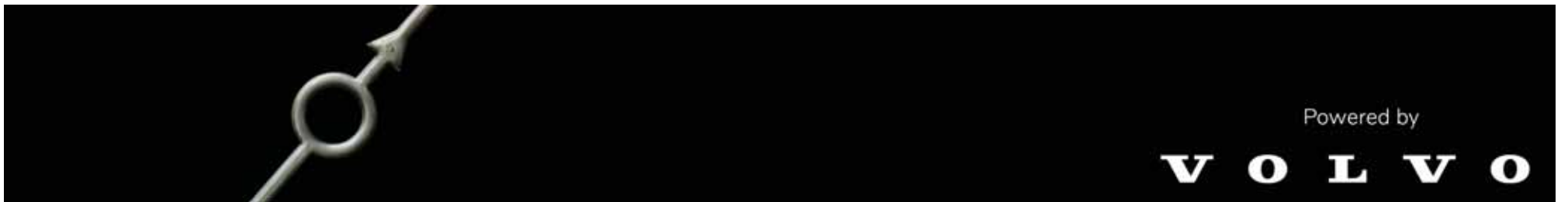


Friday Times

ISSUE NO: 18445

SHAWWAL 16, 1442 AH | FRIDAY, MAY 28, 2021



KUWAIT: MPs attend a special parliament session yesterday. (Inset) National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, wearing a facemask with the pattern of the traditional Palestinian keffiyeh, speaks during the session. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Assembly rewards frontliners; nod to widen Zionist boycott

See Page 9



HOW NEW SALE REGULATIONS WILL AFFECT BUYING GOLD IN KUWAIT

By Nawara Fattahova

Kuwait's Minister of Commerce and Industry Dr Abdullah Al-Salman issued a new ministerial decision earlier this week regarding precious handmade crafts and jewelry, imposing new regulations, namely tagging each displayed piece with a price. The precious jewelry commercial shops should tag the piece they sell with fixed price, and the price should be registered in the shop's commercial record, the ministry explained.

The new decree that regulates the way gold and jewelry are sold in Kuwait was recently published in Kuwait Al-Youm official gazette. According to the decree, which went into effect on May 9, 2021, jewelry shops are obliged to place a label on each piece of gold jewelry that includes the following:

- Name of the company
- Barcode connected to an electronic system
- Karat
- Type of gold
- Weight
- The making charge
- Type of gems used

Regarding silver and platinum jewelry, the label on each piece should include the same information as for gold pieces; in addition, the total price of the piece should be mentioned on the label. For other precious jewelry, the label should include the name of the company, barcode connected to the electronic system, description of the gem (weight, color, cut and quality), karat, type and weight of the metal.

The ministry decree also mentions that some pieces are sold separately due to their special nature, so they should be placed in a separate and visible part of the shop. Each of these pieces should have a label including the name of the company, barcode connected to the electronic system, weight, type of metal and the description of the gem or stone if available.

Kuwait Times visited more than 10 gold shops in old Salmiya gold market, but none of them were aware of the new decree. They were only aware of ministerial decree 283/2019, which obliges shops to place a label stating the making charge. This making charge differs depending on the country where the piece was made.

At these shops, there was one label mentioning the making charges for a box with over 50 different pieces, but from the same country. One shop even told Kuwait Times that for gold pieces from Italy, there is no making charge. The making charge is calculated differently. For small pieces like pendants and most rings, it's calculated per piece. In this case, the charge starts from KD 7. For larger pieces like bracelets, necklaces, etc, the making charge is calculated per gram, which usually starts from KD 2.

At the Mubarakiya gold market, many shops were aware of the new decree and most of their pieces were marked with detailed labels. Many salesmen said the short notice period of a week was not enough to prepare labels for all the pieces, but they are working on it. Other shops in the market were not aware of the new decree and didn't have the

new labels or only had labels with the making charges. All the shops said inspectors from the ministry of commerce hadn't visited this week for checks.

At Watiya Complex, some jewelry shops were aware of the new decree, while most were not. Larger stores had labels on all the

pieces, some smaller ones had labels on a few items, while some shops didn't have labels on any piece. The salesmen at all of these shops said the complete details about the sold piece will be printed in the invoice.

