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V O L V O



Fighting rages as divided powers fail to rein in Zionists

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Palestine rises like a phoenix from ashes, blood and fire

JUST KIDDIN', SERIOUSLY

By Sahar Moussa

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A person can only be born in one place. However, he may die several times elsewhere: In exile and in prison, and in a homeland transformed by occupation and oppression into a nightmare. —Mahmoud Darwish

Gaza. No more words to write or describe the situation in the presence of the powerful images of shattered bodies of children, women and men under the debris. Let's go back in time and ask ourselves what led to the massacre that we are witnessing today. It all started on Nov 2, 1917, when the British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour promised the leaders of the Zionist movement they could establish their national homeland in Palestine, violating Palestinians' right to self-determination. Balfour laid the foundation for the conspiracy launched against the people of Palestine, which later led to the Palestinian catastrophe in 1948 called the "Nakba".

Unlocking 'Nakba'

The Nakba is one of the darkest periods in Palestine's history. Zionist forces supported by the British attacked and ransacked more than 500 towns and cities throughout Palestine. More than 700,000 Palestinians fled the rampaging Zionist forces, fleeing their homes to save their lives. The Zionists intended ethnic cleansing, to steal the land and make way for their own people by open dispossession, mass killing and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians living there.

Today in 2021, history is repeating itself with another Nakba in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. Zionists continue their policy of ruthless ethnic cleansing — stealing homes and building settlements on Palestinian land. That is what they are attempting in Sheikh Jarrah — ethnic cleansing and land theft.

Sometimes I wonder if the Zionist government wants to avenge the Holocaust — where six million Jews were murdered by Nazi Germany — by ethnically cleansing the Palestinians. Nazi Germany argued that it was "racially superior" and that Jews were "inferior" and thus tried to justify their ethnic cleansing. Zionists argue they are the "chosen people" and they are justified in the ethnic cleansing and genocide of Palestinians. 'Holocaust' is a word of Greek origin meaning 'sacrifice by fire', and by fire and blood, Zionists are sacrificing innocent Palestinians.

Strong political stand needed

I can't understand why some nations like the US and some Arab countries continue to support what is clearly genocide and ethnic cleansing. I don't think you need to side with any political or religious party to stand up against what is taking place in Palestine. Just be human, and realize that this violence must stop.

How can they blind themselves to what is happening in Palestine, with the killing of Muslim and Christian Palestinians in the name of an apartheid regime? The Zionists are committing genocide and getting stronger because no one is stopping them. Zionists have an extremist agenda that justifies the theft of Palestinian homes and the murder of Palestinian children. Why is that? Is it because

New history books must be written about what is happening in Palestine now, what is happening in Gaza now, what is happening in Jerusalem now and how nations reacted, so that future generations can learn from history and avoid repeating the same injustice and violence.

We need books to be incorporated in schools and universities that will inform people about the siege. We need to talk about the wall that was built to shatter Palestinians' dreams and hopes and about the gates and fortresses that the Zionists use to suffocate Palestinians.

Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis have protested in Irada Square, although it is illegal for non-Kuwaitis to protest — unless they want to be deported. Despite this risk, many expats took

walls, fortresses and advanced internationally-banned weapons which it uses liberally against Palestinians. However, nowadays people's views are shifting thanks to the power of social media. People are expressing their views, and we are seeing that governments' statements do not necessarily represent their people's opinions.

Last but not least, we are responsible for impacting the Palestinian children's future by the decisions we take today. What are we going to answer them when they ask about all the violence? What are we going to tell them when they ask why a six-year-old child is lying with a blood-covered cloth covering its face in a morgue instead of being in school with friends? We need to use social media's power to educate people about Naji Al-Ali, Ghassan



Palestinian demonstrators chant slogans and wave their national flags during protests against Zionist occupation and its air campaign on the Gaza strip, in the occupied West Bank town of Hebron. — AFP

of Arab silence? People in Palestine don't need money or food donations. They don't need silence. They need a strong political stand against violence and genocide before a whole generation, ethnicity and civilization disappears.

Another brick in the wall?

Now with the power of social media, we can't hide the truth. We can't keep blaming Palestinians, assuming that they sold their houses to the Zionists willingly in 1948 without being forced to, just because there were no witnesses — which gave them the chance to fabricate their own stories throughout history.

a stand against violence and the horrifying massacre taking place. Kuwaitis already know what it feels like to be invaded and deported from their homes, which is why they have always supported unfortunate countries like Lebanon and Palestine.

'Neither death nor suicide'

I have a dream that someday all nations, especially Arab nations, will stand united against violence in the name of humanity, because bloodshed and mass destruction is not the solution. There is no doubt that the Zionist entity is considered to be one of the most powerful countries, hiding behind its

Kanafani, Souha Bechara, Muhammad Al-Durrah and Mahmoud Darwish to teach them about resistance, sacrifice and justice.

As for Palestinians, who despite being trapped and pushed each and every day to drown in the sea, get swallowed by walls and be killed like flies, have always managed to survive and rise with every dawn like phoenixes. They draw doors on the walls to cross to the other side simply armed with faith and hope, which is the strongest weapon of them all.

The propaganda of occupiers


 In My View

 By Nejouad Al-Yagout
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child hurling a rock, or meeting unarmed protesters with skunk spray and chemicals to disperse “threats to security”. Even at a mosque during the holiest month of the Islamic calendar, the military spares no mercy, using grenades against people worshipping. People have lost their lands and their eyes and their children.

Yes, but they insist, they have the right to defend themselves against worshippers and unarmed children. As Trevor Noah pointed out, when discussing the issue at hand, his mother told him not to fight his younger brothers because they are not strong enough to handle his punches.

And the most dangerous propaganda is the one that blends with spirituality, using scripture to justify one’s presence, although this is being

We all fell for the “peace” efforts, some countries even going so far as to make it official. Bit by bit, many of us began wanting peace between the occupiers and the Palestinians. This is what is known as the Stockholm Syndrome. Much of the world fell for it. Except this form of the Stockholm Syndrome is dangerous because the rapist, the kidnapper claims innocence, and spreads it far and wide, enough to penetrate hearts and minds. Such a tactic includes spiritual bypassing: Pretending everything is alright for the sake of love and peace.

But it doesn’t work that way. The violence has to stop by those in power, those in a place of privilege; then, peace comes. First, the land has to return to the Palestinians, then peace can come. When we befriend the aggressor,

And there is no need to say that the occupiers have the right to defend themselves. Let them say it plain and clear: They want the right to kill, to attack, to steal land, to persecute and to flagrantly violate international law. Let them say it. And even if they can’t say it, we are onto it now. And they know we are, they know so well, that an official Twitter account twisted the words of a supermodel to garner sympathy, only to be met with more criticism against them. It’s a classic example of blatantly lying to further an agenda. That’s how far the propaganda is losing. They must be surprised that the entire world has caught on after years of winning in the domain of propaganda.

We will no longer be fooled by invitations to peace and love. Those days are over. The occupiers should invite themselves to peace and love, instead of spewing the same tired narrative of being attacked by everyone. Why is there war? Did anyone ask this question? Why is there resistance? A land has been



Zionist police detain a Palestinian man during protests against the Zionist entity’s occupation and its air campaign on the Gaza Strip at Damascus Gate in East Jerusalem on May 18, 2021. — AFP

debunked by knowledgeable rabbis who know their scripture well and are tired of having their scripture hijacked. These rabbis have been chanting Free Palestine for eons, and they are finally being given more publicity.

Because the world is waking up. And we know religion would never justify kicking people out of their homes and turning an entire land into a checkpoint zone, controlling its water and electricity, beating up women in their cars, bullying people in the streets or turning land into a refugee camp, where the refugees are natives! Using spirituality as a tactic is not confined to scripture for these propagandists.

we are saying, it’s okay, we’ll turn a blind eye for the sake of love.

Peace comes when there is peace. Simple. It does not come in the midst of settlers beating up natives. It does not come when a bully beats a person unable to defend himself to a pulp and shouts: He started it. No, the occupiers started it when they entered the country and took over an entire land. We have to reclaim the narrative and reclaim language. It is not terrorism, it is fighting resistance. It is not, as mentioned previously, antisemitism; it is anti-Zionism. It is not a clash when an unarmed person loses an eye to an armed soldier.

**The propagandist says:
That’s antisemitism. No,
it is not antisemitism. It
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are two different things.**

stolen. Let us no longer ignore the bleeding, dying elephant in the room.

For those who have never been swayed by the propaganda of peace, bravo! That is commendable. For those of us who fell for the peace talks, today is a new day. Let us wake up and defend our brothers and sisters in Palestine and raise our voices in support of them. Let us sing, dance, write, cook, do anything to shine a light on their cause. And for those who made peace official, it is never too late to use your voice to walk away from an abusive relationship. There’s a cure for the Stockholm Syndrome: Calling a spade a spade.

We love you, Palestine.

For the first time since the occupation of Palestinian lands, the world is waking up to the reality of the situation. For years, we have been blinded by rhetoric reminiscent of the chief propagandist of the Nazi regime: Joseph Goebbels. The way to justify violence is to make people believe in the lies, to make people hate the victims.

But what propagandists forget is that what goes around comes around. History has taught us that persecution has an expiry date, and the end begins when enough people incline towards the side of victims for justice to prevail. And propaganda, which feeds on lies, can only be fought with one weapon: The truth. The truth about what is happening, the true picture of brutality, the true terrorists.

The Nazi propaganda gave validation to evil by glorifying shared ethnicity, kicking people out of their homes, placing them in camps, and terrorizing them. Sounds familiar? Isn’t it tragic that the people perpetrating such crimes are the descendants of people who shared the same horror stories of stolen homes, a forced diaspora and brutality, which are now quotidian happenings for Palestinians?

Propaganda needs to evolve, however, so that nobody catches up with the lie. The way for a lie to thrive is to pay to keep it alive, through media, movies and music. Money is paid to make the aggressor more lovable and to portray the victim as an enemy or a terrorist. And then when someone notices the bias of such a ploy, the propagandist says: That’s antisemitism. No, it is not antisemitism. It is anti-Zionism. These are two different things.

We were almost fooled by hearing repeatedly that they are the same thing, but not anymore. We were almost fooled by the victim mentality, adopted to induce guilt in nations that mistreated them in the past. We condemn the Holocaust. And we condemn what the occupiers are doing to Palestinians now. A crime is a crime no matter who it is perpetrated against.

Even ex-military members who fought for the occupiers have left and are speaking out about atrocities committed against Palestinians. What will it take for them to see what they are doing? What will it take? Just as some of us awoke from a long stupor of hypnosis, they, too, can wake up to how they meet any objection with excessive force - even if it means using a rubber bullet against a

Local

Taking Flight:

The Birds of the Jahra Nature Preserve

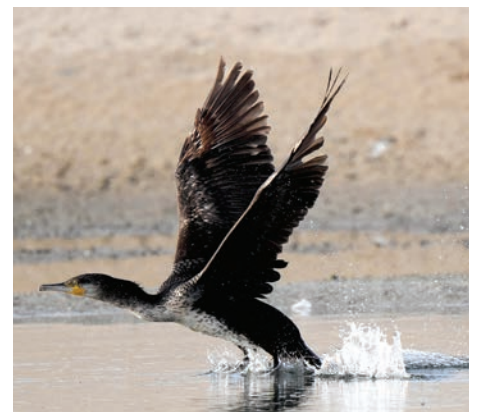
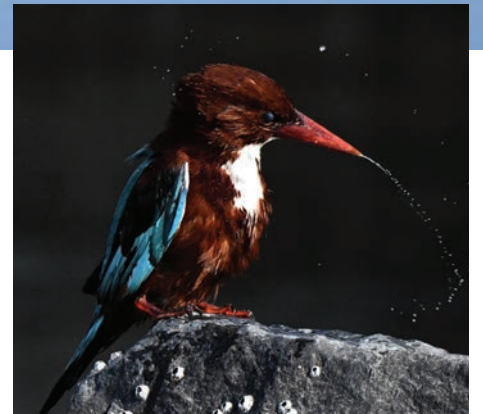


Photographs by Ghazy Qaffaf

In these images taken over the past few months, a variety of birds, including European bee-eaters, kingfishers, great cormorants, egrets, squacco herons and flamingoes, forage at a beach in Jahra governorate.



PHOTO FEATURE



Local

By Faisal Al-Nafisi

European Super League

What goes through your mind when you hear the word football? I think about unity, hard work and most importantly, that football is for the fans. Football clubs were started by poor working-class people and made for the community around them.

Over the past years, billionaire owners decided to get ahold of the big teams in the beautiful game. They slowly started to move them away from the communities and foundations these teams were built on. They are treating them as businesses and franchises to make huge money. That is certainly not how football teams should be run. Personally, as a football fan, I have always been doubtful of these owners and never believed that they could be true custodians of the future of these clubs.



April 18, 2021 — the thought that niggled in the back of the heads of every football fan became a reality. Twelve of the biggest teams in Europe decided to establish a new mid-week 'Super League' governed by its founding clubs. So basically what they did is break away from their current leagues and make their own. This means the rich are getting richer without caring about the teams below them, regardless of performances and success. In their statement when announcing the ESL, they used the pandemic as an excuse to start this league and make more money, when in reality the idea of this league was being worked on for the last couple of years. The only reason the owners of these clubs are doing this is because of greed.

Thankfully, 48 hours later, the ESL was 'suspended' because nine out of the 12 teams decided to withdraw from the competition. In my opinion, this is certainly not the end. How can you trust the owners of these massive football clubs when they have attempted to ruin the sport we love?

Now that the ESL is on hold, I think that the next step for fans is to get rid of these greedy owners, who don't care about anything but their pockets. Protests have been held over the last couple of days, especially in England, to try to persuade the owners to sell. I think this is a step in the right direction, and fans should make their voices heard.

Unfortunately, over the past decade, we have gradually seen fewer and fewer owners listening to what the fans want to happen within their football club. I hope that in the future, fans will have a bigger say on what goes around in football, because after all, football is for the fans.



By Fouzia Al-Kharafi

Animal testing

Did you know that more than half of the products found in an average person's restroom are from brands that test on animals? You could be guilty of animal abuse without even knowing it! My name is Fouzia Al-Kharafi, and I'm a sophomore at Al Bayan Bilingual School who is passionate about the ongoing issue of animal testing. We should all give an ear to animal testing and try to put an end to it since it is inhumane and unreliable. Animal testing is an overlooked topic that people rarely speak about, but these animals have rights just as important as ours. I believe that their voices NEED to be heard.

To begin, animal testing is an unethical, inhumane, and cruel method to resort to. According to the Humane Society International Organization, it is estimated that more than 115 million animals — including mice, rats, birds, fish, rabbits, guinea pigs, farm animals, dogs, cats and non-human primates — are used and/or killed in laboratory experiments each year around the world. These unfortunate beings are held captive in laboratories, tormented and suffer pain for

foolish reasons. They are intentionally injected with toxic substances and treated like toys to experiment on. Once scientists are done with an experiment, they insensitively murder the animal.



Not only is animal testing unethical, but it is also unreliable. The PETA organization stated this in one of their articles that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has noted that 95 percent of all drugs that are shown to be safe and effective in animal tests fail in human trials because they don't work or are dangerous. This demonstrates why animal

testing is extremely unnecessary. It is expensive for results that are ineffective and inaccurate. Ask yourself this — why should animals go through all this pain, if we aren't even getting accurate results?

As I explained above, animal testing is not logical and should be prevented. There are many different alternatives and ways to prevent this cruelty. The Cruelty-Free International Organization explains that there are numerous options other than animal testing. This includes tests on human tissues, cell structures, computer models and so on. Other than these methods, we should also work together in boycotting non-cruelty-free brands, and inform others about this issue. Many substitutes would be more effective than animal testing.

In conclusion, animal testing is a continuing issue that is going on around us. It must be stopped because it's brutal and undependable. Animals are constantly tortured and murdered for ineffective results. Imagine being trapped behind walls, in a confined space, getting fed unknown substances. Wouldn't you feel lonely and afraid? That's what these poor animals have to go through only for something as ridiculous as a tube of lip-gloss!

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Local

Syrians in Kuwait vote in presidential election



KUWAIT: Syrians living in Kuwait cast their vote for the presidential election at the Syrian Embassy in Mishref yesterday. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Syrian citizens living abroad voted in presidential election at their embassies around the world yesterday. Those in Syria will vote on May 26. In Kuwait, voting was open from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm at the Syrian Embassy in Mishref. Voters can choose from three candidates - President Bashar Al-Assad, Mahmoud Marei and Abdullah Salloum Abdullah.

Syrian Charge d'Affaires Mustafa Dayoub said that thousands of voters arrived since morning to vote. According to him, there are over 100,000 Syrian citizens residing in Kuwait. "We haven't faced any problems or complications. The voting process is going smoothly; voters can select their candidate behind a curtain. We will collect the ballots in the evening after voting closes," he told Kuwait Times. All staff and the voters were wearing facemasks as part of health measures. Also, a safe distance was maintained be-

tween voters, the temperature of the voters was checked at the entrance, and other safety precautions were followed.

According to one of the secretaries, the Syrian Embassy posted the invitation to participate in these elections on their official page on Facebook, in addition to advertising in local dailies to inform all Syrian citizens living in Kuwait about this event. These are the second elections held since the approval of the new Syrian constitution in 2012.

Dine-in only allowed from 5 am to 8 pm

KUWAIT: Restaurants and coffee shops can receive customers for dine-in only from 5:00 am until 8:00 pm from Sunday, the committee in charge of implementing health measures said. After 8:00 pm, only takeaway and home delivery orders are permitted, the committee's head and Municipality Director-General Ahmad Al-Manfouhi said in a statement.

The committee cautioned all restaurants and coffee shops to abide by health precautionary measures, namely ensuring customers make a booking prior to their visit in order to avoid crowding. Restaurants and cafes have also been told to conduct temperature checks of employees daily and of customers upon entry.

Other measures include ensuring that customers use electronic payment methods instead of cash and commit to social distancing. The committee noted that these measures will face constant review, with future decisions taken based on overall health conditions in the country. — KUNA

Two arrested for running online trolling network

KUWAIT: The interior ministry arrested two bedoons for having fake accounts on social media which they used to troll people online. It said the two used a basement equipped with 50 monitors and other equipment to run bogus accounts to bully personalities, insult others and attack national unity. Security sources said the two ran three fake accounts on social media. They said that electronic crimes detectives located the network in Qasr in Jahra and raided the basement of a house that contained monitors, computers, smartphones and international SIM cards.

The two suspects confessed to running more than 70 accounts on Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram. The two used to denigrate a certain group in the society, stir up sectarian strife and insult notable Kuwaiti dignitaries. The two confessed to having support from some figures and receiving large amounts of money to defame many members of the society.

The equipment was sent to the criminal detectives to decode and check the messages and summon those who contacted them to question them, as investigations continue to find out their partners, motives and financiers. — Al-Rai



KUWAIT: Bidaa firemen douse a fire that engulfed five vehicles parked in an open area in Salmiya. Investigations are underway to determine the cause of the blaze.

Local

MPs propose law to ban dealing with or traveling to Zionist entity

Lawmakers call for basic civil rights for bedoons

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Five MPs yesterday submitted a new draft law stipulating a jail sentence of between one and three years for people and authorities dealing with or traveling to the Zionist entity. The bill, submitted by MPs Adnan Abdulsamad, Hisham Al-Saleh, Ali Al-Qattan, Ahmad Al-Hamad and Khalil Al-Saleh, bans any dealing or normalization with the Zionist entity.

It also bans any direct or indirect contacts with the Zionist entity and also bans any Kuwaiti or expat residing in the country from visiting the Zionist entity with or without a travel document. The bill also bans any expression of sympathy with the Zionist entity. It proposes a jail sentence of between one year and three years and a fine of up to KD 5,000 for violators.

The bill must be first cleared by the legal and legislative committee before the National Assembly can debate and pass it. The committee is currently studying another bill banning deals with the Zionist entity. The Assembly is

scheduled to hold a special session next week on developments in Palestine.

Meanwhile, five lawmakers yesterday submitted a draft law calling to grant stateless people known as bedoons basic civil rights including free education and medical care, allowing them to work and travel abroad. The bill calls to grant all bedoons, estimated at more than 100,000, a civil ID for five years, which can be renewed. On the basis of the ID, bedoons are entitled to obtain permanent residency, free public services, take up jobs and travel abroad.

The court of cassation set June 16 to issue its verdict on three petitions filed by former opposition MP Bader Al-Dahoum over the cancellation of his membership. Dahoum was granted a final verdict from the cassation court in December allowing him to run in the Assembly election on Dec 5. He won a seat in the fifth constituency. Later, his win was challenged before the constitutional court, which nullified his election and stripped him of his Assembly seat. In his petitions to the cassation court, Dahoum argued that there is a contradiction in the two verdicts and asked the court to settle the dispute.

Kuwait to hold 14th by-election tomorrow

KUWAIT: Voters in Kuwait's fifth constituency head to polling stations tomorrow in the by-election, the 14th in Kuwait's history, to select a representative following the vacancy of a seat occupied by Bader Al-Dahoum. A by-election is held in line with article 84 of the constitution, which stipulates that elections are held within two months following the vacancy of a parliamentary seat. The mandate of the new member shall last until the end of that of their predecessor.

Since the 1963 legislative elections, by-elections were held for different reasons: Death of a member, resignation or annulment of results. The first was when Sulaiman Ahmad Al-Haddad from the 6th constituency resigned from the National Assembly on Oct 27, 1964. By-elections were held on Dec 23, bringing Ali Al-Omar to the house.

Eight MPs resigned on Dec 7, 1965 in protest against the endorsement of what they considered "laws curbing freedoms". They were Ahmad Al-Khatib, Jassem Al-Qatami, Rashed Al-Tawheed, Sami Al-Munayyes, Sulaiman Al-Mutawa, Abdulrazaq Al-Khaled, Ali Al-Omar and Yaaqoub Al-Humaidhi. By-elections were held on Feb 9, 1966, resulting in the victory of Ahmad Al-Abduljalil, Nayef Al-Khulaifi, Rashed Al-Hajri, Sulaiman Al-Thuwaikh, Abdulaziz Al-Masaeed, Ghannam Al-Jumhour, Mohammad Al-Wazzan and Nasser Al-Muaili.

