejad also faced the wrath of his own supporters over some political moves, with some rivals labeling him a "loose cannon". His diatribes against Israel—including saying it was doomed to be "wiped off the map" and that the Holocaust was a "myth"—even sparked rebukes from fellow Iranian conservatives for damaging Iran's international standing.

But for many Iranians, the blacksmith's son was seen as a devout and hardworking man of the people, a reputation he built on with huge spending programs and tours of the rural heartland during his first term. The populist ex-president had also put his name forward for the 2017 presidential election, against the advice of the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

His candidacy was rejected by the Guardian Council, an unelected body dominated by conservatives and responsible for overseeing the presidential polls. Ahmadinejad has continued to be a thorn in the side of authorities, demanding "the immediate holding of free presidential and parliamentary elections—without their being engineered by the Guardian Council and without interference by military or security bodies. He has also set up a profile on Twitter—a platform his administration banned in 2009 — preaching "Freedom, justice and love," focused on global issues like ending racism and inequality. — AFP

News in brief

Nauru vaccinates all its adults

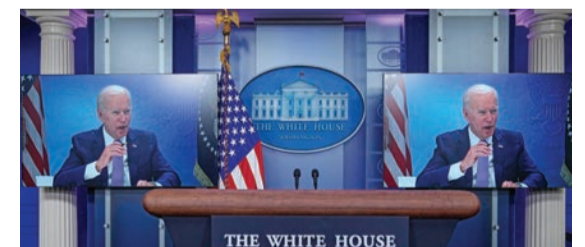
KOROR, Palau: The tiny Pacific nation of Nauru has congratulated itself on a "world record" COVID-19 vaccination drive which resulted in all its adult population receiving their first shot. The remote island nation is one of the few places in the world to remain virus-free and has now also become one of the first to give at least one shot to all adults. Authorities in Palau, another far-flung island nation in the Pacific, say they are on the verge of a similar feat, with 97 percent of adults receiving their first jabs. The Nauru government said its four-week campaign exceeded expectations as vaccination centers stayed open for extended hours to ensure maximum access.—AFP

UN envoy to Yemen to leave post

UNITED NATIONS: The UN envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, who has been in line for a senior role at the UN since April, is expected to leave his current post, sources said Tuesday. Houthi rebels recently refused to meet with the 69-year-old British diplomat, who has held the position since 2018, raising doubts as to whether he could effectively continue his work as Yemen's mediator. On Friday, the US State Department blasted the Houthi rebels for skipping the opportunity for talks with Griffiths to discuss a possible resolution to the conflict in Yemen. The war, which has lasted for years, pits Houthi rebels against the Yemeni government, which has been backed since 2015 by Saudi Arabia.—AFP

Colombia toll climbs to 42

BOGOTA: At least 42 people have been killed in near-daily protests against the Colombian government since April 28, the country's human rights ombudsman said Tuesday. All but one—a member of the armed forces—were civilians, the ombudsman's office said. The updated toll made these the bloodiest demonstrations since Colombia signed a peace agreement with the FARC guerrilla group in 2016, ending decades of civil war. It is lower than the 47 deaths reported by NGOs, who claim at least 39 were the direct result of "police violence". — AFP



WASHINGTON, DC: President Joe Biden is displayed on a monitor in the press briefing room while he attends a virtual meeting with governors at the White House Tuesday in Washington, DC. — AFP

state sees as part of its eternal capital but is considered occupied by the United Nations.

Following US appeals, the Zionist entity postponed a court ruling and rerouted a flashpoint march. But hundreds of Palestinians were injured in clashes with police, and the Islamist movement Hamas—which controls the Gaza Strip-fired rockets as it demanded the occupation forces leave the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, holy to Muslims. The Zionist forces responded with fierce attacks by fighter jets and helicopters, with at least 50 Palestinians now killed in the violence since Monday evening. Successive US presidents have tried to tread carefully on the Middle East in their first months, and the Biden administration had made explicit it was in no rush on peacemaking, especially with question marks over the futures of both Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas.—AFP

International

Taliban seize district on outskirts of Afghan capital

Three-day ceasefire to mark Eid Al-Fitr starts today

KABUL: The Taliban have seized a district from Afghan government forces on the outskirts of Kabul, ahead of a three-day ceasefire agreed between the warring sides, officials said. Nerkh district is around 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the Afghan capital in neighboring Wardak province, which has long been used by militants as a gateway to reach Kabul and launch deadly attacks. Violence has soared since May 1 when the US military began formally withdrawing its last remaining troops, as peace efforts between the Taliban and the Afghan government have stalled.

"Security and defense forces made a tactical retreat from the police headquarters of Nerkh district," Interior Ministry spokesman Tareq Arian said. Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesman for the Taliban, said the insurgents had captured the area on Tuesday, adding that their fighters had seized the police headquarters and an army base. The Defense Ministry yesterday said it would launch an offensive to win back the district, home to more than 60,000 people.

"Commando reinforcements are on their way," said Fawad Aman, a spokesman for the defense ministry. Large swathes of Wardak and neighboring Logar province have been controlled or contested for years by Taliban fighters and have served as a strategic staging ground for militants hoping to enter Kabul.

The main highway that connects Kabul to southern Kandahar province—the former Taliban stronghold and the scene of intense fighting in recent weeks—goes through the district. Taliban fighters have been encircling major Afghan urban centers, spurring speculation the militants are waiting for the Americans to withdraw before launching all-out assaults on Afghan cities.

US hands over base

The capture of Nerkh comes after the Taliban and



In this file photo, Afghan security forces stand near an armored vehicle during ongoing fighting between Afghan security forces and Taliban fighters in the Busharan area on the outskirts of Lashkar Gah. — AFP

the Afghan government agreed to observe a three-day ceasefire to mark the Eid Al-Fitr holiday starting today. Ceasefires in the past have widely held in what is largely thought to be an exercise by the Taliban leadership to prove they have firm control over the myriad factions across the country that make up the jihadist movement.

Violence has intensified across the provinces, particularly in the south, since the United States missed a May 1 deadline agreed with the Taliban to withdraw the last of its troops. While the Taliban have avoided engaging American forces, attacks against government and civilian targets have not stopped.

Thousands of residents in Helmand have been displaced because of clashes, which saw the US military

that the corpses had been dead four to five days. Press reports said as many as 25 bodies had also been recovered in the Gahmar district of Uttar Pradesh state. The Hindu daily quoted a local police official there as saying there were long queues at cremation grounds in the northern state. "It is possible that in hurry some disposed of the bodies in the river like this," Hitenra Krishna was quoted as saying.

Toll crosses 250,000

Meanwhile, India's coronavirus death toll passed 250,000 yesterday but comparisons of official data with those from people on the frontlines suggested the true number is several times higher. Across the vast nation, the devastating COVID-19 wave has overwhelmed hospitals with patients and crematoriums with bodies, and many coronavirus deaths are not being properly recorded as such.

Experts say the official quarter-million death count is hugely underreported. "Even three to four times would be an underestimate," Anant Bhan, an independent health policy and bioethics researcher, told AFP. Harrowing images from overwhelmed crematoriums, graveyards, and even makeshift funeral pyres have highlighted the scale of the crisis. Bodies of suspected COVID-19 victims have also been seen floating down the holy Ganges river.—AFP

Net across Ganges to catch India COVID-19 corpses

NEW DELHI: Authorities in northern India said they have installed a net across the Ganges river after the bodies of dozens of suspected COVID-19 victims washed up. The discovery of 71 corpses in Bihar state stoked fears that the virus was raging unseen in India's vast rural hinterland where two-thirds of its people live.

Locals suggested to AFP that relatives immersed the bodies in the river because they could not afford wood for traditional Hindu cremations or because crematoriums were overwhelmed by the number of funerals. Bihar's water resources minister Sanjay Kumar said on Twitter yesterday that a "net has been placed" in the river on the state border with Uttar Pradesh and patrolling increased.

He said the impoverished state's government was "pained at both the tragedy as well as harm to the river Ganges". Kumar added that postmortems confirmed



In this aerial photograph, funeral pyres of COVID-19 coronavirus victims are seen in a cremation ground along the banks of the Ganges River, in Garhmukteshwar. — AFP

IS-linked militants kill four farmers in Indonesia

PALU, Indonesia: Islamic State-linked extremists have killed four farmers in a remote village on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, police confirmed yesterday, with one of the victims reportedly beheaded. Five sword-wielding attackers ambushed a group of farmers who were harvesting their coffee plantation in Kalimago village in Poso regency on Tuesday morning. Central Sulawesi police spokesperson Didik Supranoto said.

The police blamed the attack on the Sulawesi-based East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT), one of dozens of radical groups across the Southeast Asian

archipelago that have pledged allegiance to IS. "Five eyewitnesses recognized one of the perpetrators as (a man named) Qatar, who is a MIT member," the police spokesperson said. Locals were made aware of the MIT members by their pictures, distributed by the police in their hunt for suspected terrorists in the area.

The attack was motivated by "terrorism as well as robbery", according to the police.

"Everything the victims had was taken away by the perpetrators including rice, money and other belongings they kept in their huts," he added. Local media reported that the victims were from Christian-majority ethnic group Toraja, and one was beheaded. These reports haven't been confirmed by the police. Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation, has long wrestled with Islamist militancy and terror attacks, while Central Sulawesi has seen intermittent violence between Christians and Muslims for decades. In November last year, MIT militants ambushed a Christian community in Poso, killing four with one victim beheaded and another burned to death.—AFP

labeled by the United Nations as "one of the greatest threats we face as a global community" and is predicted to cause 10 million deaths annually by 2050.

Previous research has shown that inflicting higher antibiotic doses on bacteria can slow its ability to develop resistance, yet little attention has been paid to how those higher doses impact the overall health of microbes. A team of Britain- and Europe-based researchers looked at how populations of E. coli reacted to varying concentrations of three common antibiotics.

They found that while higher antibiotic doses slowed the rate at which the bacteria developed resistance, they also gave rise to bacteria with "higher overall fitness"—

called in to defend Afghan forces. In the latest violence to rock Kabul, more than 50 people were killed and scores wounded in a western district of the capital when three bombs exploded outside a girls' school on Saturday. It was the deadliest attack in more than a year and came as residents were out shopping ahead of Eid.

The US military has so far completed between six and 12 percent of its final withdrawal, the Pentagon said Tuesday. The Afghan defense ministry announced yesterday that it had taken control of Camp Morehead, a US base in Kabul where American troops trained the Afghan military. The camp will now be used by Afghan special forces. The US military did not offer any immediate comment.—AFP



An Afghan man and woman walking outside the "Barchi National-100 Beds Hospital" where an attack at the maternity ward in May 2020 left 16 mothers and mothers-to-be dead, in the Dasht-e-Barchi area of Kabul. — AFP

Still no justice a year after Afghan hospital massacre

KABUL: It has been a year since Atiqullah Tanha's wife was murdered during a cold-blooded killing spree at a Kabul maternity ward, leaving their twin daughters motherless. "They cry a lot at night," Tanha said, saying the children are frequently unwell. "The doctor says mother's milk would have helped prevent most of the health issues." Even in a war-weary nation already deeply scarred by decades of conflict, the massacre of 16 mothers and mothers-to-be in western Kabul's Dasht-e-Barchi neighborhood caused horror.

International groups issued bold statements of condemnation, while Afghan politicians decried the violence and promised justice, though the assault—which killed 25 in total—went unclaimed. But, like with most attacks in Afghanistan, there was little to no follow-up. Only on Saturday, a series of bombs targeting a school in the same neighborhood—which is largely populated by Shiite Hazaras—killed more than 50 people, most of them schoolgirls. Few expect authorities to track down the perpetrators of the latest carnage—or prevent similar massacres in the future. And those fears are rising as Washington and NATO accelerate the withdrawal of their troops, leaving Afghan government forces to fend for themselves and protect the vulnerable population. Still, many had hoped the sheer savagery of last year's attack would finally usher in change.

That May 12, three gunmen rampaged through the hospital, shooting mothers in their beds and forcing many pregnant women to hide in safe rooms, where one gave birth. One infant, just hours after being delivered, was shot in the leg, but survived. In the immediate aftermath several women volunteered to help. "Being a mother myself I feel their pain," said Ghazal Sharifi, a lecturer, who along with her friends collects aid for the babies.

"No one is like their (real) mother... but we still have several women going to their houses to feed them." Weeks after the attack, Doctors Without Borders (MSF), an international medical charity that managed the ward, pulled out of the facility.—AFP

meaning it had a higher rate of reproduction. "We consider growth rate as a proxy for fitness, under the assumption that a strain that grows faster is more likely to take over the population and become dominant," lead author Mato Lagator, from the University of Manchester's School of Biological Sciences, told AFP.