How to buy gold in Kuwait

There are many gold markets in Kuwait, but the biggest and most popular one is in Mubarakiya. It is also the oldest, with hundreds of shops. Then there is the gold market in Watiya Complex, also in Kuwait City, a gold market in Salmiya on Salem Al-Mubarak Street opposite Marina Mall, and a popular gold market in Fahaheel, which is also very old. In Hawally, there is a small gold market which consists of a few shops next to each other on Ibn Khaldoun Street. There are several other gold stores in other areas and shopping malls.

A gold piece of jewelry doesn't have a fixed price, as the prices differ depend-

ing on the price of gold on that day. So after choosing a piece, the salesperson will place it on the scale and calculate the price. But the new regulation says the weight should be mentioned on the label stuck to the piece, so the salesperson only calculates the price.

The exception to this rule are international jewelry brands such as Cartier, Tiffani, Gucci, etc. The prices of pieces in these stores are fixed and do not change daily according to the price of gold. After buying any piece, the customer should receive a receipt with the complete description of the item they bought, the price and their name.

In case of any complaints, they can always seek the help of the customer protection department of the ministry of commerce. Also, the invoice is important in case the customer wants to sell the piece later, as most shops demand it, especially if the piece is expensive.

Kuwait Times

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Local

PHOTO FEATURE



Ahmad Surur — KUNA



As'ad Abdullah — Al-Rai



Ghazi Qaffaf — KUNA

The photojournalists of Kuwait

'Risking life and limb to capture the country's key moments'

By Nawara Fattahova

The job of a photojournalist can be challenging and even dangerous. Capturing the moments when flood waters overwhelm a highway, when a military invades a country, when a group of alleged terrorists engage in a shootout with police takes grit, courage and incredible amounts of patients. Kuwait Times spoke with some of the country's longest serving and most well-known news photographers to learn more about the moments that make up a career and a life as a photojournalist.

Yasser Ahmad Al-Zayyat started his career in 1991 with Al Seyassah Daily. Then he worked for Yaqaza Magazine, and in 2000 he joined the Kuwait Times. "The most difficult assignment was shooting during the war on Iraq between the years 2003 to 2007. I was lucky I didn't get injured, but it was dangerous, although I

enjoyed it," he stated.

Husni Hilal, head of the photography department at Al-Qabas newspaper, has been working as a photojournalist since 1992. "I first joined Al Fajr Al Jadeed magazine in 1992, then worked with Al-Deera magazine, Al-Anbaa daily and finally Al-

Qabas. The most difficult assignment was during the chaos and gatherings at the Harbash Diwan in 2010, when special forces were called to enforce the law. I took an iconic photo that was published in various media. Another interesting photo was of a letter furtively passed by the head of the financial committee to the minister of finance," he told Kuwait Times.

Jaber Abdulkhaleq started his career as a photojournalist in 2006. "I first joined Alam Al-Youm newspaper, then Al-Jarida newspaper. In 2011 I joined KUNA, where I work till today. I still remember a very embarrassing situation when I went with a reporter to interview an MP for the first issue of the newspaper. But when the issue was published, it badly criticized this MP, who called the newspaper and complained. He was very angry," he recalled.

Hashim Al-Yousef is the head of the photography department at Al-Nahar daily. He became a photojournalist when he joined Al-Dana magazine in 2005. After

two years, he joined Al-Nahar, and still works there. "One of the most embarrassing and funny situations was when I had an interview with a VIP along with a reporter. I was late and rushed to the place in a hurry, so I forgot that I didn't have a memory card in my camera. I had to repeat the photoshoot. The most difficult moments were during the demonstrations and protests," he said.

Ghazi Qaffaf is the oldest photojournalist in Kuwait. He started his career in 1979 when he joined Al-Watan newspaper. He also worked for Kuwait Times, Riyadat Al-Jamaheer, Al-Jarida and finally KUNA, where he has been working for the past 12 years, in addition to Chinese news agency Xinhua. "I have experienced many difficult moments, out of which the Iraq-Iran war was one of the toughest. I took photos of Al Faw's liberation on 8/8/1988 when the shooting stopped, along with UN forces," he told Kuwait Times.