MP Mudhi Al-Nazzal resigned from the parliament on Oct 29, 1966, and a by-election was held resulting in the victory of Khaled Al-Meseb. Seven MPs resigned during the second legislative term in 1967: Khaled Al-Fuhaid, Rashed Al-Farhan, Abdulrazzaq Al-Zaid, Abdulaziz Al-Saqer, Ali Al-Omar, Mohammad Al-Kharafi and Mohammad Al-Adasani. Their resignations were in protest of the outcome of the elections. By-elections were held on May 10, 1967, bringing Ibrahim Al-Mailam, Ahmad Al-Abduljalil, Ahmad Al-Khulaifi, Khaled Al-Tahous, Khalaf Al-Otaibi, Rashed Ismail, and Ghanem Al-Amiri to the house.

MP Ali Thunayyan Al-Athaina who represented the 9th con-

stituency passed away during the third legislative term. The seat was announced vacant on Dec 11, 1971. By-elections were held on Feb 9, 1972, resulting in the victory of Faleh Al-Suwaileh. On April 7, 1982, the sixth by-election was held in the 14th constituency following the death of MP Nasser Al-Osaimi. Humoud Al-Jabri won the vote.

On Dec 29, 1992, the constitutional court annulled voting in the 14th and 16th constituencies, an unprecedented verdict. By-elections on Feb 15, 1993 resulted in the victory of Mubarak Al-Khrajneij and Humoud Al-Jabri, the very MPs whose seats were contested. The 8th by-election was held on Feb 19, 1997 after candidate Saadoun Al-Otaibi contested results at the constitutional court. However, Waleed Al-Jeri and Khaled Al-Adwa won elections and returned to their seats.

MP Khaled Al-Adwa contested the voting results of the 21st constituency in the 9th legislative term. The constitutional court ruled in his favor and annulled the membership of Saadoun Al-Otaibi. By-elections were held on Jan 24, 2000 and Adwa won. On Dec 7, 2000, the 10th by-election was held following the passing of Sami Al-Munayyes. Jamal Al-Omar won.

Five MPs resigned from the house during the 14th legislative term: Riyadh Al-Adasani, Abdulkarim Al-Kandari, Hussain Al-Quwaaan, Ali Al-Rashed and Safa Al-Hashem. They resigned due to a dispute over an interpellation against the prime minister. The house approved the resignations on May 15, 2014. By-elections were held on June 26, in which Ahmad Al-Qedheebi, Ahmad Lari, Abdullah Maayouf, Fares Al-Otaibi and Mohammad Al-Barrak won seats.

On Feb 20, 2016, a by-election was held following the demise of MP Nabil Al-Fadhl, and Ali Al-Khamees won the seat. On March 16, 2019, a by-election was held in the 2nd and 3rd constituencies following the vacancy of seats occupied by Jamaan Al-Harbash and Waleed Al-Tabtabaei. Bader Al-Mulla and Abdullah Al-Kandari won the elections. — KUNA



GAZA: Palestinians inspect a site hit during a Zionist airstrike in Gaza City yesterday. — AFP

Kuwait supports OIC call for special session, backs Palestinian cause

GENEVA: Kuwait strongly supports the call of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to present human rights violations in the occupied Palestinian territories in a Human Rights Council special session, said Kuwaiti Permanent Representative to the UN and other international organizations in Geneva Jamal Al-Ghunaim yesterday.

In a statement to KUNA, ambassador Ghunaim affirmed that the session, which will be held on May 27, will deal with the grave violations that the Palestinians were subjected to during the recent Zionist aggression, whether in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank or East Jerusalem.

He noted that Kuwait, in cooperation with other countries,

was able to mobilize the required quorum to hold this special session, which will be an opportunity to show and present Zionist violations and to prevent further exacerbation of the humanitarian conditions of the Palestinian people.

The special session will be the ninth held by the Human Rights Council to discuss the grave Zionist violations in the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, since the council's activities were launched in 2006.

Meanwhile, Speaker of Kuwait's National Assembly Marzouq Al-Ghanem on Wednesday said Kuwait has an unwavering position backing the Palestinian cause on both popular and official levels. In an interview with Palatine TV, Ghanem extolled the Palestinian resistance, describing Palestinians who are struggling for obtaining their rights as "heroes".

He affirmed continued backing of the Palestinian cause, expressing his sorrow over the massacres committed by the Zionist occupation forces against the Palestinians there. He appealed to all to provide any kind of support to the Palestinians. — KUNA



Clashes erupt on Morocco border as Madrid accuses Rabat of blackmail

Syrians abroad kick off vote on new term for Assad



GAZA CITY: Palestinians pray over the body of 23-year-old Palestinian Muntaser Jawabreh, who succumbed to his injuries after being wounded two days ago in clashes with Zionist troops during protests against the ongoing airstrikes on Gaza, at his funeral in the village of Uum Dar east of Jenin in the occupied West Bank yesterday. — AFP

Divided powers fail to rein in Zionists

Hamas trades heavy fire as Zionists continue to pound Gaza

PARIS/GAZA CITY: With Europe divided and the United States wary of antagonizing Zionist forces, world powers have failed to rein in the Gaza conflict, in a new sign of the international community's inability to put any Middle East peace process on track, analysts say.

World powers are walking a diplomatic tightrope, trying to strike a sometimes excruciating balance between Zionist entity and Palestinian militant group Hamas in the conflict that has raged for 10 days. Condemnation of the stream of Hamas rockets Zionist cities has only in the last few days been balanced by ceasefire calls directed at the Zionist entity, with Washington now urging de-escalation.

Meanwhile, a column of grey smoke billowed above Gaza after a night in which families covered in fear from the bombing while, the Zionist army said, some 70 rockets were fired from Gaza toward the Jewish state, sending residents fleeing into bomb shelters. Talks continued to end the bloodshed after US President Joe Biden

urged a "significant de-escalation" while Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to push on until the military campaign reaches its objective, "to restore quiet and security."

UN Middle East peace envoy Tor Wennesland was visiting Qatar for talks with Ismail Haniyeh, the political leader of the Islamist group Hamas which rules the enclave, as part of an effort to "restore calm," according to a diplomatic source.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said "indirect talks" with Hamas were essential to advancing efforts toward an end of hostilities. "Of course Hamas has to be included because without Hamas there will be no ceasefire," she said.

'Path to a ceasefire'

A senior Hamas official told AFP: "We expect a return to calm in the coming hours, or tomorrow (Friday), but it depends on the cessation of the aggression of the occupation forces in Gaza and Jerusalem." "But there is nothing definitive for

the moment," added the source, indicating that Qatar, an emirate financing aid to Gaza and where Haniyeh lives, was at the heart of "intense" negotiations.

The occupation army said Hamas and other Islamist armed groups in Gaza have fired 4,070 rockets towards the Jewish state, with the overwhelming majority of those that were bound for populated areas intercepted by its Iron Dome air defenses. The rockets have claimed 12 lives in the Jewish state, including one child, with one Indian and two Thai nationals among those killed, the police say.

Zionist strikes on Gaza have killed 230 Palestinians, including 65 children, according to the Gaza health ministry, leaving vast areas in rubble and displacing some 120,000 people, according to the Hamas government.

Overnight, the Zionist entity continued to pound Gaza with air strikes and artillery fire aimed at destroying Hamas tunnels and other infrastructure, the military said. One Zionist strike

on Gaza on Wednesday killed a disabled man, his pregnant wife and their three-year-old child, the enclave's health ministry said. "What did my brother do?" the man's bereaved brother Omar Saleha, 31, told AFP. "He was just sitting in his wheelchair."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken however again stressed on Twitter that Washington "expects to see de-escalation on the path to a ceasefire".

The Zionist state's bombing campaign has left the two million people of Gaza, which has been under its blockade for 14 years, desperate for relief. The International Committee of the Red Cross warned that people in both Gaza and Zionist state "urgently need respite from non-stop hostilities".

The World Health Organization yesterday issued an urgent appeal for \$7 million it said are needed to "enable a comprehensive emergency response in the next six months" following the escalation of violence. — AFP

International

All eyes on Hezbollah as tensions rise on border

Observers say 'all-out war' with Zionist forces unlikely

BEIRUT: Zionist forces' deadly Gaza offensive has many eyes trained on the Lebanese border for a Hezbollah reaction, but observers argue the Iran-backed movement is unlikely to risk an all-out conflict. Incidents at the border in recent days have raised the temperature but, with Lebanon already on its knees amid a deep political and economic crisis, the Shiite group seems intent on refraining from an escalation.

"There is nothing that currently suggests escalation," said Sadiq Al-Nabulsi, a Lebanese academic close to Hezbollah. "But the decision to go to war traditionally falls on Zionist entity."

Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas, both designated as terrorist groups by the Zionist state and much of the West, have mended fences after ending up on opposing sides of the Syrian war a decade ago. Hezbollah, founded in the 1980s to fight Zionist occupation of southern Lebanon, has grown into Iran's main regional proxy with operatives in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

The only Lebanese faction to have kept its weapons after the 1975-90 civil war, Hezbollah now has a more powerful arsenal than the Lebanese national army. It justifies this by emphasizing its role of "resistance" against the Zionist enemy, a theme that still occupies a central place in the rhetoric of the movement.

Six years after Zionist pulled out of Lebanon in 2000, the Lebanese militia and the Jewish state fought a devastating 34-day war. The 2006 conflict killed around 1,200 Lebanese and cost the country dearly by impacting infrastructure, investment and tourism. The two foes have since avoided all-out war, including during the previous wars in Gaza in 2008, 2012 and 2014.

Their simmering conflict has played out mostly in war-ravaged Syria, where occupation forces have carried out hundreds of strikes on Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian assets. Minor border spats sporadically bring tensions to a boil but often wind up with a set of carefully choreographed face-saving salvos. "Any minor incident can lead to an exchange that could snowball and any miscalculation could cause escalation," Nabulsi said.

Border tensions

On Wednesday, four rockets were fired from southern Lebanon towards Zionist state, in the third such attack since hostilities flared between the Jewish state and armed Palestinian groups in the Gaza Strip last week. The Zionist army said it responded with artillery fire after its air defenses intercepted one of the rockets. The others likely fell in open areas, it said. On Monday evening, rockets were also fired from the Shebaa farms area in south



GAZA CITY: Palestinians pray over the body of a man killed during Zionist airstrikes in Gaza City yesterday. — AFP photos

Lebanon towards Zionist but failed to fly past the border. The occupation army responded with artillery fire.

Last Thursday, three rockets were fired from near the Palestinian refugee camp of Rashidiyeh toward Zionist state. The Zionist army said the rockets fell into the sea. Hezbollah has not officially commented on any of the attacks.

Also in the border area, protests have been held against Zionist air campaign on Gaza, with a Hezbollah member killed by Zionist fire last week during a pro-Palestinian rally. Hezbollah mourned the victim as a "martyr" but stopped short of calling for vengeance or retaliation.

Before the latest tensions, Hezbollah and Zionist entity repeatedly signaled they were not interested in an escalation. Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah, in a speech to mark Al-Quds (Jerusalem) day this month, said it was a responsibility for his movement to stand behind Palestinians. "But the primary responsibility is on Palestinians" themselves, he said, before warning the Zionists that his group would respond firmly if provoked in Lebanon.

In a statement this week, Hezbollah deputy chief Naim Qassem pledged unyielding support to Palestinian factions fighting occupation forces in Gaza. "We are with them, we will offer support and assistance in all ways and we will always carry out our duties



This picture shows rockets being fired from Rafah in southern Gaza Strip toward Zionist state yesterday.

as required during different steps and stages," he said after meeting with representatives of these factions. The group may consider sending financial, military and logistical support as it has done in the past, said political analyst Talal Atrissi of the Lebanese University. — AFP

UN rights council to hold May 27 session on Mideast

GENEVA: The UN Human Rights Council said yesterday it would hold a special session on the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, amid deadly violence between Zionist entity and armed Palestinian groups in Gaza.

The session, planned for next Thursday, will address "the grave human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem," the council said in a statement. The session was requested

by Pakistan, which is the coordinator of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Palestinian authorities, it said.

It will be the 30th extraordinary meeting of the UN's top rights body since its creation 15 years ago. The United Nations did not immediately say how many of the Geneva-based council's 47 member states had backed the call, but at least a third must come out in support for a special session request to be granted.

Yesterday's announcement came as Zionist air strikes continued to hammer Gaza yesterday and as diplomats stepped up efforts towards a ceasefire to stem the devastating violence that erupted 10 days ago. Zionist forces' strikes on Gaza have killed 230 Palestinians, including 65 children, according to the Gaza health ministry, leaving vast areas in rubble and displacing tens of thousands in the crowded territory. — AFP



Relatives of 23-year-old Muntaser Jawabreh, who succumbed to his injuries after being wounded two days ago in clashes with Zionist troops during protests against the ongoing airstrikes on Gaza, mourn at his funeral in the village of Oum Dar east of Jenin in the occupied West Bank. — AFP

International

Syrians abroad kick off vote on new term for Assad

Dozens of Syrian embassies abroad open doors to eligible voters

BAABDA, Lebanon: Thousands of Syrians flocked to their embassy in Lebanon yesterday as expatriates and refugees kicked off voting for next week's presidential election which is expected to keep Bashar Al-Assad in power. Buses packed with Syrians jammed main roads leading to the embassy in Baabda, south of Beirut, where a sea of people had gathered from 5 am (0200 GMT) amid tight security. Some of the vehicles carrying voters came under attack in several parts of the country by groups of young men who lobbed stones or pounded passengers with their fists.

A 54-year-old Syrian man died from a heart attack aboard one of the buses, the state-run National News Agency reported without providing additional details. Outside the embassy, voters chanted slogans in support of Assad and carried portraits of the longtime president and his late father Hafez, an AFP correspondent reported. Pictures of Assad's two little-known challengers were nowhere to be seen. Mohammad Al-Doummani, from the Damascus countryside, was among the first to vote. "I voted for Bashar Al-Assad because I believe in his project," Doummani told AFP after casting his ballot. "I have full faith in him and his ability to drag Syria out of crisis."

Dozens of Syrian embassies abroad, including those in Russia, Jordan and Kuwait, also opened their doors to eligible voters who are required to present a valid passport carrying an exit stamp from Syrian territory. The requirement is an obstacle to millions of refugees who fled the country through unofficial channels. Several countries that oppose Assad have blocked the

vote altogether. Polling inside Syria is set for next Wednesday.

'Go home'

The election will be the second since civil war erupted in 2011. The conflict has killed more than 388,000 people and prompted more than half of Syria's pre-war population to flee their homes. It will likely yield a win for Assad, who has held power for the past 21 years. Outside the embassy in Lebanon, voters chanted: "God, Syria and Bashar." Abdul Rahman, a 21-year-old from the northern province of Aleppo, said he too was voting for the longtime ruler. "He did everything for us," said the man who has been living in Lebanon for five years. "He gave us healthcare and education for free."

"Look at the difference between the situation in Lebanon and the situation in Syria." Lebanon, which is grappling with an economic crisis, says it hosts some 1.5 million Syrians, including around one million registered as refugees with the United Nations. The country of more than six million people has pressured refugees to return home but human rights groups still deem the country unsafe. On social media networks, Lebanese users criticized Assad supporters heading to the ballot box. "The Syrians that want to vote for Assad inside Lebanon are supporters of the regime ... so they should go ahead, pack their things and return to their land," one post said.

Videos circulating on social media networks also showed groups of men assaulting vehicles carrying Syrian voters with



BAABDA, Lebanon: Lebanese security forces stand guard as Syrian voters residing in Lebanon carry portraits of President Bashar Al-Assad, one of the candidates in the upcoming presidential election in Syria, while they line up the road from the eastern outskirts of Beirut to Baabda to vote at the Syrian embassy yesterday. —AFP

wooden rods and stones. In one video, no fewer than six men surround a vehicle and kick through its windshield while beating up passengers inside. —AFP

US and France tangle at UN over Middle East

UNITED NATIONS: The conflict in the Middle East has stirred up a diplomatic stand-off at the United Nations between France and the United States, the first open tension between the two allies since President Joe Biden took power. Despite guaranteed opposition from Washington, France proposed another draft UN Security Council resolution calling for the end of hostilities between Zionist and the Palestinians, as well as humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip. According to the text obtained by AFP, the draft "demands an immediate cessation of hostilities" and calls for "intensification and acceleration of diplomatic efforts and support for a negotiated two-state solution".

The text has been circulated among the 15 Security Council members, who had until yesterday to weigh in, diplomats said. France has not given any indication on when a vote might be held. The United States has repeatedly vetoed similar resolutions in recent days, saying it is pursuing other avenues to solve the crisis. France's latest proposal—announced in a statement from Paris on Tuesday evening—quickly drew a firm response from the United States, signaling it would wield its veto again if needed. A US spokesperson at the UN told AFP "we are focused on intensive diplomatic efforts underway to bring an end to the violence and that we will not support actions that we believe undermine efforts to de-escalate." At the same time, Biden announced he had directly told Zionist's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he expects "significant de-escalation" on Wednesday—highlighting the contrasting approaches to the conflict. —AFP

Ethiopia sets new date for elections in key test for Abiy

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopia's poll body yesterday said twice-delayed national elections would be held on June 21, kicking off a fresh countdown to a major test of democratic reforms under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Africa's second most populous country was first due to hold the polls last August, but officials pushed them to June 5 of this year because of the coronavirus pandemic. Then last weekend electoral board chairwoman Birtukan Mideksa announced a new delay was needed because of logistical woes related to tasks like training electoral staff and printing and distributing ballot papers.

The new date was revealed at a press conference by electoral board spokeswoman Solyana Shimeles, following meetings with Abiy's government, opposition parties and regional officials. Solyana said she did not expect any further delays, citing the upcoming rainy season which begins in June and can wreak havoc with infrastructure. "We're trying to keep it before the rainy season," she said. The logistical challenges promise to be daunting even with the delay, and Solyana estimated yesterday the board would need to hire more than 100,000 additional staff and train them on voting day procedures and tabulating results. Staff shortages have been especially apparent so far in Afar and Somali regions, where registration started late, she said.

Conflict complications

Abiy came to power in 2018 on the back of several years of anti-government protests and promised to break from Ethiopia's authoritarian past in part by holding the most democratic elections



ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed smiles during the launch of his green legacy initiative, the nationwide environmental campaign to plant billions of trees, at a hall of Prime Minister's office temporarily transformed into a green garden in Addis Ababa. —AFP

the country had ever seen. His reform agenda earned him the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, but his tenure has been marred by security challenges, most prominently the six-month-old war in the northern Tigray region, which will not participate in the June 21 polls.

Around 36 million Ethiopians had registered to vote as of last weekend, though no registration had occurred in several constituencies rocked by ethnic violence, including in the country's most populous regions, Oromia and Amhara. Solyana said it would be "very difficult" to include these conflict-hit constituencies on June 21. But she said she expected voters in those areas to be able to cast ballots before a new parliamentary session begins in early October. The elections will choose national and regional parliamentarians. The national MPs elect the prime minister, who is head of government, as well as the president—a largely ceremonial role. —AFP

International

Nigeria's Boko Haram leader 'badly wounded' in suicide bid

Shekau hogged international headlines after Chibok kidnapping

KANO, Nigeria: Nigerian Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau has been seriously wounded after trying to kill himself to avoid capture during clashes with rival Islamic State-allied jihadists in the north of the country, two intelligence sources said yesterday. Shekau's Boko Haram faction and fighters from the Islamic State West Africa Province had been battling in northeastern Borno state, where ISWAP militants have become the dominant force in Nigeria's more than decade-long jihadist insurgency.

Shekau, who made international headlines when his men kidnapped nearly 300 schoolgirls in Chibok in 2014, has been reported dead several times since Boko Haram first began its insurgency in 2009. After a series of clashes, Shekau and some of his fighters were surrounded on Wednesday by ISWAP jihadists in Boko Haram's Sambisa forest stronghold, where they demanded he surrender, one intelligence source said. "To avoid capture, Shekau shot himself in the chest and the bullet pierced his shoulder," the source said, adding: "He was badly injured."

Some of his men managed to escape with him to an unknown destination, the source added. A second intelligence source said Shekau was critically wounded after detonating

explosives in the house where he was holed up with his men. Nigeria's army and officials did not immediately respond to requests for confirmation of the incident. Shekau's critical injury or death would be a blow to his Boko Haram faction which has already been weakened by military air strikes on its bases and defections among his men.

More than 40,000 people have been killed and over two million displaced from their homes by the conflict in northeast Nigeria, and fighting has spread to parts of neighboring Chad, Cameroon and Niger. Boko Haram and ISWAP have fought battles for control of territory in the past. ISWAP has emerged as the stronger force, carrying out complex attacks on the military and overrunning army bases. Shekau took over Boko Haram, formally known as the Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, after its founder Muhammad Yusuf was killed by police in 2009.

Under Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram turned large swathes of the northeast into a no-go territory, proclaiming a "caliphate" in the Borno town of Gwoza in 2014. An offensive since 2015 by Nigerian troops backed by soldiers from Cameroon, Chad and Niger drove jihadists from most



Photo shows Abubakar Shekau, the leader of one of two Boko Haram factions, from a video published on November 9, 2018.

of the area that they had once controlled. Angered by Shekau's indiscriminate targeting of civilians and use of women and children suicide bombers, a rival faction broke away in 2016 to become ISWAP with the backing of the Islamic State group. —AFP

Greek villages evacuated as forest fire rages

ALEPOCHORI, Greece: Several Greek villages were evacuated yesterday with no injuries reported as firefighters battled the country's first major blaze of the year on a mountain range overlooking the Gulf of Corinth. Six villages and two monasteries were evacuated after the fire broke out on Wednesday evening near the village of Schinos on the Gulf of Corinth, some 90 kilometers (56 miles) west of Athens, a spokesman told AFP. Bleary-eyed residents said they barely had time to dress as they were taken to the nearby coastal village of Alepochori for safety. "We were alerted at four in the morning by the police, who told us to leave," an elderly local told Skai TV.

"They then searched neighboring homes for people unable to move on their own. We were not in danger," he said. Fire department chief Stefanos Kolokouris said reinforcements had been rushed in from around the country to contain the blaze. Local officials said the fire had a front 10 kilometers wide. "The situation is clearly better now," Kolokouris told Skai TV. "It's a large fire in a pine forest (and the) terrain is difficult."

