



3 Two killed in fire at Jahra commercial complex



5 Thousands rally in N America in solidarity with Palestinians



12 Cooked at 1,000 degrees C: Guatemala's volcanic pizza



15 Leicester players show support for Palestinians after FA Cup win



Kuwait strongly condemns barbaric Zionist offensive

Palestinian FM slams Zionist war crimes, normalization • US 'blocks' UN statement

Freedom of expression according to laws: MoI

KUWAIT: Freedom of expression is permissible according to relevant Kuwaiti laws, the interior ministry affirmed yesterday. The ministry noted that public demonstrations, such as assemblies to express solidarity with the Palestinian cause, must be legal and warrants having a permit. Holding unlicensed public gatherings constitute a breach of the law, a matter the ministry will not allow at all, the ministry statement emphasized. It urged citizens and residents to adhere literally to the relevant laws and public security regulations, affirming legal action will be taken against violators. — KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait yesterday slammed the Zionist entity for its brutal attacks against the Palestinians, during an emergency meeting of foreign ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. "Our brethren in Palestine are facing today one of the largest, fiercest flagrant offensive, carried out by (Zionist) occupation forces, targeting children, women, unarmed civilians with no mercy whatsoever and no regard to international laws and covenants," Kuwaiti Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said.

"Kuwait greets with awe our patient and steadfast brothers in Palestine in the face of these brutal

crimes by the (Zionist) occupation forces and renews its strong condemnation of these systematic crimes against the Palestinian people in the city of Jerusalem and all occupied Palestinian territories that have resulted in destabilization in the Middle East, posing a threat to international peace and security," he added. (See Page 3)

Palestinian foreign minister Riyad Al-Maliki criticized countries that moved to normalize relations with the Zionist entity last year, as other Muslim nations slammed it for "barbaric" attacks against the Palestinians. "Normalization and running towards this colonial (Zionist) system without

Continued on Page 2



GAZA: Palestinians recover the body of a child from the rubble of a destroyed building in Gaza City's Rimal residential district yesterday following massive Zionist bombardment. — AFP

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Local

Kuwait logs less than 800 daily COVID cases for two straight days

Minister affirms keenness to develop relations with WHO

KUWAIT: Kuwait has recorded new COVID-19 cases below the 800 mark for two days in another sign of improvement regarding the health situation in the country. The Ministry of Health on Saturday reported six COVID-19 deaths and 795 infections registered in the previous 24 hours. It had reported 763 coronavirus infections and seven deaths on Friday. The figures took the country's death toll to 1,687 and the caseload to 290,801, noted the ministry's spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad. The ministry announced 1,047 recoveries on Saturday and 1,191 on Friday, raising the total to 276,792.

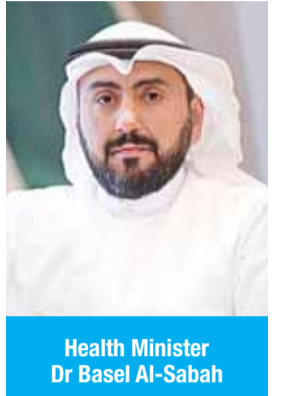
He added that the number of people hospitalized with the virus stood at 12,322 as of Saturday, including 194 currently in ICUs. Dr Sanad revealed Saturday that some 14,178 swabs were conducted over the previous two days, bringing the total to 2.45 million. He renewed calls to abide by health precautions to curb the spread of the virus.

Separately, Health Minister Dr Basel Al-Sabah on Saturday expressed his hope to develop and enhance the strong and deep relations with the World Health Organization (WHO), which extends for more than 60 years since Kuwait joined its membership in

May of 1960. Coinciding with the preparation to open a permanent office for the organization in Kuwait, Dr Basel welcomed the organization's initiative to announce the allocation of a page on its official website bearing the name of Kuwait and its contributions to the organization.

The minister pointed out the relations between the two sides abounds many important initiatives in different fields. In this regard, he referred to the award of the late Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah that were given under the World Health Organization for the best researches, initia-

tives, and contributions in the field of elders Health and enhancing health care. Dr Basel Al-Sabah revealed that this year's award would be presented on May 28, 2021 to the National Center for Gerontology in China. The ceremony will be held on the sidelines of the 74th session of the World Health Organization Assembly in Geneva. Kuwait Health Minister previously announced finalizing the preparations to open the organization's permanent office that will give chances to develop and improve policies, plans, and health programs that are consistent to the latest related developments. —KUNA



Health Minister
Dr Basel Al-Sabah

Foreign Minister receives new envoys' credentials



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah receives a copy of the credentials of UK's new Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis. —KUNA photos



Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah receives a copy of the credentials of Nigeria's Ambassador to Kuwait Jazuli Imam Galadanci.

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah received yesterday a copy of the credentials of UK's new Ambassador to

Kuwait Belinda Lewis. Sheikh Dr Ahmad also received a copy of the credentials of the newly-appointed Nigerian Ambassador to Kuwait Jazuli Imam Galadanci. During the meetings that were

held at the ministry's headquarter, Sheikh Dr Ahmad wished the new ambassadors success in their tenures and that bilateral relations would further progress and prosper. —KUNA

Kuwaiti oxygen continues to fill shortage in Indian hospitals

NEW DELHI: Kuwaiti Ambassador to India Jassem Al-Najem announced on Saturday that oxygen supply and emergency medical aid from Kuwait continues to arrive to Indian ports to fill shortage in hospitals to thousands of COVID-19 patients. Ambassador Najem said that an aid ship from Kuwait arrived in Mumbai Port in the western Indian state of Maharashtra; considered the most affected by COVID-19.

The ship carries 75 metric tons of liquid oxygen and 1,000 oxygen cylinders, the ambassador noted. This aid is coming as part of the sea bridge that Kuwait established to support India in fighting the mutated coronavirus. Najem said, adding more ships are slated to arrive in Indian ports in the coming days. In the coming two weeks, the oxygen supply from Kuwait is poised to reach 1,400 metric tons making it one of the top countries in the world to supply huge quantities of oxygen to India. He also underlined Kuwait's keenness to alleviate the suffering of the friendly Indian people due to this health disaster.

Three Indian military ships had arrived at Mangalore Port, southern Karnataka state as they sailed from Kuwait's Shuwaikh Port carrying 140 metric tons of liquid medical oxygen and 1,600 oxygen cylinders. A Kuwait military plane loaded with 40 tons of oxygen concentrators, ventilators, oxygen cylinders, medicines and other relief materials had arrived in Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi.

Earlier last week, Indian External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar, during a phone call with Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, expressed his country's gratitude and appreciation to the leadership and people of Kuwait for extending support to tackle the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic. The Kuwaiti Cabinet recently decided to send oxygen and emergency relief materials to India to help it face the impact of the spread of mutated strain of the coronavirus. —KUNA

Two perish in Jahra mall fire



KUWAIT: Firefighters battle a blaze at a commercial complex under construction in Jahra yesterday.

KUWAIT: Two workers perished in a fire in a three-floor commercial complex under construction in Jahra yesterday while firemen safely rescued five others from the scorching blaze. The workers who were rescued were stranded in the burning building, Kuwait Fire Force (KFF) said in a press release. The

two deaths resulted from dense smoke inside the 1,000-square-meter complex, it added. Flames engulfed the three floors of the complex, the KFF said.

Firemen rapidly scrambled into action, arriving at the scene in just five minutes after being alerted



Firemen extinguish a fire in a tire dump in the Abdullah Port scrapyard on Saturday.

about the accident. An investigation was opened into the incident. Separately, a preliminary investigation revealed that a fire that broke out in a tire dump in the Abdullah Port scrapyard on Saturday was deliberately started, KFF said. No suspects have been named or arrested so far.



Kuwait strongly condemns...

Continued from Page 1

achieving peace and ending the (Zionist) occupation of Arab and Palestinian lands represents support for the apartheid regime and participation in its crimes," Maliki told the virtual OIC meeting hosted by Saudi Arabia.

"This colonial occupation must be confronted, dismantled, ended, and banned. The recently accelerated normalization will not have an impact on the sentiments of the Arab world or change their assessment." The deadly flare-up of violence between the Zionist entity and the Palestinians has embarrassed countries which moved to normalize relations with the Jewish state - Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates.

In a joint statement, the OIC said it "condemns in the strongest terms the barbaric attacks launched by (the Zionist entity) ... against the Palestinian people and their land and holy sites". The pan-Islamic body

demanding a complete cessation of hostilities, saying the violence was causing "severe suffering" to civilians and increased the "risks of instability" in the region.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan also called on the international community to take "urgent action" to halt the Zionist military operation and to revive peace talks aimed at securing a two-state solution. "Preserving Jerusalem is the responsibility of all of us," he said. Reem Al-Hashimi, the UAE minister of state for international cooperation, spoke at the meeting but did not address the criticism, only calling for a halt to the violence and not specifically blaming the Zionist entity for the troubles.

Yesterday, Zionist strikes killed at least 42 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the worst daily death toll yet in the almost weeklong clashes, as the UN Security Council met amid global alarm at the escalating conflict. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres pleaded for an immediate end to the deadly violence, warning that the fighting could plunge the region into an "uncontainable security and humanitarian crisis".

"Fighting must stop. It must stop immediately," Guterres said as he opened a Security Council session delayed by the Zionist entity's ally the United States, calling the violence over the past week "utter-

ly appalling". The heaviest fighting in years, sparked by unrest in Jerusalem, saw the rivals again trade heavy fire, with the death toll rising to 192 in the crowded coastal enclave of Gaza since Monday and at 10 in the Zionist entity, according to authorities on either side.

Palestinian Foreign Minister Maliki accused the Zionist entity of "war crimes" as he urged international pressure at the UN Security Council session. "Some may not want to use these words - war crimes and crimes against humanity - but they know they are true," Maliki told the virtual session on the crisis.

He renewed the charge that the Zionist entity is pursuing a policy of "apartheid" against the Palestinians. "Act now to end the aggression. Act now so freedom can prevail - not apartheid," he told the Security Council. The Zionist entity "is an occupying colonial power. Any assessment of the situation that fails to take into account this fundamental fact is biased," Maliki said. "(The Zionist entity) always says, put yourselves in our shoes. But (the Zionist entity) is not wearing shoes. It is wearing military boots."

China later voiced regret that the United States was blocking a UN Security Council statement on the violence as it urged greater international efforts to stop the bloodshed. "Regrettably, simply because

of the obstruction of one country, the Security Council hasn't been able to speak with one voice," Foreign Minister Wang Yi, whose country holds the Council's rotating presidency, told the virtual session. "We call upon the United States to shoulder its due responsibilities."

In Gaza, the death toll kept rising as emergency teams worked to pull out bodies from vast piles of smoking rubble and toppled buildings, as relatives wailed in horror and grief. "We were sleeping and then all of a sudden there were rockets raining down on us," said Lamia Al-Koulak, 43, who lost siblings and their children in the dawn bombardment. "The children were screaming. For half an hour we were bombarded without previous warning. We came out to find the building next door flattened. All the people under the rubble were simple people."

Zionist air strikes also hit the home of Yahya Sinwar, head of Hamas' political wing in the Gaza Strip, the army said, releasing a video showing plumes of smoke and intense damage, but without saying if he was killed. At least 58 children have lost their lives in Gaza, local health authorities said, more than 1,200 people have been wounded and entire buildings and city blocks reduced to rubble. — Agencies

Local

Palestinians face one of the largest, fiercest flagrant offensives: Kuwait

Foreign Minister heads delegation at OIC emergency meeting

UN praises Kuwait's commitment to peace

KUWAIT: Dr Tarek Elsheikh, the UN Secretary General Representative and Resident Coordinator to the country, yesterday lauded Kuwait's commitment to world peace and human dignity. Since its admission to the United Nations in 1963, the State of Kuwait has always emphasized its commitment to regional and world peace and human dignity, promoting dialogue among nations and fighting all forms of terrorism, Dr Elsheikh said in a statement marking the "International Day of Living Together in Peace."

Now, in 2021, Kuwait stresses on the importance of dialogue to empower the values of equity, acceptance and co-existence among the different civilizations, cultures, and religions, and hence live together in peace. With this belief asserted in actions, the State of Kuwait developed a State Vision of New Kuwait 2035, harmonizing its national development plan with the international development vision by adapting the plan to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) 2030 agenda, he said. In 1961, the year of its political independence, the state of Kuwait established the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED). A generous declaration to the world that Kuwait is willing to share its wealth with other developing countries and hence lead in that vital and noble role of enhancing the regional and international peace and development. Since that date, KFAED has provided loans to 107 countries, for the purpose of implementing development projects in sectors such as education, transportation, industry, energy, water and sewerage, peace-building, and many others.

This year, while the world is bravely fighting an unprecedented global crisis unleashed by COVID-19, it is important more than ever to promote equity, solidarity, compassion, and kindness to help ensure peace, under the motto 'Nobody is safe until everyone is safe'. People from different groups volunteered together to respond to the pandemic. Stemming from this belief, on 10 August 2020, the State of Kuwait pledged \$10 million to Gavi, the vaccine alliance for supporting COVAX Advance Market Commitment Countries. On 15 November 2020, the Kuwait Fund has contributed \$4 million to UNICEF's COVID-19 response in Syria, supporting the most vulnerable children and families. On 6 July 2020, the World Health Organization acknowledged the generous funding of Kuwait that supported the implementation of Jordan's COVID-19 national preparedness and response plan. In 2021, the state of Kuwait has donated oxygen cylinders, oxygen concentrators, ventilators, and other medical supplies to aid India in their fierce fight against COVID-19.

These are only few examples however the State of Kuwait still has much more to openhandedly contribute to the world, it is a destiny Kuwait is proud to fulfill. Such destiny was commended during the General Assembly in its Seventy-Sixth Session, October 2020, when Secretary-General Antonio Guterres celebrated the life of the late Amir, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah also known as "dean of Arab diplomacy" and described him as a bridge builder and a messenger of peace. With foresight and political wisdom, His Highness Sheikh Sabah shaped Kuwait's preventive diplomatic engagement, he said, recalling how in the thick of the Syrian refugee crisis, His Highness the late Amir convened the first conference of solidarity, and started it off with a generous offer that inspired other countries to step up their response.

In a recent update from WHO, the Executive Director Tedros Ghebreyesus expressed his gratitude to the government of Kuwait for providing over \$200 million between 2015-20, enabling WHO to progress towards achieving health for all, address health emergencies and save millions of lives around the globe. The partnership between the UN and Kuwait goes beyond mobilizing resources for UN programs and includes collaboration on global projects. These are focused on advocacy, capacity development and technical collaboration with the aim of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and providing assistance that alleviates the suffering of millions around the world. Two days ago, 14th May marks the 58th anniversary of the State of Kuwait as a member State to the United Nations.

"I take this opportunity to congratulate the government of Kuwait under the leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and wisdom of His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah for the continuous and tireless efforts in promoting peace and prosperity through our long-standing strategic partnership to provide much needed support and assistance to communities around the world and particularly in support of various humanitarian operations including in Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Yemen and for the Rohingya, to name a few," Elsheikh noted further. When declaring the International Day of Living Together in Peace: the United Nations invited countries to observe the Day in accordance with the culture and other appropriate circumstances or customs of their local, national and regional communities, including through education and public awareness-raising activities. — KUNA



RAFAH: Palestinians inspect their house, after it was destroyed by a Zionist airstrike, in the city of Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. — AFP

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah yesterday chaired the State of Kuwait's delegation partaking in the virtual emergency meeting of the Executive Committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to discuss current developments in Palestine, namely attacks and violations perpetrated by the Zionist occupation forces in the holy City of Jerusalem. Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser addressed a statement at the meeting, citing a verse from the Holy Quran that urges the faithful to be patient and remain pious and obedient to His Almighty Allah. "Our brethren in Palestine," he started, "are facing today one of the largest, fiercest flagrant offensives, carried out by the Zionist occupation forces, targeting children, women, unarmed civilians with no mercy whatsoever and no regard to international laws and covenants. The State of Kuwait, while it greets with awe our patient and steadfast brothers in Palestine in the face of these brutal crimes by the Zionist occupation forces, renews its strong condemnation of these systematic crimes against the Palestinian people in the city of Jerusalem and all occupied Palestinian territories that have resulted in destabilization in the Middle East, posing a threat to international peace and security."

Repeated history

"History is recurring itself," the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister stated. "Our organization was established due to the fire at Al-Aqsa Mosque and now after 52 years, the brutal Zionist measures intended to scratch off features of Holy Jerusalem are happening again as part of a continuous criminal scheme for altering its identity. Kuwait denounces with

strongest terms the Zionist occupation forces relentless breaches of international and humanitarian laws. These forces carry on with forced immigration and construction of settlements on the Palestinian territories namely in the Holy Jerusalem and at Sheikh Jarrah district.

"International resolutions affirm that special sanctity of holy Jerusalem must not be desecrated and East Jerusalem must remain part of the occupied Palestinian territories according to the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention, also as stipulated by the decisions of Islamic summits; latest of which was Resolution Number one issued at the 2019 Makkah Summit. These continuing Zionist practices aim to alter facts in the occupied territories and constitute blatant violation of all relevant resolutions of the international legitimacy that consider these measures as invalid and imply no commitment or right."

The Kuwaiti foreign minister praised efforts exerted by Tunisia and the Niger, two non-permanent members of the OIC, for their reactions to the bloody and tragic events involving the Palestinian brothers. He urged the OIC to take decisive measures to stop the flagrant aggression and hold the occupation Zionist forces fully responsible for their crimes and crimes against humanity. The State of Kuwait, he has continued, renews its adherence to the Arab and Islamic stances that affirm that peace is a strategic option, that a lasting, comprehensive and just solution is based on the two states principle, the road map, the Arab peace initiative where the Palestinian people can attain in full their legitimate rights and establish their independent state on their territories — with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Arab-level coordination

Sheikh Dr Ahmad had discussed during a phone call Saturday with his Tunisian counterpart Othman Jerandi the serious effects resulting from the Zionist attacks on Gaza, as well as consultations and ways of coordination regarding the Security Council session that was scheduled for yesterday, to look into such critical situation. Tunisia is currently the Non-Permanent Representative in the Security Council and Arab representative in the Council.

The Kuwaiti Foreign Minister had on Friday discussed ceasefire and de-escalation efforts in the occupied Palestinian lands with his Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal Bin Farhan. A statement by the Foreign Ministry pointed out that the phone conversation came in line with the State of Kuwait's support and coordination of international efforts for a ceasefire in occupied Palestine. Sheikh Dr Ahmad lauded immense efforts wielded by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in this regard.

Kuwait TV office destroyed

Meanwhile, a Zionist air strike had on Saturday destroyed a high-rise building in the Gaza Strip where a production company that does reporting for the State-run Kuwait television in addition to other media outlets are located, a media source said. "The 12-storey Al-Jalaa tower block in Gaza collapsed after repeated missile strikes from the Zionist air force," reporter Suad Al-Imam told KUNA. The compound, which houses offices of news media including Qatar's Al-Jazeera television network, collapsed in plumes of smoke that caused damage to nearby buildings and private flats. The incident has been widely condemned by journalists as an attack on press freedom.

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News in brief

Amir thanks well-wishers

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Saturday thanked citizens and residents of Kuwait for their Eid Al-Fitr greetings. His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Crown Prince expressed hope for the happy occasion to recur with further goodness, blessing and development for Kuwait and its people. — KUNA

No letter received

KUWAIT: The Foreign Ministry categorically denied claims that a letter was sent by the former US Secretary of State to the ministry, which included the inclusion of a number of Kuwaiti citizens and institutions among violators of imposed sanctions to Iran. The Ministry called on all to show responsibility and report accurate information before publishing, confirming that it retains its legal right against anyone who publishes or promotes such matter that would in turn harm the reputation of Kuwait or its national security.

Kuwait condemns attack

KUWAIT: Kuwait expressed its condemnation over an explosion last week in the Maldives capital Male, which left the archipelago's former president Mohamed Nasheed critically wounded. Kuwait stands in solidarity with the Maldives and supports the island nation's efforts to protect national security, said a foreign ministry statement, emphasizing its objection to all forms of violence. Nasheed, the current speaker of parliament, underwent life-saving surgery after he was hit by shrapnel from a bomb blast outside his home in what is being treated as a terror attack.