The team behind the research, published in the journal Royal Society Biology Letters, said it showed how higher antibiotic doses presented a "dilemma" and could result in ultimately more-resistant bacteria. "Considering the fitness of the evolved strains adds another dimension to the problem of optimal antibiotic dosing," they wrote. Several studies in recent years have warned of the risks

News in brief

Belarusian politician goes on trial

MINSK, Belarus: A opposition politician in ex-Soviet Belarus went on trial yesterday on charges of joining "mass unrest," in a continuing crackdown on dissent following demonstrations after presidential elections last August. Historic protests swept the country over several months after Alexander Lukashenko, 66, claimed a landslide victory in the vote that opposition and European leaders said was rigged. Pavel Severinets, who co-chairs the unregistered Belarusian Christian Democracy party, was arrested in June last year during a picket.—AFP

Hungary submits plan to EU

BUDAPEST: Hungary has submitted to Brussels a national plan for tapping into the EU's post-pandemic recovery fund, the European Commission said yesterday. The 750-billion-euro (\$905-billion) rescue package of grants and loans comprises funds contributed by the EU's 27 member states to help the bloc's economies hard hit by the coronavirus. Budapest and Warsaw threatened to veto the recovery fund last year along with the entire EU budget over proposals to link some fund payments to rule of law conditions, describing it as "political blackmail". —AFP

Eight killed in Tajikistan landslides

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan: Tajikistan's government said yesterday that eight people had died and many properties were devastated in landslides in different parts of the country following heavy rainfall. Fatal landslides affect mountainous Central Asian Tajikistan every year around springtime, blocking off important roads in a country lacking transport infrastructure and forcing families to rebuild homes from scratch. The southern Khatlon region was worst affected by the latest landslides that struck on Tuesday, with three people dying in the provincial city of Kulyab, according to the country's emergency committee.—AFP

Austria chancellor probed over

VIENNA: Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz announced yesterday that prosecutors had started investigating him after the opposition accused him of making false statements to a parliamentary committee on corruption. "I wish to inform you that... prosecutors have opened an investigation against the head of my office," Bernhard Bonelli, "and against me", Kurz told reporters before a cabinet meeting. Kurz denied any wrongdoing, saying: "I always answered all (the committee's) questions truthfully." He said the investigation would have no impact on his work and that he would not resign.—AFP

Five die on ferry as Bangladeshis defy lockdown for Eid

DHAKA: At least five people died in Bangladesh yesterday on an overcrowded ferry carrying more than a thousand passengers, officials said, as millions defied a coronavirus lockdown to head home for the holiday of Eid. Tens of millions of Bangladeshis usually travel home to villages for the festival but this year the government has shut down long-haul buses, trains and boats to prevent the virus from spreading.

But ferries used to carry ambulances and food transportation trucks have remained in use, prompting a dangerous rush of people in recent days hoping to catch a ride on the vessels ahead of Eid on Friday.

The five people who died were found unconscious on the ferry near Shibchar, southwest of Dhaka, after more than 1,000 people rushed onto the vessel, which is designed to carry mostly buses and cars along with several hundred passengers. "They passed out in the ferry due to suspected heat stroke. We sent them to a hospital where (they) were declared dead. At least eight were also hospitalized," police official Chailau Marma said.

"The ferry was overcrowded as more than a thousand people boarded it," he said. Hafizur Rahman, another police officer, told AFP that crowds had built up at ferry stations in the area packed with people hoping to catch a ride home. "A five-kilometer (three-mile) traffic jam of cars and vans queued at Mawa ghat today," he said, referring to a major river station to cross the Padma river. Health experts fear the massive movement of people will spread the virus to the country's nearly 100,000 rural villages, which so far have not seen any major outbreak of coronavirus.—AFP

Higher antibiotic doses may make bacteria 'fitter'

PARIS: Using higher doses of antibiotics in a bid to tackle the growing problem of drug resistance may end up strengthening certain bacteria, according to research released yesterday that highlights a previously unthought-of risk. Antimicrobial resistance has been

of antibiotic over-prescription in medicine and over-use in livestock rearing, with the US Center for Disease Control estimating that one in three prescriptions for antibiotics are unnecessary. "New drugs are typically developed with one dominant focus—how well they get rid of the infection," said Lagator. "What is rarely considered is the likelihood of target bacteria evolving resistance to those drugs, as well as the fitness of the resistant strains that are likely to emerge." With antibiotic-resistant superbugs predicted to kill more people globally than cancer by mid-century, Lagator said that more research was needed into how higher doses impact the long-term evolution of bacteria.—AFP

Business

THURSDAY, MAY 13, 2021

Cities fail to adapt to climate change

400 million people at risk • Vulnerable communities to be hardest hit

PARIS: Hundreds of cities have no climate adaptation plans in place despite rising threats like floods, heatwaves and pollution, according to a report yesterday that said this could put 400 million people at risk across the world. Fast-expanding urban areas are home to more than half the population of the planet and are increasingly exposed to climate-fueled disasters, economic shocks and health crises as the world warms, with fears that vulnerable communities will be hardest hit.

CDP, a global non-profit that collects data disclosed by companies, cities, states and regions on environmental impact, analyzed over 800 global cities and found that 43 percent do not yet have a plan to adapt to the challenges of climate change. With more and more people drawn to live in urban areas, CDP estimated that by 2030 around 400 million people will be living in poorly prepared cities.

"The urgent need to act and have adaptation measures in place to keep the citizens safe, is increasing together with (the growing urban population)," said Mirjam Wolfrum, CDP's Policy Director for Europe. She said that 93 percent of the cities included in the report were facing "significant threats", while 60 percent highlighted "substantive" water security issues.

The top five hazards are flash and surface flooding - including from rising sea levels - heat waves, rainstorms, extreme hot days and droughts, she said, adding that air pollution is also a major health concern. Ongoing adaptation strategies in the municipalities that reported to CDP include tree planting (20 percent), flood mapping (18 per-

cent) and developing crisis management plans like evacuation systems (14 percent).

With cities responsible for some 70 percent of global emissions, the report said urban centers are also looking at schemes like increasing the use of renewable energy and improving green spaces, transport infrastructure and recycling.

'Investment in the future'

Under the 2015 Paris climate deal, countries agreed to limit global heating to 2 degrees Celsius, with a less damaging target of 1.5 degrees Celsius. The years since have been among the hottest on record, while severe storms, floods and wildfires have affected communities across the planet. But in some cases cities are also moving faster and setting more ambitious climate targets than national governments, according to CDP.

The report highlighted Santa Fe County in the United States, Greater Manchester in the United Kingdom and Penampang in Malaysia - the first city in Southeast Asia to report a net zero ambition. There has also been a marked increase in cities taking part in the CDP's annual report, with 812 cities disclosing in 2020, compared to just 48 in the first study in 2011.

Wolfrum said this could be down to the fact that the changes to the climate are increasingly visible. "People in the city council, they can now feel this and see this," she said. "They are already paying billions in climate hazards, and they see this as increasing." But even those with climate plans are struggling to finance them, CDP found, with a quarter of all cities citing budget shortfalls



DUBAI: This picture taken with a fisheye lens on May 9, 2021 shows a view of the Dubai city skyline as seen from Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building at 828 m. —AFP

as a barrier to action.

Globally, cities said they needed at least \$72 billion to finance planned environmental projects, with around three-quarters looking to the private sector for funding and innovation to help plug the gaps. "As an investment in the future, the costs of action greatly outweigh the cost of inaction," said Wolfrum.

The World Bank says that the more people and assets are concentrated in urban centers the greater the exposure to climate and disaster risk. Global average annual losses from weather-related and other disasters in cities were estimated at about \$314 billion in 2015 and the Bank says they are expected to increase to \$415 billion by 2030. —AFP

Sisi greenlights Suez expansion after blockage

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi approved Tuesday the widening and deepening of the southern part of the Suez Canal, after a stranded mega-ship crippled the critical maritime artery for six days in March. "What you heard today is about the upgrade in the southern stretch, where the problem (the grounded vessel) happened," Sisi said from Ismailia, where the Suez Canal Authority (SCA) is headquartered.

The major engineering enhancement "will lead to improvements in the ability of the guide (SCA) and the captain of any ship to navigate inside the canal", said SCA head Osama Rabie, who presented the expansion plan to Sisi in a televised address. Rabie said the upgrades would stretch "from the 122-kilometre mark to the 162-kilometre mark" and would include a 10-kilometre "duplication of the canal from the 122- to the 132-kilometre mark".

The project will last 24 months, he added, with the widening extending lanes "by 40 meters (131 feet) to the east and deepening from 66 feet (20 M) to 72 feet". Sisi said the work would improve the canal, "taking into account the growth of global trade". The 200,000-tonne MV Ever Given got diagonally stuck in the narrow but crucial global trade artery in a sandstorm on March 23, triggering a mammoth six-day-long effort by Egyptian personnel and international salvage specialists to dislodge it.

Egypt lost between \$12 million and \$15 million in revenues for each day the waterway was closed, according to SCA figures. After the vessel was freed, Sisi pledged investment to avoid any repetition of the canal closure. The mega-ship has since been impounded in a lake between two stretches of the canal amid a compensation dispute. A court in Ismailia last week rejected an appeal from the ship's Japanese owners against its seizure. Egypt spent more than \$8 billion on an expansion of the northern section of the canal in 2014-15. —AFP

Money sent home helps Mexicans survive recession

IZUCAR DE MATAMOROS, Mexico: Like millions of Mexicans struggling during the pandemic, the money sent home by her father from the United States became a lifeline for Maria Fernanda Camano after she lost her job. Such remittances, which rose to a record high in March, have helped to cushion the devastating blow to Latin America's second-largest economy from the coronavirus.

Camano's father Victor Hugo has lived for 15 years in California, where he works night shifts as a freight truck driver. "It made me think: what would have happened if he had stayed here? Maybe he wouldn't have been able to help me," said the 22-year-old former office worker. At one point her father received a telephone call from his employer telling him not to show up to work as the pandemic shut down activities in the United States.

"It was mortifying," Camano told AFP in Izucar

EU predicts big turnaround as jobs ramp up

BRUSSELS: The EU yesterday sharply revised its growth forecasts for this year and next, saying an accelerated vaccination drive and the bloc's landmark recovery plan would lift Europe out of recession. "Recovery is no longer a mirage. It is under way," EU economic affairs commissioner Paolo Gentiloni told a media conference.

The pickup in growth confirms forecasts by the IMF and other data that showed an increase in manufacturing and greatly improved confidence by consumers who see a happy end to the long winter of COVID-related restrictions. Europe also hopes to quiet criticism that it has fallen short in jump-starting its economy compared to the US where the economic activity has already roared ahead on the back of major stimulus plans.

According to the European Commission, growth in the 19 countries that use the euro currency will hit 4.3 percent in 2021 and 4.4 percent in 2022, compared with 3.8 percent for these years in its previous estimate given in February. For the full 27 members of the EU, the commission said the econ-

Oil demand drops as virus surges: IEA

PARIS: Oil demand dropped last month as the coronavirus surged in India and elsewhere, the IEA said yesterday, in a reminder that the global recovery from the pandemic remains fragile. Nevertheless, the International Energy Agency said in its latest monthly report that its outlook for a strong rebound in energy demand in the second half of the year remains unchanged as expanding vaccination programs allow the global economic recovery to power ahead.

de Matamoros in the central state of Puebla, one of the areas of Mexico that receives the most remittances. "Fortunately they decided that my father's job was necessary, so he had more work," she said, adding that she was "deeply grateful" and worried about the sacrifices he was making.

'Economic ravages'

An estimated 1.8 million households receive remittances from Mexicans living abroad, mostly in the United States. Some 12 million people born in Mexico live in the US, as well as another 26 million second or third generation Mexicans. The remittances totaled \$40.6 billion in 2020, according to official figures.

In March 2020, as the pandemic began gripping Mexico and the United States, remittances rose 35 percent compared with the same month of the previous year. The average amount of each transfer rose to \$370 in 2020, according to the central bank. Remittances have remained strong and in March this year reached a monthly all-time high of \$4.15 billion.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has repeatedly thanked emigrants for their contribution at a critical time for the economy. "This has helped us deal with the economic ravages of the

omy will expand by 4.2 percent in 2021 and by 4.4 percent in 2022.

"The shadow of COVID-19 is beginning to lift from Europe's economy," Gentiloni said, though he cautioned that "the risks of a scarring effect remains real". If the growth is confirmed, the European economy will have sped out of a second recession in less than year, after a slow rollout of COVID vaccines stymied a first economic recovery in the winter of 2020-21. It would still be trailing the other two biggest economies in the world, however. The United States is forecast to reach growth of seven percent this year - its fastest pace since the 1980s - and China is looking similarly buoyant.

Public debt

The EU said public debt in the eurozone will be at historic levels, with a debt pile stuck at above 100 percent of annual GDP over the next two years. This public debt is particularly high in Greece, at 208.8 percent in 2021, and Italy at 159.8 percent of GDP. But despite the historic budget-busting, Gentiloni insisted that major public spending "has been - and remains - essential in helping Europe's workers and companies to weather the storm".