"During the floods three years ago, I fell into a manhole in the street and was hold-

Yasser Ahmad Al-Zayyat
Kuwait Times

Local



Heshim Al-Yousef — Al-Nahar



Husni Hilal — Al-Qabas



Jaber Abdulkhaleq — KUNA

ing the camera high while half of my body was under water. I succeeded in saving the camera from getting damaged, and they later pulled me out. Now I focus on taking photos of birds, which I enjoy the most. I have held two exhibitions of my photos - in 1990 and 2017," added Qaffaf.

As'ad Abdullah became a photojournalist in 2005 after joining Al-Seyassah daily. Two years later, he joined Al-Rai newspaper and is the head of the department now. He was seriously injured and was taken to hospital while taking photos of a demonstration in Sabah Al-Nasser. "One of the participants who was escaping from the police hit me with his vehicle. The funniest and longest assignment was when I went to photograph the 'Hawally Monster' during his court hearing. I went very early with another photographer, at 5:00 am. I told him I will rest for 30 minutes only, but he also fell asleep. We woke up after more than an hour and missed the suspect entering the court. So we had to wait about 12 hours till 6:00 pm, when he left," said Abdullah.

Rezq Tawfeeq, the head of the photography department at Al-Seyassah, started his career as a photojournalist in 1999 when he joined the paper. "The worst assignment in my career was when I went to take a photo of a man who just died after an overdose in front of his family's

house. I took the photo with a flash, and his family saw me. The men gathered and beat me so badly that I thought I would die. We later went to the police station and resolved the matter. Another time I was beaten was when I went with other photographers to shoot at the cemetery. The family of the deceased got into a fight over whether the deceased was a martyr or not. They start fighting and then attacked the photographers. Some of them had their cameras broken," recalled Tawfeeq.

Ahmad Surur started his career as a photojournalist in Syria in 1983. He arrived in Kuwait in 1991 and joined Al-Seyassah. He then worked for Al-Rai, Al-Anbaa, Awan, Al-Qabas and finally KUNA, where



Mahmoud Jadeed — Al-Seyassah

he still works. "The most difficult assignment was in Somalia. I went with a team from Al-Anbaa during the war there. I was arrested there and was about to be executed. The head of the delegation Adnan Al-Rashed worked quickly to free me from prison. Also, shooting military actions in Iraq was tough from near the border. The most interesting assignment was when I went onboard an aircraft carrier in the Arabian Gulf and Sea," Surur said.

Mahmoud Jadeed became a photojournalist in 2006 when he joined Al-Seyassah, where he works till today. "The most painful assignment was during a football match in which my son was a goalkeeper. While I was taking photos,

one of the players shot the ball at my face, injuring me," he said.

Jamal Al-Minshawi joined Al-Qabas in 2000 as a photojournalist and still works there. "The most interesting assignment was when we went to photograph a suicidal woman in Salwa. The woman was at the window of a flat on the third floor, and the weather was hot. It was 1:00 pm, and by 4:00 pm, the photographers got tired and decided to leave. They put their cameras down, but I didn't. A few minutes later the woman jumped, and I was the only one who took a photo. She didn't die as the police had already placed mattresses across the entire area," he recalled.

Mohammed Morsi Al-Habaal, started working in 2003 at Shu Fe Ma Fe Magazine as a dealer. He then passed a course of photography and start taking photos for the same magazine. Later he joined Habayibna Magazine, the Oil Ministry, and finally Al-Seyassah Daily where he works till now. "The most exciting assignment was during a diving coverage in Khairan. While we were taking photos a colleague fall from the boat and he was holding pulling me. I was about to fall in the sea with my camera, but my friends rescued me and I saved the camera," he noted.



Jamal Al-Minshawi — Al-Qabas



Mohammad Morsi Al-Habaal
Al-Seyassah



Rezq Tawfeeq
Al-Seyassah

Local

By Ben Garcia

Are you brushing your teeth regularly? How many times daily? Why is it necessary for children to visit a dentist?