Historic buildings in Kuwait a national heritage: NCCAL

KUWAIT: Historical buildings are a national heritage and a living witness to the past, and Kuwait is keen to take care and preserve architecture over the years, said an official on Saturday. Assistant Secretary of the Antiquities and Museums Sector at the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL) Tahani Al-Adwani said that the NCCAL was playing an active role in preserving historic buildings in the country. NCCAL documents, studies, and prepares architectural plans as well as structural checks of historical buildings to complete rehabilitation, restoration and maintenance works for each of them. Adwani noted. In addition to monitoring historical buildings and developing a methodology for preserving this national heritage through proposals and finding solutions to the challenges to preserve, maintain and restore architectural heritage.

Adwani revealed that since the beginning of the current year, many historical buildings have been restored such as Sheikh Abdullah Al-Jaber Palace, Investigation Department Building, Al-Khalawi House, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Rest House and Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Palace in Failaka Island, and Al-Jahra Gate. NCCAL strategy is to create alternative opportunities and paths for partnership with the private sector or other bodies to support the Council's work and strategy, such as the Kuwait Authority for Partnership Projects, the National Cooperative Projects Committee and others, she noted. Adwani said that the council's interest in empowering and preserving historical buildings comes with unlimited support from the Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdul Rahman Al-Mutairi.

Preserving history

Engineer Walid Al-Hamidi, the superintendent of historical buildings in the council, said meanwhile that Kuwait is interested in historical buildings and preserving them, referring to the Amiri Decree No 1 of 1960 on the Antiquities Law and the amendments made to it in Law No 9 of 1994. He said that the memorandum restricted the right to restore sites and buildings in the council and regulated special conditions for the rise of modern buildings and archaeological areas and buildings to preserve their own environments. Hamidi added that one of the most important points is also obtaining approval from the National Council before starting any repair or restoration procedure for registered buildings and determining the percentage and quality of buildings adjacent to any historic building that has been registered. The structural plan for Kuwait when developing designs in relation to historical buildings to ensure that a building campus is creat-



Al-Jahra Gate



Souq Mubarakiya



KUWAIT: Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Palace in Failaka Island.



Sheikh Abdullah Al-Jaber Palace.

ed around these buildings and to set conditions for new buildings adjacent to them in line with their existing historical environment, he added.

Hamidi said the maintenance and restoration of the Al-Ghanim Palace is currently being rehabilitated, which comes with a donation from the Al-Ghanim family represented by Fouad and Qutayba Al-Ghanim, in order to ensure that the palace is restored to its historical authenticity. The Minister of Information Mutairi confirmed in a previous statement that legal action will be taken against any person who enters a historical building or archaeological site surrounded by a security fence without a license. This comes according to the Antiquities Law, in which the punishment for transgressions reaches five years in prison and legal measures will be taken not to allow entry to any historical build-

ing or archaeological site without official written approval from the General Secretariat of the National Council for Culture and Arts. — KUNA



An old building under maintenance.



Al-Ghanim Palace



Partial intersection with Ghazali Road open

KUWAIT: Kuwait Public Authority for Roads and Transportation (PART) announced a partial opening of the 6.5 ring road intersection with Ghazali Road early yesterday. The intersection is part of the 6.5 ring road, stretching over 800 meters with four lanes and two safety lanes of 20.2 meters, the authority said in a statement on Saturday. It intersects with Ghazali Road with a lower road of 1,017 meters, which will be opened for cars coming from Shuwaikh Port, the airport and the air cargo service area, it added. It has three exits for cars coming from Ghazali towards Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, fifth and sixth exits towards Al-Jahra and from Abdullah Mubarak towards

the airport and Kuwait City. PART noted. The authority added that the 6.5 ring road project was completed by 92 percent last April and is expected to be fully launched by end of year. The project will improve traffic jams in the 6th ring road and will be key to ease traffic in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh as well, it said. The project will also create an intersection with the 6th ring road to provide an immediate entry to Sabah Al-Salem University City. — KUNA



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Confusion reigns as US health agency eases mask restrictions

Fighting resumes in southern Afghanistan as ceasefire ends

Page 7

Page 6



(Clockwise from top left) A man holds a "Free Palestine" sign during a demonstration in support of Palestine in Brooklyn, New York on Saturday; Demonstrators hold signs as thousands gather during a rally to support Palestine at Copley Square in Boston; Residents of Dearborn, Michigan, gather to protest the actions of the Zionist army in Gaza as well as the forced removal of Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem; Activists and protesters march in support of Palestine near the Washington Monument in Washington, DC. — AFP photos

Rallies for Palestine held in N America

Tensions in Paris as pro-Palestinian protesters defy police

NEW YORK: Thousands of pro-Palestinian demonstrators rallied in cities across North America on Saturday, calling for an end to Zionist attacks on the Gaza Strip. Gatherings to show solidarity with Palestinians took place in cities including New York, Boston, Washington, Montreal and Dearborn, Michigan.

About two thousand people turned out in the Bay Ridge area of Brooklyn, chanting "Free, free Palestine" and "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free". They waved Palestinian flags and held placards that read "End (Zionist) Apartheid" and "Freedom for Gaza." Many protesters wore black and white, and red and white, keffiyeh scarves, while drivers sounded car horns and motorcyclists revved their engines as the sun beat down.

Several Jewish people attended, carrying placards that said "Not in my name" and "Solidarity with Palestine" as the protesters took over a street in the area which has a large Arab population. A few dozen police officers looked on at the peaceful protest, dubbed "Defend Palestine". "When you have a nuclear-armed state and another state of villagers with rocks it is clear who is to blame," said 35-year-old Emraan Khan, a corporate strategist from Manhattan, as he waved a Palestinian flag.

Alison Zambrano, a 20-year-old student, travelled from neighboring Connecticut for the demo. "Palestinians have the right to live freely and children in Gaza should not be being killed," she told AFP. Mashhour Ahmad, a 73-year-old Palestinian who has lived in New York for 50 years, said "don't blame the victim for the aggression".

"I'm telling Mr Biden and his cabinet to stop supporting the killing. Support the victims, stop the oppression. The violence committed by the (Zionist) army recently is genocide," he added, raising a poster above his head that said "Free Palestine, End the occupation".

'Catastrophe' day

The protests were held on the anniversary of Nakba Day, or "catastrophe", that saw hundreds of thousands of Palestinians displaced during the Zionist entity's creation in 1947-1948. Throngs of people gathered in Copley Square in Boston, while a few hundred rallied on the Washington Monument grounds in the US capital. Several thousand demonstrated in Montreal, calling for "the liberation of Palestine".

Protesters also denounced "war crimes" committed by the Zionist entity in Gaza and carried placards accusing the Zionist entity of violating international law during the protest in the cen-

ter of the Canadian city. Earlier, a caravan of cars sounded their horns and drove with Palestinian flags blowing in the wind as they protested outside the consulate of the Zionist entity in the western part of Montreal. A protester was arrested for breaking a window, a police spokesperson said, but otherwise the demonstration was peaceful.

Meanwhile, Paris police used tear gas and water cannon Saturday to disperse a pro-Palestinian rally held despite a ban by authorities, who feared a flare-up of anti-Semitic violence during the worst fighting between the Zionist entity and Hamas in years. The interior ministry said between 2,500 and 3,500 people converged on the heavily immigrant Barbes neighborhood in the north of the capital, while organizers claimed as many as 5,000 rallied amid a massive security presence involving some 4,200 officers.

Police blocked off wide boulevards as well as narrow streets where some of the protesters were forced to retreat, while knots of residents and passers-by watched or recorded the scene with their phones. Some threw stones or tried to set up roadblocks with construction barriers, but for the most part police pursued groups across the district while preventing any march toward the Place de la Bastille as planned. — Agencies

"You want to prohibit me from show-



People wave flags atop cars in traffic during a demonstration to voice support for the people of Palestine at Toronto City Hall in Toronto on Saturday.

ing solidarity with my people, even as my village is being bombed?" Mohammed, 23 and wearing a "Free Palestine" t-shirt, told AFP. Other demonstrators chanted "Free Palestine" or "Get out, Palestine doesn't belong to you" while waving the territory's flag. As a cold rainstorm settled over the city toward evening, many protesters left, leaving a large group of mostly young men facing off against

ranks of officers who held their ground on a stretch of boulevard. A handful of garbage bins were set on fire and rocks and other projectiles were hurled toward police, who broke up the demo by around 7:00 pm (1700 GMT). Out of 51 arrests at protests nationwide, 44 people were held in Paris. One policeman was slightly hurt in the capital and another in Nice. — Agencies

Strike flattens Gaza building hosting media

GAZA CITY: A Zionist air strike Saturday flattened a 13-floor building housing Qatar-based Al Jazeera television and the US news agency the Associated Press in the Gaza Strip. The Zionist entity "destroyed Jala Tower in the Gaza Strip, which contains the Al Jazeera and other international press offices," Al Jazeera said in a tweet, with an AP journalist saying the army had warned the tower's owner ahead of the strike.

AFP journalists, whose Gaza offices are in a different place, watched the building collapse to the ground after the Zionist air strike, sending up a huge mushroom cloud of dust and debris. Zionist defense officials said the building housed not only news bureaus but offices of Hamas militants. But Walid Al-Omari, Al Jazeera Jerusalem bureau chief, was incensed and vowed the network would not be silenced.

"It is clear that those who are waging this war do not only want to spread destruction and death in Gaza, but also to silence media that are witnessing, docu-



GAZA: A ball of fire erupts from the Jala Tower as it is destroyed in a Zionist airstrike in Gaza City on Saturday. — AFP

menting and reporting the truth," he said. AP President and CEO Gary Pruitt said he was "shocked and horrified" by the attack, adding about a dozen AP journalists and freelancers had been in the office, but were able to flee. "This is an incredibly disturbing development. We narrowly avoided a terrible loss of life," Pruitt said.

The White House, which has kept a rel-

atively low profile on the Zionist-Palestinian flare-up, said it has cautioned the Zionist entity about the importance of protecting independent media. "We have communicated directly to the (Zionists) that ensuring the safety and security of journalists and independent media is a paramount responsibility," White House press secretary Jen Psaki tweeted. — AFP

CONDOLENCES

The Owners,
Management and Staff of
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and
Sinotrans Middle East FZE
Extend their sincere condolences to
Gayathri

(Kuwait Representative, Sinotrans Middle East FZE)

on the demise of her Father

Rajmohan Nair

at his home in Thiruvananthapuram,
India on 15th May, 2021.

We pray that all of us find the strength to push through the grief. Our prayers and heartfelt condolences go out with the grieving family.

May his soul Rest in Peace

International

Confusion reigns as US health agency eases mask restrictions

Despite guidance, not everyone ready to give up masks

WASHINGTON: A day after the top US health agency eased COVID-19 mask restrictions, many people could still be seen walking around the capital Washington wearing face coverings. Among them was a student, Chloe, who said she was fully vaccinated-but was wearing her black face mask anyway. "I think the announcement... was definitely a shock to a lot of people. It definitely was a shock to me," the student, who declined to give her last name, told AFP Friday.

Chloe, 20, viewed the CDC announcement as "hopeful" but said she plans to keep wearing her mask for a while longer. "If I see more people not wearing masks, it'll make me feel comfortable not wearing masks," she said. "And then just seeing the number of people who are vaccinated in the US will definitely help. If that number goes up, I might feel more comfortable taking it off."

But "it's really important to recognize that the pandemic's still going on." Currently, only 36 percent of people are fully vaccinated in the United States, where the pandemic has killed more than 580,000. "Yesterday, I was not really into the idea" of going maskless, said Lauren, who wore a white cloth face mask. "Even though I'm vaccinated, what if there's some slight chance that I'm around somebody who's sick? A non-vaccinated person?" The 36-year-old consultant, who also chose to only give her first name, told AFP she plans to keep her mask handy when she's out and decide whether to put it on based on a "day-to-day, even hour-to-hour feeling."

"It has kind of become a part of our face. I feel

kind of bare without it," Lauren said, adding her mask sometimes can feel like a "security blanket."

Health experts say it's normal to feel anxious about returning to normal life, given how hard the last year has been. But there is such a thing as being too careful, warns Dr. Amesh Adalja: "The science is showing that if you're fully vaccinated, the virus is going to treat you very differently, so you can act very differently." Part of the problem, said Adalja, a senior scholar from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, is that the CDC was overly cautious during the pandemic and has now shocked people with what seems like a more aggressive step.

When the CDC announced Thursday that people fully vaccinated against COVID-19 no longer had to wear masks outdoors, President Joe Biden celebrated the decision, calling it a "great day" for the country hardest-hit by the pandemic. Comedic takes flooded Twitter, but their humor belied users' deeper-seated anxiety over the issue. "We don't have to wear masks anymore if we're vaccinated but what if I'm mistaken for a republican," another woman wrote, referring to political divisions over masks.

"This is a just a note to say that masks are like weighted face blankets and I'm keeping mine forever," tweeted author Glennon Doyle. According to Adalja, "people didn't develop the ability to risk calculate."

"There just was a lot of precautionary principles that got carried away to a point that I think it's going to be hard for people who totally



CONCORD: Rally goers hold signs protesting vaccines at the "World Wide Rally for Freedom", an anti-mask and anti-vaccine rally, at the State House in Concord, New Hampshire Friday. —AFP

embraced all of that to jettison it," he said. But "what value are you deriving from the vaccine if you're not actually living your life?"

Lauren ultimately agrees: "I'm really desperate to see people's faces again," she said. "I want to be able to smile at people." —AFP

Republicans elect pro-Trump Stefanik to House leadership

WASHINGTON: US Republicans on Friday elected congresswoman Elise Stefanik, an outspoken defender of Donald Trump, as their new House conference chair, as the party scrambles to unify amid an explosive debate about its direction. Stefanik, a 36-year-old former moderate representing upstate New York, easily overcame a late entrant to the race and won strong support from the Republican conference in a closed-door vote of 134 to 46.

"My focus is on unity, because that's what the American people and that's what our voters deserve," she told reporters after vaulting into the number three House Republican position-becoming the party's most powerful woman in Congress.

"We are going on offense and are going to win back the majority in 2022" in the House of Representatives, said Stefanik, the party's new top messenger. The vote came two days after the conference ousted Liz Cheney, a conservative stalwart and daughter of former vice president Dick Cheney, from the post over her repeated criticism of Trump and her refusal to embrace his false claim that Democrats stole the 2020 election.

With Trump retaining enormous influence, Republicans have been desperate to tamp down swelling discord within party ranks over its future. Conservatives aim to craft a coherent message heading into next year's midterm elections, but some Republicans fear that failing to reject Trump's rhetoric about voter fraud could hurt the party at the polls. But Stefanik made clear that Trump and Trumpism will remain vital in the effort to turn back the "radical, far-left socialist agenda" of President Joe Biden and his Democrats.

"I support president Trump, voters support president Trump," Stefanik said. "He is an important voice in our Republican party and we look forward to working with him." Trump, whose grip on the party has tightened with Stefanik's elevation, congratulated her for the "overwhelming" win. "The House GOP is united and the Make America Great Again movement is Strong!" the former president said. Stefanik's ascension was the singular bright spot for Republicans in an otherwise difficult week.

On Thursday after a meeting with Biden and top congressional Democrats, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy made the dubious assertion that "I don't think anybody is questioning the legitimacy of the presidential election." One day earlier during a contentious House hearing, Republicans downplayed the seriousness of the deadly January 6 attack on the US Capitol by Trump supporters, with congressman Andrew Clyde saying footage from the day of the insurrection appeared to show "a normal tourist visit" to the building. —AFP

Pandemic to be 'far more deadly' this year: WHO

GENEVA: The World Health Organization issued a grim warning on Friday that the second year of COVID-19 was set to be "far more deadly", as Japan extended a state of emergency amid growing calls for the Olympics to be scrapped. "We're on track for the second year of this pandemic to be far more deadly than the first," said WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The mood also darkened in Japan where the coronavirus state of emergency took in another three regions just 10 weeks before the Olympics, while campaigners submitted a petition with more than 350,000 signatures calling for the Games to be cancelled. With Tokyo and other areas already under emergency orders until the end of May, Hiroshima, Okayama and northern Hokkaido, which will host the Olympic marathon, will now join them. Japanese public opinion is firmly opposed to holding the Games this summer.

Swiss tennis great Roger Federer said Friday that "what the athletes need is a decision: is it happening or isn't it?" "I would love to play in the

Olympics... But if that doesn't happen due to the situation, I would be the first to understand," he added.

The pandemic has killed at least 3,346,813 people worldwide since the virus first emerged in late 2019, according to an AFP tally of official data.

Sputnik vaccines reach India

India meanwhile started deploying Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, the first foreign-made shot to be used in the country that has been reeling from an explosion in cases and deaths.

The first token batch of Sputnik vaccines-reportedly 150,000 doses-arrived on May 1 and a second delivery is expected in the next few days. A number of leading India-based drugmakers have agreements for local production of Sputnik V with the aim to produce over 850 million doses of the jab per year.

India has been adding roughly as many new COVID cases daily as the rest of the world put together.

More than 260,000 Indians have died, according to official figures. In Europe, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned that the arrival of the B.1.617.2 variant, one of those believed to be driving the Indian surge, could delay reopening of society and the economy. "This new variant could pose a serious disruption to our

Ethiopia defers landmark polls as woes pile up

ADDIS ABABA: The head of Ethiopia's election board said Saturday it would be impossible to hold parliamentary elections as planned on June 5, due to mounting logistical issues, without giving a new date. When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power three years ago, he promised to break from Ethiopia's authoritarian past and hold the most democratic elections the country has ever seen.

The elections had already been delayed from last August due to the coronavirus pandemic, and problems have only mounted since, with a conflict in the northern Tigray region and brutal ethnic violence in several areas.

"The vote will not happen on June 5 ... we can't tell you the date as the board has to examine the inputs it received

from parties," said election board chairwoman Birtukan Mideksa. She cited a plethora of logistical delays, such as finalizing voter registration, training electoral staff, printing and distributing ballot papers. "Practically, it became impossible to deliver all these at the originally slated dates," Mideksa said the new date would take into account the rainy season-which runs from about June to September. With just weeks to go to the election there had been few signs of campaigning, and several opposition parties planned to boycott the vote, describing it as a "farce".

Numerous crises

The nation of 110 million people was due to choose national and regional parliamentarians via the ballot box. The MPs elect the prime minister, who is head of government, as well as the president-a largely ceremonial role.

Even with the delay, numerous security crises are expected to make voting impossible in large swathes of the country. This includes the northern Tigray region, where

since last summer. What initially looked like a byproduct of the movement against police violence following George Floyd's murder and social dislocation caused by the pandemic appears no longer to be the case. From knife attacks on the subway to a surge in shootings, including in Times Square last weekend, violence is "definitely up," says John Pfaff, a criminal law professor at Fordham University.

"The spike of 2020 does run the risk of continuing into 2021," he said. "I see a huge economic uncertainty, a huge emotional stress, you have institutions that are shut down across the board. All these things are going to contribute to violence and then that violence can be somewhat self-perpetuating going forward," Pfaff added. New York is gradually beginning to emerge from the coronavirus crisis and unemployment is falling, but crime statistics are far from improving.

The latest figures, released on May 9, showed 505 victims of shootings since the beginning of January, the highest in 10 years. It was up from 275 for the same period in 2020. There have been 146 murders so far this year, up 40 percent from 2019 when 104 people were killed and up 27 percent on last year.

Officially, crime in the subway is down 43 percent, but many experts note that is misleading as ridership plummeted with the pandemic. A shooting in broad daylight in Times Square on May 8, which injured two women and a child, propelled rising violent crime to the forefront of the mayoral campaign, six weeks before the Democratic primary on June 22. The primary effectively nominates the winner of the November election due to the unpopularity of Republicans in New York. —AFP



NEW DELHI: Relatives and family members mourn as they arrive to perform the last rites of the patient who died of the COVID-19 coronavirus at a crematorium in New Delhi Friday. —AFP

progress," Johnson said.

Britain's health ministry has tracked the variant in northwest England and in London.