That includes the EU's landmark 750-billion-euro (\$910-billion) recovery plan, which was decided almost a year ago but is expected to only start paying out later this summer. Gentiloni said

The IEA said that global oil demand fell by 130,000 barrels per day in April from March, and remains lower than at the end of last year. "The recovery in global oil demand remains fragile as surging COVID cases in countries such as India and Thailand offset recent more positive trends in Europe and the US," it said. The IEA lowered slightly its forecast for overall demand growth this year, to an increase of 5.4 million barrels per day (mbd), due to the pandemic's continued grip on much of the world at the beginning of the year.

However, it still sees demand nearly recovering to pre-pandemic levels by the end of the year. It forecasts global oil demand to reach 99.6 mbd in the fourth quarter of this year, not far off the 100.6 in the final quarter of 2019. But the IEA doesn't forecast supply to rise as sharply as demand with OPEC+ producers not fully ramping up production.

pandemic," he said last week. More than half of the country's population of 126 million lives in poverty, according to Mexico's National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy. In Puebla the figure stands at 59 percent.

'Pays for everything'

Experts say that an economic recovery and fiscal stimulus measures in the United States, a popular destination for Mexican workers, have helped to boost remittances. US President Joe Biden's American Rescue Plan approved by Congress in March included \$1,400 stimulus checks for most taxpayers, following two previous rounds of payments of up to \$1,200 and \$600 last year. "Much of that was turned into remittances," said Juan Jose Li Ng, an economist at the bank BBVA.

Another factor was the strengthening of the dollar which boosted the value of the money sent home when converted into pesos, he said. While Mexico is the main recipient of remittances in Latin America, the payments have also been a major boost to other countries in the region.

In neighboring Guatemala, Crescencia Oliva is one of millions who rely on remittances, which hit a record high of \$11.34 billion in 2020, according to



BRUSSELS: European Commissioner for Economy Paolo Gentiloni takes off his mask upon his arrival to attend a news conference on the economic forecast for spring 2021 yesterday. —AFP

that, largely thanks to that recovery package, "the EU is now projected to recover to its pre-crisis level in the fourth quarter of '21" and the eurozone would reach that point in the first quarter of 2022.

Out of the major eurozone economies, Spain and France, which were particularly hard hit in 2020, will have the highest growth rates in 2021, both nearing six percent, according to the Commission's estimates. Growth will be more moderate in Germany, at 3.4 percent, and the Netherlands, at 2.3 percent, as they were slightly less affected last year. —AFP

At the start of the COVID-19 crisis OPEC and its allies including Russia failed to agree to restrain production, instead they ramped it up to gain market share, resulting in a crash in prices that even saw some oil contracts briefly turn negative. That also resulted in inventory levels surging higher. That overhang in inventories is only now being worked off as OPEC+ continue to only slowly increase output after having cut it sharply last year to stabilize prices.

If the group continues along its current path the gap in demand for its products and production could reach 2.5 million barrels per day by the final quarter of this year, the IEA estimates. Even if Iran reaches a deal easing sanctions the gap would still be 1.7 mbd, it added. A reduction in inventories in coming months would give OPEC+ nations greater leverage over prices. The countries have the ability to rapidly increase output to meet demand. —AFP



IZUCAR DE MATAMOROS, Mexico: Mexican student Maria Fernanda Camano walks out of the international money transfer system office through which she receives remittances from her father on May 8, 2021. —AFP

the country's central bank. The 80-year-old said that she survives thanks to the money she receives every month from her daughter, who moved to the United States 18 years ago as an undocumented migrant. "She pays for everything. She's the one who supports us. She tells me: 'Mom, even if I'm left with nothing, you don't have to go hungry,'" Oliva said. —AFP

Business

Citing labor shortage, US states end pandemic jobless benefits

Biden has championed bill that extends benefits till September

WASHINGTON: A handful of US states have announced they will end extra unemployment benefits provided by the federal government, which they blame for creating a shortage of workers. Iowa on Tuesday joined Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Montana and South Carolina in cutting off the payments that through September are providing \$300 a week on top of regular state benefits.

But President Joe Biden pushed back against the argument that the extra payments - funded by the \$1.9 trillion rescue package Congress approved in March - mean "people are being paid to stay home rather than go to work." The moves in the Republican-led states came after a disappointing employment report released last week, which showed the US economy recovered just 266,000 positions last month, far short of the expected gain of one million positions.

The data show the economy still has not recovered 8.2 million of the 22 million jobs lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some employers and the US Chamber of Commerce blame the sluggish hiring in part on the generous jobless benefits. "It's time for everyone who can to get back to work," Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds tweeted on Tuesday, saying her state would end its participation in all federal pandemic-related unemployment benefit programs.

"Our unemployment rate is at 3.7 percent, vaccines are available to anyone who wants one and we have more jobs available than unemployed people," she said. Some states also cut off the special federal program that provided funds to help freelance and gig workers, such as those employed by ride hailing services, who do not qualify for regular unemployment benefits. Montana recently reacted to its labor shortage by launching a "return-to-work bonus" that would pay \$1,200 to workers who accept a job and get off unemployment. In Mississippi, Governor Tate Reeves said he had spoken to many small business owners and found the special programs "that

may have been necessary in May of last year are no longer so in May of this year". "It has become clear to me that we cannot have a full economic recovery until we get the thousands of available jobs in our state filled," he said on Twitter.

'Americans want to work'

Biden championed the bill that extended the benefits till September, and told reporters Monday "we don't see much evidence" of their linkage with the labor shortage. "Americans want to work," he said, adding, "We also need to recognize that people will come back to work if they're paid a decent wage." The president also noted that unemployed workers lose their benefits if they refuse a suitable job offer so they cannot "game the system."

A White House official told AFP the pandemic benefits have been "a vital lifeline" to families during the crisis. The official employment data were collected in the week of April 12, when only 18 percent of working age people were vaccinated against COVID-19, while the rate has risen to 24 percent, and the White House official pointed to uneven school reopenings and lack of childcare as key factors hindering workers from accepting positions.

The White House official said data show that states with higher wage replacement rates have higher job finding rates. "The opposite effect of what we would expect if the FPUC were inhibiting job creation right now." A study published by the University of Massachusetts in February found "no indication" that changes in benefit amounts "had a substantial impact" on hiring. Even so, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey said Monday the benefits are "contributing to a labor shortage that is compromising the continuation of our economic recovery."

Bumpy ride

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has acknowledged that "there's no question" businesses are

New US electric car chargers are green leap of faith

MONTCLAIR, New Jersey: It has been a long road for electric cars in the United States, but myriad announcements by major automakers signal they are at last moving towards the mainstream. With more electrical models set to hit showrooms, the focus will shift to consumers' willingness to pivot to electric cars at a time when conventional gas stations remain familiar and ubiquitous.

The fear of being stranded has long been viewed as a barrier for electric vehicles (EV). Addressing this unease, dubbed "range anxiety," is driving President Joe Biden's policy and bringing new EV charging companies to public markets. In New Jersey, a northeastern state with an auto-centric orientation typical of the United States, officials recently announced \$5.4 million in grants to build EV chargers at 27 high-traffic locations, including at 7-Eleven convenience stores, gas stations and outdoor strip malls.

The new chargers, which will allow motorists to fuel up in 20 to 30 minutes, aim to normalize EVs, counter range anxiety and create a path to a

petroleum-free future. But the push highlights a quirk in the future of EVs: It is not clear exactly how much these new stations will be used, because most charging is still expected to take place at home or at work.

"The public charging is really to fill up here and there," said Peg Hanna, an assistant director at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. Ben Rich, who charges his Tesla at home but uses fast chargers when traveling, suspects some of the sites will be underutilized, but thinks they are probably needed to transition off of fossil fuels. "People need to feel they will be able to charge if they need to," said Rich, who teaches physics and environmental science in Montclair, New Jersey. "If they don't feel this, they will stick with gasoline cars."

Political momentum

Momentum for EVs was rising even before the 2020 election, but since November, General Motors has set a 2035 target for having an all-electric fleet, and states have accelerated EV programs. Biden pledged to build 500,000 new EV charging stations during the campaign and included funding for new chargers in his proposed \$2 trillion infrastructure package.

The plan faces opposition from Republicans, yet White House support for EVs has added to confidence that change is coming. "It's no longer a

fact that the pipeline should be substantially operational by the end of this week and over the weekend," she told reporters at the White House.

The shutdown raised fears the shortages would cause gasoline prices to spike just ahead of the US Memorial Day holiday, the unofficial kickoff to the summer travel season. But Granholm called on station owners to act responsibly and said, "We will have no tolerance for price gouging." The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on Tuesday announced a one-week suspension of clean air rules in an effort to ease supply issues.

The waiver is meant "to address the fuel supply emergency caused by a cyberattack on Colonial Pipeline's computer networks that led to the pipeline's shutdown," EPA Administrator Michael Regan said in a letter to the governors of Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia and the mayor of Washington. Regan said the EPA and Energy Department "have been actively monitoring the supply of fuel" and found that "the unusual pipeline shutdown has affected gasoline supplies."

No gas by nightfall?

The EPA move, effective through May 18, suspends rules that require urban areas to use fuel with additives like MTBE, which makes gasoline less polluting but also more expensive. The waiver "is necessary to take action to minimize or prevent disruption of an adequate supply of gasoline to consumers," Regan said.

That followed the weekend announcement from the Transportation Department that it was easing up

of the eastern state of Massachusetts. The "Vineyard Wind" project calls for up to 84 wind turbines to be built 12 nautical miles off Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, two islands off the Massachusetts coast. The administration of President Joe Biden has set a goal of generating 30 gigawatts of energy from offshore wind by 2030.

The 800-megawatt Vineyard Wind project would provide enough power for 400,000 homes and businesses, the Interior Department said in a statement. "A clean energy future is within our grasp in the United



COLUMBIA, South Carolina: In this file photo, job applicants register at a military job fair for National Guardsmen, veterans and their families on Jan 19, 2012. —AFP

having trouble filling open positions, an issue borne out by data. The National Federation of Independent Business said Tuesday that while optimism among its members improved, "a record 44 percent of owners reported job openings that could not be filled."

"Small business owners are seeing a growth in sales but are stunted by not having enough workers," NFIB Chief Economist Bill Dunkelberg said in a statement. "Finding qualified employees remains

the biggest challenge for small businesses and is slowing economic growth." Members are raising wages to attract employees, he said.

Meanwhile, the Labor Department's report Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary released Tuesday showed openings jumped to a record 8.1 million on the last day of March, but hires were little changed at 6.0 million. Yellen cautioned that "we've had a very unusual hit to our economy, and the road back is going to be somewhat bumpy." —AFP



An electric vehicle charging station is seen at a BP gas station in New Jersey on May 6, 2021. —AFP

question of 'if' and not even a question of 'when.' It's now," said Jonathan Levy, chief commercial officer at EVgo. "The question is how much faster does it go?"

EVgo, which plans to go public later this year, is a leader in fast chargers, which run at many times the voltage compared with "Level 2" chargers that recharge cars over several hours. The burst of electricity needed can sometimes require additional transformers. Local permitting and siting requirements can also drag out projects, industry officials say. —AFP



ATLANTA: Gas stations begin to run out of gasoline after motorists rushed to fill up on Tuesday. —AFP

on time limits for drivers of tankers carrying diesel, gasoline and jet fuel to 18 of the most affected states, and is considering easing shipping rules as well. "Everybody's seeing the news, you know, they get fearful, then everybody rushes out and gets gas. They're filling up gas cans and everything," one gas station manager in Raleigh, North Carolina told AFP. "We'll be out of gas before the sun goes down if it stays this way."

American Airlines said in a statement that two daily long-haul routes out of Charlotte, North Carolina, were impacted by the fuel shortage, without giving further details. Oil industry analyst Patrick De Haan said on Twitter the national average gasoline price reached \$2.97 a gallon, "matching the highest since 2018." —AFP

States," Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said. "The approval of this project is an important step toward advancing the administration's goals to create good-paying union jobs while combatting climate change and powering our nation."

The United States currently relies very little on wind power, with only small wind farms located off the coasts of Virginia and Rhode Island. Vineyard Wind, a joint venture between Avangrid Renewables and Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners, said the project will be operational in 2023. —AFP

US attack exposes DarkSide as cyber attack service

PARIS: US authorities have identified a relatively new gang of cyber criminals as being behind the ransomware attack which paralyzed a key fuel pipeline. Called DarkSide, experts say it is one of a growing number of outfits that provide attack software to other groups. DarkSide first emerged publicly in August 2020 and it specializes in what is known as ransomware: programs that infiltrate a victim's computer network and then encrypt data on machines, thus blocking operations. The criminals then demand a ransom to free the data.

Pay or data sold

Experts believe that the team behind DarkSide is made up of experienced cyber criminals as the software goes beyond earlier indiscriminate ransomware attacks. "DarkSide follows the double extortion trend, which means the threat actors not only encrypt the user's data, but first exfiltrate the data and threaten to make it public if the ransom demand is not paid," said analysts at Cybereason, a firm which helps companies protect themselves against such attacks.