These questions and more were answered by Dr Sumant Mishra, Pediatric Dentist at the Ministry of Health, during an interview with Kuwait Times. Dr Mishra said oral dental hygiene is as important as other health issues.

"You have to care about dental and oral hygiene because it affects you as a human and your ability to eat and speak properly. It also affects your poise and confidence, and that is why we advise parents to address the issue of dental hygiene of children as early as six months old," he said. But children's teeth at this age are not permanent, so why the fuss?



Expat dentist helps kids in Kuwait learn dental hygiene

EARLY TRAINING KEY TO CHILDREN'S DENTAL HEALTH

"Because we want our kids to learn the importance of dental hygiene and inculcate it in their subconscious. Normally, baby teeth start to appear when they are between six months to almost a year old. Even at the age of three months, you'll notice babies are exploring by their mouths, and this is the right time for parents to intervene slowly by giving them safe teething tools. Sometimes if they are teething, babies feel discomfort. A soft baby toothbrush can stimulate their minds and massage their gums. Cotton fabric and biscuits help too," Mishra said.

"If you train them early, they will definitely make brushing a regular habit and you will never have problems of tooth pain, abscess or swelling, and won't need a root canal or other surgeries. I want to reiterate the importance of dental and oral hygiene. We need it more than anything else for our lives to be great every day. We need to brush our teeth every time we eat, but two times daily is ideal," he said. He said children should visit their dentists every three months, while adults should do so

at least twice a year.

Dr Mishra is a dedicated Indian pediatric dental doctor at Bnied Al-Gar Specialized Dental Clinic and Amiri Hospital. His early years as a dentist were spent in India and Europe, before he came to Kuwait at the invitation of the ministry of health in 2009. "I became interested in the care of children because I believe they are most important component of the society and are the future of any society. When we are treating a child, we are not just treating their teeth. We are treating them psychologically and are indirectly communicating with the child and their parents, giving them hope that they will be okay," he said.

"I treat children like I want my kids to be treated - with compassion and empathy and following all infection, health, safety and hygiene protocols.

The child walks inside the dental center crying, but walks out smiling. How immensely satisfying this is for a dentist," Mishra told Kuwait Times.

One of his many passions is to serve various communities of expats in Kuwait through social work and dental camps, and sharing his expertise through seminars and workshops. "Apart from my regular job at Amiri Hospital, I've been doing lots of charity work for various community organizations here in Kuwait. Before the pandemic, I was also invited to schools. Now I hold virtual events," he said.

"I have helped the Nepali, Bangladeshi, Egyptian, Sri Lankan, Filipino, Palestinian and Pakistani communities in Kuwait. Most of the time I do it for free. I have even been invited outside Kuwait to conduct dental camps and seminars, for example, when I went

to Nepal. I am often invited by Kuwait TV's English channel to talk about dental care, especially for kids. My belief is that if you care for others, God will take care of the rest, and when you share, your rewards will multiply hundredfold," Dr Mishra said.

A native of Chhapra in India's Bihar state, Mishra completed his bachelor's degree in dental surgery from the University of New Delhi as a gold medalist. He then worked at North Cumbria NHS Trust in Scotland. He did his master's in clinical pediatric dentistry from Queen Mary's University in London and obtained a postgraduate certificate from Finland's University of Helsinki with honors.

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Local

Kuwait regrets int'l inaction towards Zionist attacks on Gaza

'World stood idle as Zionist entity disregarded laws in deadly offensive'



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah attends United Nations Human Rights Council emergency virtual session to discuss the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories. — KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said it is "regrettable" that the international community stood idle as the Zionist entity disregarded international law and United Nations resolutions in its deadly offensive on Gaza. "As the occupying power of Palestinian land and other Arab territories, the Zionist entity continues its various violations. This calls for the necessity of implementing the principle of accountability for all of its violations of international law in the occupied Palestinian territories and to not allow the occupying power to believe that it has the green light to continue committing its crimes without any repercussions," said the minister.