Germany has already added the UK back onto its list of "risk areas" requiring extra checks-but not necessarily quarantine-for incoming travellers. Elsewhere around the continent, tourist hotspots are opening up. Greece kickstarted its tourism season on Friday, hoping to reverse last year's miserable summer. "I hope to forget

this damn Covid," said Jil Wirries, a 28-year old student from Hanover, Germany, collecting luggage on the island of Crete.

"Everything is terrible in Germany... people are depressed... I'm so happy to be here."

France and Spain launched tourism campaigns this week too. But in the United States many were confused a day after the top health agency lifted all mask-wearing requirements for fully vaccinated people. —AFP



Women sell vegetables in a street stall in Debre Berhan, Ethiopia. —AFP

Abiy launched a military operation in November last year that has turned into a grinding war, with massacres, brutal sexual violence and humanitarian misery. Birtukan said that some 36 million voters had regis-

tered so far, with no registration taking place at all in some areas which have seen ethnic violence, including in the country's most populous regions, Oromia and Amhara. —AFP

Rising crime takes center stage in NY mayoral race

NEW YORK: New York, which has long prided itself on being one of the world's safest cities, is experiencing a surge in crime, with the topic becoming a central theme of a mayoral race set to be decided in June. Crime was endemic in the Big Apple in the 1970s and 1980s when America's largest metropolis was gripped by a budgetary crisis, but it has been on a continuous downward trend since the mid-1990s.

However, the picture has deteriorated drastically



NEW YORK: Times Square is reflected in protective eyewear as Democratic candidate for NYC mayor Ray McGuire holds a press conference in Times Square in New York. —AFP

International

Fighting resumes in southern Afghanistan as ceasefire ends

21 militants dead as violence rages amid US pullout

KANDAHAR: Fighting between the Taliban and Afghan government forces resumed yesterday in the restive southern province of Helmand, officials said, ending a three-day ceasefire agreed by the warring sides to mark the Eid Al-Fitr holiday.

Violence has soared as the United States military presses ahead with a plan to withdraw all of its troops by September, bringing an end to a 20-year military operation in Afghanistan. "The fighting started early today and is still ongoing," Attaullah Afghan, head of the Helmand provincial council, told AFP as a three-day temporary truce ended late on Saturday.

He said Taliban fighters attacked security checkpoints on the outskirts of Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, and some other districts. An Afghan army spokesman in the south confirmed fighting had resumed, and the Helmand governor's office said that 21 Taliban fighters had been killed so far. "They (Afghan forces) started the operation... do not put the blame on us," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said. Washington has vowed to end America's longest war but missed a May 1 deadline to pull out, as agreed with the Taliban last year in return for security guarantees and a promise to launch talks with the Afghan government. President Joe Biden pushed back the date to September 11 — exactly two decades on from the terrorist attacks in the United States which led Washington to invade Afghanistan and oust the Taliban.

Tens of thousands of Afghans have been killed and millions have since been displaced by the conflict, which has seen a resurgent Taliban take hold of large swathes of the country. Nishank Motwani, an independent Afghanistan expert based in

Australia, told AFP the Taliban viewed the American withdrawal as a win.

"It gives the insurgents a proclamation of victory, bookends their removal and eventual return to power, and signals that the end is in sight for the Afghan republic in its current state," he said.

Fragile truce ends

Government forces have continued to receive vital air support from US warplanes, and there are concerns over whether they would be able to hold back the insurgents without Washington's help.

"It is now going to be very difficult for us to conduct operations," an Afghan army officer said earlier this week after US forces pulled out fully from Kandahar Airfield, once the second largest base of coalition forces. "Our aircraft can't fly at night so the night operations are going to be difficult."

The three-day truce initiated by the Taliban and swiftly agreed to by the Afghan government had largely held during the Eid holidays that ended on Saturday. The calm was, however, broken on Friday by a blast at a mosque on the outskirts of the Afghan capital, which killed 12 people including the imam leading Friday prayers. The Taliban denied it was behind the attack, which has been claimed by the Islamic State group, according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors jihadist groups.

The truce was only the fourth agreed pause in fighting in the two-decades-long conflict. The warring sides launched unprecedented peace talks in September in Qatar, but they have stalled in recent months. Some negotiators from the Afghan government and Taliban said they had met in Doha on Friday to discuss



KABUL: Devotees gather inside a mosque after a bomb blast on the outskirts of Kabul that killed at least 12 people, shattering the relative calm of a holiday ceasefire between the warring Taliban and government forces. —AFP

speeding up the faltering talks.

"Both sides agreed to continue the talks after (Eid Al-Fitr)," the Taliban tweeted. As violence raged, including a wave of targeted killings on Afghanistan's educated class, international efforts had been made to jump start the negotia-

tions—including a one-day conference in Moscow in March.

Turkey was also scheduled to hold an Afghanistan conference in late April but it was postponed indefinitely because the Taliban declined to attend. —AFP

Anti-coup fighters say six dead in Myanmar clashes

YANGON: Six opposition rebels have been killed after days of clashes in Myanmar, an anti-junta defense force made up of civilians said yesterday, as Britain and the United States condemned the military's violence against civilians. The country has been in uproar since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a February 1 coup, triggering a massive uprising which authorities have sought to quell with lethal force.

Some in the anti-junta movement have set up local militias armed with home-made weapons to protect their towns from security forces—which have killed at least 790 civilians according to a local monitoring group. In the western state of Chin, the town of Mindat has emerged as a hotspot for unrest, where some residents have formed the Chinland Defense Force (CDF).

"Six members of our CDF who tried to protect

the security of the people in Mindat attacked (junta forces) and sacrificed their lives for the national revolution," said a CDF statement yesterday. A spokesman also told AFP that over 10 have been wounded this week, while five Mindat residents were arrested by the military. With mobile data blocked across the country, details about the fighting have been slow to come out, and on-the-ground verification is made harder as locals are fearful of retaliation.

The spokesman, who declined to be named, said CDF fighters set fire to several army trucks, destroying them, and ambushed reinforcement troops, while the military has attacked the town with artillery. By Sunday, the CDF had retreated into the jungle, he said. "We will not stay any more in the town... but we will come back to attack soon," he said. "We only have home-made guns. This was not enough."

He added that residents remaining in Mindat—which has been under martial law since Thursday—were afraid to leave their homes for fear of being targeted by the military.

Violence 'cannot be justified'

The US and UK embassies in Myanmar sound-

ed the alarm Saturday on Mindat's unrest, calling for security forces to cease violence. "The military's use of weapons of war against civilians, including this week in Mindat, is a further demonstration of the depths the regime will sink to to hold onto power," the US embassy said in a tweet Saturday.

"Attacks on civilians are illegal and cannot be justified," said the British embassy, referring to reports of violence from Mindat. "Evidence of atrocities should be sent to the (United Nations Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar) so perpetrators can be held to account," the embassy tweeted, referring to a committee that collects evidence of international crimes.

State-run newspaper New Light of Myanmar reported Sunday that a military tribunal would be convened to try "perpetrators of terrorist attacks" in Mindat. Security forces saw multiple attacks which left one man dead, said the newspaper, and an ambush on Friday by "1,000 rioters" killed some soldiers—though it did not say how many. Across the country, anti-coup protesters continue to march for democracy—with demonstrators in northern Hpakan holding signs that said "Stay strong, Mindat". —AFP

At least 4 dead as powerful cyclone heads for India

AHMEDABAD: At least four people have died in torrential rain and winds as virus-hit India braces for a powerful cyclone, officials said yesterday, with tens of thousands set to be evacuated from their homes. Cyclone Tauktae-India's first major tropical storm this season—is moving northwards in parallel with the country's western coast, bringing heavy rains, thunderstorms and strong winds to several states, the meteorological department said. It is expected to make land in coastal Gujarat as early as tonight, bringing wind speeds of around 150-160 kilometers per hour (93-99 miles per hour), the weather bureau added.

Four people lost their lives on Saturday as torrential rain and winds battered Karnataka state, the disaster management authority said yesterday.

Several towns and villages were flooded and properties damaged, officials added.

Two others were reported dead and 23 fishermen were feared missing in the neighboring state of Kerala, local media said. Up to 75,000 people are set to be evacuated from coastal districts in Gujarat, where the ongoing COVID-19 vaccination rollout will be suspended today and tomorrow, officials told AFP. Hospitals with coronavirus patients in the affected districts were also backing up their power supply, local district development officer Varunkumar Baranwal told AFP.

Oxygen and power supply to hospitals in the state would be uninterrupted. Maharashtra said, while hundreds of virus patients will be moved from field hospitals. India is already battling a deadly wave of infections that has pushed its healthcare system to breaking point, leading to severe shortages of hospital beds, oxygen and medicines.

The vast nation of 1.3 billion people reported just over 311,170 new infections on Sunday, taking the total tally to nearly 24.7 million. The death toll rose to more than 270,000 after 4,077 deaths were officially recorded over the past 24 hours. Experts say

group. In his homily, Francis, 84, skirted an overt denunciation of the military regime, instead appealing to the faithful to be "steadfast in the truth" and urging them not to lose hope.

"Dear brothers and sisters, in these days when your beloved country of Myanmar is experiencing violence, conflict and repression, let us ask ourselves: what we are being called to keep? In the first place, to keep the faith," he said. The pope appealed for unity, calling division among communities and peoples "a deadly disease."

"Sins against unity abound: envy, jealousy, the pursuit of personal interests rather than the common good, the tendency to judge others. Those little conflicts of ours find a reflection in great conflicts, like the one your country is experiencing in these days."

Commit to peace

There are an estimated 700,000 Catholics in Myanmar, about 1 percent of the population, and in Rome their ranks include students, priests, nuns, lay workers and missionaries. Catholics have been in Myanmar for over 500 years after Portuguese traders introduced the religion from their Indian settlement in Goa. Missionaries arrived in the 18th century. The February coup by military generals, which ousted the civilian government, has eroded the improved standing that Catholics enjoyed over the past decade in the wake of the 2010 general election.



This handout photo released yesterday by the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) shows National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) personnel clearing fallen trees from a road following severe cyclonic storm 'Tauktae' at Margao in Goa. —AFP

the actual toll could be significantly higher.

Last May, more than 110 people died after "super cyclone" Amphan ravaged eastern India and Bangladesh, flattening villages, destroying farms and leaving millions without electricity. —AFP

Suu Kyi has remained under house arrest, accused of a raft of charges that could see her barred from politics for life. In his homily, the Argentine pontiff acknowledged "some political and social situations are bigger than we are."

Still, he added, "commitment to peace and fraternity always comes from below: each person, in little things, can play his or her part." "Amid war, violence and hatred, fidelity to the Gospel and being peace-makers calls for commitment, also through social and political choices, even at the risk of our lives."

'Great miracle'

Ending mass, a Myanmar priest thanked the pope for his solidarity. "Our people want peace. For many in Myanmar, this mass is a great miracle," said the priest, speaking in Italian. "The pope, the head of the Catholic church, who is praying together with the people of a small country, for them it's a marvelous thing." Francis has urged peace in Myanmar multiple times since the coup.

In the immediate aftermath, Francis urged the junta to respect a "democratic coexistence" with the people while and a release of political leaders. A month later, he made reference to the Catholic nun who implored soldiers on her knees in February not to fire on protesters, saying, "I too kneel on the streets of Myanmar and say: stop the violence!" —AFP

News in brief

Indonesian fishing crew rescued

JAKARTA: The crew of an Indonesian fishing trawler that was "clinging to their vessel" in bad weather has been rescued off Australia's west coast, a top Canberra official said yesterday. The boat had started sinking in the Indian Ocean on Thursday with 20 crew members on board, Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton said in a statement. Australian air force planes dropped life rafts for the crew, stranded 670 nautical miles west of Perth, before a Japanese fishing vessel picked them up on Saturday. Dutton said the crew had been "clinging to their vessel", and the rescue efforts took place "in bad weather and high sea state". —AFP

Child killed in northern England

LONDON: One child died and four adults were injured early yesterday after two houses collapsed in a suspected gas explosion in northwest England, police said. Police in the county of Lancashire said they were called to the row of terraced houses at 2.40am (0140 GMT) where they evacuated other residents and set up a safety cordon. "We remain at scene of a suspected gas explosion on Mallowdale Ave Heysham which has caused 2 houses to collapse & badly damaged another," the Lancashire force said on Twitter. "Sadly, we can now confirm a young child has died & 4 other people have been injured, 2 seriously. Our thoughts are with all those affected." —AFP

Brazil struggles to vaccinate all

RIO DE JANEIRO: Four months into a COVID-19 vaccination campaign marred by shortages and delays, hard-hit Brazil is still struggling to find enough doses, as political and diplomatic blunders prolong its pandemic nightmare. Around 33 million people — 15 percent of the population—have received at least one vaccine dose in Brazil, a proportion still too small to have a substantial impact on the virus' spread. Targeted by a Senate inquiry over its handling of the pandemic, President Jair Bolsonaro's government is facing criticism for failing to secure more vaccines, including its refusal of offers to purchase millions of doses and diplomatic tension with China that may be slowing the import of vaccine ingredients. —AFP

Venezuela kidnapping lamented

CARACAS: Venezuela on Saturday condemned what it said was the "kidnapping" of eight soldiers by armed groups operating on the Colombian border, where clashes have been ongoing for nearly two months. "During the fighting, eight professional soldiers were captured and on May 9 we received proof of life," Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez said in a televised statement. "We denounce before the international community... the appalling kidnapping of these soldiers," he said. Venezuela's armed forces have engaged in clashes with Colombian armed groups along the border since March 21, displacing thousands of civilians who fled to Colombia. —AFP

Zimbabwe CJ tenure extension 'illegal'

HARARE: Zimbabwe's High Court on Saturday ruled that President Emmerson Mnangagwa's controversial extension of tenure of the country's top judge is illegal. Mnangagwa announced last week that he had extended Luke Malaba's term of office by five years, just hours before the Chief Justice was to due to retire, a move seen as aimed at consolidating the president's power. Three high court judges sat through Friday night as lawyers argued over the legality of the extension. —AFP

Pope urges peace, unity in special mass for Myanmar

ROME: Pope Francis celebrated mass in honor of conflict-ridden Myanmar yesterday, repeating his calls for an end to violence in the country roiled by months of bloodshed. The mass inside the Vatican's Saint Peter's Basilica came after several appeals for peace in recent months by Francis, who visited Myanmar in November 2017, the first papal visit to a Buddhist-majority nation.

A Myanmar nun recited the first reading in Burmese before a congregation of about 200 nuns, priests and seminarians during the mass intended for the country's Catholics in Rome and beyond. Myanmar has been in chaos since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a February 1 coup, triggering a massive civilian uprising that authorities have sought to quell with lethal force.

Street protests calling for a return to democracy continue to occur nearly daily, despite the junta's bloody crackdown having killed an estimated 790 people to date, according to a local monitoring

Business

MONDAY, MAY 17, 2021

In Ivory Coast, boom times for organic cocoa farmers

Ivory Coast produces two million tons of cocoa per year

TIASSALE, Ivory Coast: Cocoa farmers across Ivory Coast, the world's biggest producer of the key ingredient for chocolate, are down in the dumps after prices for their commodity have fallen for the second year running. Not so in M'Brimbo, a village in central Ivory Coast which 11 years ago became a testing ground for organic cocoa farming and today is prospering.

The local farmers' collective, the Fair Cooperative Society of Bandama (SCEB), sell their high-quality produce at twice the market rate for non-organic cocoa. "When producers are trained and well-paid, they can make very good cocoa in Ivory Coast," said Arthur Gautier, an agronomist who works for Ethiquable, a French company that specializes in marketing fair-trade products and buys SCEB's harvest.

The chocolate made from their cocoa is sold in French supermarkets under the brand "Grand Cru M'Brimbo," a name that resonates with fine wines—"Grand Cru" means "vintage."

Cocoa growing was massively promoted by Ivory Coast's government following independence in 1960, becoming the backbone of the country's rise as one of West Africa's leading economies. Today, Ivory Coast produces two million tons of cocoa per year, equivalent to more than 40 percent of the world's market.

But expansion has also come at a grim price for the environment and fuelled a dependency that ratchets up rural poverty whenever prices slump. Around 90 percent of Ivory Coast's forests have been destroyed, stripping away habitat for elephants and other species, and in some places herbicides and pesticides have lastingly tainted the soil. Using techniques pioneered in Latin America, SCEB farmers weed their fields

manually and have developed specific methods to dry and ferment cocoa beans, helping to develop the chocolate's signature rich taste.

Traceability

Monitoring and certifying the process and ensuring traceability, right down to the individual bag of cocoa, have been key to winning the confidence of consumers who are willing to pay more for a product that has quality and ethical values. Ethiquable claims to sell a quarter of the organic chocolate sold in French supermarkets. Organic chocolate accounts for just eight percent of the national market, but is growing at 18 percent per year.

"Doing bio is harder, it requires more work and you need more labor," said Solo Bony, a member of the cooperative. "But at the end of the day, you get a better return." Ethiquable pays the SCEB 1,850 CFA francs (2.82 euros) per kilogram, of which 1,350 francs goes to the producer, which compares with the current official price for non-organic cocoa of 750 francs per kilo—a benchmark that in any case is not always respected.

Another boon is that this price is guaranteed for a three-year period—a welcome reassurance compared with the rollercoaster conventional market. The "organic" label offers higher rewards than "fair trade" certification, issued for around 10 percent of Ivory Coast's production, which is for cocoa that meets environmental standards and does not involve child labor.

An emerging worry in Ivory Coast is about the health impact from farmers who use conventional chemicals to fertilize the soil and kill pests. The cooperative's farmers are testing safer formulas made from residues derived from locally-grown plants. Farmers in the



Ivorian cocoa farmers break organic cocoa pods in the plantation in M'brimbo, a village in central Ivory Coast village near Tiassale. — AFP photos

cooperative also get training in sustainable techniques — planting cocoa trees in the shade of bigger trees rather than in the open, diversifying crops by planting fruit trees and by sowing legume plants, which take nitrogen out of the air and fix it into the soil, thus increasing its fertility naturally.

"A plantation of cocoa trees drawn from older varieties, grown organically and using sustainable farming, provides better-quality cocoa and higher yields, and produce over a timescale of 50 years compared to 20 years for a conventional plantation," said Gautier.

The cooperative's president, Evariste Salo, attested personally to the growth in wealth. "I used to have a bicycle, now I've got a motorbike. I have been able to put my kids through school and build a house." — AFP



Ivorian cocoa farmers fill bags with organic cocoa beans at the warehouse of the local farmers' collective, the Fair Cooperative Society of Bandama (SCEB) in M'brimbo.

Flared natural gas latest prize in bitcoin miners' energy quest

WASHINGTON: As the value of bitcoin soars and concerns rise about the energy-intensive process needed to obtain it, cryptocurrency entrepreneurs in the United States believe they have found a solution in flared natural gas. Profitably creating, or mining, bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies requires masses of computers dedicated to solving deliberately complicated equations—an endeavor that globally consumes more electricity than entire nations, but for which these start-ups say the jets of flaming gas placed next to oil wells are perfect power sources.

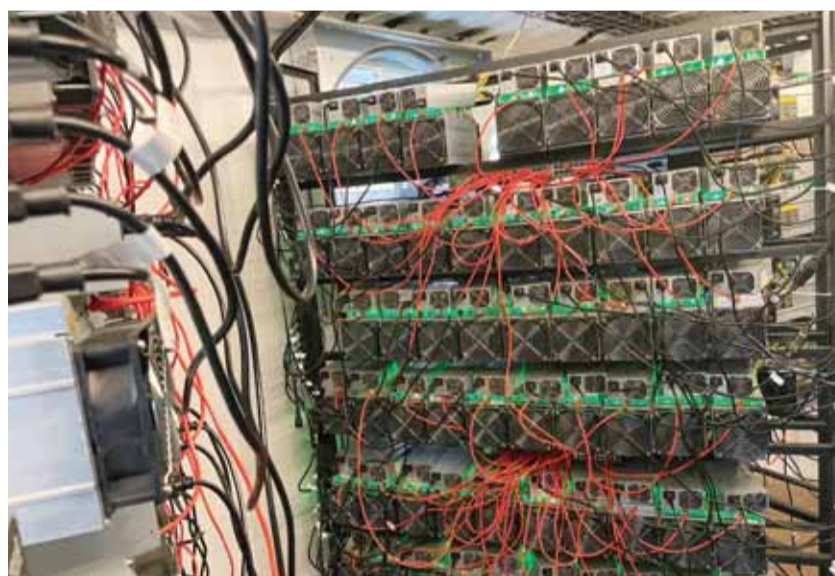
"I think the market is enormous," said Sergii Gerasymovych, CEO of EZ Blockchain, which has six different data centers powered off natural gas in the US states of Utah and New Mexico, as well as in Canada. Across the country, companies like EZ Blockchain are setting up shipping containers where racks containing hundreds of computers mine cryptocurrency, fueled by natural gas from oil wells that otherwise would be

burned in the open.