The fire raged overnight around the protected wildlife habitat of Mount Geraneia. "This is a dense forest that had never burned before," the mayor of the neighboring resort town of Loutraki, Yiorgos Gionis, told Alpha TV. Kolokouris said he believed the fire could be brought under control during the course of the day. However, the Loutraki mayor said there was still concern should the wind switch direction. Billowing clouds of smoke were visible in the capital.

Many locals have summer homes in the area, but lives are



ALEPOCHORI, Greece: Firemen intervene in a forest near the village of Mazi, after an overnight fire on a mountain range overlooking the Gulf of Corinth, yesterday. —AFP

not in immediate threat, fire officials said. However, electricity has been knocked out in the area and could take 48 hours to restore service, according to state grid technicians on the scene. "This is the first major fire of 2021... communities have been evacuated as a precaution," fire department spokesman Vassilis Vathrakogiannis had earlier told Skai. "We have no information (that people's lives were threatened) and we have not had to rescue anyone," he said. Over 180 firemen with 62 fire engines in addition to volunteers have been deployed to the area, backed by 17 planes and three helicopters, the fire department tweeted.

A handful of homes are believed to have been burned, the Loutraki mayor said. The fire on Wednesday had reached the sea, burning two boats in the coastal village of Mavrolimni, local officials said. Wildfires pose a challenge for Greece every year during the dry summer season, with strong winds and temperatures frequently exceeding 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit). In 2018, 102 people died in the coastal resort of Mati, near Athens, in Greece's worst fire disaster. —AFP

Renewed violence in DR Congo's volatile east has deep roots

KINSHASA, DR Congo: Thousands of Banyamulenge people have fled a flare-up of fighting in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo in recent weeks to take refuge in the town of Uvira, on the northern shores of Lake Tanganyika. The renewed violence is a blow for communities that have been wracked by unrest in recent years as warring militias battle over bitter, longstanding ethnic rivalries.

"People died, houses were set on fire... all our property was taken away," said Aline Ndariburugwa, one of the roughly 3,000 to have fled the fighting in the Hauts Plateaux region. Banyamulenge civilians, resented for their role in violence that racked the DR Congo after Rwanda's 1994 genocide and suspected of being tools of an attempt by Kigali to destabilize its neighbor, have been targeted by militias known as Mayi-Mayi drawn from other ethnic groups. Ndariburugwa said Burundian militiamen took part in the attack alongside Mayi-Mayi fighters.

South Kivu province has been the scene of periodic inter-ethnic violence for the past three decades, and April was "the second most active month... since mid-2017," Kivu Security Tracker (KST) coordinator Pierre Boisselet said. The KST's monitoring of violence in eastern DRC, especially volatile North and South Kivu, has shown the situation worsening since late March in the verdant High Plateaux, which overlook Lake Tanganyika and neighboring Burundi from a height of some 3,000 meters (10,000 feet). Conflicts variously pit armed groups from the local Babembe, Banyindu, Bafulero and Banyamulenge communities against one another. —AFP

International

Experts to probe health risks of human-animal interaction: WHO

Study to help avert outbreaks of diseases like bird flu, Ebola and COVID-19

GENEVA: The World Health Organization said yesterday it had tasked experts with assessing health risks at the interface between nature and humans in a bid to avoid future pandemics. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was sparked by a virus that likely originated in animals, the WHO this week created the One Health High-Level Expert Panel. Set up with the backing of France and Germany, it will provide advice to the WHO and others striving to draft a plan for averting outbreaks of diseases like bird flu, Ebola and COVID-19. "The COVID-19 pandemic is a powerful demonstration that human health does not exist in a vacuum, and nor can our efforts to protect and promote it," WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters. "The close links between human, animal and environmental health demand close collaboration, communication and coordination between the relevant sectors," he said.

A full three quarters of all emerging infectious diseases originate in animals, the UN health agency said. COVID-19, which has now killed more than 3.4 million people globally since it first surfaced in China in late 2019, most likely

jumped from bats to humans via an intermediate animal, according to experts, although it remains unclear exactly how and when this happened. The WHO is working with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the UN Environment Program (UNEP) to develop a strategy to spot risks of new viruses jumping from animals to humans and help avoid outbreaks.

"The high level expert panel will advise us on how to bridge the gaps between sectors, connecting veterinary and human medicine, and environmental issues and to address the challenge of implementation at both the global and country level," Tedros said. He said the expert panel, co-chaired by Thomas Mettenleiter of Germany and Wanda Markotter of South Africa, will help push for bold policy measures and investments needed "to reduce the risk of future pandemics and to change harmful practices that threaten us now and in future generations."

UNEP chief Inger Andersen meanwhile said that if the world wanted to "end the three planetary crises of climate change, of biodiversity loss and pollution, which threaten our peace and



prosperity, we have to understand that human and animal and planetary health are one and the same." If COVID-19 has taught us anything, she said, "it is that we cannot be caught off guard

again. There's simply too much at stake." The panel had held a first meeting this week and hopes to produce its first tangible results later this year, Mettenleiter said. — AFP

Record 55 million people internally displaced worldwide

GENEVA: Conflicts and natural disasters forced someone to flee within their own country every second of last year, pushing the number of people living in internal displacement to a record high, monitors said yesterday. This came despite strict restrictions on movement imposed around the globe in efforts to halt the spread of COVID-19, which observers had expected to push down displacement numbers last year. But 2020 was also marked by intense storms, persistent conflicts and explosions of violence, forcing 40.5 million people to become newly displaced within their countries, according to a joint report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

That is the highest number of newly displaced reported in 10 years, and brings the total number people living in internal displacement around the world to a record 55 million, the report showed. "Both numbers this year were unusually high," IDMC director Alexandra Bilak told AFP, saying the surge in internal displacement was "unprecedented". The number of internally displaced people is now more than double the some 26 million people who have fled across borders as refugees. "It's shocking that someone was forced to flee their home inside their own country every single second last year," NRC chief Jan Egeland said in a statement. "We are failing to protect the world's most vulnerable people from conflict and disasters." — AFP

German safety firm held liable over French breast implant scandal

PARIS: A Paris appeals court ruled yesterday that the German safety certification firm TUV Rheinland was liable for improperly approving faulty breast implants and ordered it to pay damages to hundreds of victims.

The latest decision in a 10-year legal battle over implants made by French company Poly Implant Prothese potentially opens the door for tens of thousands of women worldwide to receive compensation. The implants were used for some 400,000 women, most of them in Latin America. Ruptures caused severe lymph node inflammation, and thousands of patients had to have them removed. TUV was held responsible "due to its negligent failures and inaction in its missions and obligations in carrying out the supervision of quality systems" at PIP, the court said in its ruling, seen by AFP.

But the court dismissed a couple hundred of the cases lodged by the 2,500 plaintiffs in the case, in particular women who had the implants before September 2006. "We are thrilled at this outcome, which puts a definitive end to any doubts about TUV's responsibility," a lawyer for the PIPA victims' association that represents around 20,000 women in various lawsuits, said in a statement. "After 10 years of waiting and a hard fight, the German certification firm will have to fully compensate victims," he said. TUV has faced multiple lawsuits since the scandal erupted in 2010, when French regulators discovered that implants made by Poly Implant Prothese (PIP) had been made with industrial-grade silicone gel, cheaper and more dangerous than medical-grade silicone.

13 inspections

The certifier has denied any wrongdoing, with a lawyer telling



MARSEILLE: This file photograph shows a breast implant produced by the implant manufacturer Poly Implant Prothese company (PIP). — AFP

the Paris court in November that PIP "did everything it could to deceive patients as well as the health authorities and TUV." Other courts have cleared TUV of any responsibility despite its finding no causes for concern even after 13 inspections of PIP between 1997 and 2010, most recently an appeals court in the Paris suburb of Versailles. In a statement after the ruling yesterday, TUV contested the court's decision that "some pieces of evidence could have led (the company) to take additional measures as of September 2006."

"The evidence in this case clearly shows that TUV Rheinland acted diligently, in compliance with applicable regulations, and it was not its role to track down the fraud pursuant to regulation," the company said. A spokeswoman said TUV was studying the ruling before deciding if it will try to appeal. Another case is ongoing in the southern French city of Toulon involving 1,500 patients, with a court expected to issue its ruling on June 11. As a result, legal experts say any definitive ruling will most likely be decided by France's highest court, the Cour de Cassation. — AFP

International

Clashes erupt on Morocco border as Madrid accuses Rabat of blackmail

Spain moves quickly to return most of the migrants who reached Ceuta

FNIDEQ, Morocco: Spain accused Morocco of “blackmail” yesterday for allowing a record 8,000 migrants to reach the Spanish North African enclave of Ceuta, sparking a crisis that saw clashes on the Moroccan side of the border overnight. Spanish authorities were caught by surprise on Monday when large numbers of mostly young people began swimming or using small inflatable boats to cross the frontier as the Moroccan border forces looked the other way, quickly leaving the tiny territory overwhelmed.

But Madrid moved quickly to return most of the migrants and calm has largely returned the Spanish beach of Tarajal in Ceuta, where soldiers and armored vehicles have been deployed in large numbers.

The outskirts of the Moroccan border town of Fnideq were deserted yesterday, also under a heavy security presence. However the previous night hundreds of Moroccan youths threw stones at Moroccan forces guarding the border, forcing them to retreat, according to an AFP correspondent at the scene.

The youths also set fire to a motorcycle. The migrant influx comes amid tensions between Rabat and Madrid over Spain's decision to provide medical treatment for the leader of the Polisario Front, Brahim Ghali, who has COVID-19.

The Polisario Front has fought for the independence of Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony mainly under Moroccan control. Spanish Defense Minister Margarita Robles said Morocco's actions were “an aggression of Spanish borders and of the borders of the European Union”.

“We are not talking about youths aged 16, 17, children as young as seven or eight were allowed through according to NGOs... ignoring international law,” she said in an interview with Spanish public radio yesterday.

“Call it what you want but I call it blackmail,” she said, adding

Moroccan teens ready to give up everything to reach Europe

FNIDEQ, Morocco: Moroccan high school student Mohamed, 17, dropped everything—his studies, his final exams, even his family—to try to reach the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, like countless other youngsters who see no future in the North African country.

Since Monday, more than 8,000 would-be migrants, many of them unaccompanied minors, have managed to scramble, wade or swim across the border in search of a better life in Europe.

Most have been sent straight back by the Spanish authorities, who have been angered by the blind eye turned by Moroccan border guards as the youngsters streamed across to the tiny enclave of 84,000 people. But with already limited job prospects for school leavers greatly reduced by the COVID pandemic, many of the young returnees are determined to try again, and there are thousands more eager to follow in their footsteps.

Youth unemployment in Moroccan cities reached 40 percent last year, according to official figures, and many young people barely get by doing odd jobs. Abdellah, 16, was sent back to Morocco by the Spanish authorities on Tuesday.

“My mother hasn't stopped ringing me to beg me to return home, but adventure holds no fear for me,” he said. The

“it is not acceptable to put the lives of minors or of people of one's own country, at risk.”

‘I will try my luck again’

Spain's government said that around 5,600 of the 8,000 migrants had already been sent back, and there were no new entries on Wednesday as anyone who reached Ceuta's beach was immediately returned. Some of the returned migrants said they hoped to try cross over into Ceuta again if border controls were eased once more. “I have no future here, I want to work to help my family,” 17-year-old Mohamed told AFP in Fnideq after being returned from Ceuta. He left his studies and his family in Morocco to try to enter Spain in search of a better life.

Hassan, 17, said “one day I will try my luck again and I will make it,” adding he “dreams of living in Europe”. Barefoot or in sandals, a crowd of mostly young people have tried to cross into Ceuta, a small enclave of 84,000 inhabitants which is connected to mainland Spain by ferry services across the narrow Strait of Gibraltar. Ceuta, along with Spain's other North African enclave Melilla, have the European Union's only land border with Africa and have long been a magnet for migrants seeking a better life in Europe.

Earlier this week Spanish soldiers fired tear gas to prevent the migrants from nearing the border fence. Several people were injured according to Moroccan media, but Rabat has not offered an official figure.

‘Pawns in a political game’

Spain has received the support of top European officials, with European Commission vice president Margaritis Schinas warning that Europe “won't let itself be intimidated by anyone on the issue

teenager, who said he dropped out of school two years ago and has been getting by working in a mechanic's workshop in Tangier, said he has enough money to stay a few more days in the Moroccan border town of Fnideq and intends to try his luck again getting across.

His friend Hassan, 17, said he had decided to go home to Tangiers for now. He still dreams of living in Europe but doesn't want to take the risk of setting off right away.

“One day, I'll try my luck again and I'll make it.” Others travelled to Fnideq from further afield after hearing news of this week's mass crossing. “I have no future here. I want to work to help my family,” said Mohammed, who arrived in the border town on Wednesday after a long journey on foot.

Anxious parents

As Spain pressed on with its mass repatriations, anxious parents gathered on the Moroccan side of the border desperate for news of their loved ones.

“I'm looking for my 15-year-old daughter,” said a visibly worried Abdelhak Bouchahtaoui. “Another girl said she saw her in Ceuta but I have no news and nobody knows anything.” Another woman who gave her name only as Ouafa acknowledged that at first she wanted her 15-year-old son to succeed in reaching Ceuta.

But in the end she had been “relieved” to be reunited with him after rushing to the border from the port city of Tangier. Human rights activist Omar Naji said the striking number of teenagers among the would-be migrants was a first.

He was deeply critical of the treatment of the youths by both



Migrants climb a sea wall in the northern town of Fnideq after attempting to cross the border from Morocco to Spain's North African enclave of Ceuta Wednesday. —AFP

of migration” in a veiled allusion to Morocco. Rabat responded in the form of a flurry of angry dispatches published by the official MAP news agency saying that “Morocco is a sovereign country” and “is not the police of Europe”.

Several NGOs have expressed concern over the huge number of minors who have crossed over into Ceuta from Morocco—and the fact that Madrid is sending them back. “Asylum seekers and migrants are being used as pawns in a political game between Morocco and Spain,” Amnesty said in a statement. It estimated that “around 2,000 unaccompanied children” had entered Ceuta this week from Morocco. —AFP



Migrants burn a motorbike as they clash with Moroccan riot police in protest at being stopped from crossing the border, in the northern town of Fnideq, close to the border between Morocco and Spain's North African enclave of Ceuta Wednesday. —AFP

the Spanish and Moroccan governments.

“Their expulsion by Spain runs contrary to international treaties on the rights of the child,” he said. “The Moroccan authorities used them to put pressure on Spain for political purposes.” His allegation against the Moroccan authorities has been echoed by the Spanish government. “We are not talking about youths aged 16, 17 — children as young as seven or eight were allowed through according to NGOs ... ignoring international law,” said Spanish Defence Minister Margarita Robles. —AFP

International

US, Russia seek to ease tensions in first meeting under Biden

Kremlin hails 'positive signals' in US-Russia ties

REYKJAVIK, Iceland: The US and Russian foreign ministers have sought to ease tensions in their first meeting since President Joe Biden took office, saying they were ready to cooperate but acknowledging the wide gulf separating them. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described the talks in Reykjavik on Wednesday-aimed in part at confirming a potential summit between presidents Biden and Vladimir Putin-as "constructive".

"There is an understanding of the need to overcome the unhealthy situation in ties between Moscow and Washington," Lavrov told reporters, although he added there were "a lot of logjams".

During almost two hours of discussions, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed Washington's "deep concerns" about Russian troops massed along the Ukraine border despite an announced pullback, a US State Department spokesman said. Blinken also voiced US disquiet over the health of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny and the "repression" of opposition organizations, the spokesman added. While there was no breakthrough, discussions were "productive, constructive, respectful and honest", a US official told journalists.

Since taking over the White House in January, Biden has taken a firm line against Russia-going as far as describing Putin as a "killer"-in sharp contrast to his predecessor, Donald Trump, who was accused of complacency towards the Russian leader.

At the start of the talks, Blinken said "our view is that if the leaders of Russia and the United States can work together cooperatively ... the world can be a safer and more secure place". "But if Russia acts aggressively against us, our partners, our allies, we will respond," he warned, reiterating that Washington wants a "predictable and stable" relationship with Moscow. "We are ready to discuss all issues without exception if we understand that discussions will be

honest and based on mutual trust," Lavrov responded.

Arctic tensions

Statements before the face-to-face talks on the sidelines of the Arctic Council meeting in Iceland did not appear to bode well for a de-escalation of tensions. Blinken had called for the Arctic to become a laboratory for cooperation focused on common challenges such as the fight against global warming.

But Lavrov issued a strongly worded warning on Monday. "It has been absolutely clear for everyone for a long time that this is our territory, this is our land," Lavrov said at a press conference in Moscow.

The Russian foreign minister at the same time accused Norway of "trying to justify the need for NATO to come into the Arctic". He insisted Russian military activity in the region was "absolutely legal".

The Russian warning prompted Blinken on Tuesday to stress that Washington wanted to "avoid a militarization" of the Arctic. "We have concerns about some of the increased military activities in the Arctic. That increases the dangers or prospects of accidents," Blinken said.

'Plough through the rubble'

There were some signs of thawing relations just before the meeting when the White House announced it would not sanction the main company involved in the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project between Russia and Germany, Nord Stream AG, and its managing director.

Sanctions are still planned against some entities, but the Biden administration wants to avoid antagonizing Berlin and in doing so has cleared a major obstacle for the pipeline to go ahead. Meanwhile, Lavrov stressed the need for "building and maintaining bridges and dialogue", and said he was ready to "plough through the rubble left over from previous US administrations".



REYKJAVIK: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken hold a meeting at the Harpa Concert Hall in Reykjavik, Iceland, early yesterday on the sidelines of the Arctic Council Ministerial summit. —AFP

One priority was to ensure the proper functioning of US and Russian diplomatic missions, currently reduced to minimum service following tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats. Biden and Putin have agreed in principle to hold their first summit, possibly in June in Europe following a G7 summit and a NATO leaders' meeting. On Monday, Blinken said he expected the summit to happen in the next few weeks. But asked after the meeting if Russia had formally agreed to the summit, Lavrov did not reply. —AFP

Pakistan teen dies in TikTok fake suicide stunt

PESHAWAR: A young Pakistani was killed as he pretended to shoot himself while being filmed by friends for a TikTok video, police said yesterday. Hamidullah, 19, who police said was well-known locally on social media, held a friend's pistol to his temple and pulled the trigger, unaware the gun was loaded.

"The young man died on spot," said Badshah Hazrat, a senior police official in the northwestern Swat Valley. While the clip of the incident was not uploaded to TikTok, police said friends circulated it among themselves and it soon spread further afield.

"The young man was locally famous and active on TikTok," Hazrat said. The 19-year-old had more than 8,000 followers and posted nearly 600 TikTok clips. Most were of him playing pranks with friends, cricket, or featured life in the rugged and picturesque valley. The death was just the latest incident of a social media stunt gone wrong in Pakistan.

A security guard was killed in Karachi last year while toying with his rifle as he filmed a TikTok clip, while in January another teenager died after being struck by a train while filming for the app in Rawalpindi. —AFP

Slovenia PM faces impeachment vote

LJUBLJANA, Slovenia: Less than two months before Slovenia takes over the EU's rotating presidency, conservative Prime Minister Janez Jansa is battling fires at home and abroad-including an impeachment motion. The vote in the Alpine country's parliament is the latest crisis for the combative 62-year-old, known for his support for former US president Donald Trump and his outspoken Twitter posts. Four center-left opposition parties have initiated the impeachment bid, alleging among other things that Jansa mismanaged the country's coronavirus response.

With the nation of two million suffering a relatively high proportion of pandemic deaths compared to other EU countries, the premier's public approval ratings have slumped to their lowest point since he took office in March 2020. Jansa's critics say his moves against media he deems hostile-notably cutting off funding, which has also drawn Brussels' attention-resemble the tactics of his ally, nationalist Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

Thousands have gathered during protests in central Ljubljana since late last month. Holding placards that read "Stop the dictator" and "Freedom to the people", they demand new elections. "The foundations of the state of law have come more and more under attack," protest organizer Jasa Jenull said. The protests mark "a breaking point, a litmus test", showing an invigorated civil society movement, Ljubljana University professor of social psychology Vlado Miheljok told AFP.

Clashes with EU

The outcome of the impeachment vote-originally expected on Tuesday but now postponed until next week-is on a knife-edge. As Jansa's coalition has no majority in the 90-seat parliament, the decisions of a handful of inde-

pendent MPs will be crucial.

A fragmented center-left opposition failed to pass a no-confidence motion in Jansa in February.

If the impeachment motion succeeds, early elections will be the most likely outcome. But even if the three-time premier survives, further turmoil seems likely. His reaction to increasing political pressure has been in part to turn his fire on the media-for one, cutting off funding for public news agency STA and calling it a "national disgrace". In the funding row, the European Commission has reminded Slovenia of the role independent news agencies play in ensuring "the plurality of media and information sources throughout the EU".

A further run-in came when Jansa-who declined to be interviewed by AFP-disconnected from an online grilling on press freedom by a committee of MEPs in March, accusing them of "censorship" for refusing to play a video he had prepared. "We owe the EU nothing," he tweeted, dismissing some of the committee's members as "overpaid EU bureaucrats".

German Social Democrat MEP Katarina Barley, a member of the committee in question, told AFP that Jansa's behaviour amounted to "utter disrespect for the European Parliament".

"All this does not bode well, because a Council Presidency traditionally has to unite and not divide," she added.

Jansa has also faced censure from yet another EU institution. In an interview with the Delo newspaper, the bloc's Chief Prosecutor Laura Codruta Kovesi criticized Slovenia for its "manifest lack of sincere cooperation" in failing to name delegated prosecutors to the new body she leads. —AFP



Slovenia's Prime Minister Janez Jansa

International

New India cyclone warning as death toll mounts to 110

Storm on course to hit West Bengal and Odisha around May 26

AHMEDABAD: A major new storm was brewing in the Bay of Bengal off India's east coast yesterday, forecasters warned just days after the biggest cyclone to hit the west of the country in decades left at least 110 people confirmed dead. Scientists say cyclones in the densely-populated region, currently reeling from coronavirus, are becoming both more frequent and stronger as climate change leads to warmer sea temperatures.