"This technique effectively renders the strategy of backing up data as a precaution against a ransomware attack moot," the company said on its website. If the group doesn't get what it wants, it can "auction the data off to other pirates, to databases of stolen information," said Damien Bancal, a journalist at Zataz.com who specializes in the illegal traffic of stolen information. DarkSide can also threaten to make public sensitive or embarrassing data. "The amount of a DarkSide ransom varies between \$200,000 and \$2 million," France's national data security agency Anssi said in February.

Ransomware as a service

Experts believe that DarkSide rarely carries out attacks itself. Instead, it provides the software and assists its clients who carry out the attacks. "Those responsible for DarkSide are very organized, and they have a mature Ransomware as a Service (RaaS) business model and affiliate program," said Cybereason.

"The group has a phone number and even a help desk to facilitate negotiations with and collect information about its victims - not just technical information regarding their environment but also more general details relating to the company itself like the organization's size and estimated revenue," the company added.

Zataz.com's Damien Bancal said DarkSide even offers a sort of "after-sale service" option to help negotiate with victims. Security expert Jerome Billois at WaveStone compared DarkSide's business model to that of technology platforms like Uber. It links up cyber criminals with potential victims, provides the necessary software, and receives a commission from whatever ransom is paid.

In a statement published on the darknet - a area of the Internet not accessible by the general public - DarkSide states that it has no political agenda and no governmental links. It said it is out to make money, not to create social problems so it claimed it will only ransom companies that can afford it. US authorities believe DarkSide is based in Russia. —AFP

Pipeline shutdown sparks fear of US gasoline shortage

WASHINGTON: Fears the shutdown of a major fuel pipeline network would cause a gasoline shortage led to some panic buying and prompted US regulators on Tuesday to temporarily suspend clean fuel requirements in three eastern states and the nation's capital. While it remained unclear the degree to which supplies would be affected, drivers lined up to fill their tanks at gas stations in the southeast, with some carrying extra containers amid fears of fuel scarcity.

A ransomware attack Friday on Colonial Pipeline forced the company to shut down its entire network, but government officials on Tuesday urged calm and said the situation is only temporary. The operator of the largest fuel conduit system in the United States, Colonial Pipeline sends gasoline and jet fuel from the Gulf Coast of Texas to the populous east coast through 8,850 km of ducts that serve 50 million consumers.

The company said it expects to have the pipeline network fully up and running by the end of the week. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said some areas "may feel a supply crunch, as Colonial fully resumes." However, "there should be no cause for hoarding gasoline, especially in the light of the

US approves its biggest offshore wind farm yet

WASHINGTON: The US announced on Tuesday that it had granted final approval for its biggest wind power project yet, which will be located off the coast

Business

Deaths in Australia highlight plight of delivery riders

Gig work is the main source of income for many people

SYDNEY: Lockdown-fueled demand for take-out meals has brought throngs of new delivery riders onto streets around the world, but in Australia the boom has also seen tragedy with a spate of road deaths highlighting the plight of couriers. As many industries ground to a halt last year, millions lost their jobs and others were asked to work from home, 43-year-old Xiaojun Chen was among the legions of couriers who rushed out on the job.

The work was hard, the hours were long, and most of Chen's pay went back home to China - but he was driven by a dream to send his 15-year-old daughter to university. Food riders doubled the time they spent zipping around Australia's streets in April and May last year as lockdowns were in force, according to data from one delivery service, Deliveroo.

Then on Sept 29, Chen collided with a bus while delivering food in Sydney. He later passed away in hospital - one of five couriers to die on Australian roads in just three months of 2020. "My husband loved his life, looked forward to the future, and was kindhearted," his wife Lihong Wei told AFP through tears. His loss left Wei shaken and unsure how she would support elderly parents and two children alone.

Chen's firm Hungry Panda paid for his funeral expenses and for his widow to fly to Australia, but his status as a contractor rather than a full-time employee has made further help unclear. "He has been working for Panda all this time, and he has been working so hard, so why is he not entitled to those benefits that every personnel is entitled to?" Wei told a New South Wales parliamentary inquiry.

A Hungry Panda spokesman told AFP that, although it was not legally required to, the company was still discussing compensation over Chen's death and was working to improve safety for riders through equipment and training.

'Exploitation'

The "gig economy" - using temporary "independent" workers for short-term tasks - has exploded since the launch of the Uber ride-sharing service in 2009. Promoted as a flexible way for people to earn

money without the constraints of a full-time job, gig work is the main source of income for many. Sixty-one-year-old Steve Khouw, who has been riding for Deliveroo for more than four years, told AFP he started delivering for the platforms mainly for exercise, but found many of his fellow couriers needed the work to survive.

"These people hardly speak English, and are very much dependent on themselves for their daily living and to send back money abroad to their family," he said. Riders, who are paid by delivery, often feel pressured to rush to avoid bad reviews that can mean they are booted from a platform, Khouw added. "They can't afford not to work, to be suspended or to be terminated, you know, with no recourse. That to me is exploitation."

Esteban Linares, who was injured while riding for Uber Eats, says the promise of flexibility disappears when you rely on the platforms for a living. "It's not as flexible as you might think because if we want to make a profit, we will always have to work at the peak hours," Linares told AFP.

In recent years legal challenges to gig worker conditions have multiplied around the world, pushing back against the lack of employer-provided benefits like health insurance or minimum wage protections. Earlier this year, Spain became the first country in the European Union to announce Deliveroo riders would be considered salaried staff, with France expected to announce proposals for delivery platforms soon.

'Global struggle'

Australian and New Zealand app Menulog last month moved toward treating its Australian delivery riders as employees, following a similar move by its European owner Just Eat. "When people start getting killed out there and hospitalized that's where we draw the line," Menulog Managing Director Morten Belling told a hearing of federal parliament in Sydney.

"It doesn't really matter if they're being killed on the Menulog platform or another platform: we play in the same industry, and we don't want to be part of



SYDNEY: This photo taken on Dec 12, 2020 shows food delivery rider Steve Khouw waiting to collect an order at a restaurant in the Sydney suburb of Chatswood. —AFP

that." The announcement was heralded as a "watershed" moment by Australia's Transport Workers Union. But Menulog's Australian market share pales in comparison to Uber Eats which, according to research from IBISWorld released last year, claims nearly 70 percent of the sector's revenue.

An Uber Eats Australia spokeswoman told AFP that the company continues to call for "sensible measures" to provide benefits and protections but wouldn't follow Menulog as it would reduce the flexibility of working for the platform. The company also said it provided "specialized insurance" for riders to cover injuries and income support for riders hurt on the job.

Similarly, Deliveroo said it was committed to

improving conditions but blamed current industrial law for preventing it from providing increased benefits. Khouw, working alongside the Transport Workers Union, is trying to negotiate better safety for riders at Deliveroo, but finds organizing isolated riders in a smaller market like Australia incredibly hard. "We find that in Australia, we don't have the same density of riders as, for example, in Britain," he said.

But as a growing number of riders across the world meet online to share information, he hoped pressure from overseas would fuel change in Australia. "It is paramount to let everyone know that we are not alone," he said. "We are part of a global movement, part of a global struggle." —AFP

Delivery riders become staff in Spain reform

MADRID: Spain's cabinet on Tuesday approved a labor law reform that recognizes delivery riders working for firms such as Deliveroo or UberEats as staff in a first in the European Union. The modifications will be published in the state's official journal in the coming days and firms will have three months to comply. "Spain is now at the forefront of international legislation. There is no other country in the world... that has dared legislate on this matter," Labor Minister Yolanda Diaz told a press conference.

It is the first legislation passed in Europe that explicitly regulates the status of delivery workers who get around on bikes and motorcycles and whose numbers have exploded in recent years. California passed a law in 2019, the only one of its kind in the United States, requiring companies in the "gig economy" to treat their workers as employees and provide them with social protection.

But it was ultimately rejected in a referendum last November. In Europe, delivery workers are generally considered as self-employed, especially in France. The legislative decree "recognizes the presumption of employment for workers who provide paid delivery services" via such digital companies, a ministry statement said. "A young person riding a bike with an app or a mobile device is not an entrepreneur," said Diaz.

Paying social contributions

Companies will now have to pay contributions so their delivery riders can receive social benefits. Under terms of the reform, companies using riders must make available to unions details about how they share out the delivery orders and the bonuses paid to riders. The pledge came after a Supreme Court ruling in September that there was a "working relationship" between riders and Barcelona-based food delivery app Glovo.

In Spain, as in other countries, the riders have repeatedly denounced their precarious working conditions, taking legal action to demand recognition as salaried staff, which would guarantee them benefits such as paid holidays and sick leave. In early March, Deliveroo, Stuart, Glovo and UberEats issued a statement warning that such "forced laborization... endangers a sector that contributes 700 million euros (\$850 million) to Spain's GDP". The main delivery workers union, Riders X Rights, denounced the reform as "insufficient" while other smaller unions fear the reform will drive platforms to cut back on jobs. —AFP

Ivory Coast cocoa sector faces struggle with child labor

SOUBRE, Ivory Coast: Twenty minutes into his meeting with a social worker after being picked up by police, 15-year-old Issouf wrings his hands and admits it: He has been working on a cocoa plantation. The scrawny lad is one of an army of youngsters who forego school to provide cheap labor for farmers in Ivory Coast, the world's top producer of the cocoa bean. Police had netted Issouf and 67 other children in a crackdown in Soubre, the country's cocoa-producing heartland 400 km west of the economic capital Abidjan. The widely-publicized operation last week, named Nawa 2, comes as the West African country faces mounting demands from western consumers for ethical chocolate - a product that is ecologically sound and free of child labor.

According to the NORC research group at the University of Chicago, nearly 800,000 children were involved in cocoa-related labor in Ivory Coast in 2018-19 - a figure that compares to an estimate of 1.2 million in 2013-14, made by researchers at Tulane University in New Orleans. Many of the children in Ivory Coast come from Burkina Faso and Mali, poor landlocked countries and traditional

providers of labor for their richer neighbor.

This was the case of Issouf, who said he came from neighboring Burkina with his father two years ago. His father went away after a month and left the boy with a man, who was presented as his uncle, to work on a plantation. "This is a case of trafficking," said Alain-Didier Lath Mel, director of child protection at the Ivorian ministry of the family.

Vocational training

Operation Nawa 2, the fifth swoop of its kind since 2009, mobilized about 100 men from the security forces, police and paramilitary gendarmes over two days, said Luc Zaka, deputy director of the criminal police. A team of journalists, including those from AFP, was able to follow the police in the Meagui area, 50 km from Soubre.

The convoy of half a dozen 4x4s preceded by a motorbike rider drove along a reddish clay track that wound between the green fields of cocoa and rubber trees. Regularly, the convoy stopped. Children were sometimes surprised along the path, returning from the field with their machetes, sometimes in hamlets tending to the heaps of cocoa beans drying in front of the houses.

Police officers also roamed the fields to flush out children in the plantations. Some of the youngsters were caught only after a chase, but after four hours of activity, a dozen children and adolescents were taken in. They were driven to the Children's Reception Centre in Soubre, which opened in 2018.



SOUBRE, Ivory Coast: Police officers detain a child caught drying cocoa in the sun in the village of Opouyo on May 7, 2021 during an operation to remove children working on cocoa plantations. —AFP

Like Issouf, the underage workers were heard and sensitized by social workers and psychologists.

Their parents were due to pick them up the next day, after a discussion with the police and center officials. In serious cases of forced labor or child abuse, young people stay at the reception center for a few months. Many are illiterate. They can go back to school and learn a trade, such as cattle raising, market gardening, sewing, hairdressing and ironwork. Apart from the swoops by police, regular work is carried out in the countryside by local child protection committees. —AFP

Nearly fifth of Earth's surface transformed

PARIS: Whether it's turning forests into cropland or savannah into pastures, humanity has repurposed land over the last 60 years equivalent in area to Africa and Europe combined, researchers said Tuesday. If you count all such transitions since 1960, it adds up to about 43 million sq km, four times more than previous estimates, according to a study in Nature Communications.

"Since land use plays a central role for climate mitigation, biodiversity and food production, understanding its full dynamics is essential for sustainable land use strategies," lead author Karina Winkler, a physical geographer at Wageningen University & Research in the Netherlands, told AFP. Plants and soil - especially in tropical forests - soak up about 30 percent of manmade car-

bon pollution, so large-scale landscape changes could spell success or failure in meeting Paris Agreement temperature targets.

The 2015 climate treaty enjoins nations to stop global heating at "well below" two degrees Celsius, and 1.5C if possible. The planet has already warmed 1.2C above the preindustrial benchmark, enough to unleash a crescendo of deadly storms, sea level rise and other impacts. Since 1960, Earth's total forest cover has shrunk by nearly a million km², while areas covered by cropland and pastures have each increased by roughly the same extent, the study found.