Interest in their work has grown over the past year. Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies like ethereum and dogecoin have seen meteoric price spikes since the Covid-19 pandemic turned the global economy on its head and mainstream companies began to embrace the technology.

But a backlash has formed against the digital assets' energy usage, fueled by concerns it relies on carbon-emitting power sources that contribute to climate change. This week, Tesla boss Elon Musk criticized bitcoin's power consumption, particularly of energy produced from coal, and said he would no longer accept the cryptocurrency as payment for his electric cars.

While entrepreneurs in the fledgling industry say using natural gas that is otherwise wasted represents a solution to these concerns, its ability to actually cut emissions remains to be seen, said Tony Scott, managing director of analysis at oil and gas research firm BTU Analytics. "In the



In this photo, a bitcoin mining data center is seen at an oil field in North Texas.

grand scheme of things and relative to other load, yes, it's small," Scott said. "They are creating economic value (but) they're not necessarily significantly changing the emissions profiles." Huge numbers of processors worldwide are dedicated to the task of mining bitcoin. The activity uses 149.6 terawatt-hours per year, according to the Cambridge Bitcoin

Energy Consumption Index (CBECI). That is slightly less than all the electricity consumed by Egypt. As the most popular cryptocurrency, bitcoin is undoubtedly valuable, trading at around \$50,000 in mid-May from less than \$10,000 a year ago, giving miners incentive to find the cheapest source of power to increase their margins. — AFP

Walmart to end mask mandate for vaccinated

WASHINGTON: US retail giant Walmart on Friday said customers who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 no longer have to wear masks in their stores, and staff can do the same starting next week. "Beginning today, vaccinated customers and members are welcome to shop without a mask, and we will continue to request that non-vaccinated customers and members wear face coverings in our stores and clubs," the company said in a statement, while adding that masks would still be required where mandated by local authorities.

Employees who are more than two weeks past their vaccination can stop wearing masks from May 18, the company said, and all employees are eligible for a \$75 bonus if they prove they have got their jab.

"These are positive developments. We can do

this. We've been through a lot this year, and now we need to do our part to finish this," Walmart said in a statement signed by corporate leadership. The announcement follows the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's lifting on Thursday of mask-wearing guidance for people who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19, a decision that came over a year after it was first issued at the beginning of the pandemic that has killed more than 585,000 people in the United States.

Walmart mandated customers wear face masks starting last July, and is now among the first major American corporations to end the requirement. "We are also reviewing whether masks may still be required for certain job codes for health and sanitation purposes and will share additional guidance soon. Some associates may choose to continue to wear masks, and as part of our value of respect for the individual we should all support their right to do so," the company said. The largest private employer in the United States, Walmart has a staff of about 1.5 million people in the country and saw soaring sales throughout 2020 despite the pandemic's business disruptions. — AFP



In this file photo taken on July 15, 2020 a man walks near a sign informing customers that face coverings are required in front of a Walmart store in Washington, DC. US retail giant Walmart on May 14 said customers who are fully vaccinated against Covid-19 no longer have to wear masks in their stores, and staff can do the same starting next week.

Ireland rejects FB bid to block regulatory probe

DUBLIN: Ireland's High Court on Friday rejected Facebook's bid to block an investigation that could potentially stop data transfers from the European Union to the United States. "I refuse all of the reliefs sought by (Facebook Ireland) and dismiss the claims made by it in the proceedings," read a statement from High Court judge David Barniville, dismissing its challenge against the Data Protection Commissioner's decision to hold a probe. Facebook's European headquarters is the Irish capital, Dublin, and the DPC acts as the firm's lead regulator in the EU.

The US tech titan was not immediately available for comment when approached by AFP about Friday's news. The Irish regulator launched its inquiry last summer after a top EU court decision over Facebook invalidated a key online data arrangement between Europe and the US. "The DPC decided to commence an 'own volition' inquiry ... to consider whether the actions of Facebook Ireland Ltd in making transfers of personal data relating to individuals in the European Union/European Economic Area are lawful, and whether any corrective power should be exercised by the DPC in that regard," the court statement noted.

'Problematic' transfers

The prior EU decision in July 2020 stemmed from a legal complaint by Austrian activist Max Schrems, who in 2015 scuppered a previous EU-US deal on which tech giants depend to do business.

Schrems had forced the Irish regulator to try and block transatlantic data transfers in the wake of the EU judgment. The DPC has meanwhile attempted for several years to block such transfers, arguing they were "inherently problematic" due to privacy concerns. Facebook had objected to the DPC's inquiry, arguing that it had acted "unlawfully" in starting the probe. The US firm added the decision was made without supplementary guidance from the Court of Justice of the European Union or the European Data Protection Board. — AFP

Business

Macron hosts Africa summits on Sudan, post-COVID finance

Meetings on Africa to address \$300bn shortfall caused by pandemic

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron this week hosts African leaders and chiefs of global financial institutions for twin summit meetings that will seek to help Sudan into a new democratic era and provide Africa with critical financing swept away by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A conference today attended by several heads of state will aim to rally support for the Sudan government under Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok in the transition after the 2019 ousting of longtime strongman Omar Al-Beshir. This will be followed by a summit tomorrow on African economies that will try to fill a financing shortfall of almost \$300 billion caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both meetings, held in a temporary exhibition center under the shadow of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, will be a chance for Macron to show himself as a statesman on Africa whose influence goes beyond the continent's francophone regions. With some two dozen African heads of state due to attend Tuesday's summit, it will be one of the biggest in person top level meetings held during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It should also see a rare visit to France by Rwandan President Paul Kagame as Paris presses for reconciliation with Kigali after a historical report made clear France's failings in preventing the 1994 genocide.

'Explore opportunities'

Hamdok told AFP in an interview ahead of the meeting he hopes Sudan can help wipe out a \$60 billion foreign debt bill this year by securing relief and investment deals at the Paris conference. Sudan's debts to the Paris Club, which includes major creditor countries, is estimated to



PORTO: France's President Emmanuel Macron (center) talks with Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban (right) and Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (left) after a meeting as part of the European Social Summit hosted by the Portuguese presidency of the Council of the European Union at the Palacio de Cristal in Porto. Macron hosts African leaders and chiefs of global financial institutions for twin summit meetings in Paris today. — AFP

make up around 38 percent of its total \$60 billion foreign debt. "We are going to the Paris conference to let foreign investors explore the opportunities for investing in Sudan," Hamdok said.

"We are not looking for grants or donations," he added. Hamdok and his government have pushed to rebuild the crippled economy and end Sudan's international isolation under Bashir, whose three-decade iron-fisted rule was marked by economic hardship and international sanctions.

Sudan was taken off Washington's blacklist of state sponsors of terrorism in December, removing a major hurdle to foreign investment. But many challenges still lie ahead. His government has been pushing to forge peace with rebel groups to end conflicts in the western region of Darfur as well the southern states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

'New, cheaper, longer'

Africa has so far been less badly hit by the Covid-19

US pipeline hacker Darkside shut down

WASHINGTON: Russia-based cyber-extortionist Darkside appeared out of business Friday after unknown actors shut down the servers of the group, which had forced the closure of a large US oil pipeline in a multi-million dollar ransomware scam. US cyber security firm Recorded Future said that Darkside had admitted in a web post that it lost access to certain servers used for its web blog and for payments.

Recorded Future threat intelligence analyst Dmitry Smilyanets said he found a Russian language comment on a ransomware website ostensibly from "Darksupp", described as the operator of Darkside. "A few hours ago, we lost access to the public part of our infrastructure, namely: Blog. Payment server. DOS servers," Darksupp wrote. Accessed via TOR on the dark web, the Darkside site address showed a notice saying it could not be found. Recorded Future reported that the Darkside operator also said cryptocurrency ransom payments had been withdrawn from its server, dealing a setback to the group which had marketed itself as a formal business for hijacking victims' IT systems until they paid to unlock them.



Image shows the Colonial Pipeline Houston Station facility in Pasadena, Texas (East of Houston). US President Joe Biden said that a Russia-based group was behind the ransomware attack that forced the shutdown of the largest oil pipeline in the eastern United States. — AFP

Speculation focused on who could have taken down Darkside's computers after it had spent the past half-year extorting millions of dollars from companies which fell victim to its ransomware. Some suspected that the US military's Cyber Command took action, pointing to the Twitter account of the Pentagon's 780th Military Intelligence Brigade, a hacking unit that retweeted the Recorded Future report shortly after it came out. Asked in a Congressional hearing Friday if they were taking action against Darkside, Cyber Command Commander General Paul Nakasone said he would not discuss the unit's operations.

Ireland hit by ransomware

The Darkside episode came as ransomware actors continued to wreak havoc across the globe.

Ireland's health authority said Friday it had shut down its computer systems after experiencing a "significant ransomware attack." And another extortionist group, Babuk, continued to release sensitive online files stolen from the Washington metropolitan police department. It has demanded a seven-figure payout from the main security body of the US capital city.

Darkside, which only surfaced online late last year, was behind the attack last week on Colonial Pipeline that forced the shutdown of its network shipping gasoline, diesel and aviation fuel across much of the eastern half of the United States. That sparked fuel shortages and long lines at gas stations across much of the southeast. On Thursday Colonial said it had resumed fuel deliveries along its 5,500 mile (8,850 kilometers) pipeline amid unconfirmed reports it had paid Darkside \$5 million to end the cyber-siege. The attention that the Colonial shutdown brought to Darkside and the apparent attack on it appeared to spark turmoil in the flourishing ransomware "industry," in which hackers and owners of the ransomware software and payment operations openly collaborate on mainly Russian language forums.—AFP

Expect choppiness in US economic recovery: Expert

WASHINGTON: Expect "choppiness" in the US economic recovery as different sectors bounce back at varying speeds, but inflation will not be a long-term problem, a top White House official said Friday.

Cecilia Rouse, chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, said the current turbulence is unpredictable. For example, she joked, the government health authority's ruling on Thursday that vaccinated people can safely drop their coronavirus masks suddenly means "we now anticipate an oversupply of masks and an under-supply of lipstick."

"In all seriousness, different sectors of the economy will come back online at different times," she told reporters. "Given the extraordinary and unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic, it will remain difficult for analysts to accurately forecast economic data." Rouse said this week's figures showing a leap in consumer prices, as well as last week's hugely disappointing employment data, need to be seen in context.

An average of half a million jobs have been created every month since January, she said, while the inflation figures reflected wild, yet temporary swings in economic activity as Americans emerge from partial lockdowns—particularly a return to air travel and buying cars. "Airline prices ticked up because they had completely cratered last year," she said.

Those ticket prices still have some way to go to reach pre-pandemic levels—heralding more inflation—but the increases will eventually plateau, as pent-up demand is satiated.

"I do not expect those prices to continue... because at some point people will stop," she said. "I don't think people take multiple vacations." "There's going to be some choppiness," Rouse said. Runaway inflation, however, is not on the White House's horizon.

"People fully expect this inflation to be temporary," Rouse said. "There are not the sort of structural factors that should lead to an inflation that the Federal Reserve cannot control."

Rouse pointed out that the current recovery was in response to significant gains in taming the Covid-19 pandemic through vaccinations. However, she cautioned that there is a long way to go, meaning more economic uncertainty. "We are making fabulous progress in this country, in terms of controlling the virus, but I'd like to remind you that only 58 percent of adults have had one shot at least," she said. Only a quarter of 18- to 29-year-olds are fully inoculated. "We are still eight million jobs down from where we were last year. We have a long way to go." — AFP

Stocks rebound on bargain-buying after inflation rout

NEW YORK: Bargain-buying Friday helped major markets bounce back from some of this week's steep losses as investors bet on the US economy's recovery, despite lingering inflation fears.

Oil prices recovered after heavy losses a day earlier to end the week in the black as equities rose, but the dollar lost ground following recent gains. Bitcoin finished below \$50,000 after oscillating throughout the day. Global stocks have been convulsed for months by expectations that a blockbuster global recovery will



In this file photo, brand new Tesla cars sit in front of a Tesla dealership in Corte Madera, California. After a rush of shopping in March, US consumers took a break in April and total retail sales were flat, according to government data. — AFP

US retail sales flat, inflation fears on rise

WASHINGTON: The US economic recovery showed signs of hitting some turbulence as shoppers curbed their spending last month and manufacturing slowed due to supply bottlenecks.

After a rush of shopping in March, US retail sales were flat in April, and while auto sales rose, vehicle production fell amid a global semiconductor supply crunch, according to government data released Friday. Meanwhile, a private survey showed consumer confidence fell due to concerns about rising prices as the reopening of the world's largest economy drives speculation of a sustained rise in inflation.

Officials in President Joe Biden's administration have tried to downplay the fears of a slowing recovery, but acknowledged there could be some bumpy months ahead. "This was an unprecedented economic downturn... where we completely powered down the economy," said Cecilia Rouse, chair of Biden's Council of Economic Advisers. "Given the extraordinary and unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic, it will remain difficult for analysts to accurately forecast economic data until we have more fully recovered," she told reporters. The University of Michigan consumer sentiment index fell more than six points to 82.8 in May, amid increasing concerns about inflation. But the survey showed "consumer spending will still advance despite higher prices due to pent-up demand and record saving balances."

Fears the world's largest economy will see an inflationary spike have been gaining traction, fueled by recent data showing prices surging as the economy reopens following the COVID-19 shutdowns, including a 4.2 percent year-on-year jump in the consumer price index for April reported earlier this week.

Economists say the spikes reflect a rebound from the price collapses one year ago as the pandemic began, and also are pushed by supply bottlenecks as industries struggle to return to normal.

send prices rocketing, forcing central banks—particularly the Federal Reserve—to taper the ultra-loose monetary policies that have helped drive a rally for more than a year.

But in the United States, the economy appears to be "opening at a faster clip" and the price gains that come with it may not be a problem, Quincy Krosby of Prudential Financial said. "It seems as if the market is accepting that as long as it also is in concert with the economy doing better and corporate earnings doing better, it can withstand a little bit more inflation," Krosby told AFP.

Wall Street gained definitively after three back-to-back losses earlier in the week, with the Dow finishing up 1.1 percent and the Nasdaq adding 2.3 percent, though the indices were about the same amount lower for the week overall. Major European markets closed around one percent ahead, with manufacturers lifting London's FTSE after BAE Systems and Rolls Royce

pandemic than other global regions—with a total of 130,000 dead across the continent—although the human catastrophe in India shows it is way too early to sound the all clear. But the economic cost is only too apparent, with the International Monetary Fund warning in the autumn that Africa faces a shortfall in the funds needed for future development—a financial gap—of \$290 billion up to 2023.

A moratorium on the service of public debt agreed by the Paris Club and the G20 in April last year was welcomed but will not be enough on its own. Many want a moratorium on the service of all external debt until the end of the pandemic. "We are collectively in the process of abandoning Africa by using solutions that date from the 1960s," Macron said last month, warning that failure would lead to reduced economic opportunity, sudden migration flows and even the expansion of terrorism.

International financial leaders attending will include IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva as well as World Bank managing director of operations Axel van Trotsenburg. Serge Ekue, the president of the West African Development Bank (BOAD), told AFP that Africa needed much longer loan maturities that went beyond seven years and interest rates that were 3 percent rather than 6 percent.

"In West Africa, the average age is 20. You walk in (Ivory Coast's biggest city) Abidjan and there is incredible energy," he said, noting that Africa had seen growth rates of 5-6 percent in the last years. "The issue is therefore not so much a moratorium as obtaining low rates. Because it is better to issue new, cheaper and longer debt than to obtain a suspension," he said. — AFP

But the Federal Reserve's repeated assurances that the issues are transitory have not eased the concerns. Rouse said some price gains are due to unusual and temporary factors, like rental companies buying up cars to replenish their fleets. "There's going to be some choppiness" as the economy recovers, she said, but the issues should not lead to inflation beyond the Fed's control.

'Post-stimulus hangover'

The volume of retail sales last month held steady at just under \$620 billion, as declines in clothing, sporting goods, furniture, gasoline and even the roaring e-commerce market were offset by gains in cars, electronics, food and health care, the Commerce Department said.

The cooling off came after a 10.7 percent jump in March compared to February, but total retail sales in April were more than 51 percent higher than the same month last year, when the Covid-19 pandemic first forced the near-shutdown of the world's largest economy. Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics called the April pause "a modest post-stimulus hangover after the March binge." The National Retail Federation (NRF) stressed that while consumers tapped the brakes last month, sales remain strong and household finances are healthy.

"Consumers are demonstrating that when they feel safe, they are both willing and able to spend and are driving the economy forward," NRF President Matthew Shay said in a statement.

He predicted "the economic recovery will likely continue to gain steam as we head into the summer months." Motor vehicle and parts sales were up just 2.9 percent in the month, and excluding the auto sector, total retail sales actually fell 0.8 percent, according to the report. And with more Americans vaccinated against Covid-19 and authorities relaxing mask and social distancing restrictions, sales at restaurants and bars rose three percent, the report said. Online sales slipped 0.3 percent—a rare decline—but are up 29 percent from a year ago.

Meanwhile, the Federal Reserve said "supply chain difficulties" kept US industrial output to a 0.7 percent gain last month. Automakers have been forced to slow or shut down plants amid a worldwide shortage of semiconductors, and the Fed data showed production of motor vehicles and parts fell 4.3 percent. —AFP

each scored three percent gains. While central bank officials have been in no rush to change course, investors have been preparing for what they see as the inevitable, selling firms at risk from higher interest rates, such as in the tech sector, and buying those that benefit.

The scorching inflation narrative was reinforced this week with US consumer prices coming in far above estimates on Wednesday, followed by data Thursday showing the wholesale price index at its highest since comparable records began in 2010. Fawad Razaqzada, market analyst with ThinkMarkets, was nonetheless unworried, saying, "There is a sense of calm returning to the market with investors happy to buy the dip in the markets of stocks, especially cyclical."

Razaqzada said Fed consensus appeared to be "that inflation is likely to rise somewhat further before moderating later this year. But I am sure the Fed is secretly getting worried about the situation." —AFP

Business

UK health service comes under strain despite COVID promises

Frontline health workers say promise rings hollow and they feel 'betrayed'

LONDON: In April last year, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson thanked the doctors and nurses who saved his life after he spent days in hospital intensive care with COVID-19. In an emotional address on television, he promised all the necessary funds for the state-run National Health Service (NHS), which is Europe's biggest employer.

But 12 months on, frontline health workers said that promise rings hollow and they feel "betrayed", as experts warn the system is imploding for lack of investment. Even before the global health crisis hit, the NHS—a cherished national institution funded by taxation and providing free healthcare—was already under severe strain.

"The NHS had just finished the most difficult winter. We were behind on delays of treatment, on all metrics," said Stuart Tuckwood, nursing officer for the public sector union Unison.

Hospitals then had to cope with two devastating waves of COVID-19 that stretched staff to the limit and put capacity at breaking point. Since Britain's outbreak began, more than 127,000 people have died after testing positive for the disease—one of the worst death tolls in the world.

Staff are physically and mentally exhausted, said Tuckwood. "Then the government has indicated that all it's going to offer is a one-percent raise for

NHS workers. It feels like a massive betrayal," he told AFP.

The proposed pay increase has caused anger far and wide, prompting calls from the main opposition Labor party—which set up the NHS in 1948—for a much bigger award. Even pop star Dua Lipa weighed in at this week's Brit Awards, saying frontline workers should be given a "fair pay rise".