Even before Cyclone Tauktae hammered the coast late Monday, torrential downpours at its outer bands and strong winds killed around 20 people in western and southern India. In Gujarat where winds smashed windows, felled tens of thousands of trees and knocked out power for huge numbers of people, the number of dead rose to 53, officials said late Wednesday.

The toll could rise further, however, with local newspapers saying almost 80 people had died in the state, many killed by collapsing houses or walls. Around 200,000 were evacuated before the cyclone arrived and no serious problems were reported at COVID hospitals, however.

The cyclone weakened as it moved northeast, dumping heavy rain in Allahabad and New Delhi, which reportedly had its wettest and coolest day in May in 70 years. The storm also pummeled offshore oil installations with waves up to eight meters (26 feet) high, dislodging one oil rig and several support vessels with around 700 people on board.

Deadly 'black fungus' surges among India COVID patients

NEW DELHI: Special hospital wards will be set up in India's capital New Delhi to fight 'black fungus', authorities said yesterday as the life-threatening infection surged among coronavirus patients. A rare disease in normal times, authorities say thousands have developed Mucormycosis-or black fungus-across India as it battles a COVID-19 wave that has killed more than 100,000 people in the past month.

Some doctors say the high use of steroids to combat the coronavirus has caused the black fungus explosion. The disease kills more than 50 percent of sufferers within days. In some cases, eyes and upper jaws are removed by surgeons to stop the spread of the infection.

New Delhi's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal said special wards would be set up at three hospitals to handle the increased number of black fungus cases. He also vowed to ensure that all patients will get the medicines they need, with anti-fungal drugs the latest shortage to hit India's already stretched healthcare system. There are more than 200 black fungus patients in New Delhi hospitals, with dozens on waiting lists for beds, according to media reports.

Indian social media has been flooded with requests from relatives of Mucormycosis sufferers pleading for help to find medicines. The Rajasthan and Telangana states have declared black fungus epidemics. Maharashtra state alone has reported more than 2,000 cases.

Authorities have not been able to give a figure for Mu-

Around 600 had been rescued by the navy but 38 remain missing from an accommodation barge for oil workers that ripped free of its anchors in the storm and sank.

Search for survivors

Thirty-seven bodies have been recovered so far and navy planes and helicopters were scouring the Arabian Sea for any more survivors. The vessel's chief engineer Rahman Shaikh told the Indian Express from hospital that the captain and the company had failed to take the cyclone warning seriously enough. "We had a big hole. Water started coming in. We tried using life rafts on the port side but only two could be launched and the (other) 14 were punctured," he told the paper. "I saw death coming but was saved by the grace of Allah," he said.

"We are lucky to be alive," one crew member told AFP after he disembarked from a navy destroyer in Mumbai on Wednesday. "We were clinging onto the barge and luckily the life jackets helped us as the water was going over our head," he added.

In its latest warning, the Indian Meteorological Department said that a cyclonic storm was on course to hit the eastern states of West Bengal and Odisha on around May 26. Cyclones in April and May before the monsoon season are becoming more common, scientists say.

Last May, more than 110 people died after "super cyclone" Amphan ravaged eastern India and Bangladesh, flattening vil-



Naval personnel from INS Kolkata are seen escorting a rescued crew members from the sea after they were washed away from a barge which had gone adrift amidst heavy rain and strong winds of cyclonic storm Taukta. —AFP

lages, destroying farms and leaving millions without electricity. But as with other recent cyclones, the death toll was far lower than the many thousands killed in previous cyclones of that size, a result of improved weather forecasting and better response plans. —AFP



JABALPUR: A doctor assists a COVID-19 patient with Black Fungus, a deadly and rare fungal infection, as he receives treatments at the NSCB hospital in Jabalpur yesterday. —AFP

cormycosis deaths since the coronavirus wave hit six weeks ago. Black fungus is caused by organisms called mucormycetes, which can enter the body through breathing or skin injuries. These are naturally present in soil and decaying organic matter, but once inside humans, they can infect air pockets behind the forehead, nose, cheekbones and between the eyes and teeth. Some doctors say there has been panic use of steroids to combat COVID-19 which has helped the spread of black fungus.

Coronavirus patients with diabetes and a weakened immune system are particularly prone to black fungus. Many of the drugs used to fight the coronavirus suppress the body's immune system that would normally ward off a fungal infection. The prevalence of diabetes in India is among the highest in the world. —AFP

Arrest over bid to assassinate Maldives ex-president

MALE: Police arrested a key suspect in the attempted assassination of Maldives ex-president Mohamed Nasheed, officials said yesterday as the well-known climate change campaigner recovered in a German hospital. The unidentified man, reportedly a known Islamist extremist and the fourth person to be arrested, parked the motorcycle rigged with a bomb that exploded in Male on May 6, police sources said.

Nasheed, 54, who famously held an underwater cabinet meeting to highlight the dangers of rising sea levels for his low-lying nation, was flown to Germany last week following 16 hours of emergency surgery. A ball bearing in the bomb missed his heart by a centimeter (0.4 inches), and shrapnel was removed from his lungs, liver and limbs. He now appears to be on the mend, posting photos on social media of himself walking outside the medical facility in Germany and tucking into a Sri Lankan meal sent by Colombo's envoy in Berlin.

There has been no claim of responsibility for the attack, but his Maldivian Democratic Party has said religious extremists and political interests could be involved. The Indian Ocean archipelago nation of 340,000 Sunni Muslims has had past brushes with Islamist extremism. In October 2019, police arrested a suspected Islamic State recruiter accused of sending dozens of Maldivians to Syria. Nasheed ended decades of one-party rule in the Maldives and became its first democratically elected president in 2008, only to be toppled in a coup in 2012. —AFP

International

China says US 'creating risks' with South China Sea warship sail-by

Japan must 'radically' speed defense build-up: Minister

BEIJING: China yesterday branded the United States an "out-and-out security risk creator" in the South China Sea, after an American warship sailed through waters near the disputed Paracel Islands.

Tensions in maritime waters claimed by both China and many of its neighbors have ratcheted up recently, with Beijing staging live-fire drills and sending hundreds of fishing vessels to a reef claimed by the Philippines. China's military said the USS Curtis Wilbur, a guided missile destroyer, was warned and driven away from the contested waters near the islands, which are claimed by China.

US actions "increase regional security risks, which easily causes misunderstandings, misjudgements and unforeseen maritime incidents", People's Liberation Army Southern Theatre Command spokesman Colonel Tian Junli said in a notice posted on social media. "This is unprofessional and irresponsible, and fully demonstrates that the US is an out-and-out 'South China Sea security risk creator'."

Beijing on Wednesday had chastised Washington for sailing the USS Curtis Wilbur through the Taiwan Strait earlier this week. The US Seventh Fleet described it as a "routine" transit.

The United States frequently conducts what it calls "Freedom of Navigation Operations" in the flashpoint waterway. The South China Sea and its various islands are claimed by multiple countries including China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Japan, Malaysia and the Philippines. It is home to some of the world's most resource-rich waterways.

Tokyo must boost its military at a "radically different pace" than in the past to counter Beijing's growing capacity, Japan's defense minister said in an interview published yesterday. Nobuo Kishi warned

the gap between Japan and China's military was "growing by the year," in an interview with the Nikkei newspaper.

"We must increase our defense capabilities at a radically different pace than in the past," he said, citing China's military spending as well as new areas of warfare including space, cyber and electromagnetics.

Japan's defense spending has tended to hover at around one percent of GDP, but Kishi said that spending would be guided by needs rather than caps. "The security environment surrounding Japan is changing rapidly with heightened uncertainty," the Nikkei quoted him as saying.

"We will properly allocate the funding we need to protect our nation." Japan's post-war constitution limits the scope of its military to defensive power, and efforts to boost capacity have sometimes been controversial domestically. Kishi's comments come with Japan increasingly concerned about the regional security environment and particularly China's growing assertiveness. The military balance between Japan and China has "leaned heavily toward China in recent years, and the gap has been growing by the year," he told the paper.

Kishi also said Japan considers issues related to Taiwan "as our own problem", as China increases pressure on the self-ruled island territory, which Beijing sees as a rebel province.

Japan has been more vocal in recent months about Chinese moves in regional waters, and particularly the presence of coastguard ships around disputed islands in the East China Sea. In talks last month, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and US President Joe Biden



In this file photo, the USS John S. McCain (DDG 56) destroyer is moored in a dock at the Yokosuka Naval Base in Yokosuka, Japan

discussed concerns over Beijing's maritime moves, as well as clamp-downs in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and growing tension over Taiwan. The United States has long pressed Japan and its allies to increase their military capacity. —AFP

Singapore bans Brits over yacht party that breached COVID rules

SINGAPORE: Nine Britons have been banned from working in Singapore after breaking coronavirus rules by partying on a yacht in swimwear and Santa hats, reports said yesterday. Images of last year's Boxing Day festivities on the vessel went viral on social media, sparking fury from Singaporeans and prompting authorities to launch an investigation.

At that time, gatherings outside the home were limited to only five people under curbs to prevent the spread of the virus. The labor ministry announced yesterday that eight Britons from the party-five men and three women—had been permanently banned from working in Singapore, broadcaster CNA and newspaper the Straits Times reported.

Another British woman who took part in the festivities had already been banned in March from working in the city-state, which has a large foreign population. Eight of the Britons also pleaded guilty yesterday to exceeding the maximum limit on group sizes and were each fined Sg\$3,000 (\$2,250), reports said.

They could have been fined up to Sg\$10,000 or jailed for up to six months, or both. The ministry did not immediately respond to requests for confirmation. The city-state—which has had a relatively mild outbreak, reporting around 61,700 cases and 31 deaths—has taken a tough stand against violations of virus restrictions. —AFP

Taiwan president issues rare pardon for Indigenous hunter

TAIPEI: A Taiwanese Indigenous hunter facing jail for killing protected animals was granted a rare presidential pardon yesterday, a gesture that followed an unfavourable court ruling in his long-running case.

Tama Talum, a member of the Bunun tribe, was arrested in 2013 for killing two protected species with a modified rifle and sentenced to 3.5 years in prison. The verdict caused anger within Indigenous communities and sparked a legal battle that went all the way to Taiwan's top court.

President Tsai Ing-wen's office said Talum was being granted the first pardon since she took office five years ago "out of respect for Indigenous people's traditions". "Talum violated relevant laws for hunting wild animals but the president took into consideration that he went hunting for food for an ailing family member," the statement said. Talum, 62, described the pardon as "a good thing for me personally".

"But there is no progress on the whole issue and hunting is still a crime," he told AFP. "I'm worried that there could be a second or third Talum and I hope the government can amend relevant laws." Talum has long argued he was following tribal customs that should be protected and was hunting the animals for his elderly mother who was used to eating wild game.

His prosecution pitted activists against both conservationists and a legal system that Talum's supporters argue has long discriminated against Indigenous culture and customs.

This month, Taiwan's Constitutional Court ruled some hunting restrictions placed on the Indigenous inhabitants were unconstitutional. But it stopped short of supporting the complete overhaul of regulations that campaigners had pushed for.

The ruling meant Talum's conviction remained and he had been due to



In this file photo taken on May 1, 2020 shows Indigenous hunter Tama Talum (right) and his neighbor (left) posing for photographs at a village in Chishang township, Taitung county. —AFP

return to another court for final sentencing. But Tsai's pardon now stops that process.

'Transitional justice'

Hunting restrictions have become a bone of contention among Taiwan's Indigenous communities, who have long felt marginalized and discriminated against by the Han Chinese majority that first began arriving in the 17th century.

Austronesian in ethnicity, culture and language, they now make up only 2.5 percent of Taiwan's 23 million population. Under current regulations, Indigenous communities are only allowed to hunt with homemade rifles during certain festival days and only with prior approval from authorities.

Activists say homemade rifles are dangerous and argue that the restrictions impede on the subsistence hunting traditions their communities have practised for centuries. —AFP

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BERSERK

Grief as Japanese author
of famed 'Berserk' manga dies

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FASHION'S GREEN FUTURE OF SEAWEED COATS AND MUSHROOM SHOES

From making algae-sequin dresses, dyeing clothes with bacteria to planting trackable pigments in cotton, an emerging tide of technological innovations offers the fashion industry a chance to clean up its woeful environmental record. Change is urgently needed, since the industry consumes 93 billion cubic meters of water per year, dumps 500,000 tons of plastic microfibers into the ocean, and accounts for 10 percent of global carbon emissions, according to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

The growing demands for change have generated ingenious responses, such as New York designer Charlotte McCurdy's seaweed raincoat. The shimmering algae-plastic she concocted in a lab made for a striking (and carbon-free) garment, even more so when she teamed up with fashion designer Phillip Lim to make a sequin dress. They are unlikely to show up in department stores. She sees them more as a way to demonstrate that decarbonized clothes are possible. "I'm not trying to monetize it. I just want to plant a seed," she told AFP. "Material development is so slow and it's so hard to compete with cellphone apps for funding. Frankly, I take climate change seriously and I don't have time," said McCurdy, whose focus now is on forming an innovation and outreach hub.

Bacterial colors

Others, like Dutch designers Laura Luchtman and Ilfa Siebenhaar of Living Color, are finding ways to reduce the toxic chemicals and intensive water consumption of dyeing clothes. They found an unlikely ally in bacteria. Certain microorganisms release natural pigments as they multiply, and by deploying them on fabric, they dye clothes in striking colors and patterns.

The research is published freely online and the pair have no



US designer Charlotte McCurdy has used seaweed to make a raincoat.

approaches," warns Mark Sumner, a sustainability expert at the University of Leeds School of Design. "It's an incredibly diverse industry with thousands of factories and operators all doing different things. It's not like the car industry where you only have to convince six or seven major companies to try something new."

Sumner sees the biggest impact coming from improving rather than replacing the existing systems and says pressure from consumers and NGOs means this is already happening. "Among responsible brands and retailers, this has genuinely moved away from being a fad. They are now considering sustainability as a business imperative," he told AFP. Not that there are any right or wrong answers. The sustainability movement's strength comes from many actors

pulling in the same direction.

"Many different strategies need to run together," said Celine Semaan, founder of the Slow Factory Foundation which supports multiple social and environmental justice initiatives around fashion, including McCurdy's algae-sequin dress. "Technology won't resolve the issues on its own. It needs policy, culture, ethics," Semaan said.

Cotton tracing

One area many see as a priority, however, is transparency, and here technology has a clear role to play. Such is the complexity of supply chains that "many companies have no idea where their garments are made, where fabrics come from, who provides their raw materials," said Delphine Williot, policy coordinator for Fashion Revolution, a campaign group. Recent uproar over reports that cotton from China's Xinjiang region was picked by forced labour was compounded by the difficulty of knowing where this cotton ended up. Beijing denies the allegations.

Fibretrace, which won a sustainability award from Drapers magazine this year, offers a possible solution. It implants an indestructible bioluminescent pigment into threads. Any resulting garment can then be scanned like a barcode to find its origins. "You can't find the environmental impact of anything unless you know where it was made," Andrew Olah, Fibretrace's sales director, told AFP. Combined with data sites like SourceMap and Open Apparel Registry that give companies unprecedented clarity on their supply chains, it has become increasingly hard to plead ignorance. "When you don't share your supply chain, you either do it because you're hiding something or you're stupid," said Olah. "There's a lot of work to do," he added. "But I'm very optimistic." —AFP

DNA STUDY RESTARTS TO DISCOVER COLUMBUS ORIGINS

Researchers said Wednesday they will restart a DNA study of the remains of Christopher Columbus to try to settle the question of where the explorer came from. Was Columbus from the Italian port city of Genoa, as most historians believe? Or was he Spanish or Portuguese? There are several theories. Five centuries after his death in 1506, this study could finally end the debate over the geographic origin of the navigator whose voyages on behalf of the Spanish monarchs between 1492 and 1504 opened the door to Europe's colonization of the Americas.

The results of this "pioneering study" are expected in October, Jose Antonio Lorente, a professor of forensic medicine at Granada who is leading the investigation, told a news conference. Launched in 2003, the study achieved a major breakthrough after DNA tests established that bones in a tomb in the cathedral in the southern city of Seville were those of Columbus. But it was suspended in 2005 because the research team felt that DNA technology at the time required a significant sample of the bones of the explorer "to obtain very little information", said Lorente. The research team decided to preserve the bones "until there was better technology" which can use small bone fragments as is the case today, he added.

The DNA of small bone fragments from Columbus which are stored at a vault at Granada University in southern Spain will be compared to those from the remains of suspected family members of the explorer. It will also be compared with the DNA of people alive with the same family name as Columbus from the different parts of the world where he is believed to have come from. While Lorente hopes the results will be "totally conclusive", he acknowledged researchers were not certain they could obtain genetic samples from all the bones "in sufficient quantity and quality to reach a conclusion". "The goal is to try to offer as much information as possible for historians and experts to interpret," he added. The study is being carried out with the University of Florence in Italy and the University of North Texas in the United States. —AFP



File photo shows Valentino 2018/2019 fall/winter collection fashion show on March 4, 2018 in Paris.

VALENTINO JOINS GROWING BAND OF FUR-FREE DESIGNERS

Valentino has become the latest fashion powerhouse to abandon real fur, in a move welcomed on Wednesday by Italian campaigners as a "nail in the coffin for the cruel fur trade". The iconic Italian house said it would cease production at its Milan-based fur company, Valentino Polar, at the end of this year and the last collec-

tion to include fur will be the fall/winter 2021-22 season. "The fur-free stance is perfectly in line with the values of our company," said Jacopo Venturini, CEO of Valentino, in a statement. "We are moving full-steam ahead in the research for alternative materials in view of a greater attention to the environment for the upcoming collections."

The decision follows a growing number of big fashion names renouncing the use of animal fur, including Armani, Prada and Gucci. Martina Pluda, Italy director for campaign group Humane Society International, said Valentino's decision "is a major nail in the coffin for the cruel fur trade". "Like so many other designers, Valentino knows that using fur makes brands look outdated and out of touch, and fur industry certification schemes are little more than the hollow PR spin of an industry that kills 100 million animals for fur a year," she said. —AFP



Grief as Japanese author of famed 'Berserk' manga dies

Kentaro Miura, a Japanese manga author known for his popular dark fantasy Berserk, has died at 54, his publisher announced yesterday, prompting an outpouring of grief from fans around the world. His best-known creation Berserk debuted as a series in 1989 and featured a journey of revenge by a young warrior travelling through a medieval-inspired universe. Praised for its intricate illustrations, it has been cited as an inspiration by numerous authors and creators of comics and video games around the world.

Miura died on May 6, Berserk publisher Hakusensha said in a statement. "All

us editors sincerely pray for his repose, expressing our deepest respect and appreciation for his work," the Japanese firm said, adding that Miura's family had already held a private funeral. News of his death was received with shock by fans. "I can't even begin to express how devastated I am about the passing of Kentaro Miura," tweeted video game host and interviewer Kelly Link.

"Berserk is an incredible epic that will live for generations as one of the greatest stories ever told and only to be equally matched by its absolutely breathtaking art." Canadian art director Pascal Blanche praised Miura in a tweet

as "author of one of the best manga that have ever existed". There are currently 40 volumes of Berserk, with more than 50 million copies in circulation in a dozen countries including the United States and Friday. The most recent was published in Japan in 2018.

It was also adapted into an animated series, a book, animated movies as well as a video game. "Miura-sensei was a master artist and storyteller and we had the great privilege of publishing several of his finest works, including his masterpiece, Berserk," tweeted American publisher Dark Horse Comics. "He will be greatly missed." —AFP

POP STAR DEMI LOVATO ANNOUNCES THEY ARE NON-BINARY

Pop star Demi Lovato on Wednesday shared that they are non-binary and will start using the pronouns they/them, saying "this has come after a lot of healing and self-reflective work." "I'm still learning & coming into myself, and I don't claim to be an expert or a spokesperson. Sharing this with you now opens another level of vulnerability for me," wrote the singer-whose music fame exploded after they worked as a Disney Channel actor-on social media. "I'm doing this for those out there that haven't been able to share who they truly are with their loved ones. Please keep living in your truths and know I am sending so much love your way xox."

"Non-binary" is a term used by some people who do not identify exclusively as a man or a woman, the traditional gender binary. The 28-year-old singer behind hits like "Sorry Not Sorry" has been open about their struggles with mental health, including depression, eating disorders and addiction. In a recent documentary they also detailed suffering rape as a teenager. Lovato in 2018 suffered a near-fatal fentanyl overdose that caused brain damage and partial blindness. In their recent album "Dancing with the Devil...The Art of Starting Over," Lovato airs much of that trauma, delving into topics including sobriety. Some tracks also see a more open embrace of gender non-conformity. —AFP



In this file photo US singer Demi Lovato performs on stage during the Rock in Rio Lisboa music festival at Bela Vista Park in Lisbon. —AFP



In this file photo taken on November 14, 1992 Princess Diana leaves a bookshop in Paris. —AFP

BBC TO PUBLISH REPORT INTO DIANA INTERVIEW

The BBC is to publish the findings of an internal investigation yesterday into how the journalist Martin Bashir secured an explosive 1995 interview with princess Diana. Questions have long been asked about how Bashir persuaded Diana to talk, with the princess' own brother claiming he used faked documents and bank statements. The interview, on the BBC's flagship "Panorama" program in November 1995, was watched by a record 22.8 million people and lifted the lid on Diana's troubled marriage to Prince Charles. She famously said "there were three

people" in her marriage—her, Charles and his long-time mistress and now wife, Camilla Parker-Bowles, and also admitted adultery. Bashir, 58, was little-known at the time of the interview but went on to have a high-profile career on US television networks, interviewing big-name stars, including the singer Michael Jackson, before returning to work for the corporation as religion editor. He stepped down last week, citing ill health, hours before the report was submitted to BBC director-general Tim Davie. A scheduled BBC program into the controversy was also delayed.