But the global figures obscure important regional differences. Forest areas in the Global North - Europe, Russia, East Asia and North America - have increased in the last 60 years, while forest loss in developing countries of the Global South has been staggeringly high, the study showed. Conversely, croplands have declined in the north and expanded in the global South, especially to satisfy rich country appetites.

"Tropical deforestation has occurred



ANKARA: A farmer in the Golbasi district of Ankara tills his field as he drives his tractor on May 8, 2021. —AFP

for the production of beef, sugarcane and soybean in the Brazilian Amazon, oil palm in Southeast Asia, and cocoa in Nigeria and Cameroon," Winkler noted. High oil prices - peaking at around \$145 per barrel of crude in 2008 - also fueled

conversion of forests to bioenergy crops. The study revealed rapid land use change - driven first by the Green revolution in the 1960-70s, and then by the expansion of globalized markets - up to 2005. —AFP

UK economy in recovery mode

LONDON: Britain's economic recovery began to recover strongly at the end of the first quarter despite lockdown restrictions, official data revealed yesterday. Gross domestic product jumped 2.1 percent in March, the Office for National Statistics said, although by not enough for the UK economy to

avoid contracting overall in the first quarter. GDP shrank by 1.5 percent overall in the first three months of 2021 compared with the final quarter last year, the ONS said.

The UK is meanwhile currently exiting lockdown at a gradual pace, allowing the economy to further recover from pandemic fallout. "As we cautiously reopen the economy, I will continue to take all the steps necessary to support our recovery," finance minister Rishi Sunak said in reaction to the data.

Darren Morgan, ONS director of economic statistics, said the strong recovery seen in March was led

by retail and school reopenings, offsetting weakness in the services sector. He added that construction grew strongly over the quarter and stood above its pre-pandemic level in March. Morgan also noted that manufacturing recovered robustly in both February and March.

Meanwhile, "exports of goods to the EU continued to increase in March and are now almost back to their December level" before Brexit took place, he added. "However, imports from Europe remain sluggish in the first three months of the year, being outstripped by non-EU imports for the first time on record." —AFP

Business

Lessons from 2011 disaster help Toyota ride out chip shortage

Annual net profit jumps 10.3%, further growth forecast

TOKYO: The global microchip shortage dragging on the auto industry has put barely a dent in production at Toyota, the world's biggest automaker, thanks to lessons it learned after Japan's 2011 tsunami disaster. While the latest crisis caused by skyrocketing demand for semiconductors has forced global car makers to revise production plans, Toyota exceeded its sales targets this year and expects to sell even more units in the next 12 months.

Christopher Richter, an auto expert and managing director at the brokerage CLSA.

The Japanese giant reviewed all its suppliers, even the most indirect, giving it a better understanding of its supply chain and allowing it to react quicker in times of crisis. Faced with a global semiconductor shortage this year, "they were just way better prepared than any other automaker in the world", Richter told AFP. A source close to another Japanese carmaker agreed.

The global auto industry has faced serious headwinds during the pandemic, with lockdowns fueling declining sales, and a shortage of the chips used in modern vehicles has only compounded the woes. A surge in demand for home electronics that use semiconductors, as well as a US cold snap, a drought in Taiwan and a fire at Japan's Renesas manufacturer have created a perfect storm throttling chip supplies.

Loyal suppliers

Toyota was a pioneer of the widely used "just-in-time" production model - where stockpiling is kept to a minimum to reduce costs. But as soon as it spotted the first signs of a chip shortage, the firm switched things up. "Toyota was the first automaker to adjust its supply chain management system from a purely 'just-in-time' model to a hybrid model where it stockpiles more of the critical components such as semiconductors," said Joshua Cobb, an auto analyst at Fitch Solutions.

"Toyota has always been a leader in developing supply chain management systems, and other automakers tend to follow Toyota's lead," Cobb said. German auto giants Volkswagen, BMW and Daimler, and their US rival General Motors, have all recently announced that they will change their supply and stockpiling systems to build up more reserves.

But Japanese firm had a head start, and another crucial advantage: Most of its suppliers, including chipmakers, are Japanese companies, which will "prioritize supplying Toyota", Cobb said. Toyota often holds shares and sometimes controlling stakes in these firms, so it has "greater control" over the situation, he added. "This differs from other automakers, specifically European and American automakers which source most of their components from Asian companies," Cobb told AFP. An industry source said Toyota also prioritizes good relations with suppliers, ensuring consistently solid sales and pledging not to renegotiate fees after a contract has been signed. All these factors mean Toyota often comes out on top. "If we receive orders from several clients at the same time, we have to prioritize the most powerful and stable," said the source. Announcing its earnings yesterday, Toyota could point to the fruits of its preparations, surpassing its sales target with 9.9 million vehicles sold by all its brands in the financial year to March. It is now targeting total sales of 10.5 million units in 2021-22.



TOYOTA CITY: In this file photo taken on Dec 8, 2017, robot arms weld the bodies of fourth generation Toyota Prius cars on the production line at the company's Tsutsumi assembly plant in Aichi prefecture. — AFP

Its success lies in part, experts say, in its decision to prepare extensively for disruptions after the experience of Japan's devastating earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis 10 years ago. The catastrophe left parts of Japan's industry on its knees for months, especially vehicle makers, whose domestic supply chains were thrown into turmoil. Toyota suffered like its rivals and took six months to return to normal production, but the firm resolved not to let the same thing happen again. "Toyota learned the lessons of the 2011 earthquake probably better than anybody," said

"We all took steps like that post-Fukushima, but Toyota did it best, and kept it up," he said, referring to the nuclear plant that was crippled by the tsunami.

Toyota's full-year net profit jumped 10.3 percent even as the pandemic hit the auto industry, the Japanese firm said yesterday. Toyota said it generated 2.25 trillion yen (\$20.6 billion) in the fiscal year to March, up from 2.04 trillion yen the year before, beating its own annual forecast. For the year to March 2022, it now projects an annual net profit of 2.3 trillion yen, up 2.4 percent.

Tech coalition seeks US aid to respond to chip shortage

WASHINGTON: A newly formed coalition of technology firms called Tuesday for \$50 billion in US government aid to boost incentives for domestic semiconductor manufacturing in the face of a deepening chip shortage. The Semiconductors in America Coalition urged Congress to allocate funds for research and manufacturing, calling the effort essential for economic and national security.

The coalition - which includes giants including Apple, Microsoft, Google, Amazon, AT&T and Verizon and several dozen other firms - said it seeks funding for the CHIPS for America Act, which was passed by lawmakers earlier this year but without funds appropriated.

"Semiconductors are the brains of the systems and technologies that enable America's economic growth, national security, digital infrastructure, and global technology leadership," said John Neuffer, president and chief executive of the Semiconductor Industry Association, whose member firms are part of the coalition. "Leaders from a broad range of critical sectors of the US economy, as well as a large and bipartisan group of policymakers in Washington, recognize the essential role of semiconductors in America's current and future strength."

The shortage has added to a supply crunch for the technology sector and a variety of other manufacturing sectors including automotive as the economy emerges from a pandemic-induced slowdown. "To address this problem in the short term, government should refrain from intervening as industry works to correct the current supply-demand imbalance causing the shortage," the coalition said in a letter to congressional leaders.

"But for the longer term, robust funding of the CHIPS Act would help America build the additional capacity necessary to have more resilient supply chains to ensure critical technologies will be there when we need them." — AFP

Researchers' new best friend? Robot dog gets to work

BURE, France: Deep underground in eastern France, a four-legged bundle of energy named Scar steps gingerly through vast caverns, loaded with sensors for taking measures in places where humans might fear to tread. It's an ideal training ground for Scar, a robotic "dog" being groomed by researchers at the Ecole des Mines engineering school in Nancy.

Its name is a French acronym for "Advanced Robotic Assistance System", and the Ecole des Mines was the first in France to purchase the Spot robot from the US firm Boston Dynamics last September. On Tuesday, a team from the university tested out Scar's abilities at the Cigeo lab 500 m below the village of



Brazilian navy divers recover on June 8, 2009 a huge part of the rudder of an Air France A330 aircraft lost in midflight over the Atlantic Ocean on June 1, 2009. — AFP

Court orders Air France, Airbus trial over Rio-Paris crash

PARIS: Air France and Airbus must stand trial on involuntary manslaughter charges over the 2009 crash of a Rio de Janeiro to Paris flight that killed all 228 people on board, a Paris court ruled yesterday. Flight AF447 plunged into the Atlantic Ocean during a storm on June 1, 2009, the deadliest crash in Air France's history. The court followed the general prosecutor's recommendation, overturning an earlier court decision to drop the case against both the French flagship carrier and Europe's top aircraft maker. It took two years to find the wreckage of the Airbus A330 jet, which was eventually located by remote-controlled submarines at a depth of 3,900 m.

Investigators determined the crash was caused by errors by pilots, who were disorientated by faulty

speed monitoring equipment. The general prosecutor's office call for a manslaughter trial against both Air France and Airbus went beyond the Paris prosecutor's initial demand that only Air France should face manslaughter charges.

Both prosecuting teams contested a 2019 decision to drop the charges by the two investigating magistrates assigned to the case, who said they could not ascribe fault to the companies in what appeared to be a case of pilot error. But prosecutors accused Air France of indirectly causing the tragedy by providing insufficient training on how to react in case of malfunction of the so-called Pitot tubes, which enable pilots to monitor their speed. The pilots reacted incorrectly when the plane stalled after the speed sensors froze over as it flew through a large cloud at high altitude. Lawyers for Airbus said they would lodge an appeal against the decision, saying it "in no way reflects the conclusions of the investigation which resulted in no charges against Airbus in this case". Air France told AFP that it had committed "no criminal act" and that it, too, reserved the right to lodge an appeal. The Paris appeals court decision had been much awaited by victims' families. — AFP

Bure, slated to become a permanent home for thousands of tons of toxic waste from France's nuclear power plants. At times the black-and-yellow robot was guided by remote control, but at times it could navigate on its own, opening up the possibility for researchers to program autonomous tasks. Scar can also enter and inspect areas that are hard to reach or could expose humans to radiation risks.

"We're now interested in developing artificial intelligence so it could be deployed for surveillance of deep geological storage," said Guillaume Hermand, an engineer with France's ANDRA nuclear waste management agency. "Our underground lab is a unique and exceptional playground," he said.

Students at the university will work on advanced AI applications for Scar that will be tested at the lab. One possibility is to have it carry out regular data capture surveys of the same room or route, which could give early warning to the lab's operators of minute geological shifts at the site. It could also be deployed quickly in case of accidents where larger equipment would be impractical. — AFP



Margrethe Vestager

Amazon wins EU court appeal in Luxembourg case

LUXEMBOURG: Amazon scored a major legal victory yesterday when an EU court annulled an order from the bloc's powerful antitrust authority that Luxembourg recoup €250 million (\$295 million) in back taxes. The European Commission in 2017 accused Luxembourg of handing tax privileges to the internet retail giant that amounted to illegal state aid. But the EU General Court found "no selective advantage" had been given to the firm by the small EU Duchy, a statement said.

The setback for the EU lands less than a year after iPhone maker Apple spectacularly won its appeal in the same court against the European Commission's blockbuster order in 2016 that Apple repay Ireland €13 billion. French energy giant Engie meanwhile lost its appeal yesterday in the same court against a similar EU order to repay Luxembourg €120 million in taxes. In that case, the EU's General Court said the commission did demonstrate a tax advantage by Luxembourg to the company.

Amazon hails ruling

The cases came in the wake of the 2014 LuxLeaks revelations that unearthed secret deals between Luxembourg and hundreds of companies guaranteeing super low tax bills. In the Amazon case, in 2017 Europe's competition chief Margrethe Vestager Luxembourg of an illegal deal with the internet giant to pay less tax than other businesses.

In a statement, Amazon said "we welcome the Court's decision, which is in line with our long-standing position that we followed all applicable laws and that Amazon received no special treatment". At the heart of the case was a violation of the so-called "arm's length principle", which for tax purposes is meant to ensure that transactions between subsidiaries are based on prices other companies would pay.

The court said that the EU's methods for calculating the advantage was "based on an analysis which is incorrect in several respects," the statement said. The European Commission was not immediately available for comment, but it has previously said that win or lose its cases have had a positive effect, with international efforts currently under way to close tax loopholes.

In recent weeks, the United States has embraced the idea of a global minimum corporate tax that would make special deals offered to multinationals a thing of the past. Talks are ongoing at the OECD to decide on the minimum tax that if confirmed would likely see higher taxes for US tech giants and other multinationals.

The EU has had trouble defending those decisions, losing against Apple, but also in its case against Starbucks. The commission appealed the EU General Court's decision in the Apple case, which will now go to the EU's highest body, the European Court of Justice. The lower court similarly struck down an order by Brussels that Starbucks pay €30 million in back taxes in the Netherlands, but upheld a decision against Fiat in Luxembourg. — AFP



BURE, France: A robot-dog is pictured in a corridor of 490m-deep in an underground laboratory near Nancy on Tuesday. — AFP

Lifestyle | Awards



In a handout picture released by the Brit Awards English singer-songwriter Dua Lipa accepts her award for Female Solo Artist at the BRIT Awards 2021 in London.