Beyond COVID

A British Medical Association survey of 2,100 staff indicated that more than one in five plan to leave the NHS and change careers because of COVID-related stress and fatigue. Nurses are widely viewed as underpaid, while auxiliaries and other staff earn even less, with many living below the poverty line. The Royal College of Nursing wants a 12.5 percent pay rise, while Unison is calling for a one-off £2,000 (\$2,809, 2,325 euros) per person bonus for the year. Franco Sassi, professor of international health policy and economics at Imperial College, is concerned about the "lack of additional structural funding for the NHS, beyond the commitment of expenditure to face the pandemic emergency".

Health spending in Britain was already 43 percent lower than in Germany, and 15 percent less than in France before the crisis, he wrote in a note on the university's website. The

number of doctors — 2.8 per 1,000 people—is also "well below EU averages", while Britain has the second-lowest number of hospital beds in Europe. If this backlog is not addressed, "the NHS will fail to meet patient needs and expectations in a post-pandemic world", he said. "It will place additional demands on public finances, already under significant strain, but the risks involved in leaving the NHS underfunded are too great."

Waiting times

Johnson's Conservative government—regularly accused of wanting to privatize the NHS—has defended its proposed pay award. The Department of Health pointed out that public sector pay increases have been suspended because of the economic situation caused by the pandemic. More than one million NHS staff had been given new multi-year pay deals, leading to a rise of more than 12 percent for newly qualified nurses.

Junior doctors' pay scales will go up by 8.2 percent while an extra £63 billion has been made available for health services in the last year, and £29 billion in 2021. "This includes £1 billion to support NHS recovery by incentivizing providers to address backlogs and tackle long waiting lists which have built up because of the pandemic," the department said. The backlog is causing concern. NHS



LONDON: A handout photograph released by the UK Parliament shows Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson updating MPs on the COVID-19 pandemic in a socially distanced, hybrid session at the House of Commons, in central London. —AFP

figures this week showed nearly five million people were waiting for routine hospital treatment—and 436,000 for longer than a year.

George Stoye, associate director at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said long waits were likely "for years to come", even as COVID-19 cases fall. "The waiting times figures are only the tip of the iceberg... Catching up on this care

will take years and billions of pounds of additional health spending," he said.

He welcomed a £160 million government package to tackle the backlog but said a "clear plan" was needed to boost staff numbers to cope. "After more than a year of tackling the pandemic, a clear workforce strategy that rewards and retains staff is more vital than ever," he added. —AFP

French water and waste companies eye mega-merger

PARIS: French conglomerate Veolia and rival Suez said Friday they had signed a deal on the outlines of their merger to create a global champion in water services and waste management.

In a statement confirming an announcement earlier this week of an offer of 20.50 euros (\$24.90) per Suez share, the companies said the deal would power Veolia's growth goals while leaving a smaller but "coherent and sustainable" Suez. Veolia chief Antoine Frerot hailed the agreement, under which his company will acquire a large part of Suez, as a "win-win" for the two companies. It would leave his firm free to pursue its ambition of becoming "the world champion of ecological transformation", slated to have annual revenues of 37 billion euros and 230,000 employees worldwide.

The company wants to become a global leader in helping firms and cities reduce their environmental impact, including by recycling treated waste and reducing the use of resources. Veolia's 20.50-per-share offer was the breakthrough after months of bitter battles in the media and courts, topping a previous 18-euro bid. The battle between the two companies was primarily over what would happen to Suez in the tie-up. Under the final terms, Suez's remaining activities will mainly cover waste and water in France plus water in Italy, Senegal, China and India, leaving it with around 7 billion euros in annual revenue. French investment fund Meridiam and US-based GIP will each own 40 percent of the new Suez, with the remainder held by France's public Caisse des Dépôts. —AFP

Macron, Ardern in new push against online extremism

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern sought Friday to advance their two-year-old campaign to curb online extremism, after it was boosted by the United States finally joining the initiative. Their talks marked two years since the leaders launched the Christchurch Call, an initiative named after the New Zealand city where a far-right gunman massacred 51 people at two mosques on March 15, 2019 while broadcasting his rampage live on Facebook.

The campaign, which aims to bring together governments and top tech platforms, has been boosted by the decision of the administration of new US President Joe Biden to join the initiative after his predecessor Donald Trump turned his back on the drive. "We all have a role to play in continuing to implement the engagements of the Christchurch Call. This evening, we reaffirmed our willingness to continue down this road, together," Macron wrote on Twitter after the talks.

He said that 55 states, including all EU member states, two international organizations and ten companies are now part of the initiative. Participants in the Christchurch Call are asked to commit to pledges to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content on social media and other online platforms. Macron welcomed the move by the United States—as well as six other nations—to join the initiative. However some key nations, including China and Russia, have still not signed up. —AFP

DR Congo's diamond hub loses luster

LUPATAPATA, DR Congo: Two hours by dirt road from the Democratic Republic of Congo's diamond hub Mbuji-Mayi, life is hard for freelance miners. On the way to Lupatapata, abandoned maize fields attest to a decline of the region's once thriving agriculture sector.

The town has no major market, no maize depot, just a "mini-market" for diamonds where middle men wait to name their price for the precious stones, standing behind makeshift counters. "Punters aren't coming here anymore, money isn't circulating. Just as the diamond has become rare, everything is difficult here," said one of the buyers, Jean-Claude Basanabo.

"Food prices have gone up, workers are going unpaid (and) the roads have really deteriorated," he said. Lupatapata's decline is emblematic of a more general malaise in the region, even though it is a stronghold of President Felix Tshisekedi, who

took office in April 2019.

The son of historic opposition figure Etienne Tshisekedi won 100 percent of the vote in some Kasai-Oriental towns. His predecessor and arch-rival Joseph Kabila had ruled the poor central African country since 2001. The election led to the first peaceful transition of power in the former Belgian colony's history, but Tshisekedi was forced into a governing coalition with Kabila supporters who at the time wielded a huge majority in parliament.

'People are hungry'

Among Tshisekedi's main campaign promises under the slogan "The People First" were boosting youth employment and improving access to public health care. "After the elections, we thought (economic) activity would recover, but there is nothing and people are hungry," one diamond miner said.

"There's nothing concrete, so we try to get by looking for diamonds... rather than wander about waiting for the government to work," Mbuji-Mayi developed under the Bakwanga mining company MIBA, the flagship of the region's economy until the end of the 1990s, its heyday when it was dubbed the DRC's "diamond capital".



A vehicle loaded with minerals ready to be dumped into the large tank at the entrance of the Disele diamond washing plant, the first step in the cleaning process, in the presence of a group of engineers and workers from Miba (Miniere de Bakwanga) in Mbuji-Mayi, Kasai region, Democratic Republic of Congo. —AFP

"Urban roads are practically non-existent... We can't wait anymore," said local activist Nicolas Kazadi, complaining that the province lacks water and electric power. An opposition bastion for decades, Kasai residents were hoping for a turnaround under Tshisekedi. "We haven't seen much yet" of the campaign promises, said Blaise Kanda, a

clergyman active in local civil society. "Now that this opposition is in power, we hope they will do their best so that people can eat and smile again."

"We support the president, we pray for him, but the people won't continue to praise him if things don't change," he said. "People can also get tired" of waiting. —AFP

SoftBank beats Japanese record for net profit

TOKYO: Investment giant Softbank Group reported the best ever annual net profit for a Japanese company, reaping the rewards of tech share rallies to recover from last year's record loss.

The telecoms firm turned investment behemoth has poured money into some of Silicon Valley's biggest names and hottest new ventures from AI to biotech through its \$100-billion Vision Fund. People moving their lives online during pandemic lockdowns boosted the tech sector and helped the firm score a net profit of 4.99 trillion yen (\$45.8 billion) for the year to March, SoftBank said.

The yearly figure tops Japan's previous record held by Toyota and places SoftBank among the world's most profitable companies. But the firm warned that virus uncertainties meant there was

"no guarantee that the current positive impact will be sustained", while analysts said a recent rout in tech shares could spell trouble for the firm. In 2019-20, SoftBank reported a net loss of 961.6 billion yen—its worst ever—as the start of the pandemic compounded woes caused by its investment in troubled office-sharing start-up WeWork.

But it quickly returned to profit as the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns worked largely in its favour.

As people flocked to shop online, South Korean e-commerce giant Coupang, backed by SoftBank, raised more than \$4 billion in its initial public offering (IPO) in March. The value of the Vision Fund's stake in US food delivery app DoorDash also rose massively following its December IPO.

SoftBank founder Masayoshi Son took a typically defensive tone over the huge annual profit, saying it did not mean investors were "throwing their arms up in the air and giving all the praise".

"We must continue to make profit consistently to prove that all this is not out of luck... in the future, the stock market will go up and down," he said.

Argentine president holds 'positive' talks with IMF chief

ROME: Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez said Friday he was hoping to renegotiate his country's debt "as quickly as possible", after talks with the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Rome. Fernandez told reporters it had been a "very constructive" and "very frank meeting, where we expressed our will to resolve the problem of

Argentine debt". He said he wanted to "find an agreement as quickly as possible", while adding: "We cannot think about an agreement which demands more efforts from the Argentine people." For her part, IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva said it was a "very positive meeting" where they discussed the "deep social and economic challenges" facing Argentina that have been aggravated by the pandemic.

She said they committed to keep working together "on an IMF-supported program that can help Argentina and its people overcome these challenges, by strengthening economic stability, protecting the most vulnerable and setting the basis for more sustainable and inclusive growth".

"I also took note of President Fernandez's

request for a reform of the IMF's surcharges policy," she said in a statement.

The IMF says it imposes surcharges on some debtors to create an incentive for nations to exit its lending programs as quickly as possible. Argentina is looking to replace a lending program signed by the previous government in 2018 under which it currently owes the IMF about \$45 billion.

In recession since 2018, the former Spanish colony must also repay a \$2.8 billion loan with the Paris Club of creditor countries that provide sustainable solutions to debtor countries. Fernandez this week visited Portugal, France and Spain before heading to Italy, where he also met with Argentine Pope Francis. —AFP



TOKYO: A woman walks past a logo of the SoftBank Group in Tokyo. —AFP

Business

NBK Money Markets Report

Fed warns as inflation fears echo across global markets

OPEC sticks to forecast of strong recovery in oil demand in 2021

KUWAIT: US consumer prices surged 4.2 percent y/y in April following a 2.6 percent gain in March, marking the largest increase since 2008 according to the US Labor Department. The core price index which excludes volatile food and energy costs increased 3 percent on a yearly basis and 0.9 percent m/m, also far above forecasts. The higher inflation readings are a reflection of the combination of heavy fiscal support and increased spending as economic activity picks up following the rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations. The data is also reflecting surges in comparison to the relatively low levels of inflation at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, which US Fed Chairman Jerome Powell had formerly warned of.

Nevertheless, the higher than expected data fueled prior concerns that higher inflation could force the central bank to raise interest rates earlier than expected. The Fed had repeatedly insisted that such increases would prove only temporary as the economy needs time to level out after reopening. Reacting to the report, the White House council of economic advisers stated that the US economy was experiencing a "normalization" of prices as it recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic. "There will be months that come in below or above expectations as strong demand meets recovering supply. Recovery from the pandemic will not be linear. The Council of Economic Advisers will continue to monitor the data as they come in," the council said. Off the back of the report, stocks on Wall Street fell and the movements were echoed in stock markets across the globe.

Unemployment claims

Looking at the labor market, the number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell last week to a pandemic low of 473,000. Weekly jobless claims are now significantly below January's peak of 900,000, though is still far from the under-200,000 pre-pandemic levels. According to the report, the government said nearly 16.9 million people were receiving unemployment benefits during the week of April 24 (the latest available data), up from 16.2 million in the previous week. In April, employers' added just 266,000 jobs, far fewer than expected and a strong

sign that businesses are struggling to find enough workers. President Joe Biden disputed that the stimulus payment is to blame for the drop in hiring last month, urging the Labor Department to work with states on renewing requirements that recipients of aid must search for jobs and take a position if offered. "Anyone collecting unemployment, who is offered a suitable job must take the job or lose their unemployment benefits," Biden said.

Retail sales stall

US Retail Sales unexpectedly stalled in April, with the Commerce department reporting an unchanged monthly reading following an upwardly revised 10.7 percent surge in March. Looking at the core figure which excludes volatile items and is most closely associated with the consumer spending of GDP, retail sales dropped 1.5 percent following an upwardly revised 7.6 percent increase in March. The data adds further to the anxiety following worrying inflation and employment data. Those qualified had received an additional \$1,400 in checks in March as part of the White House's \$1.9 trillion pandemic rescue package. Reports suggest households have accumulated at least \$2.3 trillion in savings during the pandemic which should reflect on spending later this year.

Europe & UK

The European commission raised its growth forecast sharply for the next two years due to an accelerating vaccination campaign and improving export demand which should help the Eurozone recover from the historic pandemic hit to the economy. According to estimates, the euro area will expand by 4.3 percent this year and 4.4 percent in 2022 compared to previous forecasts for 3.8 percent growth for both years. Following the historic 6.6 percent slump in 2020, all member states are expected to return to pre-crisis output levels by the end of 2022. The recovery will be driven in part by the Next Generation EU package, which will begin payments in the summer. In total, the 6-year program will provide approximately \$140bn of grants over the next two years, which alone could translate to a 1.2 percent lift in GDP.

Rates - 16th May, 2021

Currencies	Previous Week Levels				This Week's Expected Range		3-Month Forward
	Open	High	Low	Close	Minimum	Maximum	
EUR	1.2159	1.2180	1.2049	1.2140	1.2044	1.2203	1.2162
GBP	1.3978	1.4165	1.3976	1.4096	1.4007	1.4156	1.4102
JPY	108.65	109.78	108.34	109.34	108.91	109.85	109.26
CHF	0.9014	0.9096	0.8984	0.9011	0.8976	0.9085	0.8990

UK economy contracts

As nationwide lockdown measures took hold in an effort to contain spiraling COVID-19 cases, the UK economy contracted by 1.5 percent during the first quarter of 2021. Moving ahead, as lockdowns are lifted and activity picks up, the country is expected to see a sharp rebound. The expected recovery was already illustrated in March, with the economy growing at its fastest monthly growth since August at 2.1 percent. The International Monetary Fund expects UK GDP to grow 5.3 percent in 2021, recovering from last year's largest annual contraction since the Great Frost of 1709. According to the Office for National Statistics, GDP currently sits 8.7 percent below pre-pandemic levels. Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the next stage of lockdown easing will go ahead as planned on May 17, with hospitality and travel opening up and supporting the country's dominant services industry.

Commodities

Last week, oil prices rose to highs of \$69.32 per barrel for Brent crude and \$66.08 per barrel for the West Texas Intermediate, the highest close for the commodity since March. Last week's data revealed US crude exports fell to around 1.8 million barrels per day,

the lowest since October 2018, while inventories declined 0.4 million barrels versus an expected 2.87 million-barrel draw. The International Energy Agency said in its monthly report that oil demand is already outstripping supply. Holding a similar view, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries stuck to its forecast of a strong recovery in oil demand in 2021 with the current growth in China and the US outweighing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in India. Iran, exempt from making voluntary cuts due to US sanctions, pumped more oil in April driving a mere 30,000 bpd rise in the groups output.

OPEC predicts demand will rise by 5.95 million bpd this year, or 6.6 percent - a forecast unchanged from last month. However, it highlighted that most of the growth will be seen in the second half of the year. The group estimates the volume needed to balance global demand and supply will rise to 27.65 million bpd in 2021 compared to the 25.08 million bpd of production seen in April. Voluntary production cuts from OPEC and its allies are being gradually rolled back in anticipation of the higher demand.

Kuwait Kuwaiti dinar

USD/KWD closed last week at 0.30085.

Sarah Al-Jeri wins Gulf Bank's Salary Package prize

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank conducted its fourth monthly salary package draw of the year to announce the winner for April 2021. The lucky winner, Sarah Saad Rassam Al-Jeri, will claim a cash prize worth 12 times her salary. The draw was held last Monday at Gulf Bank's main branch, in the presence of a representative from the Ministry of Commerce & Industry.

On this occasion, Mohammad Al-Qattan, General Manager of Consumer Banking at Gulf Bank, said: "This is the fourth salary draw we hold this year. As we extend our congratulations to Sarah Saad Rassam Al-Jeri for winning a prize worth 12 times her salary, we would also like to remind our clients that there are always opportunities for them to win - whether it's every month with our monthly salary draws, or our annual draw for the grand prize of 100 times the winner's salary. In addition to the draws, Gulf Bank's Salary Account is the only account in Kuwait that encompasses offers that are specifically tailored to our customers' needs."

Throughout 2021, Gulf Bank's salary package offers clients a wide range of exclusive offers, including the ability to choose between an interest-free loan or a cash prize of up to 200 Kuwaiti Dinars, and a free credit card, with these

offers being valid for workers in both the public and private sectors. Gulf Bank is also providing special offers for frontline workers in appreciation of their continuous efforts in combating the pandemic.

Frontline workers' salary package

Gulf Bank recently tailored a special offer for employed Kuwaiti frontline workers who wish to transfer their salaries to Gulf Bank. Upon transferring their salaries, these clients will immediately receive a set of benefits, including a cash gift of KD 200, or an interest-free loan of up to KD 10,000 or a special car loan offer from approved showrooms. They will also be eligible to receive a Visa or MasterCard credit card with all annual fees waived for the first year, a free MasterCard World card (upon KD 5,000 expenditure). The frontline offer also consists of other benefits, including a free safety deposit box for a period of one year upon opening the account, free concierge services, and a customer segment upgrade. The new frontline offer is open to Kuwaiti employees working in the Fire Brigade, National Guard, Civil Aviation (including Kuwait Airways) and in the following Ministries: Health, Defense, Information and Interior.

Salary package - Exclusive offer

As part of the vast range of services and benefits available to Salary Account customers, Gulf Bank offers its clients the opportunity to choose the most appropriate benefits from a wide selection of attractive options. With the 2021 Kuwaiti Salary Offer, new customers who transfer their salaries to Gulf Bank are automatically enrolled in the monthly draws, giving them the chance to win cash prizes of up to 12 times their salary. Customers are also enrolled in a yearly draw of

Kuwait's largest salary prize, a cash prize of up to 100 times the winner's salary.

Gulf Bank's Salary Account also gives new customers the opportunity to receive either a KD 200 cash gift upon transferring their salaries to Gulf Bank, or an interest-free loan of up to KD 10,000. Customers must have a minimum salary of KD 500 and are eligible for the offer following their first salary transfer to Gulf Bank. Customers can also enjoy additional benefits like a Visa or MasterCard credit card free of charge for a year. They can also apply for a loan of up to KD 70,000 with a repayment period of 15 years, or a consumer loan of up to KD 25,000.

Salary Account draws

Gulf Bank conducts monthly and annual Salary Account draws, in which all salaried customers who transferred their salaries to Gulf Bank in 2019, 2020 and 2021 are automatically enrolled. During the monthly draws, Salary Account customers have the chance to win a prize of up to 12 times their salaries and can even win up to 100 times their salaries in the annual draw.

It is worth noting that Gulf Bank is the only bank in Kuwait that offers its salaried customers the opportunity to win sums of these amounts on a monthly and annual basis, as a reward for transferring their salaries to Gulf Bank.

Customers could enter the draw on the prizes of Al-Rabeh account by opening and transferring their salaries to Al-Rabeh account, when a customer deposits three salaries during the three months prior to the draw, they will be able to win unprecedented prizes by participating in the draws, that are: a monthly draw in winning 1kg of gold for three winners, and a quarterly draw with three winners per draw with 3kg of gold per winner. At the end of the campaign, an annual draw is made to announce the grand prize winner of 12kg of gold for the first place winner, 3kg of gold for the second place winner and 2kg of gold for the third place winner. The total number of winners is 45 customers, and the total prizes at the end of the campaign is 77kg of gold.

Campaign benefits

Among the most prominent features offered by

coastal areas of Zouk and Jiyeh, the Turkish company said in a statement. "For 18 months, we have been exceedingly flexible with the state, continually supplying power without payment or a payment plan, because the country was already facing very hard times," it said.

But "no company can operate in an environment with such direct and undue risks". A Karpowership source said the remaining fuel in the barges' power plants ran out at 0500 GMT and transmission to the Lebanese grid ceased. The source said the company was owed more than \$100 million by the Lebanese state but was equally concerned about the prosecutor's order.