British media said yesterday the six-month probe by a retired senior judge had concluded Bashir used underhand methods to convince Diana to talk, in breach of editorial guidelines. The Daily Telegraph suggested the report's findings could be comparable to phone-hacking revelations at the News of the World tabloid, which forced its closure. A previous BBC inquiry had cleared Bashir of wrong-doing. Diana and Charles formally divorced in 1996. She died aged 36 in a high-speed car crash in Paris the following year. Charles married Camilla in 2005. —AFP



This photo shows video blogger Zhao Hongcheng at her apartment before going to work in Shanghai. —AFP photos



This photo shows video blogger Zhao Hongcheng along a street on her way to work in Shanghai.

China wheelchair users dodge traffic on rough road to recognition

Cars, scooters and bicycles wait impatiently at traffic lights ready to zip across one of Shanghai's main roads. In the thick of them sits an old man in an electric wheelchair. Nearby, another wheelchair user is pushed along in the street as traffic whizzes past just inches away. Busy, narrow or clogged pavements-haphazard rows of rentable bikes are a prime offender-sometimes force people in wheelchairs to brave the busy downtown roads of China's biggest city. Overpasses seemingly constructed with little regard for people with disabilities, uneven pavements, badly made ramps and patchy access to public transport can also make life difficult for "wheelers".

They say that the situation is even worse outside China's first-tier cities but is generally improving compared to just a few years ago. Zhao Hongcheng is a video blogger who highlights the challenges she faces in Shanghai and other cities. Now 31, she contracted polio as a baby and has been in a wheelchair since she was 11. Wheelchair users in roads or bike lanes are an incongruous sight, but it is also noticeable how few people with disabilities are out in public.

"You rarely see them because, first of all, barrier-free travel is not perfect so it is difficult for people (in wheelchairs) to travel farther than two kilometers (1.2 miles)," said Zhao, whose videos can draw nearly 500,000 views. "Secondly, wheelchair users still face difficulties getting into education and employment," added Zhao, who recently left her job working for a food delivery plat-

form for reasons unrelated to her condition.

Car park tragedy

Information on the number of wheelchair users among China's 1.4 billion population is elusive. But state-run media says there are 85 million disabled people and President Xi Jinping has called them "a group with special difficulties that require extra care and attention". In 2019, Xi said that "no disabled person should be left behind". Despite China's rapid and recent modernization, attitudes towards people with disabilities and facilities for them have lagged.

Huang Yan, who is also in a wheelchair, says things are gradually changing. "Ten years ago many people would look at people in wheelchairs as alien objects," said the 39-year-old, who works in e-commerce. After a day out with other wheelchair users at a Shanghai park where cherry blossoms were in bloom, she related the tragic story of her friend Wen Jun. He made headlines in 2019 when he plunged to his death in an underground car park while assessing wheelchair access in the southwestern city of Dali.

With a ramp for wheelchairs blocked by vehicles, Wen took a detour and could not see the sheer drop. "He advocated barrier-free travel and was probably the first person to lead us disabled people out of the house and into society," said Huang. "He didn't want us to be invisible anymore."

'You will see us'

Huang and Zhao, the video blogger, are not afraid to tell the authorities when they encounter a problem. Sometimes issues such as blocked wheelchair exits or inaccessible public toilets get fixed. Sometimes not. Most often they just overcome the obstacle with their own determination. They say that while some elderly people often take to Shanghai's busy roads in wheelchairs, it is not generally necessary and definitely not safe.

Zhao knows first-hand: a car struck her from behind while in her wheelchair on a road in the nearby city of Hangzhou. Fortunately she was not badly hurt. Old attitudes have sometimes proved hard to shift. Zhao receives online messages from fellow wheelchair users who tell her of their problems, including universities revoking admission after realizing they are disabled. "I think it's really heartbreaking," she said.

Zhao, who bucked the trend with a Masters degree, also says that too often she faces the humiliation of being asked by strangers why she is in a wheelchair. "Many people think that the disabled live on an island and are completely disconnected from the masses," she said. "In fact, we are integrated in society and it is very likely that you will see us. "If we really get to know each other, you will find that we have a lot in common."—AFP



This photo shows video blogger Zhao Hongcheng finding a restaurant for lunch at a shopping mall in Shanghai.



This photo shows video blogger Zhao Hongcheng having lunch at a restaurant in Shanghai.



This photo shows video blogger Zhao Hongcheng along a street on her way to work in Shanghai.

Dutch Eurovision winner to miss final with COVID

Dutch 2019 Eurovision Song Contest winner Duncan Laurence has tested positive for coronavirus and will be unable to perform live at tomorrow's grand final in Rotterdam, the organizers said. The fresh blow for the contest—which was cancelled last year because of the pandemic and is going ahead under strict conditions—comes after members of the Iceland and Poland delegations also tested positive. Laurence, who won with the power ballad “Arcade” in Tel Aviv two years ago, developed “mild symptoms” of COVID-19 on Wednesday after taking part in a dress rehearsal at the Ahoy Arena the previous day, Eurovision said.

“We are of course disappointed, first of all for Duncan, who deserves a live performance on our very own Eurovision stage after his 2019 victory,” Eurovision executive producer Sietse Bakker said in a statement. “Of course we wish Duncan a speedy recovery!” Laurence will now “feature in the show in a

different form”, the organizers said. “Duncan is very disappointed, he has been looking forward to this for two years. We are very happy that he will still be seen in the final,” his management said in a statement. The Dutch singer is the latest in a series of people to test positive at what is meant to be a strictly COVID-controlled environment at Eurovision.

Iceland Eurovision winner tested positive

Iceland's Eurovision Song Contest contender, one of this year's favorites to win, will also miss the live shows in Rotterdam after a band member tested positive Wednesday for coronavirus. Dadi og Gagnamagnid did not take part in Wednesday's live rehearsal, yesterday's semi-final or tomorrow's final, with footage of the band performing their song “10 years” in an earlier rehearsal being used instead. The news is a blow to organizers of the

competition in the Dutch port city, which was cancelled last year due to COVID-19 and is going ahead this year with strict health measures.

“We have all been extremely careful the whole trip so this comes as a huge surprise,” tweeted singer Dadi, who like the rest of the band performs in a green tracksuit with an emoji of his face on the front. “We are very happy with the performance and super excited for you all to see it! Thank you for all the love.” The European Broadcasting Union said in a statement that a member of the Icelandic group tested positive on Wednesday as did a member of the Icelandic delegation on Sunday. “Dadi og Gagnamagnid have taken the difficult decision to withdraw from performing in this year's live Eurovision Song Contest shows, as they only want to perform together as a group,” the statement said.—AFP



Dutch singer and Eurovision 2019 winner Duncan Laurence, also known as Duncan de Moor performs during the first semi-final of the 65th edition of the Eurovision Song Contest 2021, at the Ahoy convention center in Rotterdam.—AFP

Cyprus ‘devil’ song aims to set Eurovision ablaze

Cyprus rarely causes a splash at the Eurovision song contest, but controversy over its entry “El Diablo” (The Devil) and a fiery rendition by Greek singer Elena Tsagrinou are drawing attention. The island first took part in Eurovision in 1981 and holds the unenviable record of the most participations without a win. Its best performance was a second-place finish in 2018. El Diablo has been making waves since the Cyprus Orthodox Church and religious groups intervened, protesting that the song was blasphemous. The song is about falling in love with the devil. “I gave my heart to El Diablo... because he tells me I'm his angel,” blonde-haired Tsagrinou sings.

The Cyprus Church argued that the song made an “international mockery” of the country's morals by advocating “surrender to the devil”. The song “essentially praises the fatalistic submission of humans to the devil's authority”, at the expense of the island's “history, culture and traditions”, according to the church. A protest was staged outside the Nicosia headquarters of state broadcaster CyBC, calling for the song to be removed from the competition. The government and the CyBC said the song had nothing to do with devil worship and argued that freedom of expression was protected. It's about “a bad relationship with someone,” the singer told the website wivibloggs.—AFP

Russia's feminist Eurovision singer sparks conservative backlash

Russia's unlikely entry to the Eurovision song contest, a Tajik-born refugee and feminist activist, knows she is riling the country's conservatives. “I've hit a nerve,” Manizha Sangin told AFP in March, after two conservative groups lodged complaints with the authorities over her song “Russian Woman”. The 29-year-old singer, who performs under the name Manizha, was not expected to win the public vote to pick Russia's song for the contest in the Netherlands.

Donning a brightly coloured and elaborate traditional Russian costume, then shedding it to reveal red overalls, her performance was a far cry from values usually promoted on state

channels. “You're 30! Hello? Where are your kids? You are cute, overall. But should lose some weight,” went one line from her song. “Every Russian woman needs to know—you strong enough, you gonna break the wall”. A columnist at the opposition-leaning newspaper Novaya Gazeta voiced surprise that the performance was broadcast at all, saying the song “declares war on Russian xenophobia and misogyny”.

The openly feminist tune, which Manizha describes as an anthem “against stereotypes that I had faced”, has since found a huge support base with more than 10 million views on YouTube. But it also led to an outpouring of scorn from conservative groups, who

demanded that Manizha be pulled as Russia's Eurovision entry. In an open letter, an association of Orthodox women accused Manizha of “insulting and humiliating Russian women” and inciting “hatred towards men”. The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes in Russia, announced that it is following up on a complaint from a veterans' organization, which said the text incites “inter-ethnic tension and enmity”. And Senate speaker Valentina Matvienko slammed the song as “nonsense” and Manizha's appearance as “surprising”. Manizha says she became the target of scorn because in Russia it is not customary to “air your dirty laundry”. “Society is used to keeping silent about its pain and discomfort in the name of traditional values and public opinion,” she told AFP.

Even before her Eurovision selection, Manizha had drawn attention for her views. After building up a large online presence by posting short music clips on Instagram, Manizha leveraged her popularity as a platform for her activism. In 2019, she launched a phone app to connect crisis centers with victims of domestic violence—a problem in Russia that activists say the authorities have ignored.

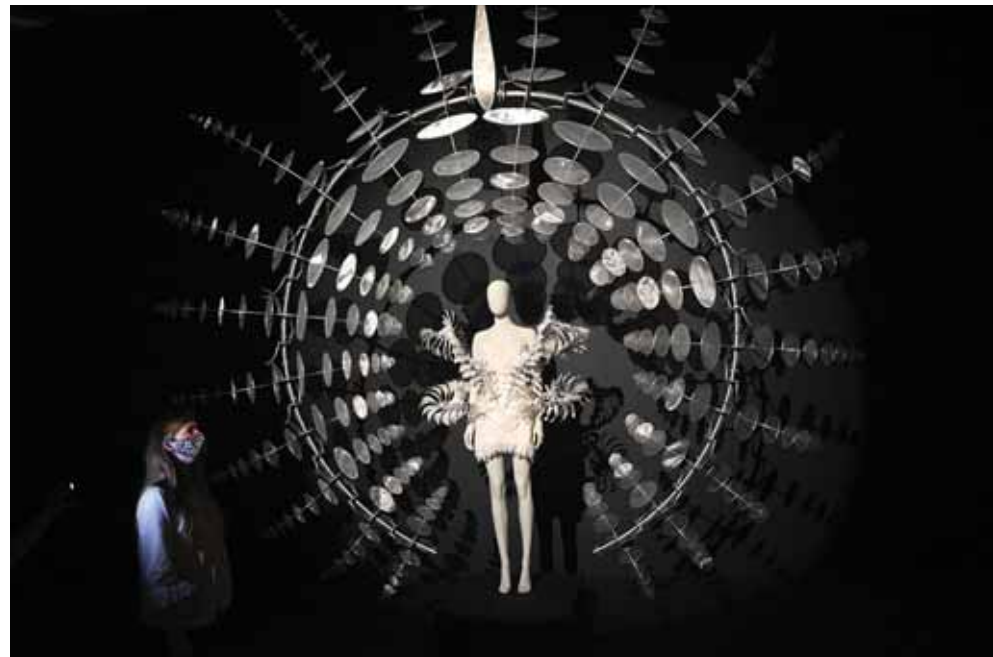
She caused a scandal that same year for taking part in a video defending LGBT rights, a move that she says cost her 10,000 subscribers on Instagram. Always accompanied by her mother—her “guru” and costume designer—Sangin (which means “tender stone” in Tajik) recalled a difficult youth.—AFP



Russia's Manizha Dalerovna Sangin aka Manizha (center) poses for a picture during the “Turquoise Carpet ceremony” of the 65th edition of the Eurovision Song Contest 2021, in Rotterdam.—AFP



A museum employee poses next to a costume entitled (left) 'Queen of Hearts costume' and 'Costume for the Mad Hatter' 2010 by artist Bob Crowley during a press preview of the exhibition Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser at the Victoria & Albert museum in London.—AFP photos



A museum employee poses next to an artwork entitled 'Infinity' dress and 'Omniverse' 2019 by Iris van Herpen and Anthony Howe during a press preview of the exhibition Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser.

London's V&A reopens with Alice in Wonderland exhibition

After a year of the coronavirus pandemic's mind-bending assault on normal life, London's Victoria & Albert Museum reopens this week, taking visitors down another rabbit hole. "Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser" explores the global impact of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland", Lewis Carroll's classic 1865 novel, and its enduring

appeal to artists. The exhibition opens to the public on Saturday, and plunges visitors, like Alice, straight down a rabbit hole—the museum stairs—with a jumble of signs in every direction. As they emerge from the V&A's dimly lit basement, guests are immersed in theatrical costumes, film extracts, manuscripts and drawings.

The installations combine sound and visual effects, "to explore the origins, adaptations and reinventions" of the work first imagined by Carroll, an Oxford mathematician whose real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. Each section of the exhibition, which is meant to appeal to visitors of all ages, has its own distinct look.

Guests walk across a Victorian beachfront, reminiscent of the time Carroll himself was writing, and encounter scenes from the book: the murderous Queen of Hearts' rose garden and the Mad Hatter's tea party with the March Hare.



A museum employee poses inside a room entitled 'Through the Looking Glass'.



Britain's Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge (right), wearing a face covering, talks with curator Kate Bailey as she is shown exhibits in the 'Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser' exhibition during her visit to the Victoria and Albert (V&A) museum in London.

'Everything is upside down'

Museums were allowed to reopen their doors on Monday after months of restrictions to curb the spread of coronavirus which has claimed nearly 128,000 lives across Britain. At the V&A in west London, as elsewhere, social distancing, hand sanitizer and facemasks are the order of the day for the reopening. Interactive booths, like those where visitors can play virtual reality croquet against the Queen of Hearts, are cleaned regularly. The Alice exhibition was originally planned to open in June 2020, but its opening now-nearly a year later-is fitting, said assistant curator Harriet Reed.

"We are so thrilled that we can bump this back in and enjoy the exhibition safely, and

share it with the world," she told AFP. "I think we're all feeling a little bit tired, a little bit jaded, a little bit uninspired maybe," she said, suggesting Alice's world could offer a restorative "boost of optimism". Reed said in the face of the pandemic, everyone can learn from Alice's "amazing determination, bravery" and the way she "stands up for what she believes in". "We definitely feel like we live in a crazy wonderland right now. Everything is upside down," she said. "I think we can really relate to that sense of complete displacement right now."

'Strong minded heroine'

The exhibition, which is divided into five parts, first looks at the novel's Victorian-era

influences before moving on to its film adaptations. Excerpts from the Walt Disney film "Alice in Wonderland" (1951) and Tim Burton's 2010 remake are displayed alongside the first silent film to portray Alice and even a Japanese anime inspired by her story. A later section focuses on the influence of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" on surrealism and the 1960s.

An original edition of the book illustrated by the Spanish artist Salvador Dali is showcased with theatre and ballet adaptations. The final installations contend with the "contemporary fascination" with the children's book over a century and a half after it was first published. The exhibition, Reed says, attempts to answer a question that is

"almost unanswerable" and show why Carroll's characters continue to inspire well into the 21st century.

"I think a lot of it has to do with having a very strong-minded heroine", she added. Her favorite item in the exhibition was the program for a play performed by the suffragette campaigners, showing Alice agitating for the right to vote. "Alice is the symbol of empowerment and female agency that was really exciting for us," she said. — AFP



A museum employee poses by installation during a press preview of the exhibition Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser.



A museum employee poses next to an artwork entitled 'Reimagining the Tea-Party' by artist Heston Blumenthal and David McKean.



Props and costumes from Robocop, Minority Report, Blade Runner, Star Wars, American Hustle, Elf and One night in Miami are among the items exhibited during a press preview of Prop Store's Iconic Film & TV Memorabilia.

Indiana Jones hat and Star Wars droid for sale in Hollywood



An C3PO mask from the movie "Star Wars" is exhibited during a press preview of Prop Store's Iconic Film & TV Memorabilia.



R2-SHP light-up remote control droid from "Star Wars: The rise of Skywalker" is exhibited.

Fans who can't wait to see the next "Indiana Jones" film can bid to own his iconic fedora next month—if they have perhaps a cool quarter-of-a-million dollars to spare. The custom-made hat worn by Harrison Ford in 1984 action classic "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" will go on sale in Hollywood from June 29, with an estimate of \$150,000-\$250,000. Filmmakers commissioned the archaeologist's fedora from London hatter Herbert Johnson a year before the film was shot, said "Prop Store" auction house COO Brandon Alinger.

"They didn't just walk in and buy a hat off the shelf... they combined attributes from a few different hats to make what became the Indiana Jones Fedora, which is probably now today, one of the most recognizable hats in all movies," he said. Ford, 78, is set to appear in his final film as the hero archaeologist next summer. Over 1,200 items from Hollywood folklore will go on sale in June and July, including Princess Leia actor Carrie Fisher's annotated "Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back" script and Tom Cruise's sword from "The Last Samurai."



Harry Potter's wand and eyeglasses and a copy of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" are exhibited next to Harrison Ford's Indiana Jones' fedora hat from the movie "Indiana Jones & the Temple of Doom" during a press preview of Prop Store's Iconic Film & TV Memorabilia, in Valencia, California.

Lifestyle | Feature

Friday, May 21, 2021



Masks from Star Wars, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker's bladed dueling lightsabers and Carrie Fisher's heavily hand-annotated script from The Empire Strikes Back, are among the items exhibited during a press preview.



A battle-damaged light-up hammerhead air assault drone from the movie "Iron Man 2" is exhibited during a press preview.

The golf cart driven by Brad Pitt's character in "Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood" will be wheeled onto the auction block alongside a wand and eyeglasses used by Daniel Radcliffe in the final two "Harry Potter" films, donated by studio Warner Bros to raise funds for charity.

Alinger said prices for Hollywood artefacts had "trended up over time" as they became a more established collector's items for investors who seek accumulating value and bid against wealthy fans. "Pieces like Stormtrooper helmets that have been sold in the past and sold more recently-you can see

that rise in value over time, as more people become aware that this type of asset is available as a collectible or as a piece for investment," he said, of the distinctive "Star Wars" costumes. Last year, a Darth Vader costume used for promoting the first film in George Lucas's original space saga sold for

\$287,500. A "light-up remote-control droid" called R2-SHP from the most recent "Star Wars" film is expected to earn up to \$120,000 at the next auction, ending July 1. — AFP



Props, masks and puppets from Terminator, Men in Black, Who Framed Roger Rabbit, Indiana Jones, Harry Potter, The Muppets, Ted and more are among the items exhibited.



A copy of the Daily Prophet and a Golden Snitch from the Harry Potter's movies are exhibited.



A staff member holds Harry Potter's wand as the eyeglasses and a copy of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" are exhibited.