Sheikh Ahmad, who doubles as Kuwait's State Minister for Cabinet Affairs, led Kuwait's delegation at a United Nations Human Rights

Council emergency session to discuss the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories after the Zionist entity's 11-day bombardment of Gaza. The attacks killed 250 Palestinians, including 66 children, and wounded around 2,000 others. "The displacement (of Palestinians) and building of settlements in Jerusalem, particularly in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, which the occupying power is undertaking, is a clear and explicit violation of international law on human rights, the Fourth Geneva Convention and all relevant international resolutions," he added.

The minister called on the Human Rights Council to activate legal mechanisms aimed at ensuring the Zionist entity's accountability for these actions. He insisted that the "credibility" of the Human Rights Council is "at stake" if

these violations are "not dealt with decisively" and a "clear message" is not sent in response, urging member states to vote in favor of the draft resolution presented at the session. The minister warned that the "roots of this crisis remain in place" as the Zionist entity continues its siege on Gaza and its settlement expansions on occupied Palestinian lands, in spite of the May 21 cease-fire, pointing out that the situation is likely to "explode again at any moment."

"Hence, we stress the need to address the root causes of the humanitarian conditions of the brotherly Palestinian people. This can only be achieved by ending the occupation and achieving comprehensive peace, as a strategic option for us, in accordance with international resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative," he concluded. — KUNA

Kuwaiti urgent aid convoy arrives in Gaza Strip: KRCS

GAZA: A Kuwait urgent humanitarian aid convoy carrying medical supplies arrived in the Gaza Strip, said Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) yesterday. In a statement to the press, KRCS Director of Disaster and Emergency Management, Yousef Al-Maraj affirmed that

the society has provided about 85 tons of food, medical supplies and wheelchairs to the Palestinian Red Crescent. Maraj expressed the society's readiness to provide more relief aid through the donation campaign organized by the KRCS under the slogan 'With You, Palestine'. He thanked the Egyptian Red Crescent for its assistance in bringing the convoy into the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Red Crescent for its efforts to deliver this aid to hospitals. Meanwhile, head of the foreign aid committee Mahmoud Hammad, thanked Kuwait's Amir, people and government for their continued generosity. — KUNA



Zain sponsored AUM's virtual career fair

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced its gold sponsorship of the American University of the Middle East's Virtual Career Fair 2021. The event, organized by AUM's Tawteen Career Development and Recruitment center, was held from 24 - 25 May and is considered the first virtual career fair of its kind in Kuwait.

Zain is proud to continue supporting this career fair on an annual basis given the high turnouts it witnesses from over 15,000 students and graduates. As the health situation did not allow the fair to be held as usual at AUM's campus in Egaila, the university was keen on holding it virtually using the latest technologies to give students and alumni the opportunity to find lucrative careers during such unprecedented times.

During the virtual fair, students and alumni learned about Zain's leading experience in the telecom sector, as well as its internal policy and wonderful work atmosphere. The company participated in the event through a virtual booth, where it highlighted the available job vacancies, provided a detailed explanation of the nature of work at various departments and divisions, as well as answered questions and inquiries visitors had.

Zain is always eager to participate in career fairs all year round as part of its Human Resources strategy, which closely focuses on supporting the education sector hand in hand with various universities, colleges, and educational institutions in Kuwait (both public and private), with the aim of providing students and graduates with career opportunities in the private sector.

Zain is committed to playing an active role in the investment in the human capital of Kuwait. The company seeks to provide young and eager Kuwaitis with job opportunities that allow them to apply their practical skills, achieve their potential, and fully develop their capabilities.



Local

Assembly passes law to reward KD 600 million to frontline workers

MPs condemn Zionist atrocities, nod to widen boycott law

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The National Assembly yesterday overwhelmingly approved a law allocating KD 600 million to grant financial rewards for over 200,000 frontline workers who worked in the campaign against the coronavirus pandemic.

The assembly also agreed in principle on amendments to widen the scope and penalties of a Zionist entity boycott law stipulating a jail sentence of up to three years for dealing with Israel, as MPs strongly condemned Zionist aggressions on Jerusalem and the Palestinians.