Legal case

In early May, a Lebanese prosecutor banned the barges from leaving the country over the alleged payment of illicit commissions, accusations that could lead to a \$25 million penalty, a Lebanese judicial source said at the time. Karpowership has rejected the allegations as "baseless and lacking credibility".

The Turkish firm says the two barges, which have been operating in Lebanon since 2013, have accounted for up to 25 percent of the mains power supply. State-



Mohammad Al-Qattan

Ireland shuts health IT system after ransomware hit

DUBLIN: Ireland's health authority said Friday it had shut down its computer systems after experiencing a "significant ransomware attack", a week after the largest US fuel pipeline network was also targeted. The Irish attack was blamed on international criminals and was said to be targeting healthcare records. Officials said patient safety was not at risk however the Health Services Executive (HSE) said it is currently unable to make referrals for coronavirus testing. Government minister Ossian Smyth told RTE it is "possibly the most significant cybercrime attack on the Irish State", calling it an "international attack" but "not espionage". "These are cyber-criminal gangs, looking for money," he told Ireland's state broadcaster.

The HSE said it shut down all its IT systems as a precaution but said the country's coronavirus vaccination program was unaffected, as were emergency service calls. But the referral system used to book COVID-19 tests was down. Health minister Stephen Donnelly said the attack was having a "severe impact" but "individual services and hospital groups are impacted in different ways". On Twitter he claimed that "COVID-19 testing and vaccinations are continuing as planned".

Liz Canavan, a top official in prime minister Micheal Martin's office, said the outage was also affecting child protection services, which are hosted on HSE servers. She urged people needed urgent treatment to attend hospital as normal but HSE chief operations officer Anne O'Connor warned of disruption if the outage continued. "If this continues to Monday we will be in a very serious situation, and we will be cancelling many services," she said. Another ransomware attack last Friday forced the shutdown of the United States' largest fuel distribution system, leading to some panic buying at gasoline stations along the east coast. Moscow has rejected US accusations that a Russia-based group was behind the cyberattack. —AFP



This picture taken on September 19, 2018 shows the Turkish-owned MW Karadeniz Powership Fatmagul Sultan, moored off the shore of the Lebanese town of Zouk Mosbeh, north of the capital Beirut. —AFP

Parliament approved \$200 million in emergency funding in late March to stave off a national power cut, but the constitutional committee earlier this month suspended its implementation. —AFP

KFH Al-Rabeh account offers chances of winning 77kg gold

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) offers a total of 77 KG of gold prizes for 45 winners during the one-year campaign, and a grand prize of 12kg of gold through the Al-Rabeh account. This comes under the campaign "It's Worth Transferring your Salary" which aims to strengthen the relationship between the bank and customers and give them a world of exclusive financing and banking offers, in addition to an integrated package of digital services that add value to the customer's banking experience.

Turkish power firm halts generation for Lebanese grid

BEIRUT: Lebanon lost as much as a quarter of its mains electricity supply Friday when a Turkish firm halted power generation, the latest blow to the crisis-hit country already suffering long blackouts. Lebanon's ailing electricity sector is facing dire cash shortages, as the country grapples with its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war. The caretaker energy minister has for months warned the country was heading to "total darkness" if no emergency funds were secured to keep the lights on. Karpowership said it had been left with little choice but to cease production from its two power barges moored off Lebanon's coast after months of delayed payment and in the face of a prosecutor's threat to seize the vessels.

"We deeply regret shutting down" the barges in the

Lifestyle | Features

Picasso painting sells for \$103m in New York

Pablo Picasso's "Woman Sitting Near a Window (Marie-Therese)" sold Thursday for \$103.4 million at Christie's in New York, the auction house said. The painting, completed in 1932, was sold after 19 minutes of bidding for \$90 million, which rose to \$103.4 million when fees and commissions were added, Christie's said. Christie's had estimated

"signals a real return to normal and also a message that the art market is really back on track," said Bonnie Brennan, president of Christie's America.

The painting, depicting Picasso's young mistress and muse, Marie-Therese Walter, was acquired only eight years ago at a London sale for £28.6 million (about \$44.8 million), less than half the price

"He was an artist, but he was also seven artists at the same time," said Giovanna Bertazzoni, vice-president of Christie's 20th and 21st centuries department. She said Picasso's personal life, his aura and his love life still resonate today even though his work dates back more than 100 years. "It's still incredibly contemporary and speaks to us," she said.

This is the first time in two years that a work has broken the \$100 million mark since an 1890 Claude Monet "Meules" painting reached \$110.7 million at Sotheby's, also in New York. On Tuesday, the painting "In This Case" by the American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat sold for \$93.1 million at Christie's in the first of the major spring sales, one of the two most important events in the auction world.

The year 1932, when Picasso painted "Woman Sitting Near a Window", is often considered the most productive period of his career and many major exhibits of his works have been devoted to that single year.

Women painters also fared well at the Christie's auction Wednesday with several works sold setting artist records. "We saw incredible prices for female artists across the 20th century tonight," said Emily Kaplan, co-head of the 20th Century Evening Sale. "Barbara Hepworth and Grace Hartigan achieved new records. Alice Neel, who is having a real market moment and an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, doubled her previous auction record." — AFP



In this photo taken on April 22, 2021, gallery workers display an artwork titled 'Femme assise pres d'une fenetre (Marie-Therese)' by Spanish painter Pablo Picasso during a photocall at Christie's auction house in central London. — AFP

the painting - bought by an online bidder in California - would sell for \$55 million.

The sale confirms the vitality of the art market despite the COVID-19 pandemic - but also the special status of Picasso, who was born in 1881 and died in 1973. The generally good performance of Thursday's auctions, totaling \$481 million,

offered Thursday. Five works by the Spanish painter have now crossed the symbolic threshold of \$100 million. Even before this sale, he was already alone at the top of this very exclusive club with four paintings, including "Women of Algiers", which holds the record for a Picasso, at \$179.4 million in 2015.



Martin Bashir

Controversial Diana interviewer Bashir leaves BBC

British journalist Martin Bashir, who is being investigated over how he obtained an explosive 1995 interview with Princess Diana, is stepping down from his role as the BBC's religion editor, the corporation said Friday. "Martin Bashir has stepped down from his position as the BBC's Religion Editor, and is leaving the corporation," said deputy director of BBC News, Jonathan Munro, adding it was due to health issues.

"He let us know of his decision last month, just before being readmitted to hospital for another surgical procedure on his heart," said Munro. Bashir's interview with Diana, in which she lifted the lid on her troubled marriage to Prince Charles, dropped a bombshell on the royal family. But his methods in securing the interview have been investigated by former Supreme Court judge John Dyson, whom the BBC appointed after calls from the late princess' brother, Charles Spencer.

Dyson's spokeswoman said Friday that he "has concluded his investigation and the report has been passed to the BBC for publication in due course." Spencer has alleged that Bashir showed him faked documents to persuade his sister to take part. In the November 1995 interview, which was watched by a record 22.8 million people, Diana famously said "there were three people" in her marriage - her, Charles and his long-time lover Camilla Parker-Bowles. Diana and Charles formally divorced in 1996. She died in a Paris car crash the following year.

New reports have surfaced alleging that Bashir used underhand methods to persuade Diana to talk, including by claiming her own staff members were being paid to spy on her. The BBC has been accused of a cover-up in a previous inquiry when rumors about Bashir's alleged methods first surfaced. Bashir was little-known at the time of the interview but went on to have a global career and famously interviewed Michael Jackson. The journalist has not been at work in recent months after contracting coronavirus and undergoing heart bypass surgery. — AFP

New dinosaur found in Mexico was 'very communicative'

A new species of dinosaur identified by Mexican paleontologists is believed to have been "very communicative" and used low-frequency

sounds like elephants to talk to each other, a researcher said Friday. The specimen, which has been named *Tlatolophus galorum*, is thought to have died around 72 million years ago in what is now Mexico's northern state of Coahuila.

After initially discovering the tail, paleontologists said they later found most of its skull, a 1.32-m bony hollow crest through which it communicated, as well as bones such as its femur and shoulder. "We are calculating the size, which could be between eight meters and 12 meters

long because just the tail is around six meters," said paleobiologist Angel Alejandro Ramirez.

"We believe that these dinosaurs were very communicative. They even produced and perceived low-frequency sounds like those made by elephants, which travel several kilometers and are imperceptible to humans," added Ramirez. These "peaceful, but talkative" dinosaurs could also have had the ability to emit loud sounds to scare off predators, the National Institute of Anthropology and



This aerial photo taken on April 27, 2021 shows a still-under-construction replica of the Titanic ship in Daying County in China's southwest Sichuan province. — AFP

Huge Titanic replica to open as Chinese tourist destination

The Titanic is being brought back from the deep, more than a century after its ill-fated maiden voyage, at a landlocked Chinese theme park where tourists can soon splash out for a night on a full-scale replica. The project's main backer was inspired to recreate the world's most infamous cruise liner by the 1997 box office hit of the same name - once the world's top-grossing film and wildly popular in China.

The original luxury vessel, the largest of its time and branded "unsinkable" by its owners, has become a byword for hubris ever since it plunged into the depths of the Atlantic in 1912 after striking an iceberg, leaving more than 1,500 people dead. Investor Su Shaojun says he was motivated to finance the audacious, 260-metre-long duplicate to keep memories of the Titanic alive. "I hope this ship will be here in 100 or 200 years," Su said. "We are building a museum for the Titanic."

It has taken six years - longer than the construction of the original Titanic - plus 23,000 tons of steel, more than a hundred workers and a hefty one billion yuan (\$153.5 million) price tag. Everything from the dining room to the luxury cabins and even the door handles are styled on the original Titanic. It forms the centerpiece of a Sichuan province theme park more than 1,000 km from the sea.

The site features a replica of Southampton Port seen in James Cameron's 1997 disaster epic, where Leonardo DiCaprio's fictional character

Jack swings on board after winning his ticket in a bet. Tour buses play the film's theme tune, Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On", on repeat. It costs up to 2,000 yuan (around \$150) to spend one night on the ship for the "five-star cruise service", Su says, adding that with a functioning steam engine guests will feel that they are really at sea. He was so excited by the challenge that he sold his energy industry assets, including a stake in several hydropower projects, to invest in the Titanic.

'Inherit the great spirit'

But even before opening, the replica has drawn plenty of controversy. Online users have questioned whether the famous ship would attract tourists given the disaster that struck its real-life inspiration. Others feared it would join other ambitious Chinese building projects that turned into white elephants - including a 2008 replica of the USS Enterprise, an American aircraft carrier, which cost over \$18 million and was abandoned shortly after it opened.

But Su hopes as many as five million annual visitors will come to see his Titanic. "This tourist volume should guarantee the return of our investment," he added. Project manager Xu Junnian said he felt it was important to preserve the vessel's memory. "The greatest significance of building this ship is to carry forward and inherit the great spirit of Titanic," he said.

Aside from the enduring appeal of the Hollywood blockbuster, the Titanic has stolen headlines in China in recent weeks with the release of a new documentary called "The Six". The film tells the story of a group of Chinese travelers on board when the ship sinks, of whom six survived. But the developers are hoping to rope in some bigger names to help draw visitors. "We'd like to invite Jack, Rose and James Cameron to the inauguration ceremony," Su said. — AFP

Cooked at 1,000 degrees Celsius: Guatemala's volcanic pizza

Guatemala's Pacaya volcano has been erupting since February, keeping local communities and authorities on high alert. But for David Garcia, the streams of molten lava oozing down the mountainside have become his kitchen. Garcia, a 34-year-old accountant, serves up "Pacaya Pizza" cooked on the smoldering volcanic rock to awed tourists and locals.

"Many people today come to enjoy the experience of eating pizza made on volcanic heat," Garcia told AFP from a rocky area that leads to the Pacaya crater, and which he's converted into his workplace. In his makeshift kitchen, Garcia spreads the dough on a metal platter that can resist temperatures up to 1,000 degrees Celsius, slathers it with tomato sauce, a generous helping of cheese and pieces of meat.

Wearing protective clothing from head to his military style boots, Garcia places the pizza on the lava. "It's done, just let the cheese melt some more," he announces 10 minutes later. "That pizza looks so good!" exclaims one of the tourists as the cheese bubbles. Garcia's kitchen has become a magnet for tourists that work up an appetite climbing the massive volcano - one of three active ones in Guatemala - located just 25 km south of the capital.

'Only' in Guatemala

He first started baking pizzas on the mountain side in 2013 in small caverns

he found amongst the rocks. "I didn't sell much the first few days," said Garcia, whose fame has now spread throughout social media. In recent weeks, with Pacaya regularly spitting out molten rock, he started cooking the pizzas directly on the moving lava, some of which has come close to population centers.



David Garcia places a pizza on a lava river that comes down from the Pacaya volcano at the Cerro Chino hill in San Vicente Pacaya municipality, Guatemala, on May 11, 2021. — AFP photos

It's a potentially risky undertaking given the plumes of volcanic ash blasted into the sky by the angry beast, to which some local villagers pray, pleading with it to desist. "Having a pizza cooked in the embers of a volcano is mind-blowing and unique in the whole world," said Felipe Aldana, a tourist trying out one of Garcia's specialties.

He found about the pizza joint on Facebook and thought: "I have to have this experience." "It's ridiculous just thinking that you're going to eat something cooked on lava, but it's something that you can see only here" in Guatemala, said Kelt Van Meurs, a Dutch visitor. — AFP



Garcia serves pizza to tourists after cooking on the lava rivers.

FERRARIS FOR THE PEOPLE: LUXURY GOODS NOW SOLD IN FRACTIONS

Anyone can easily own a Basquiat painting, a pair of Yeezy sneakers or even a Ferrari - at least, that's the promise of a growing number of fractional ownership platforms that sell shares of these rare items, starting at just a few dollars. One platform, Masterworks, in spring 2020 turned the \$6 million painting "The Mosque" by Jean-Michel Basquiat into 284,420 shares at \$20 each.

With fractional ownership, there's no chance of hanging the painting in a buyer's home, parking a Lamborghini in their garage or storing six bottles of Romanee-Conti wine in their cellar. But by owning at least a piece of the property - at least on paper, like the shares of a publicly listed company - anyone can now directly benefit from an increase in the item's value, just like a wealthy collector.

Whether it's paintings or baseball cards, "it's not a new industry," says Ezra Levine, the CEO of Collectable, a platform that specializes in sports paraphernalia. "It's not like cryptocurrencies where it was literally invented five or 10 years ago," he said. "It's just that the ways that people can participate in (the market) and experience it, enjoy it, have just dramatically changed in the last six months."

Sluggo, the username of a collector who preferred to stay anonymous, made a 500 percent profit on a few shares of a box of Pokemon cards, initially priced at \$125,000. The platform Rally had offered the box via an IPO, similar to the listing of

a company on the stock market and also subject to controls by the US market regulator, the SEC.

"These fractional platforms just open up the class to people who can't afford to buy a full (Michael) Jordan (trading card)," said John Schuck, 43, whose holdings amount to about \$20,000 in cars, paintings or sports memorabilia. The concept of shared ownership of physical assets started with real estate. Over the past 20 years, it has expanded to include private jets and yachts, but entry prices have remained high and largely inaccessible to the general public.

The new fractional platforms have drastically lowered prices, sometimes to less than \$10 a share. Such entry prices allow sneaker enthusiasts, for instance, who initially built the "sneakerhead" culture but were priced out, to own at least a part of cult pieces, explains Gerome Sapp. His platform, Rares, will in June list a pair of the Nike Air Yeezy 1 inspired by musician Kanye West, which it acquired for a record-breaking \$1.8 million in late April.

'Purely an investment'

But the emotional aspect of buying is not quite the same, as most shareholders will never actually see the object in person, unlike old-school collectors. Rally opened a museum in New York that displays some of the pieces listed online, and Masterworks has a gallery, but few people plan on visiting. "The fact that I can't touch it kind of takes away the emotion of it," said Gregg Love, who belongs to this new generation of collectors. "I don't feel a connection at all to any of these assets," said Sluggo. "This is purely an investment and entertainment for me."

Considered a pioneer of this new fractional ownership trend, Rally has seen a major surge in interest during the coronavirus pandemic, surpassing 200,000 users, with about \$25 million in assets listed on the platform. — AFP

History (INAH) said on Thursday when it announced the discovery.

Mexican researchers think *Tlatolophus galorum*'s crest may have been red. "We believe that these dinosaurs, like modern birds, saw in color and so these structures like the crest were possibly brightly colored. They could have been completely red, or multi-colored, with spots," Ramirez said. The discovery is still under investigation, but research about the ancient reptile has already been published in the scientific journal *Cretaceous Research*, accord-

ing to the INAH.

"It is an exceptional case in Mexican paleontology," it said. "Highly favorable events had to occur millions of years ago, when Coahuila was a tropical region, for it to be conserved in the conditions it was found in." The name *Tlatolophus* is derived from *tlahtolli* - which means word in the indigenous Nahuatl language - and *lophus*, meaning crest in Greek, the researchers said. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



Barbara Pravi, candidate from France with the song "Voilà", performs on stage during her second rehearsal for the Eurovision Song Contest 2021 at the Rotterdam Ahoy in the Netherlands on Saturday. — AFP photos



Italian rock band Maneskin perform the song Zitti E Buoni on Saturday.



Russian-Tajik singer and songwriter Manizha sings on May 12, 2021.



Daoi & Gagnamagnio from Iceland perform on stage with the song "10 Years" on May 13, 2021.

EUROVISION MAKES COVID-LITE RETURN IN THE NETHERLANDS

The kitschy glamour of Eurovision is back, with the Dutch hosting a scaled-down, coronavirus-safe version this week after the song contest was cancelled last year. Around 3,500 COVID-tested fans will be allowed to attend the May 22 final in Rotterdam as the return of the pageant injects some glitz into Europe's cautious reopening. French singer Barbara Pravi, dubbed a modern-day Edith Piaf, is the bookmakers' favorite to end her country's 44-year Eurovision drought, followed by Italy and Malta.

Performers will be in a special "bubble" under strict rules imposed by the Dutch government to allow the contest at the port city's Ahoy Arena to go ahead. "We don't take lightly the responsibility of hosting the Eurovision Song Contest at this challenging time," said Eurovision executive supervisor Martin Oesterdahl.

Known for its flamboyant costumes and cheesy songs, Eurovision is watched by more than 180 million people in over four dozen countries as far afield as Australia. But the television pageant was scrapped for the first time in its six-decade history last year as the coronavirus pandemic began sweeping the globe.

On Saturday, organizers announced that one of the members of the Polish delegation had tested positive for COVID-19 and that the whole delegation - including singer Rafal Brzozowski - has gone into quarantine. This means they will not be able to perform live at Thursday's second semifinal when a recording of their last rehearsal will be shown.

'Scaled down considerably'

The cancellation was a bitter disappointment for the Netherlands, which won the right to host the contest after Dutch crooner Duncan Laurence won in 2019. At the peak of the pandemic, the Rotterdam venue was even repurposed to host 88 beds for coronavirus patients. But now it will host live audiences not only for the final but also for two semifinals on Tuesday and Thursday.

Under the Dutch government's Fieldlab program of trial events, each show will allow an audience of 3,500 people, around 20 percent of the Ahoy Arena's capacity. For viewers used to a sea of flags and glammed-up artists hugging and celebrating, the 2021 Eurovision Song Contest will however be different.



James Newman, candidate from the United Kingdom with the song "Embers", performs on stage.

Artists from most of the 39 countries involved are travelling to the Netherlands, but some - such as Australia - will take part via pre-recorded video. National delegations have to follow strict protocol, remaining separated from the audience and testing every 48 hours. "The numbers have been scaled down considerably. Delegations are much smaller," Executive Producer Sietse Bakker said.

Organizers "politely reminded" partici-

pants of the rules last week after photos and videos showed artists embracing journalists, while Ukraine's entrant tested negative after a scare. They also said they expected "very few" fans would travel from abroad due to Dutch travel restrictions including a 10-day quarantine and PCR test requirement. "We want to keep the coronavirus out as much as possible," Bakker said.

Despite recently easing some restrictions, the Dutch government is still struggling with a slow vaccine rollout, in a country of 17 million people where 17,000 people have died and 1.57 million been infected.