In a handout picture released by the Brit Awards English singer-songwriter Dua Lipa performs on stage. — AFP photos

DUA LIPA WINS BRITISH ALBUM OF THE YEAR IN FEMALE-DOMINATED BRIT AWARDS



In a handout picture released by the Brit Awards English singer-songwriter Dua Lipa poses with her awards for Female Solo Artist and British Album at the BRIT Awards 2021.



In a handout picture released by the Brit Awards Griff poses with her Rising Star award in the media room.

Dua Lipa won the coveted British Album of the Year prize at the Brit Awards on Tuesday, in a ceremony that saw female artists dominate the mixed categories. Around 4,000 guests streamed into London's O2 Arena for the biggest night in British pop music, as the ceremony welcomed guests for the first time in two years as part of the government's pilot scheme easing coronavirus restrictions. The Brit Awards have been criticized in the past for nominations seen as skewing heavily male, but this year almost all of the main prizes went to female artists.

Little Mix won best British group, becoming the first female act ever to do so. Singer and poet Arlo Parks took the Breakthrough Artist award, and best international group went to the American band HAIM. In another history-making moment, Taylor Swift became the first female winner of the global icon award, for what organizers said was "her immense impact on music across the world and incredible repertoire and achievements to date".



File Photo shows Billie Eilish winner of International Female Solo Artist.

With her album "Future Nostalgia", 25-year-old Dua Lipa who has won three Brit Awards previously-beat soul singer Celeste, Parks, and rapper J Hus, who was the only male contender in the best album category. Dua Lipa and J Hus were also named best female and male solo artist respectively. "Last time I was up here accepting this award in 2018, I said that I wanted to see more women on



Photo shows Leigh-Anne Pincock, Jade Thirlwall and Perrie Edwards of Little Mix pose with their British Group award.

these stages," Dua Lipa said. "I feel so proud that three years later, we're seeing that happened, and it really is such an honour to be a part of this wave of women in music."

'Give Boris a message'
She dedicated one of her awards to

British nurse Dame Elizabeth Anionwu, noting that she had said "there's a massive disparity between gratitude and respect for frontline workers, because it's very good to clap for them, but we need to pay them." "So I think what we should do is we should all give a massive, massive round of applause and give Boris (Johnson, the British prime minister) a message that we all support a fair pay rise." The audience, which was packed with key workers after organizers reserved 2,500 seats for them, gave her a standing ovation.

Other winners included Harry Styles, who won best British single for "Watermelon Sugar", and Billie Eilish and The Weeknd, who won best international female and male artist respectively. Coldplay kicked off the show with a performance on the River Thames, and Dua Lipa herself performed live, sporting a Union Jack miniskirt and an upswept hairdo reminiscent of late singer Amy Winehouse. British rapper Rag'n'Bone Man performed live with the choir from Britain's National Health Service (NHS), while veteran American star Pink joined the performance remotely from the United States. "Having people attend this special evening makes me really excited for touring to come," said Rag'n'Bone Man before the ceremony. The annual event, which normally takes place in February, was postponed for three months because of coronavirus safety and logistical concerns. Audience members neither observed social distancing nor wore face coverings once seated, but needed to produce a negative coronavirus test result. — AFP



Arlo Parks accepts the award for Breakthrough Artist during the BRIT Awards 2021.



In a handout picture released by the Brit Awards US singer-songwriter Adam Lambert poses on the red carpet on arrival for the BRIT Awards 2021.



In a handout picture released by the Brit Awards US singer-songwriter Taylor Swift attends the BRIT Awards 2021.



In a handout picture released by the Brit Awards Elton John and Olly Alexander perform virtually at the BRIT Awards 2021.



In a handout picture released by the Brit Awards HAIM winners of the International Group award pose on the red carpet.

Lifestyle | Features

Brit Awards winners

- Album of the Year:** "Future Nostalgia" by Dua Lipa
- Male Solo Artist:** J Hus
- Female Solo Artist:** Dua Lipa
- Breakthrough Artist:** Arlo Parks
- British Group:** Little Mix
- British Single:** "Watermelon Sugar" by Harry Styles
- International Female Solo Artist:** Billie Eilish
- International Male Solo Artist:** The Weeknd
- International Group:** HAIM
- Rising Star:** Griff



In a handout picture released by the Brit Awards Coldplay are seen performing at the BRIT Awards 2021.



In a handout picture released by the Brit Awards Olivia Rodrigo performs on stage.

INSTAGRAM TIARA AND KASHMIR SAPPHIRE SHINE AT GENEVA AUCTION

A Savoy royal tiara which everyone could try on via Instagram, and the largest Kashmir sapphire ever auctioned sold for millions of dollars each on Tuesday. The tiara went for \$1.6 million and the sapphire fetched \$3.9 million when the historic treasures went under the hammer at Sotheby's auction house in Geneva. The tiara was kept in the Italian House of Savoy royal dynasty for more than 150 years. It was bought by an Asian collector, Sotheby's told AFP. The diadem, containing 11 natural pearls and diamonds, dates from the second half of the 19th century.



The tiara went for \$1.6 million (RM6.61mil) and the sapphire fetched \$3.9 million (RM16.10mil) when the historic treasures went under the hammer at Sotheby's auction house in Geneva. — Photo credit Twitter/Sothebys

The tiara can also be separated into two parts, allowing it to be worn as a necklace. Keen to attract the interest of a new generation, Sotheby's created an Instagram filter that allowed people to create a picture of themselves wearing the Savoy tiara in a sumptuous Italian palace. More than 22,000 people took advantage. "This tiara encapsulates all the pomp, power and presence associated with royal jewels and over the past couple of weeks," said Benoit Repellin, head of magnificent jewels sales at Sotheby's in Geneva. "The price achieved today is testament not only to its exceptional craftsmanship and the quality of its materials which makes it a true work of art, but also to its historical and emotional resonance."

Sotheby's said it was one of the highest prices paid for a tiara in recent years. The auctioneers say they have witnessed unprecedented global demand for royal jewelry, particularly from younger clients in Asia. Collectors from that continent have bought a third of the tiaras sold by the auction house in the past five years.

The Kashmir sapphire, a 55.19 carat gem, was formerly in the collection of Maureen Constance Guinness, a marchioness of the aristocratic Anglo-Irish brewing family, who died in 1998. Kashmir sapphires of over 30 carats are very rare. It was sold alongside a cushion-shaped Kashmir sapphire weighing 25.97 carats. Following their discovery in the early 1880s, the mining of Kashmir sapphires only lasted from 1882 and 1887, covering such gems some of the most coveted on the market, according to Sotheby's. They have a rich cornflower blue hue with a soft, velvety texture, and retain their lustre in any light. — AFP

Meet China's elderly influencers cashing in on the Internet

Exquisitely garbed in a traditional cheongsam dress, 76-year-old Sang Xiuzhu is one of an unlikely vanguard of elderly influencers storming Chinese social media with videos of glamour in the golden years. Two years ago she joined the "Fashion Grandmas", whose one-minute clips and livestreams of them turning Beijing's streets into a catwalk are devoured by millions of fans. They mix elegance with epithets of wisdom-on marriage, love and life-from a generation who are now increasingly integral to both the economy and online culture of China. "Our young fans say they are not afraid of ageing after seeing grannies like us living fashionable and happy lives," said Sang.

China is getting old fast and Beijing is faced with the monumental challenge of how to provide for tens of millions of retirees. But this has also opened opportunities for those who are financially comfortable in their dotage and able to harness the commercial possibilities of technology. It is an economy worth hundreds of billions of dollars, craving longevity, entertainment and consumer goods, and hooked like everybody else to their smartphones. The "Fashion Grandmas" collective has 23 main members, with dozens more fringe contributors across the country, all aged between their late 50s and their mid-70s. They make money from pop-up ads in their videos and livestreaming product sales. "They can sell 200 units of a product within a minute of starting a stream," says their agent He Daling.



Members of the "Fashion Grandmas" during a performance on the China Central Television (CCTV) show called "Xingguang Dadao", due to be broadcast in July in Beijing.

Their videos also carry messages of inspiration, such as "beauty is not only for the young," or "even the elderly can live a wonderful life!" as well as serious messages such as call-outs of domestic violence. One of their videos shows a man raise a hand to hit his girlfriend in a store, before a furious older woman grabs his arm and waves for him to be dragged away by security guards. "Domestic violence is illegal" reads the text on the screen, adding that it is "shameful" to hit women. Another shows a pregnant woman being threatened by her husband before an elegant granny has him pinned

back in his chair by bodyguards and gives the woman a hug. "The elderly should live how they want and be optimistic," Sang told AFP. "Age is just a number."

'Actually we know everything'

A generation of Chinese born in the 1960s are reaching their mandatory retirement age of 60 for men and 55 for women. These new retirees are the first group to receive higher education after the Mao-era Cultural Revolution, which scorned the "bourgeois" pursuit of learning and left a generation without social

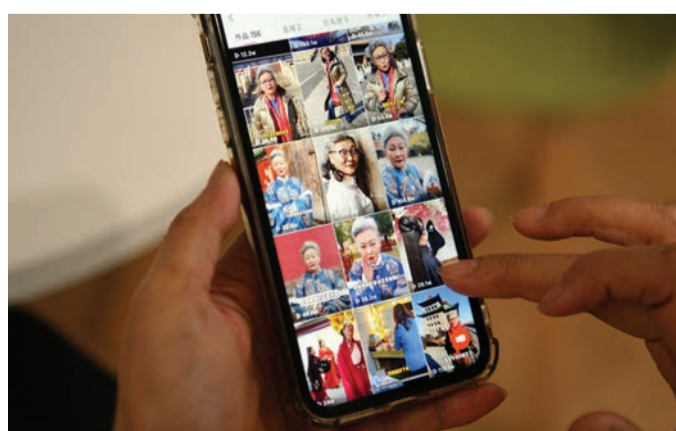
mobility. "They are richer and highly educated," said Bian Changyong, chief executive of the Beijing Dama Technology Company, which helps run the elderly influencers' social media. "That improves the 'cashability' and quality of China's elderly internet industry."

The value of China's "grey-haired" economy is estimated to reach 5.7 trillion yuan (nearly \$900 billion) this year, according to iiMedia Research. Bian said the Covid-19 pandemic had also pushed the elderly deeper online, hunting for shopping and entertainment. To reach this vast untapped pool of older consumers, Bian's company also provides online courses for senior citizens to learn singing, dancing or kung fu through livestreaming channels. "China's mobile internet industry has earned money from every group... men, women, youngsters, parents, but not the elderly," said Bian. "This could be the last structural opportunity of the industry."

Granny Ruan Yaqing, 58, has her own video channel and uses an iPhone to reach over six million fans as she tours Beijing's history and culture. She fell into the world of video-streaming to avoid becoming a "nagging" presence stuck at home, she jokes. But she also carries a message on the virtues of age from a golden generation refusing to be pushed into the background of modern China. "Young people assume the elderly know nothing," she says. "Actually we know everything." — AFP



Members of the "Fashion Grandmas" during a rehearsal for a performance on a television show in Beijing. — AFP photos



This photo shows social media influencer and granny Ruan Yaqing scrolling through her channel on video-sharing app Kuaishou, while editing her videos at an office in Beijing.



Members of the "Fashion Grandmas" dressed in traditional costumes during a rehearsal for a performance on a television show in Beijing.

Sports

Photo of the Day



Jonathan Midol of France performs in Switzerland. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Last-gasp Lakers keep Knicks waiting for playoff berth

LOS ANGELES: Talen Horton-Tucker drained a clutch three-pointer in the closing seconds of overtime as the Los Angeles Lakers snatched a thrilling 101-99 victory over the New York Knicks on Tuesday. Horton-Tucker's 24-foot effort with 21.1 seconds remaining sealed a battling win for the Lakers and prevented the Knicks from clinching their first playoff appearance since 2013.

It was the dramatic final act of a pulsating clash at the Staples Center, which saw the Knicks' former Lakers player Julius Randle dominate for long periods with a 31-point display. Randle looked to have given the Knicks the edge with a superb three-pointer of his own from 25ft which put the visitors up 99-98 with just over a minute remaining. But a crucial travelling call against Randle moments later surrendered possession to the Lakers, allowing Horton-Tucker to grab his game-winning late three-pointer.

The victory means the Lakers' faint hopes of securing an automatic playoff place are still alive, with three games remaining. The Lakers, who were missing the injured LeBron James, are seventh in the Western Conference with 39 wins against 30 defeats. The top six teams advance automatically to the post-season. Horton-Tucker finished with 13 points while Kyle Kuzma led the Lakers scoring with 23. Anthony Davis added 20 points while Andre Drummond had 16 points with 18 rebounds. Randle meanwhile was backed by Derrick Rose, who had 27 points.