Kids Page

Word Search

STAR WARS
Word Search

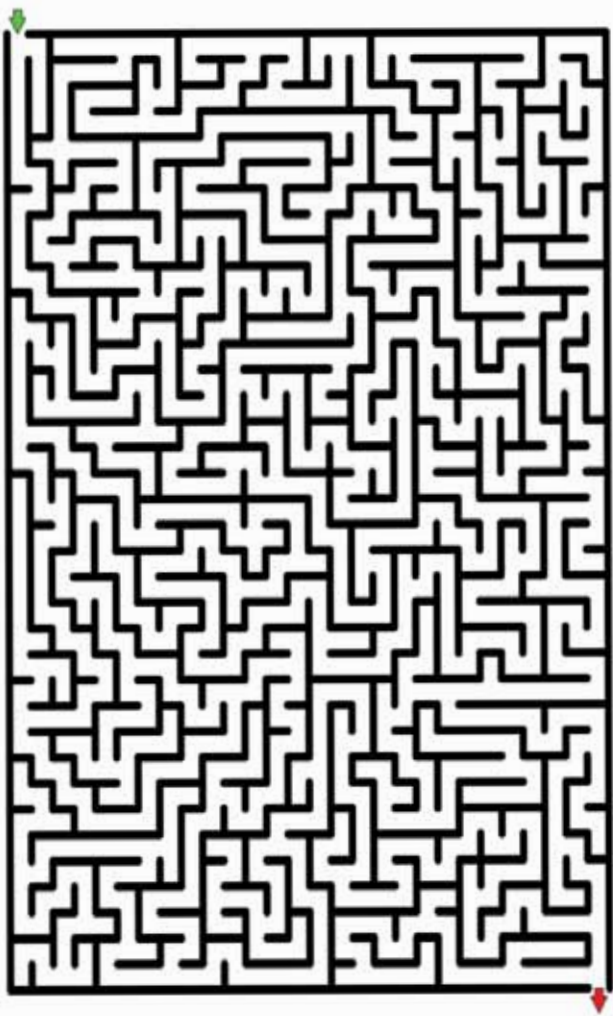
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E	D	N	H	O	H	N	J	E	F	S	G	R	Q	E	3	T	S	A
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A	O	B	I	W	A	N	N	A	G	R	A	3	T	K	U	A	O	A
N	B	N	I	E	L	T	M	E	R	I	3	W	3	T	Z	D	O	T
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| ANAKIN | DROID | LUCAS | SKYWALKER |
| BATTLESHIP | EMPIRE | LUKE | STORMTROOPER |
| C3PO | FORCE | OBI-WAN | TATOOINE |
| CHEWBACCA | HAN SOLO | PALPATINE | WOOKIEE |
| DARTH VADER | JEDI | R2D2 | YODA |

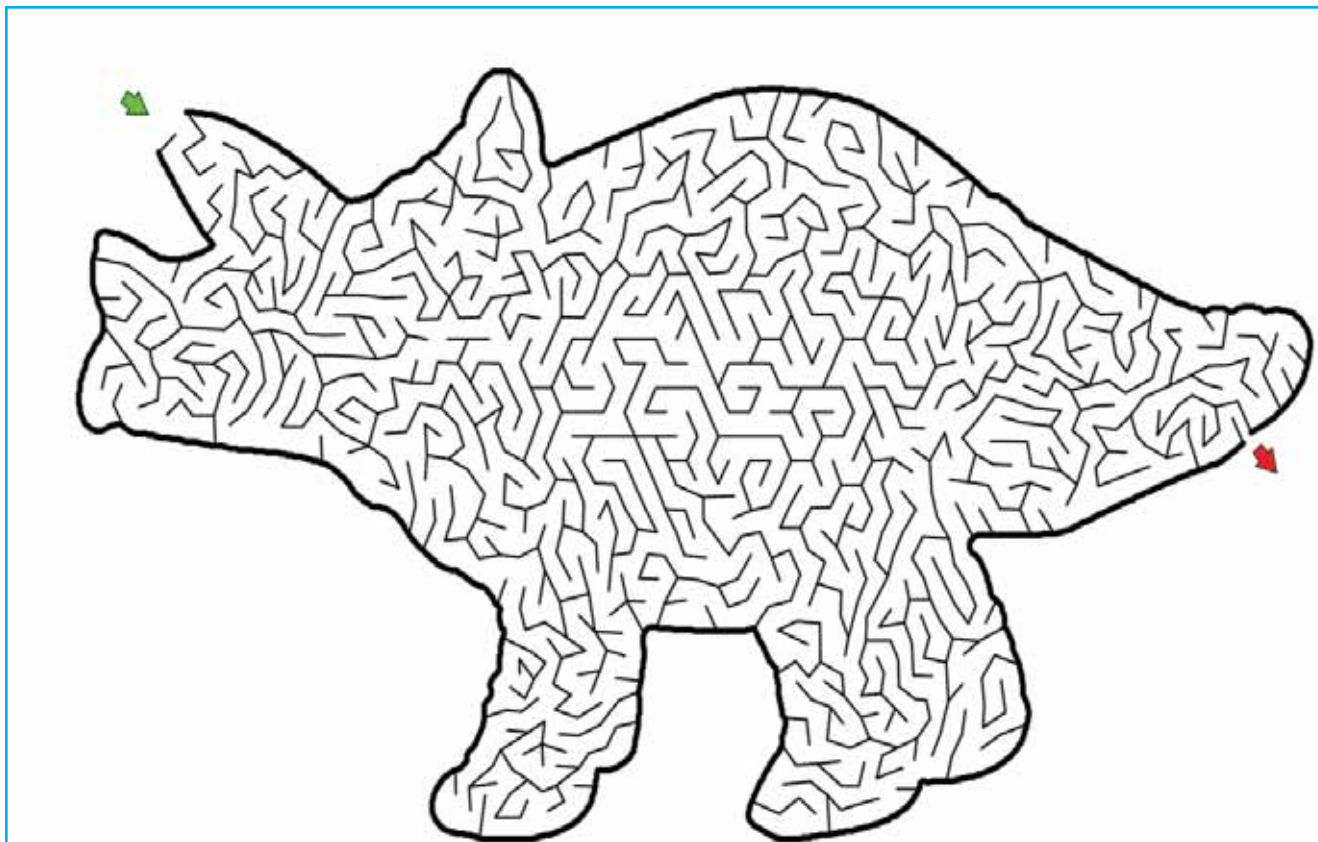
Color It



Kids Mazes



Find the way



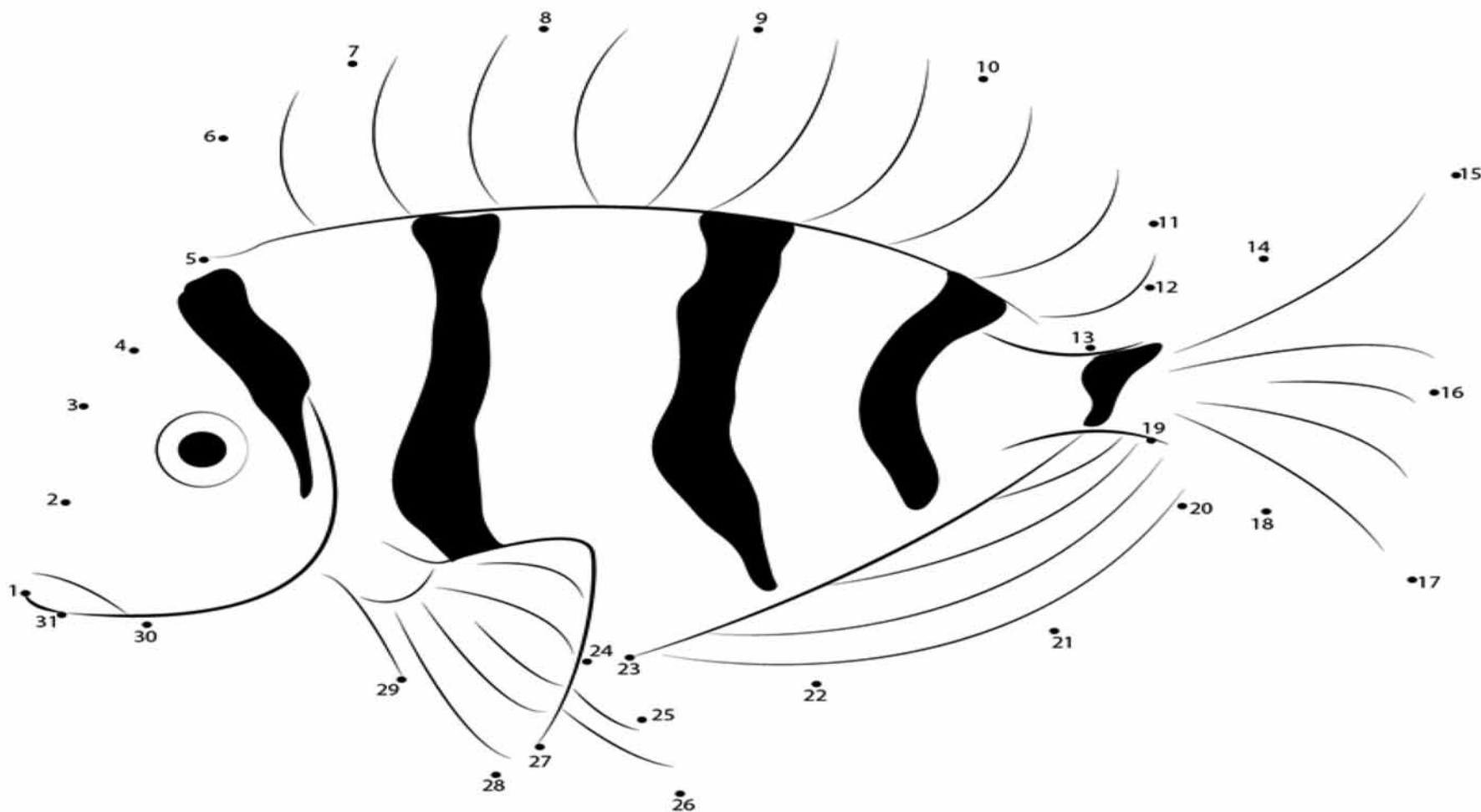
Word Scramble

State Capitals Word Scramble

All of the scrambled words below are names of state capitals. Can you put the letters in the right order to spell the 25 different state capital names correctly? Careful! Some of the names are made up of two words.

HIGBRUSARR	
EONTGRYMOM	
LAAISDNIOINP	
TKLTSLAAICEY	
EIILSPNDGRF	
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HUONLLUO	
KOITHMLAOYAC	
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ENAEHL	
RENDEV	
INACYOSTRC	
IELLSAHVN	

Join the dots



Health & Science

Sweden's snowy forests provide setting for Arctic warfare training



Swedish soldiers plan their operations as they stand next to armored vehicles camouflaged to blend into the snow during the annual "Winter Sun" exercises in the forests north of Boden on March 19, 2021.



A Swedish military armored vehicle drives through the snow. — AFP photos

BODEN, Sweden: In a snow-draped forest in northern Sweden, hundreds of soldiers in white-camouflage uniforms built dugouts, patrolled on skis and laid mock ambushes to test their readiness to fight in Arctic environments. Winter combat skills are attracting more interest both in Sweden and abroad as tensions rise in the strategic High North, and as melting Arctic ice opens new shipping lanes and uncovers a wealth of natural resources. Sweden's annual "Winter Sun" exercise takes place just 80 km below the Arctic Circle, where temperatures can sink to -30 Celsius, pitting tanks, artillery and some 900 soldiers against each other. The Scandinavian country also hosts French, British and US forces to train them in Arctic warfare at its specialized school.

In such a brutal environment, even basic tasks - like changing socks regularly - can make the difference between life and death. "Minor errors can become potentially life-threatening in minutes," Lieutenant-Colonel Fredrik Andersson told AFP during the warfare training in March, a camouflaged cap pulled low over his eyes as he watched his unit dig shelters to hide from the enemy and seek refuge from the cold.

Using heavy metal spades, the recruits smoothed over any signs of their tracks in the thick snow before disappearing into the dugouts to change clothes to stay dry. Others took a moment to eat from the generous ration bags to give them the extra energy needed to work in the cold - picking between the boil-in-bag pasta, sweets, cereal, dried beef bresaola, isotonic drinks and coffee.

"Everything takes longer in the winter," added Oscar Sandstrom, a 25-year-old junior officer, the crackle of gunfire audible in the distance. Andersson and his troops hail from Sweden's Ranger Battalions-specialists in cold-weather warfare trained to carry out reconnaissance and ambushes behind enemy lines, travelling by ski and snow scooter.

Around him, conscripts in white camouflage jackets with thick boots hurried to put the finishing touches to snow shelters, using spades to cover their tracks before disappearing into the dugouts. More battalions of the Rangers are set to

be created in the country's far north, as well as a brigade of armored vehicles.

Andersson says there is heightened interest in his unit's skills. "Since the Arctic ice is melting, we see new trade routes coming up potentially, and a lot of nations have become interested in this area," he said. The ability to fight in subarctic environments is just one area where Sweden is expanding its military, following its announcement in late 2020 that it would increase defense spending by 40 percent over five years.

'Changing security situation'

Sweden reintroduced conscription in 2017 after several years of increasingly assertive Russian behaviour, including its annexation of Crimea and violations of Swedish airspace. Speaking ahead of this week's ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council - comprising Russia, the United States, Canada, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Iceland - Moscow also warned Western countries against staking claims in the Arctic.

"There is a change in the security situation in our part of Europe," Swedish Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist told AFP, citing "the Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008, the annexation of the Crimea in 2014, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine." Hultqvist too has noticed more countries vying for influence over the High North, including China. "We see climate change opens up far more natural resources in that area and this creates an interest from different powers to have a higher level of influence."

Although Sweden is not a NATO member, it also trains in the Arctic with its Nordic neighbors Norway, Denmark and Finland, conducting air and land exercises. Niklas Granholm, deputy director of research at Sweden's Defense Research Institute, warned that climate change was not only increasing the region's strategic importance, but may impact how troops operate, as weather patterns become less predictable. "The winters aren't what they used to be so the operational and tactical circumstances may differ," he said.



Swedish soldiers sit in their vehicle during the annual "Winter Sun" exercises.

Back to basics

Lakes or bogs that would freeze over with ice thick enough to support military vehicles may no longer be viable as weather patterns shift, with warmer, wetter winters, Granholm said. In the forests around Boden, the head of Sweden's sub-Arctic warfare school watches teams of soldiers head out to patrol on skis. With white-camouflaged assault rifles slung over their thick, snow-camouflaged uniforms, group pushed themselves along a small track to carry out a reconnaissance mission.

Lieutenant-Colonel Morgan Gustafsson, his grey beard reaching down past the collar of the white camouflaged uniform of the Ranger Battalion he joined in 1986, has experienced first-hand the changes in Sweden's defence policy. But Gustafsson said the key to fighting in such a vast environment rested on mastering the basics. "We start with the most basic things - how to change your socks, how to keep dry, what to eat, what to drink and then we build on with weapons, skis, snowshoes and snowmobiles," he said. —AFP

Health & Science

Arctic nations pledge to fight global warming despite rising tensions

REYKJAVIK: Arctic countries yesterday pledged to fight global warming, which is happening three times faster in the Far North, and to preserve peace in the region as its geopolitical importance rises. Accelerated global warming, untapped resources, new maritime routes opened up by retreating sea ice and the future of local populations all topped the agenda as foreign ministers of countries bordering the Arctic gathered in Reykjavik in Iceland. "We are committed to advancing a peaceful Arctic region where cooperation prevails on climate, the environment, science and safety," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told his Arctic Council counterparts from Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia and Sweden.

"The Arctic as a region for strategic competition has seized the world's attention" but "rule of law" must be ensured so that it remains "a region free of conflict where countries act responsibly," he added. The statements were thinly-veiled warnings to China, which, although only an observer on the Council, has made no secret of its interest in the vast territory rich in natural resources and where retreating sea ice has opened up new maritime routes. Blinken was also certainly targeting Russia, after tense exchanges that preceded yesterday's meeting about the risk of a "militarization" of the Arctic.

Arctic warming three times faster than the planet

OSLO: The Arctic has warmed three times more quickly than the planet as a whole, and faster than previously thought, a report warned yesterday. Arctic sea ice looks set to be an early victims of rising temperatures, with each fraction of a degree making a big difference: the chance of it disappearing entirely in summer is 10 times greater if Earth warms by 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels compared to 1.5C, the goal set by the 2015 Paris Accord.

The alarming finding comes from the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program (AMAP) in a report timed to coincide with a ministerial meeting this week of the Arctic Council in Reykjavik, which gathers countries bordering the region. "The Arctic is a real hotspot for climate warming," said Jason Box, a glaciologist at the Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland.

In less than half a century, from 1971 to 2019, the Arctic's average annual temperature rose by 3.1C, compared to 1C for the planet as a whole. That's more than previously suspected. In a 2019 report on Earth's frozen spaces, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that Arctic surface air temperature has likely increased "by more than double the global average".

Forest fires

According to researchers, a turning point came in 2004 when the temperature in the Arctic surged for largely unexplained reason. Since then, warming has continued at a rate 30 percent higher than in previous decades. The region is now experiencing "more and longer lasting winter warm events," Box told AFP.

Military maneuvers

Russia has steadily beefed up its military presence in the Arctic in recent years, reopening and modernizing several bases and airfields abandoned since the end of the Soviet era. The Arctic Council was set up 25 years ago to deal with issues like the environment and areas of international cooperation, and its mandate explicitly excludes military security. Sergei Lavrov, foreign minister for Russia - which succeeded Iceland as rotating chair of the Arctic Council yesterday - has also called for a resumption of regular meetings between the chiefs of staff of the Council's member countries. Russia has been excluded from these meetings since 2014, after the annexation of Crimea. With the departure of Donald Trump, who sparked agitation by proposing to buy Greenland in 2019 and repeated opposition to Russian and Chinese ambitions in the region, eyes have been on the line adopted by President Joe Biden's administration. Blinken, who on Wednesday met with Lavrov in their first face-to-face meeting which was described as "constructive" by both countries, ostensibly emphasized "cooperation" rather than tensions. The US top diplomat also focused on the fight against global warming, much in line with his counterparts who have rejoiced in recent days at the "return" of

America to the international community consensus on the climate issue. "The climate crisis is our most serious long term threat with the Arctic warming three times faster than anywhere else on the planet," Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau told the Council.

Blinken in Greenland

The alarming data was part of a report published yesterday by the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), which also warned of an increased risk of the region's iconic sea ice disappearing completely in summer, before reforming in winter. "We have a duty to strengthen our cooperation for the benefit of the people inhabiting the Arctic," Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod said. At the previous Council meeting in 2019 in Finland, the Trump administration blocked the signing of a joint declaration for the first time since the Council's creation 25 years ago, as it refused to include climate change in the final statement. The adoption of a joint statement on Thursday went without a hitch, as did the agreement of a 10-year strategic plan for the first time in the Council's history. In addition to the countries bordering the Arctic, the Council also includes six organizations representing the indigenous peoples of the region and 13 observer countries, including China. —AFP



This file photo taken on Aug 17, 2019 shows bergy bits and growlers floating in front of the Apusajik glacier, near Kulusuk, a settlement in the Sermersooq municipality located on the island of the same name on the southeastern shore of Greenland. —AFP

During the summer months from June to September, there is added heat from the ocean, which is increasingly free of ice and the insulation it provides.

And the warming is not coming to an end any time soon. According to forecasts in the report, by the end of the century average temperatures in the Arctic are expected to rise 3.3 to 10 degrees above the average for the period 1985-2014. The final figure depends on how rapidly humanity draws down greenhouse gas emissions.

Warming has immediate consequences for the Arctic ecosystem, including changes in habitat, food habits and interactions between animals - including the iconic polar bear - and the migration of some species. From Siberia to Alaska, forest fires have also become a problem. "This is what 3C looks like, it's not just numbers, it's forests on fire," said Box. —AFP



World's largest iceberg breaks off Antarctica

PARIS: A huge iceberg, the world's largest, has broken off from an ice shelf in Antarctica and is floating through the Weddell Sea, the European Space Agency said. Called A-76 and roughly the shape of Manhattan but more than 70 times bigger, it was picked up on satellite images and is "currently the largest berg in the world", the ESA said Wednesday. The iceberg is around 170 km long and 25 km wide, with an area of 4,320 sq km, slightly larger than the Spanish island of Majorca. The berg, which broke off the western side of the Ronne Ice Shelf, was originally spotted by the British Antarctic Survey and confirmed using images from the Copernicus satellite. It takes the place as the world's largest from the A-23A iceberg - approximately 3,880 sq km in size - which is also in the Weddell Sea.

In November last year, what was then the world's largest iceberg appeared to be on a collision course with a remote South Atlantic island home to thousands of penguins and seals, threatening to impede their ability to gather food. The iceberg, known as A68a, had also broken off from the Larsen Ice Shelf, which has warmed faster than any other part of Earth's southernmost continent.

A68a, which was 160 kilometers long and 48 kilometers across, broke apart before it could cause any damage to the abundant wildlife in the British Overseas Territory of South Georgia. Earth's average surface temperature has gone up by one degree Celsius since the 19th century, enough to increase the intensity of droughts, heat waves and tropical cyclones. But the air over Antarctica has warmed more than twice that much. Major chunks of the Peninsula's Larsen Ice Shelf - which had been stable for more than 10,000 years - disintegrated within days in 1995, and again in 2002. This was followed by the breakup of the nearby Wilkins Ice Shelf in 2008 and 2009.

A process known as hydrofracturing was likely the main culprit in both cases, earlier research has shown. Hydrofracturing occurs when water - which is heavier than ice - pours through cracks in the surface of ice shelves caused by surface warming, violently forcing the fractures to zip open, causing and iceberg to break off. Icebergs are traditionally named after the Antarctic quadrant in which they were originally detected, then a sequential number. If they break apart more letters are added to differentiate the fragments. —AFP

Stars

STAR TRACK

**Aries (March 21-April 19)**

You're a helpful person, Aries, yet in your relationships, you often seem to confuse helping with parenting. You tend to do a lot of self-sacrificing. Today you may learn how to say no when you feel your partner has gone beyond the limits of what you can give. If you do this, you may rediscover something essential you may have lost along the way - your ego.

**Taurus (April 20-May 20)**

Everyone needs to be loved, Taurus, but it shouldn't be your only objective in life. It isn't the end of the world if your charms fall flat every once in a while. Today you may be tempted to be a little less charming and seductive with the people around you. Some may even say you aren't acting like your usual self. Ignore them. A little self-indulgence now and then never hurt anyone.

**Gemini (May 21-June 20)**

There are days when a little humility can be good for you, Gemini, and this might be one of those days. It's as if the planets are talking to you about sincerity and taking you far away from the trappings of superficiality and popularity. The things that are important to you today are much deeper concepts of humanity and compassion.

**Cancer (June 21-July 22)**

Your fiery willpower can help you move mountains, Cancer. But you already know that. When it's combined with your legendary optimism, it's a powerful tool you just can't do without. Today you will reap the rewards for your hard work over the last month, in every aspect of your life. The fire that burns inside you and gives you your incredible determination has its limits. Don't misuse it.

**Leo (July 23-August 22)**

Today could discourage even the most ardent of passions, Leo. Even if some people say you're a bit cold, know that there's a veritable volcano burning underneath all that ice. Today you may once again find yourself at a distance from your feelings, as if you were regaining control over your emotions. Be careful about being too cynical about things.

**Virgo (August 23-September 22)**

Virgo, you should try to be tolerant of other people's social and political positions. You may have to deal with certain people whose personal plans are jeopardized by events beyond their control. Don't judge them. Don't immediately defend one viewpoint without thinking how the situation affects the other person's life.

**Libra (September 23-October 22)**

This is a day for doubts, for asking those hard questions that you need to answer. If you like to meditate, Libra, think about spending a little more time at it today. You could learn a lot about yourself. You will see the whole palette of human emotion in other people, from joy to disappointment. Where do you fit in?

**Scorpio (October 23-November 21)**

It may seem that you've been accumulating a lot of excess nervous tension and stress, Scorpio. Unfortunately, you won't be able to count on the people around you to make it any better. What your partner wants and what you want may not coincide. It could be time to think about reenergizing your relationship. How about planning a weekend away for just the two of you?

**Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)**

You may feel physical and emotional tension today, Sagittarius. Are you taking the time to care for your body? Has someone been putting a lot of pressure on you lately? Are you an emotionally satisfied person? The way you feel physically is a good indicator of your mental state. Try to go a little easier on yourself and you will see immediate benefits.

**Capricorn (December 22-January 19)**

People love to be with you because you have such natural charm, Capricorn. But today you may not feel especially charming or like talking to anyone. You may have a secret inside that's screaming to get out. If someone confides in you today, do you think you could confide in him or her, too? You should get an answer to that question today.

**Aquarius (January 20- February 18)**

Your partner may be all over you today, Aquarius! Are you in the mood to listen? Are you interested in some love? Probably not. You may have had a hard day and just feel like some quiet time together. You aren't up to the demands your partner may make on you. You don't need to worry about it. It happens to everyone from time to time.