At the start of the special session, leading opposition MP Obaid Al-Wasmi, who made a historical victory in a by-election on Saturday, took the oath to officially become a member of parliament. The frontline workers' rewards law was passed by 61 MPs and opposed by one member, MP Adnan Abdulsamad who strongly criticized the law for its limited scope and lack of regulations.

The law is applicable to Kuwaiti and expatri-

ate employees who took part in the efforts to combat the coronavirus pandemic in the period between February 24 - May 31, 2020. Abdulsamad criticized the law for not including frontline workers who worked after June 1, 2020 until now, even those who may be infected or die as a result. He said the legislation is not needed and the government can grant the rewards through Cabinet decisions if it was serious enough. He said that the State Audit Bureau has stated that the number of beneficiaries has been highly inflated as many undeserved workers will be paid while some who deserve it will not be paid.

Finance Minister Khalifa Hamada said that the frontline workers have been classified into high risk and medium risk groups and that Kuwaitis who died while combating the disease will be treated as "martyrs" while non-Kuwaitis who died will be paid ten times their salary.

MP Abdullah Al-Turaiji said that based on the lists of names, as many as 198,000 employees do not actually deserve the rewards.

Opposition MP Hasan Jowhar strongly criticized the government for failing to handle this issue adding that "the biggest reward for the Kuwaiti people is the departure of this government."

Stand with Palestine

In the meantime, a large number of MPs hailed the position of the Kuwaiti government and people towards the Zionist aggressions on the Palestinians and the disposition of Palestinian homes in Jerusalem.

The assembly unanimously passed in principle legislation to toughen penalties against dealing with or visiting the Zionist entity by both Kuwaiti citizens and expats who have legal residence permits in the country. The assembly asked the legal and legislative and foreign affairs committee to revise the legislation to be approved in the next session.

Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem read a statement approved by the assembly in which it expressed continuous solidarity and support with the Palestinian people until they establish

their independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The statement expressed the assembly's strong condemnation of the latest Zionist aggression on Gaza and the Zionist crimes in Jerusalem, the West Bank and against the Palestinians in the territories occupied in 1948.

The assembly also rejected a report by its educational committee which called to hold the higher secondary examinations online as only 26 MPs voted for the report from 53 members in attendance. This means that the education ministry will hold written exams in classrooms despite strong warnings by opposition MPs that the health situation is not suitable for gathering students in exam halls.

Education Minister Ali Al-Mudhaf said that stringent health conditions will be applied during the exams as six students only will sit in an examination room with a maximum of 25 rooms in a school. He however said that if the health conditions deteriorate, the ministry will hold online exams instead.



KUWAIT: Finance Minister Khalifa Hamada speaks during a special parliament session yesterday. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah speaks with MPs during the session.

Court repeals death sentence in maid's murder case

KUWAIT: The appeals court overruled a court of first instance ruling that sentenced a Kuwaiti woman to death after she was accused of killing her Filipina domestic helper, and instead sentenced her to 15 years in jail. The case had caused a rift in Kuwait-Philippines relations and prompted Philippines authorities to ban its labor from traveling to Kuwait.

The ruling came after the court determined that premeditation was not present in the case. The court meanwhile upheld the suspect's husband's four-year jail sentence. Al-Anbaa Arabic daily reported yesterday. The public prosecu-

tion had charged the suspect with premeditated murder, saying that she attacked the victim with an iron and a car key on various parts of her body, including the head and chest, with the intention of killing her. The suspect's motives were suspicions she had that the maid had a relationship with her husband, and carried out black magic to separate the married couple.

The suspect was also accused of forcing the victim to work for extended periods of time, causing her health to deteriorate. The prosecution also charged the two suspects of human trafficking, failure to fulfill their duties towards the victim, and forced her to work illegally, and refraining from taking her to hospital in fear that her injuries would expose their abuse, which ultimately led to her death. The wife was also charged with giving false information to health authorities when she lied to get a prescription medication to treat the maid at home, instead of taking the maid to see a doctor.