Elsewhere Tuesday, Andrew Wiggins poured in 38 points as the Golden State Warriors upset the second ranked Phoenix Suns 122-116 in San Francisco. The Warriors, who downed the Western Conference leaders Utah on Monday, fought back from a 16-point first half deficit to grind out a gutsy win. Steph Curry had 21 points for the Dubs while Kent Bazemore added 17. Devin Booker led the Phoenix scorers with 34 points while veteran Chris Paul added 24.

Sixers frustrated

In other games, Caris LeVert scored 24 points as the Indiana Pacers staged a fourth quarter rally to frustrate the Philadelphia 76ers' bid for the Eastern Conference top seed ranking. The Sixers could have clinched top spot heading into the playoffs with a



LOS ANGELES: Julius Randle #30 of the New York Knicks drives between Wesley Matthews #9 and Anthony Davis #3 of the Los Angeles Lakers during a 101-99 Laker win in overtime at Staples Center on Tuesday in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

victory over the Pacers, who are ninth in the standings, but instead crashed to a 103-94 defeat in Indianapolis.

Philadelphia had led by 16 points late in the second quarter, but were gradually reeled in by a dogged Pacers performance during the second half. Power forward Tobias Harris led the scoring with 27 points while Ben Simmons finished with 20 points eight rebounds and seven assists. Philadelphia's preparations had been disrupted by a late withdrawal by Joel Embiid, who was ruled out with an undisclosed non-COVID illness earlier Tuesday. "We didn't have any execution tonight, we really didn't," Sixers coach Doc Rivers said. "We lost our focus. Just couldn't make anything in the second half."

In Boston, the Miami Heat provided more evidence that they are hitting form at the right time with a 129-121 win over the Celtics to book their playoff place. Miami, beaten by the Lakers in last season's

NBA Finals, punched their ticket with a confident victory that saw Tyler Herro finish with 24 points and 11 rebounds.

Five other Miami players finished in double figures, with Bam Adebayo and Duncan Robinson adding 22 points each. Jimmy Butler, who left the game and did not return after being poked in the eye in the first half, had 13 points.

Elsewhere, the Brooklyn Nets warmed up for the postseason with a 115-107 defeat of the Chicago Bulls. Kevin Durant finished with 21 points on a night when coach Steve Nash could afford to share the minutes amongst his roster.

Only one of the nine Nets players who had game time failed to reach double figures, with Landry Shamet finishing with only one point. Zach LaVine scored 41 points for the Bulls, who are clinging onto the faint hope of securing a play-in place from the East. — AFP

Fans must show they're virus-free to attend Roland Garros

PARIS: French Open fans must show they are free from COVID-19 if they want to be among the small number of spectators allowed to attend the last five days of this year's Roland Garros, organizers said yesterday.

French tennis federation director-general Amelie Oudea-Castera said potential spectators at the May 30-June 13 Grand Slam must demonstrate proof, from June 9, that they had a negative PCR or antigen test within 48 hours of attendance, or bear a certificate of vaccination.

"The activation of the health pass is a little revolution for us that allows us to unlock the limits a little and which will be a big first," Oudea-Castera said. She added that up to 5,388 spectators would be admitted at the Roland Garros site in western Paris until June 8, in line with current French government coronavirus-related regulations on fan-based events.



PARIS: In this file photo taken on June 2, 2019, members of the audience watch the men's singles fourth round match between Argentina's Leonardo Mayer and Switzerland's Roger Federer on day eight of The Roland Garros 2019 French Open tennis tournament in Paris. — AFP

That figure will go up to 13,146 a day later thanks to the government's decision to raise fan numbers to a 65 percent limit of actual capacity. The tennis federation, however, has not received a waiver concerning the curfew currently in force in France, meaning there will be no fans present for the first nine evening sessions.

The nationwide curfew, presently between 7pm and 6am, will be pushed back to 9pm on May 19 and 11pm from June 9, meaning the 10th and final evening session, scheduled to start at 1800 GMT, will be able to be attended by a crowd of 5,000.

This year's Roland Garros has already been pushed back by one week, with organizers hoping the COVID-19 situation in France will have improved enough to maximize the number of fans. Last year's Roland Garros was delayed by four months due to the pandemic. A maximum of 1,000 spectators were allowed on site each day.

'Significant shortfall'

In non-COVID times, the French Open was capable of welcoming 38,436 fans on a daily basis. The tennis federation is aiming to sell 118,611 tickets this year, against some 500,000 for the last properly held pre-COVID tournament, in 2019. "This is undoubtedly a very significant shortfall compared to a normal edition," Oudea-Castera acknowledged. "There will be very important work on clearing up the financial situation."

Federation president Gilles Moretton added: "Roland-Garros is the lifeblood of the French tennis economy," with the tournament representing around 80 percent of the federation's budget. Players, as was the case at last year's Roland Garros, will be lodged in two official hotels in a sanitary bubble. "And there will be no exception," tournament director Guy Forget said.

On arrival in Paris, players will go directly to the hotels for a test and will only receive their accreditation if that test is negative. PCR tests will then be conducted every four days, Forget said, adding that players only had access to Roland Garros on their respective game days, but were allowed to leave their hotels for one hour a day "to go jogging or get a bit of air". — AFP

Japan to vaccinate Olympic athletes before Games

TOKYO: Japan plans to vaccinate its Olympic athletes before the Tokyo Games, domestic media reported yesterday, a move that would place them ahead of the general population as the government faces pressure over a slow rollout.

There was no immediate comment from Olympic organizers or Japan's Olympic Committee on the reports in the Nikkei and Yomiuri Shimbun dailies, which did not name their sources. The newspapers said around 2,500 people including athletes and coaches would be included, with Japanese sports federations in charge of administering the jabs.

Japan's government had previously denied it was considering a plan to vaccinate athletes ahead of the general population. Earlier this month, US drug giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech announced a deal with the International Olympic Committee to provide vaccines for competitors and staff at the Tokyo Games. They said initial doses for participating delegations would begin at the end of May, without specifying which teams would be involved. Japan has so far only approved the Pfizer jab and the government has faced pressure over the comparatively slow rollout of its inoculation campaign as Tokyo and other areas battle new virus emergencies.

For now, only medical workers and the elderly are eligible for jabs, with no timeline yet set for the general population to receive them. Polls show public dissatisfaction with the rollout, and the government has pledged to speed up the program.

The Games, opening in just over 10 weeks, face



continued controversy in Japan, where surveys show a majority oppose holding them this summer. But in a potential bright spot for organizers, around 280 doctors have applied for just 200 volunteer positions at the Games, the Kyodo news agency reported yesterday, citing unnamed sources.

Organizers have come under fire for requesting medical volunteers step forward to help during the Games at a time when Japan's healthcare system is under pressure from a fourth virus wave. Despite public opposition, organizers insist the Games can be held safely this summer, pointing to safety guidelines, increasing vaccination of athletes and a series of recent test events in Tokyo.

A spokesman for Toyota, a top Olympic sponsor, gave an ambivalent response when asked about their view on the Games. "We are anxiously thinking every day about what is the best way," Toyota's chief communication officer Jun Nagata told reporters. "The spirit of the Olympics and Paralympics... is based on the premise that athletes as well as people in Japan are in a safe environment," he said. "Part of Japanese people's frustration has been directed at athletes, probably because of worries over medicine. We as a sponsor really regret that." — AFP



Kuwait Ramadan Bowling Open concludes

KUWAIT: Ramadan Bowling Open Championship concluded in Kuwait recently after witnessing a large turnout. Chairman of Kuwait Bowling Club Sheikh Talal Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said the club's board of directors is keen on creating a competitive atmosphere among players in order to maintain their technical level by holding local championships as an alternative to training

camps abroad due to the extraordinary circumstances brought about by the coronavirus pandemic.

Sheikh Talal lauded the strong competition during the Ramadan Open Championship and the large turnout of players of both genders, which contributed to sharing experiences and elevating the technical and physical levels of the athletes. The Bowling Club organized the month-long Ramadan Open Championship as part of local events that aim at maintaining the spirit of competition among athletes. The players were divided into A and B groups. The A group winner was Hassan Qassem, followed by Mohammad Khalid Habeeb and Yaqoub Al-Shatti. The B group was won by Fahad Al-Ali, Brian Fernandez and Nawaf Al-Hassan.

Sports

Haaland set for German Cup final return as Nagelsmann eyes title farewell

BERLIN: Striker Erling Braut Haaland is expected to return for Borussia Dortmund in tonight's German Cup final against RB Leipzig, whose departing coach Julian Nagelsmann wants to sign off with his and the club's first title.

Haaland returned to training on Tuesday having sat out Saturday's 3-2 league win over Leipzig with deep bruising as England winger Jadon Sancho scored a superb winner in the cup final rehearsal. "Even if he (Haaland) plays, I give us a good chance of winning this final," said Leipzig defender Lukas Klostermann, who scored during Saturday's away league defeat.

Dortmund will be without Switzerland goalkeeper Marwin Hitz, who injured his knee on Saturday and will be replaced in goal by Roman Buerki. Dortmund are bidding to lift the cup for only the fifth time in the club's history. Their last win in the final was four years ago when they squeezed past Eintracht Frankfurt.

"It will be very intense again," Dortmund center-back Mats Hummels said ahead of his eighth cup final, having only won twice. As Dortmund sports director Michael Zorc told AFP subsidiary SID: "The cup has been around for 85 years, we have won it four times. You don't lift it every year."

In contrast, Red Bull-backed Leipzig, who were only founded in 2009, are still chasing a first major title in any competition after a 3-0 thrashing at the hands of Bayern Munich in the 2019 final. Without or without Haaland, Dortmund are favorites after winning their last five games since losing to Manchester

City in the Champions League quarter-finals.

They are also unbeaten in their last seven matches against Leipzig. "The record is not outstanding, we have work to do," said Nagelsmann, who will leave to take charge of Bayern next season. In 11 matches against Dortmund as either coach of Leipzig or his ex-club Hoffenheim, Nagelsmann has won just once.

"It's about time, in Berlin we finally have to get it right," added Nagelsmann. The 33-year-old can make history as the youngest head coach to win the trophy, beating Hans-Dieter Tippenhauer, who was 35 when Fortuna Duesseldorf won the 1979 final. The fixture presents the chance of a first major title for Leipzig and their coach.

Despite steering Leipzig to the last four of the Champions League last season, Nagelsmann has just one trophy on his CV — the Under-19 Bundesliga title with Hoffenheim in 2013/14. When he joined in 2019, Nagelsmann said he wanted to win "some silverware" with Leipzig. This is his last chance before being replaced by Jesse Marsch, currently in charge of Red Bull Salzburg and Nagelsmann wants to sign off by celebrating a cup final win "with the boys".

Dortmund caretaker coach Edin Terzic also wants to finish his brief tenure in style. Next season, the 38-year-old will be assistant coach to Marco Rose when he arrives from Moenchengladbach. As a "life-long" Dortmund fan, Terzic coached the junior and reserve teams before taking over as caretaker boss last December and often made the trip to the



DORTMUND: Dortmund's Norwegian forward Erling Braut Haaland (left) reacts next to Dortmund's English midfielder Jude Bellingham after the German first division Bundesliga football match BVB Borussia Dortmund v RB Leipzig in Dortmund, western Germany on May 8, 2021. —AFP

capital city to see Dortmund play as a fan. "I've been there by car, by plane, by train and also

on a train for staff," recalls Terzic. "Now, for the first time, I'm taking the team bus to Berlin." —AFP

Solskjaer calls on Man Utd to strengthen

MANCHESTER: Manchester United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer called on the club's owners to bolster his squad after a 2-1 loss at home to Leicester on Tuesday confirmed Manchester City as Premier League champions. Second-placed United, who had to beat the Foxes to maintain their fading title hopes, fell behind to Luke Thomas' 10th-minute goal at Old Trafford.

Mason Greenwood equalized just five minutes later but Turkish defender Caglar Soyuncu's second-half header saw Leicester to a win that boosted their bid for a Champions League place and set them up for this weekend's FA Cup final against Chelsea at Wembley. Defeat left United 10 points behind City, with only a maximum of nine available to the Red Devils from their three remaining league games this season.

The Glazers, United's Florida-based owners, have been the target of bitter demonstrations by supporters in recent weeks as a result of their role in trying to take the club into the aborted European Super League. One protest even saw United supporters break into Old Trafford ahead of a match against arch-rivals Liverpool, causing the fixture to be postponed.

But the Glazers have backed United managers in the transfer market during their controversial time in charge and Solskjaer urged them to make more funds available in a bid to get on terms with Abu Dhabi-backed City.

"If you want to take up the challenge with them (City) we need to strengthen our squad," Solskjaer told BT Sport. "Congratulations to them. They have had a fantastic season. I am very pleased with my boys that have made it to the last 10 days with a Manchester City side ahead of us that are lauded as the best in Europe. We want to take the next step and it might be that we need a couple more to strengthen the squad."