**Pisces (February 19-March 20)**

You're often moved by emotion, Pisces. You like situations that make you feel alive. Today your love life may give you just that kind of adventurous feeling. If that's the case, don't get so far into your emotions that it becomes too much for you. There is such a concept as too much of a good thing!

Country Codes

Afghanistan	0093	Iran	0098
Albania	00355	Iraq	00964
Algeria	00213	Ireland	00353
Andorra	00376	Italy	0039
Angola	00244	Ivory Coast	00225
Anguilla	001264	Jamaica	001876
Antigua	001268	Japan	0081
Argentina	0054	Jordan	00962
Armenia	00374	Kazakhstan	007
Australia	0061	Kenya	00254
Austria	0043	Kiribati	00686
Bahamas	001242	Kuwait	00965
Bahrain	00973	Kyrgyzstan	00996
Bangladesh	00880	Laos	00856
Barbados	001246	Latvia	00371
Belarus	00375	Lebanon	00961
Belgium	0032	Liberia	00231
Belize	00501	Libya	00218
Benin	00229	Lithuania	00370
Bermuda	001441	Luxembourg	00352
Bhutan	00975	Macau	00853
Bolivia	00591	Macedonia	00389
Bosnia	00387	Madagascar	00261
Botswana	00267	Majorca	0034
Brazil	0055	Malawi	00265
Brunei	00673	Malaysia	0060
Bulgaria	00359	Maldives	00960
Burkina Faso	00226	Mali	00223
Burundi	00257	Malta	00356
Cambodia	00855	Marshall Islands	00692
Cameroon	00237	Martinique	00596
Canada	001	Mauritania	00222
Cape Verde	00238	Mauritius	00230
Cayman Islands	001345	Mayotte	00269
Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
Chad	00235	Micronesia	00691
Chile	0056	Moldova	00373
China	0086	Monaco	00377
Colombia	0057	Mongolia	00976
Comoros	00269	Montserrat	001664
Congo	00242	Morocco	00212
Cook Islands	00682	Mozambique	00258
Costa Rica	00506	Myanmar (Burma)	0095
Croatia	00385	Namibia	00264
Cuba	0053	Nepal	00977
Cyprus	00357	Netherlands (Holland)	0031
Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
Czech Republic	00420	New Caledonia	00687
Denmark	0045	New Zealand	0064
Diego Garcia	00246	Nicaragua	00505
Djibouti	00253	Niger	00227
Dominica	001767	Nigeria	00234
Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
Egypt	0020	Northern Ireland (UK)	0044
El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
England (UK)	0044	Norway	0047
Equatorial Guinea	00240	Oman	00968
Eritrea	00291	Pakistan	0092
Estonia	00372	Palau	00680
Ethiopia	00251	Panama	00507
Falkland Islands	00500	Papua New Guinea	00675
Faroe Islands	00298	Paraguay	00595
Fiji	00679	Peru	0051
Finland	00358	Philippines	0063
France	0033	Poland	0048
French Guiana	00594	Portugal	00351
French Polynesia	00689	Puerto Rico	001787
Gabon	00241	Qatar	00974
Gambia	00220	Romania	0040
Georgia	00995	Russian Federation	007
Germany	0049	Rwanda	00250
Ghana	00233	Saint Helena	00290
Gibraltar	00350	Saint Kitts	001869
Greece	0030	Saint Lucia	001758
Greenland	00299	Saint Pierre	00508
Grenada	001473	Saint Vincent	001784
Guadeloupe	00590	Samoa US	00684
Guam	001671	Samoa West	00685
Guatemala	00502	San Marino	00378
Guinea	00224	Sao Tome	00239
Guyana	00592	Saudi Arabia	00966
Haiti	00509	Scotland (UK)	0044
Holland (Netherlands)	0031	Senegal	00221
Honduras	00504	Seychelles	00284
Hong Kong	00852	Sierra Leone	00232
Hungary	0036	Singapore	0065
Ibiza (Spain)	0034	Slovakia	00421
Iceland	00354	Slovenia	00386
India	0091	Solomon Islands	00677
Indian Ocean	00873	Somalia	00252
Indonesia	0062	South Africa	0027

Business

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Boss of TikTok parent firm to leave post

Zhang prefers 'reading and daydreaming' to running the tech giant

BEIJING: The boss of the Chinese company behind viral video platform TikTok said yesterday he will leave the role because he lacks managerial skills and preferred "reading and daydreaming" to running the tech giant. Beijing has tightened the screws on China's booming tech sector, levying fines—including on ByteDance last month—for allegedly flouting monopoly rules, and issuing stark warnings to the coterie of billionaire digital bosses about their responsibilities to society.

Zhang Yiming, the billionaire co-founder of ByteDance—which created the popular short video TikTok app—said he will step down as CEO and transition to a new role by the end of the year focusing on "long-term strategy". Liang Rubo, with whom he set up the firm, will take over the role. In an unusually candid open memo by one of Asia's new tech rich, Zhang said: "The truth is, I lack some of the skills that make an ideal manager.

"I'm more interested in analyzing organizational and market principles... than actually managing people." With a net worth of \$36 billion Zhang is the fifth richest person in China, according to the Forbes Billionaire Index.

The 38-year-old added that he is also "not very social, preferring solitary activities like being online, reading, listening to music, and daydreaming about what may be possible".

Zhang has also been under enormous pressure to convince the world that TikTok will not hand data over to China's Communist Party, while also protecting his image at home by not appearing to give in to demands from the West. News that he is stepping down comes as Beijing clamps down on the unprecedented influence of some of China's biggest technology firms.

E-commerce giant Alibaba was fined 18.2 billion yuan (\$2.78 billion) last month as part of a push by regulators to rein in dominant digital platforms. As Alibaba's problems mounted, its founder Jack Ma has been unusually absent from the spotlight after speculation that brash comments by him to regulators brought the



This photo taken on April 23, 2018 shows CEO of ByteDance Zhang Yiming speaking during the 1st Digital China Summit in Fuzhou, in China's eastern Fujian province. — AFP

hammer down on his firm.

ByteDance was among 34 tech companies summoned by regulators in April that were told to undergo "complete rectification" and "heed the warning" of Alibaba.

TikTok is believed to have around one billion users worldwide including more than 100 million in the United States. While he was US president, Donald Trump made a series of de-

mands on the Chinese company over security concerns, including calls for the US operations of TikTok be sold to an American company or it would be shut down.

The firm has insisted it would never provide user data to the Chinese government. ByteDance now has more than 60,000 staff in 30 countries and last year Zhang said they were looking to recruit around 40,000 more.

The company also runs a series of popular products including Douyin—the Chinese version of TikTok—as well as news aggregation app Jinri Toutiao and productivity app Lark, which features cloud storage, chat and calendar functions. Media reports last year suggested ByteDance was planning to list some of its businesses in Hong Kong, in a move that could value it at \$180 billion. — AFP

Business

UK reforms train travel as pandemic derails sector

Rail system unveils new centralized price and reservations system

LONDON: Britain yesterday unveiled long-awaited reforms of the country's railways, including a new centralized price and reservations system, but the government insisted it was not backtracking on the sector's privatization.

Launching a new public body, Great British Railways, whose name has echoes of nationalized British Rail in the last century, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's pro-privatization government will take greater control of the sector. As part of the reforms, the Conservative government will offer flexible season tickets, with office workers continuing to work from home amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"Great British Railways will integrate the railways, owning the infrastructure, collecting fare revenue, running and planning the network, and setting most fares and timetables," the Department for Transport said in a statement.

The government insisted its plan was "not re-nationalization", adding it believed state control "failed the railways". "Rather, it is simplification... (and) private companies will be contracted to run the trains, with stronger competition to run services," it added.

Service upgrade

Britain's rail tracks are already in state hands but the trains are run by mostly private compa-

nies enjoying large government subsidies. And since privatization of the sector in the mid-1990s, the taxpayer has been forced to take control of financially-struggling franchises.

Johnson believes an improved rail sector can help to drive Britain's post-Brexit economy and last year allowed construction to begin on the country's new high-speed HS2 railway despite soaring costs.

"I am a great believer in rail, but for too long passengers have not had the level of service they deserve," the prime minister said in the statement. "By creating Great British Railways, and investing in the future of the network, this government will deliver a rail system the country can be proud of."

The announcement comes after the government in September ended the train operators' franchise system that existed for 24 years. Franchising was criticized by both train companies and passengers for its inefficiency, while the latest reforms sparked varied reaction.

"The government is right to pursue more flexible ticketing policies, especially in the light of the pandemic," said Robert Colville, director of the Centre for Policy Studies think-tank. Manuel Cortes, general secretary of transport union TSSA, dismissed the plans as "papering over the cracks", insisting that taxpayer money would



A Southern Rail train leaves Clapham Junction station in London yesterday. —AFP

continue to benefit private train operators.

Shares in online bookings site Trainline plunged 27 percent with it set to face competition from the government's own platform.

Britain launched its "root and branch" review of the rail sector before the pandemic struck, as

commuters battled frustratingly frequent delays and persistently high fares. Recommendations put forward by review chairman Keith Williams, a former British Airways chief executive, have since taken into account the pandemic's impact on the railways. —AFP

Ardern spends big in New Zealand's 'recovery' budget

WELLINGTON: New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern unveiled a big-spending budget yesterday aimed at stimulating the coronavirus-hit economy while carrying out long-awaited progressive reforms.

The center-left leader—who faced criticism before last year's election for her cautious approach to implementing change—announced major funding boosts to welfare payments, social housing and health. "We're making sure our recovery leaves no one behind," Ardern said. "It's what some people would call a two-birds-one-stone strategy—putting in place policies that ensure our finances remain sustainable while building a stronger New Zealand for the future."

Ardern said a NZ\$3.3 billion (US\$2.4 billion) boost to family benefits was the largest welfare increase in a generation and would help lift 33,000 children from poverty.

Health received an extra NZ\$4.7 billion, while spending on public transport and education was increased. Ardern also identified climate change mitigation as one of her government's priorities, earmarking NZ\$300 million for low carbon technology and almost NZ\$350 million to refurbish New Zealand's Scott Base in Antarctica, a prime source of climate data.

However, environmental group Greenpeace said the government's commitments amounted to "loose change" accusing it of failing to live up to its rhetoric

on the issue.

"It's incredibly frustrating to watch this government continue a slow and incremental approach to dealing with what is a major and urgent crisis," spokeswoman Amanda Larsson said.

Ardern, who won a landslide re-election late last year following successful management of the Covid-19 pandemic, said it would take time to achieve her government's goals.

"It is simply not possible to fulfil every promise or commitment that we made or address all of our long-term challenges in a single budget," she said. The measures will see government debt as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) balloon from 26.3 percent last year to 48.0 percent in 2023. "This is significantly elevated, of course, from what New Zealanders are used to, but it's the appropriate response to the situation we find ourselves in," Finance Minister Grant Robertson said.

Robertson said the economy had emerged stronger-than-expected from a brief coronavirus-induced recession. "New Zealanders have weathered the storm of Covid-19 and today we take the next steps in our recovery," he said.

The Treasury estimates GDP growth of 2.9 percent in the 12 months to June this year, rising to 4.4 percent in 2023.

Opposition leader Judith Collins said the budget saddled New Zealand with huge debts but contained nothing for business for middle-income earners. "All New Zealanders are feeling the pinch right now—not just those on jobseeker benefits and the minimum wage—so where is the plan to take the entire country back to prosperity?" she said. —AFP

Saudi to invest \$1bn in Africa for pandemic recovery

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia will invest \$1.0 billion to support African nations in their recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman told a summit in Paris, state media said. The summit, which brought together African leaders and global financial institutions in the French capital on Tuesday, promised to help Africa overcome the crisis with a "New Deal" to replenish treasuries and ramp up rollout of COVID-19 vaccines.

"The Saudi Fund for Development will implement future projects, loans and grants in developing countries in Africa, in an amount exceeding 3.0 Saudi riyals, or nearly \$1.0 billion this year," said Prince Mohamed, de facto ruler of the oil-rich Gulf state. "The impact of the pandemic has been severe in low-income African countries... and it is important that we continue to make efforts to overcome this crisis through joint international action," he added, in a video address released by the official Saudi Press Agency late Tuesday. Saudi Arabia has already invested some \$4 billion in various projects in the continent's energy, mining, telecommunications and food sectors, Prince Mohamed said.

The Gulf nations—particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar—have in recent years strengthened their political and economic influence in Africa.

Africa's populations have been less badly hit by the pandemic than other regions—with a total of nearly 130,000 dead compared with almost 3.4 million worldwide, according to the latest AFP tally from official sources. But the economic cost has been devastating, with the International Monetary Fund warning in late 2020 that Africa faces a shortfall of \$290 billion up to 2023, undermining efforts at development. Meanwhile a slow vaccine rollout has raised fears that variants could emerge on the continent, that would hit Africans and then spread worldwide. —AFP

Business

Ford unveils first all-electric version of its best-selling truck

Pickup an eco-friendly reinvention of a flagship American car brand

DEARBORN, US: Ford officially unveiled the all-electric version of its bestselling F-150 truck on Wednesday, in an eco-friendly reinvention of a flagship American car brand. The battery-powered Ford F-150 "Lightning" is part of a \$22 billion campaign by the US auto giant to ramp up its electric vehicle offerings by 2025.

Ford is already selling an all-electric vehicle, the Mustang Mach-E sport utility vehicle, but the Lightning will be the first battery-powered incarnation of the F-150. The F-150, first launched by Ford in 1948, has long been the top-selling US vehicle and a showcase brand for the 118-year-old firm.

Bill Ford, the great-grandson of the car giant's founder and current chairman of its board of directors, hailed a "pivotal moment" in the company's history. The F-150 Lightning is the "smartest, cleanest" model in the lineup, he said. "And it's pretty powerful."

In the event of a power cut, the vehicle will be able to supply electricity to a house for about three days, Ford has said. And for professionals using the truck on construction sites for example, the vehicle's electrical outlets can serve as a source of energy for the tools.

Ford avoided releasing details about the car ahead of the official launch at 9:30 pm Wednesday local time. But President Biden revealed Tuesday that the Lightning can hit 0-60 mph in about 4.4 seconds, during a visit to Ford's Michigan operation to build support for a \$2 trillion infrastructure plan, which includes \$174 billion for electric vehicle development.

"This sucker's quick," Biden said Tuesday afternoon following a spin in the pickup at the Ford plant in Dearborn, Michigan, describing the new technology as critical in the fight to save the planet from global warming.

'The future is electric'

Chief Executive Jim Farley touted the car at the company's annual meeting earlier this month, telling shareholders the firm is "electrifying some of the most iconic nameplates at Ford" as part of its growth strategy. "We will not cede ground in the EVs to others in vehicle segments where millions of customers rely on us and Ford as the established leader," he said. "This is our home turf."

Production of the new F-150 electric model will begin in Dearborn by spring 2022. It will face stiff competition: start-up Rivian plans to



DEARBORN, MI: Bill Ford, Jr., Executive Chairman of Ford Motor Company, and Linda Zhang, Chief Engineer, are shown at the reveal of the new all-electric Ford F-150 Lightning pickup truck at Ford World Headquarters Wednesday. —AFP

start selling its R1T electric pickup this summer, while General Motors aims to sell its own version, the GMC Hummer EV, from this fall. "The future of the auto industry is electric," said Biden

on Tuesday from the Ford Rouge Electric Vehicle Center.

"The question is whether we'll lead or we'll fall behind in the race to the future." —AFP

EasyJet's first-half net loss widens as virus bites

LONDON: British airline EasyJet revealed yesterday that first-half net losses deepened as the pandemic ravaged demand, but expressed optimism over the reopening of travel in Europe.

The group faced a loss after taxation of £549 million (637 million euros, \$777 million) in the six months to the end of March compared with a loss of £324 million a year earlier. Passenger numbers tumbled by almost 90 percent to 4.1 million, EasyJet said in a results statement published after the UK partially lifted international air travel on Monday. The airline, which is based in Luton north of London, added more than 150,000 seats on flights after the British government announced so-called green list countries from which UK passengers will not need to quarantine upon their return home.

The UK green list currently comprises a handful of nations and territories including EasyJet destinations Gibraltar, Iceland and Portugal. "EasyJet is encouraged by the reopening of travel across much of Europe and will maximize opportunities for European flying," the carrier said. —AFP

In US, 2.5 million unemployed soon to be without income

WASHINGTON: States across America are moving to cut pandemic unemployment benefits, a painful blow for millions of people who will soon be left without income.

With punishing jobless levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment benefits had been extended—especially to the self-employed—and extended further until September 6, even for those who had reached the maximum duration. But now 21 out of 27 states governed by Republicans—including Missouri, Alaska, West Virginia, Indiana and Georgia—will soon reduce or eliminate additional unemployment aid, according to a note from analysts at Oxford Economics out Wednesday.

This means that some 2.5 million people out of the 16 million unemployed Americans will receive no more help starting in June or July, depending on the state, the analysts said. One million more unemployed people will lose the additional \$300-a-week benefit. "It's going to be devastating," said Sue Berkowitz, director of the South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center, an organization that advocates for the rights of low-income residents.

"It's going to have a huge effect if families don't have the stability of income coming in, and they can't keep the lights on, or they're unable to keep up with their housing or rent payment and all the other bills. All that has a detrimental effect on kids," she said. Unemployment payouts vary from state to state and ranges between \$230 and \$820 per week, an amount that was raised by \$300 as the effects of the pandemic hit.

With the US economic recovery underway many companies are now struggling to recruit, but the jobs that remain unfilled can be low-skill, low-pay openings. South Carolina, for example, has a minimum wage fixed to the US federal government standard - \$7.25 per hour. Other states have raised their minimum wage much higher than the federal bar.

South Carolina's Republican governor, Henry McMaster, said in a May 6 letter that unemployment benefits are "incentivizing and paying workers to stay at home rather than encouraging them to return to the workplace".

Raise the minimum wage

"What was intended to be short-term financial assistance for the vulnerable and displaced during the height of the pandemic has turned into a dangerous federal entitlement," said McMaster, a supporter of former president Donald Trump. He claims these benefits "pose a clear and present danger" to the health of South Carolina's economy.

Yet, if politicians "are so worried that somebody who is on unemployment can make twice as much as they can on minimum wage" then the state should raise the minimum wage - something they refuse to do, Berkowitz said.

For his part, President Joe Biden recently said that federal unemployment benefits would remain in the states that want them, but did point out that it would be withdrawn from unemployed people who refuse to take a job. The Oxford Economics analysts said the pandemic unemployment benefits may be a factor limiting labor supply.

But health concerns remain the main constraint, as a large percentage of Americans have yet to be vaccinated.

Another important factor, the analysts say, is childcare, especially since not all schools have resume full-time in-person classes. The spark that set off the anger of the Republican governors was the release of April unemployment figures: only 266,000 jobs were created over the month, far from the expected million. It was the Republican governor of Montana, the northwestern state best known for its forests, mountains and rivers, that got the ball rolling.

To motivate residents Governor Greg Gianforte removed the additional pandemic aid, and is offering a \$1,200 bonus for anyone who accepts a job.

"Montana is open for business again," Gianforte recently declared, "but I hear from too many employers throughout our state who can't find workers. Nearly every sector in our economy faces a labor shortage." —AFP

Business

Labor-starved Australian state offers cash to 'work in paradise'

'Help wanted' signs are now a common sight in tourist towns

SYDNEY: Facing a pandemic-induced labor shortage, one sun-drenched Australian state yesterday began offering a bundle of cash to anyone willing to "work in paradise". Across Australia, long-reopened bars, shops and restaurants have struggled with vacancies usually filled by throngs of foreign backpackers who flock Down Under.

But border closures have turned off that spigot, and "help wanted" signs are now a common sight in tourist towns up and down the east coast. Countrywide, job vacancies are up almost 30 percent since the pandemic began, according to government statistics.

The unemployment rate dropped to 5.5 percent in April, even as the government ended unprecedented wage subsidies, and the economy is predicted to reach full employment next year.

In Queensland, the problem has become so acute that Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk yesterday offered Aus\$1,750 (US\$1,400) to anyone who moves there and starts a job in the tourism sector.

"We live in one of the most beautiful places in the world," she said launching the program. "This campaign will give Queenslanders and other Australians even more reasons to come to work in paradise. "From chefs, waiters and bartenders through to tour guides and deckhands on the Great Barrier Reef, there are plenty of great jobs up for grabs."

Before the pandemic began, up to 1.1 million short-term visitors arrived in Australia each month. That figure is now close to 8,000. With borders predicted to remain closed for another year and domestic tourism resurgent, analysts predict the problem could get worse.

In Western Australia, several mining companies have warned production will have to be cut and profits will be hit because posts are not being filled. Yesterday, the Virgin Australia airline group announced a recruitment drive to fill hundreds of new jobs and the launch of 700 more flights every week.

Although the problem has been made more acute by Australia's almost total border closure, economists predict other countries will face similar problems as the process of rolling back restrictions quickens. In the United States, Federal Reserve officials have warned of "bottle-necks" in the labour market as the economy transitions back to normal.

ANZ chief economist, Sharon Zollner this month warned the New Zealand economy was starting to show strains "as the economy tries to grow faster than it physically can be given shortages of both goods and labor". In Russia, the construction sector—which usually relies on a stream of cheaper migrant labourers—has turned to more expensive workers from Russia's regions.

There are small signs that Australian employers are beginning to pay more to attract



Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk offered A\$1,750 to anyone who moves there and starts a job in the tourism sector. — AFP

workers, with the wage price index rising 0.6 percent in the first quarter. But many appear to still be cautious after the biggest economic

shock in decades. "Wages growth should lift from here," said NAB Markets Research economist Taylor Nugent. — AFP

World needs 'new mindset for our survival': Goodall

PARIS: Humanity needs to discover a "new mindset for our survival" as the world exits the pandemic only to face the looming dual crises of climate change and nature loss, renowned conservationist Jane Goodall said yesterday.

In an interview with AFP, the world's pre-eminent primatologist said she was hopeful that COVID-19 could change people's approach to how we interact with Earth. "We basically brought this on ourselves by our disrespect of the natural world, forcing animals closer to people, making it easier for a pathogen to jump from an animal to a person," said Goodall.