'Devil worship'
But Eurovision's unique mix of kitsch and simmering national tensions remains much the same despite the pandemic. France's Barbara Pravi carries her country's hopes with her moody number "Voilà". "It's not pressure I feel, it's impatience and joy," said Pravi. France has been waiting for a Eurovision champion since 1977 when Marie Myriam won the competition.

Malta's singer Destiny Chukunyere, 18,

singing "Je Me Casse" (French for "I'm outta here"), has attracted attention - as well as body-shaming trolls - for her bold wardrobe choices, including a bubblegum-pink fringed number. "This is a dream come true and a testament that I am on the right track and that hard work pays off," said the singer, who won the second edition of X Factor Malta, when the deal was announced.

Weird and wonderful Eurovision stories have emerged as with any other year. Russia's entry, "Russian Woman" performed by Manizha, has upset conservatives at home with its anti-sexism lyrics. Cyprus meanwhile has stood by its controversial entry after the Orthodox Church accused it of advocating "devil worship".

And while the coronavirus pandemic has made for a very different Eurovision this year, it is not the first time the event has collided with reality. The 2017 edition held in conflict-hit Ukraine was marked by tensions with Russia while the last show in the Zionist entity in 2019 sparked protests by pro-Palestinian activists and artists. — AFP



'Forget COVID': Tourists return to Greece

Umbrellas are seen by the sea at Falaserna (Phalasarna) beach on the western coast of Crete island on Saturday. — AFP

Tourists basked in the warmth, sun and crystal waters of Crete on Friday for long-awaited holidays as Greece kick-started its tourism season after last year's pandemic misery. "I hope to forget this damn COVID," said Jil Wirries, a 28-year old student from Hanover, Germany, as he collected his luggage at the island's Heraklion airport. "Everything is terrible in Germany. Aside from the weather, everything is closed and people are depressed, including me. I'm so happy to be here," he said.

Greece and Europe's other tourism hotspots are vying to woo back visitors after the pandemic wrecked last year's holiday season as countries imposed travel bans and quarantines. France and Spain launched tourism campaigns this week while Italy said Friday it was scrapping a quarantine requirement for visitors from the EU, Britain and Israel who test negative for the coronavirus.

Portugal said it would allow British tourists visit the country again from today after London placed the country on its safe list - just in time for fans heading to the May 29 Champions League final in Porto. Tourism is crucial to the Greek economy, as it accounts for 20 percent of GDP. "We are raising anchor," Greek Tourism Minister Harry Theoharis declared as he launched the holiday season Thursday evening from the ancient Greek temple of Poseidon near Athens.

The new holiday season couldn't come soon enough for restaurateurs and cafe owners eagerly preparing for patrons to come back after suffering so long under coronavirus lockdown measures. "We hope this will be a good season because the winter was difficult for all of us, employers, employees and the tourist sector," said Alexandros Koukourakis as he set up tables and chairs at his restaurant near the old town of Chania in Crete.

operator TUI has scheduled 120 flights to Greece until the end of May. More than 100 flights were expected at Greek airports on Friday and Saturday, according to civil aviation officials.

At the western tip of Crete, three other German tourists could not believe their luck as they gazed upon the breathtaking beauty of Balos lagoon. "We searched for a location to go for our first holiday post-COVID and we ... spontaneously decided to come here," said Anne Marie Buhner, 25, from Munich. "We can't believe how beautiful it is here."

Nationwide, over four million vaccinations have already been carried out in the country of 10.8 million, and the government has made its idyllic islands a priority for jobs. With several restrictions still in place for travellers throughout Europe, Greek hoteliers expect the tourism sector to pick up from late June or early July, alongside stronger vaccination figures. In an early setback, the UK put Greece on its amber travel list, meaning that returning Britons face at least five days in quarantine.

Hotel business slow
"We have no reservations at the moment and only 15 to 20 percent of the hotels will be operating this Friday, while the rest will open gradually until the end of June," said Grigoris Tasios, president of the Greek federation of hoteliers. The opening of the tourism sector comes as Greeks will also be allowed to go about freely within the country for the first time since November.

"Last year everything was a blur, now we are entering a different tourist season," said George Segredos, a beach bar owner on Kos island. "We are aiming to get around half of 2019 revenues," he told AFP. Greece's tourism revenue plunged to €4.28 billion (\$5.0 billion) in 2020 from €18 billion in 2019, while tourist arrivals fell 76.5 percent to just 7.4 million, according to the Greek Tourism Confederation Institute. Tourism is far from being back to normal. The Greek island of Kalymnos remains in strict lockdown owing to scores of recent infections, highlighting how fragile and fluid the situation remains. — AFP

As COVID ebbs, tourists make their comeback to US capital

With the park in front of the White House reopening last week, selfie-snapping tourists have suddenly reappeared. Washington DC, home to some of the toughest anti-COVID regulations in the country, is now reopening, highlighting the United States' steady transition back to normality.

Boasting imposing landmarks such as the US Capitol and the Supreme Court, Washington began reopening the doors of its museums on Friday, including the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the National Portrait Gallery, which will soon host a painting of former president Donald Trump.

By next Friday, six museums run by the famed Smithsonian Institution, and the National Zoo, will once again welcome visitors as vaccination rates climb and infections continue to plunge. The question now is how to attract more tourists and spur an economic rebound after a year of pandemic restrictions that left the US federal capital city, normally a hub for conferences and meetings of international institutions, stricken.

"For the moment, I have very few customers," said Ngre Phung, whose mobile souvenir shop is parked near the African American museum. So far, DC residents, who are packing the terraces of restaurants and bars, haven't rushed downtown to peruse Phung's selection of caps, T-shirts and other trinkets. Instead the shopkeeper relies heavily on visitors to nearby museums.

"It's very key with the museums opening," said Anne Purcell, director of hospitality market analytics for the northeast region at CoStar Group. Between the 170-m Washington Monument obelisk and a

memorial to World War II, Read Scott Martin sat on his pedicab, patiently waiting for customers to emerge from the crowd.

Waiting for full vaccination
At the moment he gives about three or four tours a day, but that can double on weekends. "The last few weeks, it was improving," he said, especially since the city's Cherry Blossom Festival in the spring. His optimism is boosted by increasing arrivals of tourists from Asia and Latin America. One of them is 17-year-old Valeria, who came from Peru for

ones who typically fill hotel rooms. Hotel occupancy in Washington, DC on Saturday, May 1 was only 43.4 percent, slipping to 42.4 percent the following Saturday, according to STR, which provides data and analysis for the industry. That's far from the 80.3 percent and 78.6 percent recorded on the first two Saturdays in May 2019.

"Tourism is only one component of the city's business," said Purcell, noting that Washington is "very reliant" on conventions and business travel. With travel restrictions still in place for many countries



Tourists and Washingtonians visit Lafayette Square near the White House in Washington, DC, on May 10, 2021 as the area reopens to the public. — AFP photos

a weeklong visit, posing for photos in front of the White House with her little sister and parents. "We wanted to come before the COVID but we have to cancel our trip," she said.

However, the overwhelming majority of visitors are from other US states coming to see family, or tourists stopping by on their way to New York. Ghania and Abdel, who live in Los Angeles, were in Washington to visit their daughter Shiraz, 26, who just graduated from Georgetown University. "This is our first trip in just over a year," the couple originally from Algeria said in French. "We were waiting to be fully vaccinated and for the city to get a little busier."

But these leisure travelers are not the

including large parts of Europe, the tourism sector is still struggling and its recovery is uncertain. "It's still very unclear whether business travel will return to pre-pandemic levels because everyone has gotten so used to doing so much online," Purcell said.

In 2019, Washington welcomed 1.8 million visitors from abroad, led by China, Britain and India, and 22.8 million domestic visitors, according to Destination DC. While waiting for the return of international business travelers, the organization will soon launch a major advertising campaign to target the American public. — AFP

Spontaneous trip
According to government regulations announced on Wednesday, anyone travelling to Greek islands by sea or air must show a vaccination certificate or a negative COVID-19 test result. Europe's leading tour



Tourists visit the Lincoln Memorial on May 14, 2021.



Tourists visit the National Mall.

Sports

Kobe Bryant inducted posthumously into Basketball Hall of Fame

NEW YORK: Los Angeles Lakers icon Kobe Bryant was inducted posthumously into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame on Saturday part of a star-studded group that also included Tim Duncan and Kevin Garnett.

Bryant was inducted as part of the Class of 2020, almost 16 months after he and his 13-year-old daughter Gianna were killed in a helicopter crash along with seven others in southern California. Bryant's wife, Vanessa Bryant, took the podium Saturday to speak movingly about his love for basketball, his family, his teammates and his fans. "You did it. You are in the Hall of Fame now. You are a true champion, not just an MVP. You are an all-time great," Vanessa said.

San Antonio Spurs star Duncan, Minnesota Timberwolves and Boston Celtics big man Garnett, two-time NBA champion coach Rudy Tomjanovich and WNBA legend Tamika Catchings were among those also inducted on Saturday night.

The delayed enshrinement stretched over two days at the Mohegan Sun Resort and Casino in Uncasville, Connecticut, with Vanessa Bryant and Kobe's oldest daughter, Natalia, accepting Bryant's Hall of Fame jacket and ring on Friday night.

Bryant and the others were voted into the Hall of Fame as part of the 2020 class, but the formal induction ceremony was delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. "There will never be anyone like Kobe," Vanessa said. "Kobe was one of a kind. He was special. He was humble - off the court - but bigger than life."

Vanessa was helped to the stage by NBA legend Michael Jordan, who acted as a presenter for Kobe and three-time NCAA champion coach Kim Mulkey. "He and Gigi deserved to be here to witness this. Gigi would have been so proud of her dad getting into the Hall of Fame," Vanessa said.



UNCASVILLE: Class of 2020 Basketball Hall of Fame Class poses for a group photo during Enshrinement Ceremony on Saturday at the Mohegan Sun Arena at Mohegan Sun in Uncasville, Connecticut. — AFP

Like Kobe, Garnett went straight out of high school to the NBA. Garnett talked of his respect and admiration for both Duncan and Kobe. "I appreciate you," Garnett said to Duncan from the stage. "It's an honor to go into the hall with you, bro. You and Kob."

Garnett played 21 seasons for Minnesota, Boston and Brooklyn, averaging 17.8 points and 10.0 rebounds per game. "My only regret with Minnesota is that I didn't get to bring a championship," Garnett said. "But

like I said, I look forward to rebuilding Minneapolis." Duncan had an immediate impact in the NBA, winning the rookie of the year award. His first NBA title came just one year after that.

'Most nervous'

"This is the most nervous I've ever been in my life," the retiring Duncan said. "Been through finals, game sevens, this is officially the most nervous I've ever been

in my life. I've been pacing in my room all day."

In 19 seasons with the San Antonio Spurs, Duncan averaged 19.0 points, 10.8 rebounds, 3.0 assists, and 2.2 blocks per game. Catchings overcame a number of obstacles leading up to her stellar basketball career. "Basketball chose me, an awkward, lanky, introverted tomboy, born with a hearing disability, a speech impediment, and a will to overcome obstacles, dream big and to change the world," Catchings said. — AFP



INDIANAPOLIS: Anthony Davis #3 of the Los Angeles Lakers and LeBron James #23 look on during the game against the Indiana Pacers on Saturday at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, Indiana. — AFP

LeBron returns as Lakers stay in playoff hunt

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James made a successful return from injury as the Los Angeles Lakers kept alive their hopes of an automatic NBA playoff spot with a 122-115 victory over the Indiana Pacers on Saturday.

James finished with 24 points while Anthony Davis led the scoring with 28 as the Lakers served notice that they have no intention of surrendering their NBA crown without a fight as the postseason approaches.

Saturday's victory means that the Lakers can still secure the sixth seed and avoid the play-in tournament if they win their final game of the regular season against the New Orleans Pelicans on Sunday and Portland lose to Denver in their final game. On Saturday's evidence, the Lakers appear to be hitting the sort of form that delivered last season's championship at just the right time, with James linking brilliantly with Davis while other key members of the roster returned from injury.

As well as James' return, Germany's Dennis Schroder was back from a seven-game layoff due to COVID-19 protocols, scoring 14 points, while Lakers coach Frank Vogel confirmed Alex Caruso is now fit again despite not featuring on Saturday.

Any lingering doubts about James' return to fitness were wiped away early on Saturday, with the Lakers star throwing down a monstrous one-handed dunk from a Schroder alley-oop as the Lakers imposed themselves early on. Six Lakers players finished in double figures, with Schroder adding 14 points on his return. James meanwhile was happy to see his return from injury pass off without a glitch, saying afterwards that while his ankle was sore it felt much improved. "A lot more mobility, a lot more movement, it was warm," James said. "Tiny bit of soreness now that the game is over which is expected, but I didn't have a setback today which is a damn good job for myself and the medical team."

James added that he had been wrong-footed by the early afternoon scheduling of Saturday's game, initially expecting a night-time fixture. "It threw me for a loop," James said. "I knew I had to get my engine revved up early and I wasn't sure how my ankle was going to respond. But it responded very well and I'm excited about what tomorrow holds."

Jazz kept waiting

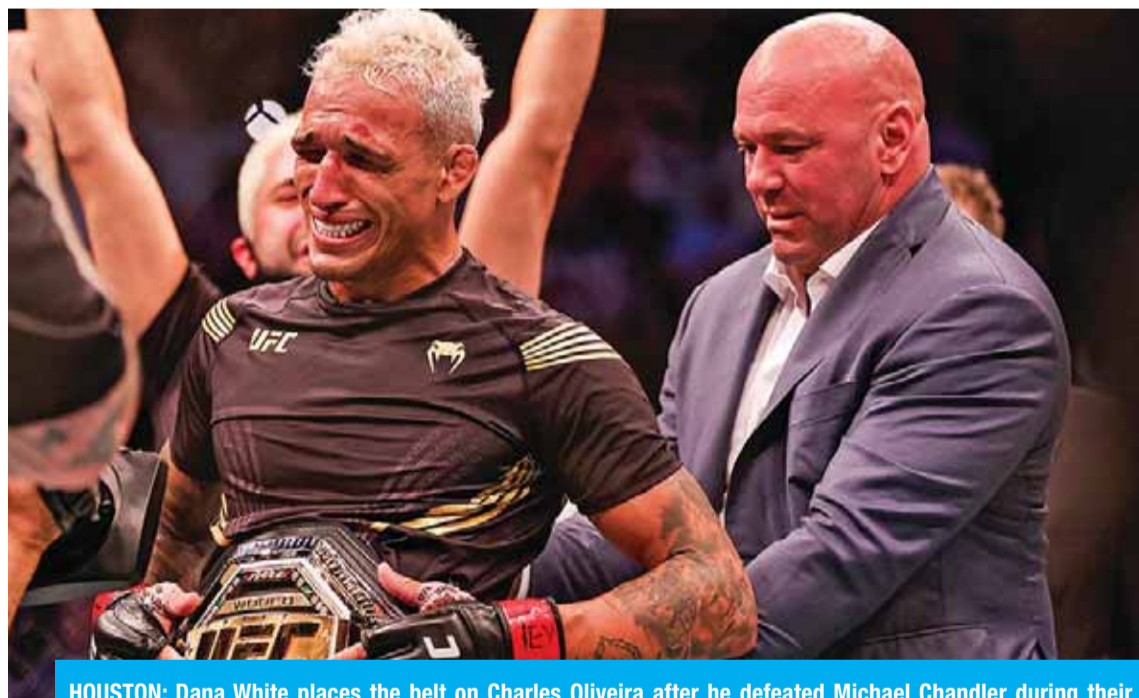
In other early NBA games on Saturday, the Phoenix Suns delayed Utah's coronation as top seeds from the Western Conference after demolishing the San Antonio Spurs 140-103. A Phoenix defeat would have guaranteed top spot in the West to the Jazz, who must now wait for Sunday's final round of regular season games to clinch the top seed. Devin Booker led Phoenix's blowout victory with 27 points while Mikal Bridges added 18.

Elsewhere, the Brooklyn Nets warmed up for the playoffs with 105-91 defeat of the Chicago Bulls. The game marked the first time Brooklyn's big three of Kevin Durant, James Harden and Kyrie Irving had taken to the court together since February. Irving led the Brooklyn scorers with 22 points while Durant finished with 12 and Harden 5.—AFP

Oliveira 'lion of lions' KOs Chandler to win UFC lightweight belt

HOUSTON: Brazil's Charles Oliveira rallied with brutal efficiency to knock out American Michael Chandler early in the second round at UFC 262 in Houston, Texas, on Saturday and be crowned new lightweight champion. "I am proving to everybody I am the lion of lions," Oliveira said inside the cage afterwards. "I told you I was going to knock him out and I came and knocked him out."

The 31-year-old Oliveira's next challenge will be to carve his legacy in the blue riband UFC weight class previously dominated by Khabib Nurmagomedov and Conor McGregor. "I wanted to come here tonight and show that I am the best," said Oliveira. The 35-year-old Chandler had been fast-tracked to a title shot after the former Bellator organization lightweight champion's stunning UFC debut in January with a first-round knockout of New Zealand veteran Dan Hooker.



HOUSTON: Dana White places the belt on Charles Oliveira after he defeated Michael Chandler during their Championship Lightweight Bout at the UFC 262 event at Toyota Center on Saturday in Houston, Texas. — AFP

KIB sponsors Kuwaiti jet ski world champion

KUWAIT: As part of its ongoing strategic efforts to support young Kuwaiti talents in various global and international forums, and in line with its policy to empower Kuwaiti youth in the area of sports, KIB announced its sponsorship of Jet Ski World Champion Yousef Al-Abdulrazzaq.

Abdulrazzaq is a famous Kuwaiti athlete and one of the world's brightest Jet Ski stars with a career that spans more than 18 years in the field of sports. He is ranked number one worldwide and won the world championship 6 times and several Olympic gold titles, thus becoming enlisted in the Guinness World Records after collecting 6 international titles under his belt.

Commenting on the sponsorship, Nawaf Najia, Executive Manager Corporate Communications Unit at KIB, said: "KIB prides itself on supporting Kuwaiti champions and local athletes capable of raising the Kuwaiti flag high by achieving many internationally renowned titles, these young athletes have become role models for young people in Kuwait and everywhere else around the world. For that reason, KIB's sponsorship of world champion Abdulrazzaq with his track record of prominent titles comes as a tribute to

An all-American wrestler in his college days, Chandler has evolved into an explosive stand-up force and appeared to have been ahead after the first round. He somehow managed to escape Oliveira's clutches after the fight had gone to the ground early and he landed some huge headshots, particularly from his left hand, when they got back to their feet.

But it was Oliveira who came out swinging hard and fast in the second. A left hook put Chandler down and was followed by a barrage of unanswered blows with the referee stepping in after only 19 seconds of the round. The jubilant Oliveira vaulted the fence and embarked on an impromptu victory lap from the cage-side commentary desk into the crowd. The Brazilian jiu-jitsu master had arrived in Texas boasting more submission wins than anyone else in UFC history with 14 and his TKO win gave him another record — 17 finishes inside the distance. "Michael said I couldn't take pressure and he hit, hit, hit and I'm still here. Here's the belt."

While Nurmagomedov, arguably the greatest MMA champion of all time, retired last October with a record of 29-0, McGregor remains in the lightweight mix. The Irish 32-year-old is ranked sixth, despite losing two of his past three fights, and he is set to face the top-ranked American Dustin Poirier at UFC 264 in Las Vegas on July 10.—AFP



GLASGOW: Police make an arrest as Rangers fans celebrate in George Square in Glasgow on Saturday, after Rangers lift the Scottish Premiership trophy for the first time in 10 years. — AFP

Arrests made as Rangers fans' title party turns violent

GLASGOW: Three police officers were injured and more than 20 arrests made after Rangers fans packed into the streets of Glasgow on Saturday to celebrate winning the Scottish Premiership with an unbeaten record. Steven Gerrard's side had already been confirmed as champions over two months ago, but fans gathered in large numbers outside Ibrox Stadium for a 4-0 win over Aberdeen on the day they were presented with the league trophy.