Ending coronavirus lockdowns increases global oil prices: Analysts

KUWAIT: The recent rise in oil prices around the world is due to an increase in fuel demand after the coronavirus lockdowns ended as many people took the COVID-19 vaccination, said two Kuwaiti oil analysts. In separate statements yesterday, the analysts noted that OPEC Plus succeeded in maintaining a balance between oil offer and demand, leading to a rise in prices.

The international rise in oil prices earlier this year was thought to be temporary, howev-

er, OPEC, led by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait was able to maintain these prices with the OPEC Plus group, professor of oil engineering at Kuwait University Dr Ahmad Al-Kouh noted. OPEC Plus maintained prices by decreasing the amount of offered oil in the markets, he added. Maintaining prices around \$65 per barrel until the end of 2021 would be a big achievement for OPEC Plus, Kouh also said.

In the meantime, analyst Jamal Al-Gharaballi said there are positive signs of recovery in the world economy, with the decrease in COVID-19 cases and the OPEC Plus' agreement on limiting oil production to specific rates. He noted that there are positive improvements in the US-Iranian file and expectations that Iran would export extra amounts of oil. In order to face this increase in Iranian exports, OPEC Plus might decrease the number of other countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, Gharaballi said.



Montenegro learns true cost of China-backed road to nowhere

Zionist attacks on Gaza may constitute 'war crimes': UN

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MELBOURNE: People queue at a vaccination center in Melbourne yesterday after five million people in Melbourne were ordered into a snap week-long lockdown following another COVID-19 virus outbreak. — AFP

Drug-makers hunt for a pill to cure COVID

Seeking alternative to vaccines, companies are working on oral antivirals

WASHINGTON: Prevention is better than cure—but when it comes to COVID, what happens when people can't get the vaccine, don't want it, or they're immune suppressed and it fails to stop infection? The hunt is on for a coronavirus treatment that can be taken as a pill soon after a confirmed positive, halting the disease in its tracks so that cases that might have been severe end up being nothing more than a bad cold.

Several companies are working on so-called oral antivirals, which would mimic what the drug Tamiflu does for influenza. "It's great that we have vaccine rollout that has been significant, but it certainly will not be taken by everybody in our population, and not everybody who takes the vaccine will have a full response to it," David Hirschwerk, an infectious diseases physician at Northwell Health in New York told AFP.

An easily storable and transportable pill would also offer practical advantages over existing treatments such as monoclonal antibodies, which are mainly injected by drips at hospital infusion centers.

One of the frontrunners in these efforts is a twice-a-day drug called Molnupiravir, which is being developed by Merck in partnership with Ridgeback Biotherapeutics.

Early results from a Phase 2 trial showed that, among dozens of volunteers who tested positive at the start, none of those who received the drug had any detectable virus by day five; while a quarter of those who received a placebo did. The numbers are promising but too small to draw firm conclusions from, and the company is now enrolling for a Phase 3 trial involving 1,850 people with results expected by fall. "Viruses are basically little machines and they need certain components to replicate themselves," Daria Hazuda, Merck's chief scientific officer of the company's exploratory science center, told AFP. Antivirals are designed to interfere with that process.

Molnupiravir belongs to a class of antiviral called "polymerase inhibitors," which work by targeting an enzyme that viruses need to copy their genetic material, and introducing mutations that leave them unable to replicate. Because antibodies target a surface protein of the coronavirus that is continually evolving, antivirals are expected to be more variant-proof.

Currently, there's just one antiviral approved by the Food and Drug Administration to treat COVID, which is Remdesivir by Gilead Sciences. Like Molnupiravir, it is a polymerase

inhibitor, though their precise actions differ. Remdesivir's biggest disadvantage is that it was developed as an intravenous drug and targeted at hospitalized Covid patients, among whom it was shown to modestly reduce recovery time.

But by the time COVID has progressed to severe, much of the harm to patients' health comes from their own immune systems going into overdrive and damaging their organs, rather than viral replication. That's why the focus now is on oral formulations that can be taken within days of infection, and apart from Merck, there are a few other notable entrants.

Roche and Atea have begun a 1,400 patient trial to study their own oral polymerase inhibitor, AT-527.