"And then, our absolute disrespect of animals—hunting them, killing them, eating them, capturing them, trafficking them, forcing them into terrible conditions, unhygienic and very, very cruel intensive factory farms. "So hopefully this pandemic has woken people up. We must develop a new relationship with the natural world."

As Western nations start making tentative steps towards exiting the pandemic, COVID-19 is still rampaging through developing nations. Goodall warned against the temptation to rush back to unfettered economic growth at the expense of the planet and called on policymakers to redefine their approach to governance.

"Unfortunately there are too many people in power who are just eager to get back to business as usual. It's all about the bottom line, about money," she said.



British anthropologist and primatologist Jane Goodall takes the hand of a Spider Monkey during her visit to the Rehabilitation Center and Primate Rescue, in Penaflo, Chile. —AFP

"We have to somehow create a more sustainable, greener economy. We have to have a new mindset for our survival."

Goodall, 87, has dedicated her life to better understanding the animal kingdom and promoting conservation efforts. Born in London and without the funds to take a university course, she shot to international stardom in 1965 when she was featured on the cover of National Geographic for her trailblazing research on chimpanzees in Tanzania.

Her pioneering, up-close study of the behavior of chimpanzees in the 1960s was the first to observe them using tools, a capacity that was until then thought to belong only to humans.

In the decades since, Goodall has championed sustainable practices and the preservation of nature through grassroots organizations and initiatives in all corners of the planet. — AFP

Bitcoin tumble slows with help from Elon Musk

NEW YORK: Bitcoin's value plunged on Wednesday after China signaled a new crackdown on the cryptocurrency, but its losses were cushioned after Tesla head Elon Musk spoke up on Twitter.

The virtual currency fell to almost \$30,000 — less than half the record value it reached last month—before climbing back over \$39,500 around 2000 GMT. It was still above its level at the start of the year. Bitcoin recovered somewhat following tweets from Musk that featured a diamond and hands emoji, taken as a signal the company had not sold off its huge bitcoin holdings as the CEO appeared to suggest recently. At its daily low on Wednesday, the unit lost nearly a third of its value compared to the start of the week and more than half compared to its record, reached just a month ago, on April 14, at \$64,869.78.

Making matters worse, Chinese authorities on Wednesday said cryptocurrencies would not be allowed in transactions and warned investors against speculative trading in them, despite the country powering most of the world's mining. Trading in cryptocurrencies has been banned in China since 2019 to prevent money laundering, as leaders try to stop people from shifting cash overseas. The country had been home to around 90 percent of the global trade in the sector. In a statement, three state-backed industry associations said "cryptocurrency prices have skyrocketed and plummeted, and cryptocurrency trading speculation activities have rebounded." — AFP

Sports

Hamilton turns up heat ahead of Monaco fight

MONACO: Lewis Hamilton made the main threat to his Formula One supremacy bristle ahead of the return this weekend of the Monaco Grand Prix, suggesting Red Bull's Max Verstappen "feels he has a lot to prove". The Mercedes seven-time champion leads Verstappen by 14 points after four races in what is emerging as a gripping two-horse race for the 2021 drivers crown. The pair have produced some electric wheel-to-wheel action and Hamilton, who has three wins to Verstappen's one, acknowledged the "respect between us".

Their two cars have touched only once, at the first corner in Imola, with Hamilton saying: "I think I've done well to avoid all the incidents so far, but we've got 19 more (races) to go and we could connect, hopefully not." He added: "I think perhaps (Max) feels he has a lot to prove. I'm not necessarily in the same boat there and I'm more long-term, it's a marathon not a sprint' sort of mentality, which is ultimately why I have the stats that I have. So I'll continue with that and I'll do everything to make sure that we avoid connecting."

Verstappen responded when appearing later at the same Monaco media briefing, saying "I have nothing to prove". "And avoiding contact, I think it goes both ways. So we have done well, that's true. But we race hard, we've avoided contact both sides, so let's hope we can keep doing that and keep being on track and racing hard against each other."

Monaco's iconic street circuit is back on the F1 menu after last year's race was dropped from the coronavirus-disrupted season. The presence

of 7,500 fans is also an indication that gradually a degree of normalcy is returning to the sport's landscape. In 2019 Hamilton narrowly held off Verstappen to claim his third win in Monaco, and given Red Bull's improved performance this term he anticipates a ferocious fight on Sunday.

"Red Bull are going to be very, very hard to beat this weekend. This is a track that has always been strong for them, and given how close the gap is between us, you can imagine this weekend they could be ahead," said the Briton. "But we're going to do everything we can to make sure that's not the case."

'Unique'

Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff agreed. "We head into the weekend knowing they are the team to beat," said the Austrian who was thrilled to be back at the legendary F1 venue. "It's such a unique, intense weekend for the drivers and the team, with no margin for error. It puts the fire under your ass, and we love the challenge."

With today a rest day in Monaco first and second practice is held unusually on Thursday, ahead of third practice and qualifying tomorrow. The narrow streets make overtaking tricky, placing even greater emphasis on a front row seat in Sunday's grid - 11 of the past 15 winners started on pole. Hamilton is going for his 101st pole position and 99th win this weekend, while Verstappen has yet to take the chequered flag in the Principality.

Sunday's spin on the Mediterranean coast marks a significant milestone for Williams with



MONACO: Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton drives during the first practice session at the Monaco street circuit in Monaco yesterday ahead of the Monaco Formula 1 Grand Prix. —AFP

the British team celebrating their 750th grand prix start. Given the anniversary George Russell and Nicholas Latifi will be hoping to get their first points of the season on the board. The only other two teams to pass the 750-race mark are Ferrari and the resurgent McLaren who on Wednesday rewarded Lando Norris for his fine start with a multi-year contract.

The 21-year-old is flying high in fourth place in the drivers' standings, with his teammate Daniel Ricciardo, a two-time winner in Monaco, in seventh. In fifth in the 2021 drivers' title race is Ferrari's Charles Leclerc, who knows the circuit's twists and turns and bumps better than anyone being a local - his mum used to cut Monaco resident David Coulthard's hair. —AFP



KUWAIT: Secretary General of Kuwait Football Association (KFA) Salah Al-Qinae and Secretary of Kuwait E-sports Club Faisal Abul meet members of Kuwait e-football national team Abdullah Al-Reesh, Ahmad Salem and Othman Al-Shallal.

Performance of Kuwait e-football team lauded

KUWAIT: Secretary General of Kuwait Football Association (KFA) Salah Al-Qinae and Secretary of Kuwait E-sports Club Faisal Abul met members of Kuwait e-football national team (FIFA21 game) Abdullah Al-

Reesh, Ahmad Salem and Othman Al-Shallal. The meeting was held after the Kuwait national team's participation in the qualifying rounds of the Nations Cup Championship in the FIFA game.

The group Kuwait was included Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, South Africa and India. Kuwait's team could not qualify for the advanced rounds, although it competed hard and performed at a very high level, equaling world champions Saudi Arabia in the number of goals. Qinae thanked the team members for their efforts and wished them well for upcoming events. Abul said the team should participate at a level that honors Kuwait e-football.

'Victory' for Belarus opposition behind ice hockey championship

RIGA: Months of political drama reminiscent of the ice arena diplomacy of the Cold War era have led up to this year's ice hockey world championship starting in Latvia this week. The contest was supposed to be co-hosted by Latvia and Belarus until the latter was swept by mass protests and deadly repression after an election on August 9, 2020.

A group of athletes fiercely opposed to President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, campaigned for the championship to be taken away from the country. They were soon joined by Latvia which on Aug 17 said it no longer wanted Belarus to co-host, breaking with decades of collaboration between the two neighbors.

"Our main agenda is to do everything, if the situation in Belarus does not change, to move the championship elsewhere," Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics said at the time. The International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), the sport's Swiss-based governing body, took months to consider the request. Eventually, and after key sponsors withdrew their support, the IIHF on Jan 18 said it was stripping Belarus of its role.

Ice rinks were an arena for superpower rivalry during the Cold War, most famously between the US and Soviet teams. The more recent diplomatic showdown struck particularly close to home for Lukashenko - a keen ice hockey player who has promoted the sport and already hosted the world championships in 2014.

In an interview with a Russian journalist at the time, Lukashenko called the decision a "disgrace" and said there was "zero reason" not to allow Belarus to co-host the tournament. But he also sought to play down the snub, saying that "it'll pass" and that he was "not particularly worked up about it". —AFP

Sports

James' 34-ft dagger lifts playoff bound Lakers over Warriors

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James overcame blurred vision Wednesday to score a 34-foot three pointer with under a minute left as the Los Angeles Lakers rallied from a first half deficit to beat the Golden State Warriors 103-100 and reach the main draw of the NBA's West playoffs. James, who said he could only see out of one eye, hit the game winner for the defending NBA champions in dramatic fashion as it came over top of Warriors superstar Stephen Curry with the shot clock expiring.

Moments before the desperate heave from well back of the three-point line, James had been fouled hard by Warriors Draymond Green while he drove to the basket. James said he got poked in the eye which blurred his vision, but the four-time league MVP showed he is better with one eye than most players in the league with two. "After Draymond fingered me in the eye I was literally seeing three rims. I just shot for the middle one," said James, who had a triple double of 22 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists. The victory gives the Lakers the seventh seed in the West playoffs main draw and a first-round matchup with the second-seeded Phoenix Suns in a series that begins Sunday. The Warriors will get another chance to get into the main playoff draw, but they now must beat the Memphis Grizzlies on Friday. James and Green collided with just over two minutes left and the Warriors ahead 98-97.

The officials reviewed the play to see if it warranted a flagrant foul but after viewing the video decided to go with the lesser penalty. James, still smarting from the poke, made one of the two free throws to tie it 98-98. James joked later that he would have a pirate patch on his eye after the game. Instead, like a swashbuckling buccaneer, he stole a victory right out from under the Warriors'

Kluber throws sixth no-hitter of the season

LOS ANGELES: New York right hander Corey Kluber threw the sixth no-hitter of the 2021 Major League Baseball season and the second in as many days as the Yankees shutout the Texas Rangers 2-0 on Wednesday. The 35-year-old Kluber's no-no comes one day after Detroit Tigers pitcher Spencer Turnbull did it in a win over the Seattle Mariners. "This was a lot of fun," said Kluber, who tossed his first career no-hitter. "It was a well-played game on both sides, we were able to scratch out a few runs there. And it was fun to be a part of."

This is also the 12th no-hitter in Yankees history and the first since David Cone threw a perfect game against the Montreal Expos in July 1999. The former two-time American League Cy Young Award winner Kluber struck out nine batters and walked just one in front of a crowd of 31,600 at Globe Life Field in suburban Dallas.



LOS ANGELES: LeBron James #23 of the Los Angeles Lakers drives to the basket against the Golden State Warriors during the 2021 NBA Play-In Tournament on Wednesday at STAPLES Center. — AFP

noses. "I have been poked in the eye before so I just tried to keep my composure," said James.

It was a tale of two halves for the Lakers who were down 28-22 at the end of the first quarter and by 13 at halftime, 55-42. The Lakers turned the tables in the second half, outscoring the Warriors 35-24 in the third quarter and then made better plays down the stretch in the fourth. "They hit us in the mouth in the first half and we just had to respond and we did that," James said.

Curry poured in a game-high 37 points for the Warriors who were one of the hottest teams in

the league heading into Wednesday's play-in game. Golden State beat Memphis at home on the final day of the regular season to earn the eighth seed in the play-in tournament. Canada's Andrew Wiggins finished with 21 points for the Warriors while Green had two fouls and two turnovers in the last five minutes.

Green finished with five fouls, six turnovers and just two points. "They made a run in the third quarter and we turned the ball over," said Curry. Anthony Davis scored a team-high of 25 points and 12 rebounds for the Lakers.—AFP

'Tonight we celebrate Corey'

Kluber capped his no-hitter by getting Texas batter Willie Calhoun to ground out to shortstop Gleyber Torres in the bottom of the ninth. He started the inning by forcing Charlie Culberson to ground out to the second baseman DJ LeMahieu. Rangers batter David Dahl was up next and he lined out to right field for the second out. "Higgy (catcher Kyle Higashioka) was unbelievable back there tonight," Kluber said.

"I think we kept them off-balance pretty much the entire game. I made a couple pitches that probably weren't where we wanted them, but we were fortunate enough that they hit them right at some people." Culberson was the lone man on base for Texas after Kluber walked him in the third inning.

Kluber's feat came against his former Rangers team, who have now been blanked twice this season. San Diego Padres Joe Musgrove no-hit Texas on April 9 at Globe Life. Kluber played for the Rangers in 2020, pitching just one inning before his season came to a halt because of a torn right shoulder muscle. He signed a one-year contract with New York in January of this year. "Coming back from what he has been through the last couple of years of course I am excited for him," said Yankees manager Aaron Boone. "Tonight we celebrate Corey and a master performance."—AFP



ARLINGTON, Texas: Corey Kluber #28 of the New York Yankees throws after the third out against the Texas Rangers in the seventh inning at Globe Life Field on Wednesday. — AFP

Kluber retired the final 20 batters he faced and threw 71 of his 101 pitches for strikes. He was mobbed by his teammates after the game and the Texas crowd gave him a standing ovation. "It's all kind of emotions. It's excitement, obviously, but also relief because it's over," Kluber said. "We were fortunate in that they hit them right at people." It marks the fourth Yankee no-hitter to come in a road game and the first on the road since 1951.

Shifting expectations put Koeman's Barca future in doubt

MADRID: "We chose him because he knows Barcelona," said the club's then-president Josep Maria Bartomeu and after nine months in the job, Ronald Koeman will know exactly how this works. Barca stabilized, improved, won the Copa del Rey and won round Lionel Messi - at least for the season and perhaps for good - but while Koeman did a lot, it will almost certainly not be enough.

Joan Laporta, who succeeded Bartomeu as president in March, said on Tuesday a "cycle has finished" and although he may have been referring to another cull of expensive players, a new overhaul could mean a new coach too. Laporta said "a renewal process" is about to begin but that was Koeman's remit and in many ways he has done what was asked of him, overseeing a year of transition in which hope and respect were restored.

Yet when Spain's biggest prize suddenly came into view, Barcelona bolted, one win in four games leaving them adrift in the title race before defeat at home to Celta Vigo on Sunday left Koeman clinging to his job. La Liga's most exciting tussle in years will be contested this weekend not between the established grandees but Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid, Barca watching on in third, their game against Eibar so irrelevant their goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen is using the week to have knee surgery.

Koeman sees it more positively, the season ending where it began, without any real chance of serious silverware due to the change the club demanded and he has dutifully begun to carry out. "Barcelona are not about to win a lot of things right now," Koeman said in January. "We have to be realistic about where we've come from, the changes we've made."

For a while, many subscribed to Koeman's theory of low expectations, a poor start even reinforcing them before the 4-1 thrashing by Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League cemented Barcelona's new-found status as pretenders to the European elite. But the level required to win in Spain has been shown to be lower than in Europe and as the gap behind Atletico shrank through the spring, the stakes grew, a 14-match unbeaten run elevating Koeman while simultaneously increasing the distance he could fall.

When Koeman arrived, he was "welcomed home" as a "blaugrana legend" but his purpose was not so much to love the club he was returning to but to rip it up and start again. He was tasked with bringing a powerful dressing room onside while jettisoning some of its most successful players. He was told to make Messi happy after selling Luis Suarez, Messi's striker partner, neighbor and best friend.—AFP

Sports

Juve beat Atalanta to win Italian Cup

REGGIO EMILIA, Italy: Andrea Pirlo insisted he wanted to continue as Juventus coach after lifting his second trophy this season in the Coppa Italia final. The dethroned league champions beat Atalanta 2-1 to win the Italian Cup for the 14th time after winning the Super Cup in January. Federico Chiesa scored the winner with quarter of an hour to go after Dejan Kulusevski struck after half an hour, in a game played in front of fans for the first time in over a year.

"It was a great match, between two beautiful teams who fought to the end, a final worthy of this name, also a big celebration for the public, with

everything that has happened this season," said Pirlo, who turned 42 on Wednesday. "I would really like to sit on the Juventus bench again next year," he continued. "I think I did my job well day by day, trying to win finals. I would like to continue, I love this club."

Pirlo conceded that his first ever coaching job has seen "many difficulties". "These victories do not cancel out those ups and downs," said the 2006 World Cup winner. "It's a season where I learned a lot." Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini, 63, was denied a first trophy of his coaching career, and his club's second trophy after the 1963 Coppa Italia.

"It's a disappointment," said Gasperini. "We are happy to be at this level, to be able to play this type of game and to qualify for the Champions League for the third consecutive season."

Buffon goes full circle

It was a boost for Juventus who go into the final weekend of the season with their Champions League qualification going down to the wire after Inter Milan ended their nine-year league reign. Gianluigi Buffon was in the Juventus goal for the final time in his career and the veteran keeper was solid on the night winning his sixth Coppa Italia 22 years after his first with Parma, where he played alongside Chiesa's father Enrico.

The veteran pulled off a big save just after kick-off at the Mapei Stadium in Reggio Emilia. Duvan Zapata had pulled back for Jose Luis Palomino with 43-year-old Buffon using his legs to stop the ball. Zapata pounced on a sloppy Matthijs De Ligt back-pass but Buffon again cleared after quarter of an hour and denied Hans Hateboer after 35 minutes.

Despite the Bergamo side's early domination Juve made the breakthrough after half an hour. Cristiano Ronaldo went down but amid a scramble in front of goal Weston McKennie sent the ball across to Kulusevski who curled into the net. But ten minutes later Ruslan Malinovskyi blasted in the equalizer. Pierluigi Gollini denied Kulusevski a second just before the hour after good work from Chiesa. Chiesa then clipped the post after latching onto a Ronaldo backheel flick. But the former Fiorentina forward made no mistake with quarter of an hour remaining after combining with Kulusevski to beat Gollini. It was Juventus's first Coppa Italia since 2018, having finished runners-up last year to Napoli. Atalanta also lost the 2019 final to Lazio.—AFP



BURNLEY: Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah (left) vies with Burnley's English defender Charlie Taylor during an English Premier League match at Turf Moor on Wednesday. — AFP

Liverpool move into top 4, Spurs' hopes dented

LONDON: Liverpool set up a dramatic final-day battle to qualify for the Champions League with a vital 3-0 win at Burnley, while Tottenham's bid to reach the Europa League suffered a blow in a 2-1 defeat against Aston Villa on Wednesday. Jurgen Klopp's side moved into fourth place in the Premier League thanks to goals from Roberto Firmino, Nathaniel Phillips and Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain.

Liverpool are above fifth-placed Leicester on goal difference, with the Reds on +24 and the Foxes on +20. If Liverpool win their final game at home to Crystal Palace on Sunday, they should finish in the top four and salvage a difficult campaign that saw them tamely surrender the title to Manchester City. Leicester host Tottenham on Sunday, while third-placed Chelsea, one point above Liverpool, travel to Aston Villa.

Firmino put Liverpool on course for their fourth consecutive victory with a clinical finish from Andy Robertson's 43rd minute cross. Phillips got the second goal in the 52nd minute with a header from Sadio Mane's cross for his first goal for the club. Oxlade-Chamberlain lashed in Liverpool's third in the 88th minute. "We had to win the 'semi-final' and we did. Nothing is decided yet but we improved our position and we have the final," Klopp said. "That's what we needed. It's what we deserve because this was a top performance."

Fifth and sixth place finishes secure a spot in next season's Europa League, while seventh place brings entry into a play-off for the new Europa Conference League. Tottenham will have to wait until their last game of the season to discover their European destiny. A second defeat in their last three games left them in seventh place, level on points with eighth-placed Everton and three points behind sixth-placed West Ham.

They will have to beat Leicester and hope West Ham lose to Southampton to pip their London rivals on goal difference. Harry Kane was named in Tottenham's starting line-up just days after reportedly telling the club he wants to leave.—AFP



REGGIO EMILIA, Italy: Juventus' Italian goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon holds the winner's trophy as Juventus players celebrate winning the final of the Italian Cup (Coppa Italia) against Atalanta on Wednesday at the Citta del Tricolore stadium. — AFP

PSG win French Cup in domestic double bid

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain have a domestic double in their sights after they won the French Cup by beating Monaco 2-0 in Wednesday's final at the Stade de France. Goals from Mauro Icardi and Kylian Mbappe won a largely uninspiring final for PSG who now go into the weekend's final round of Ligue 1 fixtures with a record-equalling 10th league title still a possibility. The French champions have now won the French Cup six times in the last seven seasons having reached the final every year since 2015.

It was also the second trophy of coach Mauricio Pochettino's managerial career after he won the Champions Trophy for PSG in January, although this will for many count as his first major honor. "We work every day to experience this kind of feeling, reward and recognition," said Mbappe. "It's the work of a whole group, staff, all the people who work every day for us, the club and of course the supporters who couldn't be there. We think a lot about the fans and this title is for them as well."

Monaco meanwhile continue their wait to win the French Cup for the first time since 1991, in their first final since 2010 when they were also beaten by PSG. Niko Kovac's side have however had a positive season and can finish it on a happy note at the week-

end by qualifying for the Champions League for the first time since 2018.

Low-key occasion

Played with no fans present, in contrast to England's FA Cup final and the Italian Cup final which was being played on the same evening, the match lacked the sense of occasion that would normally characterize an end-of-season showpiece between two of France's most famous clubs. It was also jammed in the middle of the denouement to possibly Europe's most exciting league title race, with PSG trailing leaders Lille by a single point heading into the final round of fixtures this weekend.

Monaco are also not technically out of the run-

ning for the league as they sit three points behind Lille, but realistically they have to protect their place in the final Champions League slot from Lyon, who are a point behind them. PSG opened the scoring in the 19th minute thanks to a horrendous error from Monaco defender Axel Disasi, who miscontrolled a pass from goalkeeper Radoslaw Majecki and allowed Kylian Mbappe to steal the ball.

The France forward was then left with the simple task of squaring the ball to Icardi, who tapped into an open goal. The goal failed to spark the match into life, with the nearest the opening period came to another goal being Alessandro Florenzi's long-range shot in the 33rd minute which Majecki comfortably tipped over.—AFP



PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's Brazilian defender Marquinhos celebrates with the trophy after winning the French Cup final against Monaco at the Stade de France stadium in Saint-Denis on Wednesday. — AFP



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