The entire Scottish season has been played behind closed doors due to coronavirus restrictions. A spike in positive cases in Glasgow saw the Scottish government on Friday maintain restrictions on indoor mixing of households and hospitality that will be eased for the rest of mainland Scotland today. Fans ignored pleas from the club and government to disperse as they then marched from Ibrox into Glasgow city center. Riot police were drafted in to help disperse the crowds as scenes turned violent late on Saturday night.

In a statement, Police Scotland's Divisional Commander for Greater Glasgow, Chief Superintendent Mark Sutherland, said: "As celebrations continued sections of the crowd became increasingly disorderly, property was damaged and people were assaulted. Our officers became the focus of the crowd's attention with missiles and flares being thrown at them. So far, we know that three officers have been injured and more than 20 people have been arrested."

Scotland's Justice Secretary Humza Yousaf said he will liaise with the football authorities to see what action can be taken. "This selfish and irresponsible behavior endangers the lives of others - supporters, the police on duty and the wider community," Yousaf said in a statement posted to social media. "We have already discussed this with Rangers and will liaise with Police Scotland and the football authorities to consider what further action can be taken."

The Scottish Government previously criticized Rangers' response after thousands of fans gathered on the weekend they clinched the title in early March. On the field, the Rangers rounded off a near-flawless season. Aberdeen never threatened to spoil the party as Kemar Roofe scored twice after Joe Lewis's early own goal. Former Tottenham striker Jermain Defoe completed the demolition in the final moments. Having ended Celtic's bid for a 10th successive Scottish title, Rangers finished with 102 points after going unbeaten through the entire 38-game campaign. Rangers' 19th win from 19 league games at Ibrox this season saw them finish 25 points clear of second-placed Celtic. "It was about having a vision, getting the right people in the right places, the right support from the board and fighting for it," said former Liverpool captain Gerrard. "I'm so proud of the boys and all the staff. We've fought every day for the last three years to get to this point." — AFP



KUWAIT: KIB Vice Chairman and CEO Raed Bukhamseen (left) with Jet Ski World Champion Yousef Al-Abdulrazzaq.

Sports

Leicester City beat Chelsea to claim 'historic' first FA Cup

LONDON: Leicester manager Brendan Rodgers hailed the "historical achievement" of his side in beating Chelsea 1-0 on Saturday to lift the FA Cup for the first time in the club's 137-year history. Youri Tielemans's sensational winner was witnessed by 22,000 fans at Wembley. The largest crowd for a sports event in England since the coronavirus pandemic hit 14 months ago were treated to a goal worthy to win any trophy as the Belgian midfielder blasted into the top corner on 63 minutes. Five years after the Foxes stunned the Premier League's giants to become champions, Leicester have now claimed English football's other prestigious trophy at the fifth time of asking. Four times they had previously lost the final, but the last of those was 52 years ago. "It's a historical day for the football club," said Rodgers. "Winning the FA Cup for the first time, I'm so happy for the players and supporters. They've lost four finals and now a fifth time we've managed to do it for them."

A historic week for Rodgers's men could get even better as they are on the verge of sealing a place in next season's Champions League. The sides meet again in three days' time at Stamford Bridge in a pivotal clash to decide who secures a top-four finish in the Premier League. And Rodgers suggested his side were the neutrals favorites as they aim to upset the appellation of the Premier League's 'big six' once more. Chelsea were among the clubs to sign up to the failed, quasi-closed European Super League (ESL) project last month, along with Manchester City, Manchester United, Liverpool, Tottenham and Arsenal.

"The success of this team and club is getting to positions like this and competing. The so-called bigger clubs are expected to win but our success is competing and if we can perform like today we can go and win," added Rodgers. "After everything that has happened this year, I'm sure there were people hoping from a neutral perspective that we could go on and upset the odds." Chelsea need a quick response after losing for just the fourth time in 27 games since Thomas Tuchel replaced the sacked Frank Lampard in January. The Blues also have a Champions League final to look forward to against Manchester City in two weeks' time,



LONDON: Leicester City's English-born Jamaican defender Wes Morgan (left) and Leicester City's Danish goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel (right) hold up the winner's trophy as the Leicester players celebrate victory after the English FA Cup final football match between Chelsea and Leicester City at Wembley Stadium in north west London on Saturday. — AFP

but could end the campaign without silverware or a place in Europe's premier club competition next season. "Of course we are disappointed but we are not angry," said Tuchel. "This performance was enough to win it, today we are simply unlucky. You need luck in this game to be able to win"

VAR to the rescue

Chelsea's success under Tuchel has come thanks to an excellent defensive record, but their struggles at the other end were again exposed as they rarely threatened until going behind. The welcome return of noise echoing down from 6,000 fans of each side from both

ends of the ground helped mask a general lack of quality on the field for the first hour.

One moment of magic proved decisive as Tielemans collected possession midway inside the Chelsea half and strode forward before unleashing an unstoppable strike into the top corner past Kepa Arrizabalaga.

Tuchel flexed the strength in depth of his squad in an attempt to find an equaliser as Callum Hudson-Odoi, Ben Chilwell, Kai Havertz, Olivier Giroud and Christian Pulisic were all introduced off the bench. But they were denied by the brilliance of Kasper Schmeichel in the Leicester goal.

Chilwell, whose every touch was booed by the

Leicester support, twice nearly came back to haunt his old club as his first effort was turned onto the post by the Dane. Mason Mount then could not believe his luck as his sweetly struck shot was turned behind by a brilliant stop from Schmeichel.

Even when the Leicester 'keeper was beaten, Chelsea were denied by a VAR review. Wes Morgan's attempted clearance deflected in off Chilwell, but the England international had strayed offside in the build-up. "Thank you VAR! What an amazing technology," said Tielemans. Leicester players and fans celebrated the decision like a goal and were in raptures again moments later after seeing out a nervy finale. — AFP

Leicester players show support for Palestinians

LONDON: Leicester players Hamza Choudhury and Wesley Fofana showed support for the Palestinians after winning the FA Cup final on Saturday. English midfielder Choudhury and French defender Fofana were seen holding a Palestinian flag.

Choudhury had the flag draped over his shoulders as he collected his winner's medal after beating Chelsea 1-0. Tens of thousands of protesters marched in support of Palestinians on Saturday in major European cities including London, Berlin, Madrid and Paris, as the worst violence in years raged between the Zionist entity and militants in Gaza. A social media post from Arsenal midfielder Mohamed Elneny also showing his support for the Palestinian people has been hit by a backlash from Jewish fans. The Egyptian posted on his Twitter account: "My heart and my soul and my support for you Palestine."

Arsenal confirmed to Sky Sports that they have spoken with Elneny after concerns about the post were raised from one of the club's sponsors, coffee maker Lavazza. "As with any employees of Arsenal, our players are entitled to express their views on their own platforms," the club told Sky Sports News. — AFP



LONDON: A picture that circulated on social media on Saturday shows Leicester players Hamza Choudhury and Wesley Fofana showing support for the Palestinians after winning the FA Cup final.

'Incredible' Lewandowski equals Mueller's 49-year record with 40th goal

BERLIN: Robert Lewandowski equalled Gerd Mueller's 49-year-old scoring record as the Bayern Munich striker netted his 40th Bundesliga goal of the season in a 2-2 draw at Freiburg on Saturday. Lewandowski equalled Mueller's tally, scored over 34 games in 1971/72, in just 28 league fixtures this term.

"It's a huge honor for me and for the modern history of the Bundesliga," Lewandowski told Sky. Lewandowski converted a penalty for the champions after 26 minutes to match Mueller's milestone. As part of his penalty celebrations, the Poland striker lifted his match shirt to reveal a picture of Gerd Mueller over the text "4ever Gerd".

'Very proud'

"I would never have thought that this would happen. What Gerd Mueller did is incredible. Sharing the record with him makes me very, very proud," Lewandowski added. The fixture was briefly halted after Lewandowski scored as his Bayern team-mates formed a guard-of-honor on the side of the pitch which the smiling 32-year-old ran through.

Freiburg drew level almost immediately when Manuel Gulde headed in at the near post from a corner on 29 minutes after slipping his marker. Bayern, who were crowned German champions last weekend for the ninth season in a row, upped the tempo after the break.

Serge Gnabry had a goal disallowed six minutes into the second-half after the VAR spotted he was offside in tapping home a Leroy Sane cross. However, the Bavarians kept up the pressure and when David Alaba's long-range pass found Thomas Mueller in the area just moments later, he squared for Sane who hit home on 53 minutes.

Freiburg had their chances to equalize as second-half replacements Lucas Hoeler and Janik Haberer both went close before Christian Guenter brought the sides level nine minutes from time. Lewandowski can still break Mueller's record as Bayern have one match left of the campaign at home to Augsburg next Saturday. He squandered a late chance to score "at least one more goal. You don't break records like that so quickly," added Lewandowski.



FREIBURG: Robert Lewandowski controls the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match between SC Freiburg and FC Bayern Munich in Freiburg, southwestern Germany on Saturday. — AFP

Besiktas win thrilling Turkish title race on goal difference

ISTANBUL: Besiktas claimed their 16th Turkish league title on Saturday, edging out rivals Galatasaray by one goal on goal difference with a dramatic 2-1 win at Goztepe. The three-team title race — Fenerbahce finished two points behind in third — went down to the final day after Besiktas suffered back-to-back defeats against Galatasaray and Fatih Karagumruk.

Galatasaray briefly led the as-it-stood table when Ryan Babel's goal saw them come from behind to lead Yeni Malatyaspor 2-1 after an hour. But Besiktas edged back ahead when Algeria international Rachid

Ghezal netted a 69th-minute penalty at Goztepe and they held on for all three points and the narrowest of title triumphs.

On-loan midfielder Ghezal's championship-winning goal was scored on the same day his parent club Leicester won the English FA Cup for the first time in their history. Besiktas center-back Domagoj Vida had given the visitors an early lead, but it was cancelled out by Alpaslan Ozturk's equalizer.

Galatasaray, coached by ex-Turkey manager Fatih Terim, did not settle for a 3-1 victory to come up two goals short, with Besiktas having also scored more across the season. Fenerbahce won 2-1 against Kayserispor. Hundreds of Besiktas fans gathered outside the club's stadium to celebrate, despite strict coronavirus restrictions. Istanbul Basaksehir's title defense had long been over, as they finished down in 12th despite ending the campaign with a six-match unbeaten run. — AFP



ISTANBUL: Besiktas' fans celebrate after winning the Turkish Super League Championship after the last match of the season on late Saturday at Besiktas district in Istanbul. — AFP

Napoli beat Fiorentina to keep Champions League ambitions alive

MILAN: Napoli moved third in Serie A yesterday with a 2-0 win at Fiorentina to keep their push for a Champions League return alive. Lorenzo Insigne missed a penalty but sent in the rebound after 56 minutes with a Lorenzo Venti own goal 11 minutes later sealing an important win for the visitors.

Napoli are third, two points behind Atalanta who assured a third consecutive season of Champions League football, with a 4-3 win at Genoa on Saturday. AC Milan, were a point behind Napoli, occupying in the final Champions League berth, before playing 16th-placed Cagliari late last night.

Juventus are fifth, one point behind Napoli, but still

in the running for a top four finish after a 3-2 win over newly-crowned champions Inter Milan on Saturday, with one match left this season. As in Turin on Saturday when Cristiano Ronaldo missed a penalty for Juventus but sent in the follow-up, Napoli skipper Insigne scored after Fiorentina goalkeeper Pietro Terracciano had saved his shot from the spot.

Insigne missed two further chances for a second but the Italian then played a role in Napoli's second goal. The striker sent the ball through for Piotr Zielinski whose shot took a deflection off Fiorentina defender Venuti into his own goal.

Napoli's final game will be at home against midtable Hellas Verona, as they look to return to elite European football after missing out last season. Juventus play their final game at Bologna desperate to avoid missing out on the Champions League for the first time in a decade. Lazio will not play among the European elite next season after a 2-0 derby defeat to Roma on Saturday. Sixth-placed Lazio are eight points behind Juventus having played a game less. — AFP

Alisson keeps Liverpool dream alive



WEST BROMWICH: Liverpool's Brazilian goalkeeper Alisson Becker scores his team's second goal during the English Premier League football match between West Bromwich Albion and Liverpool at The Hawthorns stadium yesterday. — AFP

LONDON: Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson's dramatic 95th-minute goal gave the Reds a 2-1 victory at West Bromwich Albion yesterday to maintain their bid to play in the Champions League. Liverpool trail fourth-placed Chelsea by one point and Leicester by three, with two league games left to play this season thanks to Alisson's late header.

With Leicester and Chelsea still to face off in a repeat of the FA Cup final, won 1-0 by the Foxes on Saturday, victories over Burnley and Crystal Palace will take Liverpool into the top four. The already-relegated Baggies took an early lead through Hal Robson-Kanu before the in-form Mohamed Salah equalized before half-time.

But Liverpool were still heading for a damaging draw when Alisson headed in from a corner in the fifth minute of stoppage-time. "Wow, is a pretty good word," elated Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp told the BBC. "It's the best goal I've ever

seen scored by a goalkeeper! Strikers score like that. If Olivier Giroud scores like that you say it's a worldie. It's a worldie! Wow!," the German added.

Already-crowned Premier League champions Manchester City and Chelsea will contest this season's Champions League final in Porto on May 29. But if Chelsea remain in the top four there won't be an additional Champions League place given to the fifth-placed side in the Premier League.

Liverpool were stunned when Robson-Kanu, making his first league start of the season for Albion, put the hosts ahead in the 15th minute after he ran onto Matheus Pereira's pass and found the bottom corner at the Hawthorns. Liverpool levelled when Sadio Mane, starting in place of the injured Diogo Jota, intercepted a loose pass to Kyle Bartley, with the ball then falling to Salah, who hit a first-time shot into the bottom left corner.

The Egypt striker's 22nd Premier League goal

of the season drew him level with Harry Kane in the race for the English top-flight's golden boot award. Tottenham Hotspur moved into sixth place, on goal difference from West Ham, after a 2-0 win at home to Wolves. England captain Kane fired Spurs ahead on the stroke of half-time, curling the ball into the corner of the net after Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg's through ball behind the defense.

Hojbjerg made it 2-0 just after the hour when he followed up as Gareth Bale's shot was parried by Rui Patrício as Spurs bolstered their hopes of at least playing Europa League football next season. "This is Tottenham Hotspur," said interim manager Ryan Mason. "We want to be playing in the biggest competition in the biggest games. This season hasn't gone to plan," added Mason, appointed after Spurs sacked Jose Mourinho.

Eighth-placed Everton, Liverpool's local rivals, are at home to bottom of the table Sheffield

United in the day's concluding Premier League match. Earlier, Crystal Palace twice came from behind to beat Aston Villa 3-2, with Tyrick Mitchell's first goal for the club sealing victory six minutes from time.

John McGinn put Villa ahead in the 17th minute at Selhurst Park before Christian Benteke equalised against his former club with a 32nd-minute header. Palace fell behind again two minutes later when Anwar El Ghazi scored from close range. The Eagles, however, equalized for a second time in the 76th minute when Wilfried Zaha grabbed his 11th goal of the season with a shot deflected in off Ahmed Elmohamady.

The comeback was complete in the 84th minute when the 21-year-old Mitchell followed-up from close range after team-mate Eberechi Eze had miscued in a victory that lifted Palace to 13th place. — AFP

Suarez winner keeps Atletico top of La Liga



MADRID: Atletico Madrid's Uruguayan forward Luis Suarez is grabbed by Osasuna's Spanish defender Unai Garcia during the Spanish League match at the Wanda Metropolitano stadium yesterday. — AFP

MADRID: Luis Suarez scored the goal that could win Atletico Madrid La Liga as his 88th-minute winner snatched a remarkable 2-1 victory against Osasuna yesterday after they looked set to hand the title to Real Madrid.

Atletico trailed with nine minutes to go at the Wanda Metropolitano and faced a defeat that would not

just have postponed their bid to be champions but allowed Real Madrid, who were beating Athletic Bilbao, to go top with one game left. Instead, Atletico scored in the 82nd and 88th minutes to pull off a stunning turnaround. Renan Lodi smashed in an equalizer before Suarez proved the hero, firing in from eight yards to spark mass celebrations. — AFP

Dortmund secure Champions League spot with sixth win

BERLIN: Borussia Dortmund secured their place in the Champions League for next season as Raphael Guerreiro, Marco Reus and Julian Brandt scored in a 3-1 win at Mainz yesterday. Guerreiro and captain Reus hit first-half goals before Germany winger Brandt made sure of the three points with a late effort.

With one game left, Dortmund, who routed Leipzig 4-1 to win the German Cup in midweek, cannot finish outside of the Bundesliga's top four. Mainz striker Robin Quaison claimed his 30th Bundesliga goal by netting a 90th-minute penalty. Qualifying for Europe caps a remarkable turnaround by Dortmund in the last six weeks.

They were fifth and seven points from the Champions League places after losing 2-1 to Eintracht Frankfurt in early April. Dortmund have since won all six league games to guarantee a place next season in the group stages of the Champions League. "Not many people believed in us," Dortmund captain Reus told Sky when asked about bridging the seven-point gap. The team deserves an incredible compliment. We have shown a really strong mentality in the last few weeks. When we have to, we are capable of great things."

Dortmund's purple patch has extended to the German Cup, winning Thursday's final



MAINZ: Mainz's Luxembourgian midfielder Leandro Barreiro Martins and Dortmund's German midfielder Mahmoud Dahoud vie for the ball during a Bundesliga football match yesterday. — AFP

after Jadon Sancho and Erling Braut Haaland both scored twice in Berlin. Qualifying for Europe also reduces the chance of star striker Haaland leaving at the end of the season. The 20-year-old has made no secret of the fact he wants Champions League football and his agent Mino Raiola has recently fuelled speculation the Norwegian could leave. Haaland has a contract until 2024, but there is report-

edly a release clause which becomes active in 2022. Dortmund are adamant he is staying, with sports director Michael Zorc insisting Haaland "will play for us next season" before kick-off yesterday. In their previous home game, Mainz pulled off a shock 2-1 win over Bayern Munich, who have since been confirmed Bundesliga champions, but Dortmund allowed no such repeat. — AFP

Nadal beats Djokovic to win 10th Rome title

ROME: Rafael Nadal beat world number one Novak Djokovic to win a 10th Italian Open title yesterday and set down a key marker two weeks out from the defense of his Roland Garros crown. Second seed Nadal won through 7-5, 1-6, 6-3 in 2hr 49min against the defending champion in the 57th career showdown between the pair.

"It's amazing I have this trophy in my hands for a 10th time, something impossible to imagine," said the world number three who also equaled Djokovic's record of 36 ATP

Masters 1000 titles in his 12th Rome final. "I remember the first final I won here in Rome back in 2005 against (Guillermo) Coria which lasted five hours," recalled the 34-year-old of his five-set battle past the Argentine.

Djokovic and Nadal were facing each other for the 57th time, having last played in the 2020 French Open final which the Spaniard won in straight sets. The pair have won 15 of the last 17 Rome titles between them, while Nadal leads their head-to-head in finals in the Italian capital 4-2. "I really wanted this title. This had been one of the most important titles in my career. I'd won 10 in Monte Carlo, Barcelona and Roland Garros and really wanted it here too," added Nadal.

Despite losing his opening service game Nadal broke back in the third game hitting twice as many winners as the Serb with 21 in the set. A dip in form in the second set

allowed Djokovic to break twice and get back into the game. But Nadal got back on track in the third with Djokovic having played nearly five hours on court on Saturday between his rain-delayed quarter-finals and semi-final matches.

The Spaniard saved two break points on his serve in the fifth game and broke for love for 4-2. Djokovic saved a first match point in the eighth game but Nadal made no mistake on his second chance in the following to seal his 88th career title after winning in Barcelona earlier this month.

"It doesn't get a bigger challenge than playing in the final against Rafa," said five-time Rome winner Djokovic, who leads their overall head-to-head 29-28. "Overall three hours of high quality tennis. I'm disappointed not to win, but pleased with my level. Going into Paris it's a good sensation. — AFP



ROME: Serbia's Novak Djokovic (left), holding the finalist's trophy, and Spain's Rafael Nadal, holding the winner's trophy, pose after the final of the men's Italian Tennis Open at Foro Italico yesterday. — AFP