Former United striker Solskjaer, faced with a schedule of three games in five days, had promised to rotate his squad. And the Norwegian was as good as his word, making 10 changes to the side that beat Aston Villa 3-1, with Greenwood the only player to retain his starting position. "It can't be like this again," said Solskjaer. "We can't play like Thursday, Sunday, Tuesday to Thursday, it is impossible that's the reason we made the changes. It's unheard of."

Leicester's victory meant the Midlands club leapfrogged Champions League finalists Chelsea into third place, although the London club have a game in hand, with the top four at the end of the Premier League season guaranteed a place among Europe's elite next term.



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's English striker Mason Greenwood (center) maneuvers through defenders on his way to scoring his team's opening goal during the English Premier League football match between Manchester United and Leicester City at Old Trafford in Manchester, north west England, on Tuesday. —AFP

'Perfect platform'

The Foxes have yet to win the FA Cup but manager Brendan Rodgers said this win was the ideal preparation for Saturday's showpiece match. "It's the perfect platform to get the three points at this magnificent club," he told the BBC. "We know we are playing a top team. Tonight was the Europa League finalists, now at the weekend it is the Champions League finalists."

"But we will be ready and let's see if we can make history," he added. United defender Harry Maguire missed his first

league match since joining from Leicester in 2019 after suffering an ankle injury in Sunday's comeback win at Villa Park. As rain lashed down upon Old Trafford, it was the visitors who took a 10th-minute lead thanks to a superb finish from Thomas, who volleyed a center from Youri Tielemans back across goal and into the top right-hand corner. United, however, drew level through Greenwood's low shot before Soyuncu rose above Nemanja Matic in the 66th minute to head powerfully into the roof of the net from a corner. —AFP

Barca title hopes hanging by a thread after Levante draw

MADRID: Lionel Messi scored a brilliant volley but Barcelona's title hopes could be over, with a 3-3 draw away at Levante on Tuesday giving Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid the chance to pull away at the top of La Liga. Another slip could prove decisive given Atletico will move four points clear of Barca with two games left. Real Madrid will edge two points ahead of Ronald Koeman's side if they win away tonight at Granada.

There are certainly no guarantees in what has been a frenetic and thrilling title race in recent weeks, with all of Spain's four contenders stumbling down the final stretch. But with only two games left now and potentially two teams to catch, Barcelona's chances of taking the title off Real Madrid this season would appear remote. "We were always depending on other results but the objective was to win our three games and hope others dropped points," said Koeman. "Now it's very complicated."

Levante sit 14th in the table and had won only one of their previous eight matches but they had also prevailed in three of their last four games at home against Barca, and they turned it on again. Barcelona led 2-0 from Messi's acrobatic strike and

a simple Pedri finish but two goals in two minutes before the hour suddenly had Levante level, Gonzalo Melero and Jose Luis Morales giving Levante hope.

Ousmane Dembele pulled the visitors ahead again but again they squandered the advantage, Sergio Leon diverting in at the near post and this time there was no way back. "We lowered our intensity from the start of the second half, lost our rhythm," said Koeman. "We weren't defensively attentive and we let Levante back in. There is no other explanation."

"Our chances are slim," added Sergio Busquets. "And that's our fault - our decisions, our concentration - we give away easy goals." Koeman has made positive strides this season but his team's lapses of concentration and fragility in defense remain.

Questions around the Dutchman's future will grow louder the more the club's title chances fade, his decisions this time to start Dembele at right wing-back and to bring Sergi Roberto into the back three particularly vulnerable to scrutiny. "Coaches will always be questioned, that isn't going to change but with that second half there will be questions asked and I understand that perfectly," said Koeman.

Barcelona had scored twice in nine minutes to take control, Jordi Alba's cross grazing the head of Miramon on its way to Messi, who adjusted his body and threw his left foot over the ball, volleying it into the bottom corner for his 37th goal of the season.

Messi instigated the second too, freeing the

ect", it announced. "Further information regarding this matter will be made available in due course."

UEFA last week said it would take "appropriate action" against the three clubs who still support the proposed Super League, a competition that would guarantee its founding members involvement every season, instead of having to qualify.

The Super League was announced on April 18 but two days later it collapsed as the six Premier League clubs withdrew after angry protests from supporters and under pressure from the British government. Nine of the original 12 clubs have now dropped out.

Tottenham, Arsenal, Manchester City, Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool, Atletico Madrid, Inter Milan and AC Milan were on Friday



VALENCIA: Levante's Spanish midfielder Jorge Miramon (center) vies with Barcelona's Spanish midfielder Sergio Busquets during the Spanish league football match Levante UD against FC Barcelona at the Ciutat de Valencia stadium in Valencia on Tuesday. —AFP

sprinting Dembele down the right, who powered past Oscar Duarte and prodded back just in time for Pedri to finish. Barca were in charge but Levante always looked a threat on the break and made it pay with two goals in two minutes before the hour.

First, Melero nipped in front of Sergi Roberto to head in and then a sloppy Messi touch allowed Morales to bounce the ball off Roger Marti, before volleying brilliantly into the far corner. Parity lasted only five minutes, though, as Barcelona came again. —AFP

given a financial penalty by UEFA for their involvement. They committed to taking "all steps within their power" to end their involvement in the break-away league and agreed to participate in UEFA competitions for which they qualify. They also agreed to pay fines of 100 million euros if they ever seek to play in an "unauthorized" competition.

Some media have reported that UEFA is contemplating a two-year ban from European competition for the three holdouts, the maximum its rules allow. However, their options are clouded by a ruling from a commercial court in Madrid on April 20. The court banned UEFA and FIFA from making any moves to block a Super League or taking any disciplinary measures against the clubs, players or officials involved. —AFP

Troyes return to France's elite backed by Man City owners

PARIS: Three years after relegation from Ligue 1, Troyes have sealed a return to the French top flight under former Marseille midfielder Laurent Batlles and backed by the City Football Group (CFG), the parent company of Manchester City.

Despite last September's takeover by CFG, majority-owned by Sheikh Mansour's Abu Dhabi United Group, promotion was not necessarily the overriding objective for a modest club from a region better known for its champagne.

But it was the reward for a successful season for a team that became the 10th in CFG's global stable, joining the likes of New York City, Melbourne City and Yokohama F. Marinos in Japan. Troyes spent much of the campaign at the top, last Saturday's 2-0 victory over Dunkerque clinching the Ligue 2 title — a year after the Covid-19 pandemic abruptly halted their promotion push.

While Clermont and Toulouse will battle for the second automatic promotion place, Troyes could beat their previous points record (78) with a win at Le Havre on Saturday. Troyes have bounced back and forth between the top tier and lower divisions since the 1950s, although the present-day version of the club was founded in 1986 as Association Troyes Aube Champagne.

They reached the top flight under Alain Perrin in 1999 but were relegated in 2003 following his departure for Marseille. Since then, Troyes have returned to the elite four times, only once avoiding going straight back down. Batlles and co. hope it will be different this time, particularly with the new management structure in place. Interestingly, it was a deal that only arose after talks with another Ligue 2 outfit Nancy fizzled out.

CFG became Troyes' new majority shareholder after buying the stake from previous owner Daniel Masoni. "At City Football Group, our objective remains to play beautiful football, identify and develop grassroots talent and have a permanent presence in the world's football centres," Ferran Soriano, chief executive of CFG, said at the time.

'Whole lot of work'

The 45-year-old Batlles, appointed to his first senior coaching job by Troyes in 2019, has built a side that plays attractive football and relies on a solid core, with no out-and-out star. Veteran attacker Yoann Touzghar, 34, has previous Ligue 1 experience with Lens, and is the third highest scorer in the second division this season, while midfielder Florian Tardieu and goalkeeper Gauthier Gallon are other key players.

A 12-match unbeaten run spanning from September to December propelled the club into first place, and despite a patchy series of results across February and March, six wins in their past seven games made sure of promotion.

"As a player you go through the emotions differently, almost in an individual way. Here, I experience it for the whole club, the staff, the players. There's a whole lot of work behind it," an emotional Batlles said after beating Dunkerque.

CFG is also part owned by US private equity firm Silver Lake, who last month received the backing of New Zealand Rugby to acquire a stake in the All Blacks, and China Media Capital Consortium. The behind-the-scenes upheaval has not affected Batlles, the new owners ostensibly heading the warning issued by the coach.

"Everything that's done today, it's me who puts it in place... nothing is dictated to me," he said following the takeover. The financial might of CFG, with its worldwide network and reservoir of up-and-coming youngsters should provide Troyes with the means for a successful transition to the top flight. And, perhaps, the resources to stay there long-term. —AFP

UEFA opens penal probe into Super League holdouts

LAUSANNE: UEFA yesterday initiated disciplinary proceedings against Real Madrid, Barcelona and Juventus, the three clubs yet to renounce the aborted European Super League project. European football's governing body has appointed disciplinary inspectors to conduct an investigation regarding a potential violation of UEFA rules by the clubs "in connection with the so-called 'Super League' proj-

'Relentless': Pep hails City after fifth Premier League in nine years

MANCHESTER: Manager Pep Guardiola hailed "relentless" Manchester City after they clinched the "hardest" of his three Premier League titles on Tuesday, sparking wild celebrations among supporters who had gathered outside the Etihad Stadium.

City were handed the title when arch-rivals and nearest challengers Manchester United lost 2-1 at home to Leicester, leaving Guardiola's side 10 points clear with three games remaining. "This has been a season and a Premier League title like no other. This was the hardest one," said Guardiola after City became English champions for the seventh time — five titles coming in the past nine years.

City missed a chance to celebrate on the pitch at the weekend, losing 2-1 at home to Chelsea with United keeping them waiting by winning at Aston Villa. But two days later they were able to savor a title triumph that is all the sweeter given the obstacles they have overcome in a coronavirus-condensed campaign played mostly without fans.

"We will always remember this season for the way we won. I am so proud to be the manager here and of this group of players," said Guardiola. It was City's second trophy in a little over two weeks after beating Tottenham in the League Cup final. "They are so special. To come through this season, with all the restrictions and difficulties we've faced, and show the consistency we have is remarkable. It is relentless."

'It feels amazing'

With coronavirus restrictions to be eased next week, there will be up to 10,000 fans in the Etihad Stadium to see City lift the trophy after their final home game with Everton on May 23. In the meantime, hundreds celebrated in the streets outside City's stadium, letting off blue flares, waving banners and joyously chanting.

"It feels amazing, the greatest feeling is winning the Premier League. Better than any other in football. Love it!" City fan Graham Warner told AFP. The club joined the celebrations by unveiling a giant sky blue banner on the outside of the stadium with the slogan "CHAMPIONS" above a picture of the team celebrating.

Since being taken over by the Abu Dhabi Group in September 2008, City have become the dominant force in English football, winning five Premier League titles, two FA Cups and six League Cups. This is the third time City have clinched a Premier League and League Cup double, and they also won a domestic treble in 2018/19 by adding the FA Cup.

They can secure another treble later this month, having reached their first Champions League final by beating Paris Saint-Germain in the semi-final last week. They will face Chelsea on May 29, with the venue likely to be switched from Istanbul to either Portugal or England so some fans can attend. "Pep Guardiola is the greatest manager in the history of English football. And hopefully we're going to cap it all in a couple of weeks with the big one," City supporter Charlie Hibber said.

'Proud of this team!'

Manchester City captain Fernandinho is now targeting being crowned European champions for the first time. "We will enjoy this moment and we hope the fans do too," said the Brazilian midfielder. "Rest assured we will continue to do everything we can to bring the Champions League home this season."

Fernandinho's City team-mates took to social media to celebrate their title triumph. Alongside a picture of him celebrating with team-mate Rodri, Aymeric Laporte wrote on Twitter: "CHAMPIONNNNES CHAMPIONNNNES OLE OLE OLE."

Kevin De Bruyne posted: "Another One", while Raheem Sterling tweeted: "What's that smell?" before following with: "IT'S THE CHAMPIONS



MANCHESTER: Manchester City fans celebrate their club winning the Premier League title, outside the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on Tuesday. — AFP

BABYYYYY." Prolific Argentina forward Sergio Aguero, who is leaving at the end of the season after 10 years at the club, wrote: "Champions! Proud of this team! Five #PremierLeague titles with #ManCity."

Leicester and United has been locked 1-1 at Old Trafford until Caglar Soyuncu's towering second-half header ensured City could pop the champagne with three games to spare after an uncharacteristically slow start because of the lack of a proper pre-season.

City won just five of their opening 12 Premier

League games but Guardiola masterminded such a superb recovery that the title race became a procession, giving him three Premier League crowns to go with three La Liga trophies with Barcelona and three at Bayern Munich in the Bundesliga.

"At the start of every season, the Premier League is the most important title for us. This is the one where you have to be there every three days, playing all your rivals home and away," Guardiola said. "Only by being the very best, week in week out, can you win this competition. It is a huge success." — AFP



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