"This drug has so far been shown to be very potent in vitro," Jean-Pierre Sommadossi, founder and CEO of Atea said. "I think that after the pandemic, you're going to have a phase which is going to be endemic," he predicted, with the company hoping to file for authorization by the end of the year and launch the drug by 2022.

Pfizer, which has developed one of pandemic's foremost vaccines, is also attracting significant attention for its oral drug PF-07321332, which has begun Phase 1 human trials in healthy

patients. Its timeline is a little behind the others, because the medicine, which belongs to a class called "protease inhibitors," was designed specifically against the SARS-CoV-2 virus, with work beginning in March 2020.

Protease enzymes act as molecular scissors that cut long protein chains into smaller pieces, that are then re-assembled as part of viral replication. "Our investigational orally-administered protease inhibitor was designed to 'fit into' the protease (ie stick into the scissors) and 'block it' (i.e. keep the scissors from working)," Charlotte Allerton, head of medicine design for Pfizer, said. The company is hoping to expand to late stage studies by the middle of this year, she added. All the drugmakers also plan to study their medicines for preventative use among close contacts of infected people.

The antivirals under development have demonstrated effectiveness in lab studies against other types of coronaviruses—some of which cause serious diseases like SARS and MERs, while others cause the cold. "If it is proven to be very safe and proven to be effective, then it can be used broadly, irrespective of the diagnosis, to treat and prevent multiple respiratory infections," said Hazuda of Merck's product. — AFP

International

Zionist attacks on Gaza may constitute 'war crimes': UN

No evidence that buildings targeted in Gaza were used for military purposes

GENEVA: Zionist's recent deadly air strikes on Gaza may constitute war crimes, the UN rights chief said yesterday, as countries discussed launching a broad, international investigation. Addressing a special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Michelle Bachelet voiced deep concern about the "high level of civilian fatalities and injuries" from the attacks on Gaza. "If found to be indiscriminate and disproportionate in their impact on civilians and civilian objects, such attacks may constitute war crimes," she warned.

She also said her office had "not seen evidence" that the buildings targeted in Gaza, including residential homes, medical facilities and media offices, were "hosting armed groups or being used for military purposes", as claimed by Zionist entity. Bachelet also stressed that rockets fired by Hamas were "indiscriminate and fail to distinguish between military and civilian objects," and were thereby "a clear violation of international humanitarian law."

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights made her statement at the start of a special one-day council session focused on the recent flare-up of violence. Before a truce took hold last Friday, Zionist air strikes and artillery fire on Gaza killed 254 Palestinians, including 66 children, and wounded more than 1,900 people in 11 days of conflict, the health ministry in Gaza says. Rocket and other fire from Gaza claimed 12 lives in Zionist state, including one child and an Arab teenager, medics say. Some 357 people in Zionist state were wounded.

'Root causes'

At the rights council, countries were debating a proposal to set up a broad, international investigation into violations surrounding the latest violence, but also into "systematic" abus-

es in the Palestinian territories and inside Zionist state. The proposal calls for an unprecedented level of scrutiny on abuses and their "root causes" in the decades-long Middle East conflict.

The draft resolution presented by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation calls for the council to "urgently establish an ongoing independent, international commission of inquiry... in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and in Zionist state". The investigators, the text said, should probe "all alleged violations and abuses" of international law linked to the tensions that sparked the latest violence, but also "underlying root causes of recurrent tensions and instability, including systematic discrimination and repression based on group identity". The investigation should focus on establishing facts and gather evidence that could be used in legal proceedings, and should try to identify perpetrators to ensure they are held accountable, it said.

'Purposely raised tensions'

Meirav Eilon Shahar, Zionist's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, slammed the session and the draft text, insisting they were yet another example of the council's bias against Zionist entity. "Hamas initiated this conflict," she said, insisting the "terrorist organization that glorifies death" had "purposely raised tensions in Jerusalem to justify its attack." Pointing to the 4,400 rockets launched on Zionist state, she urged the council not to "embolden and reward Hamas" for such behavior, and stressed that "Zionist state has the right to defend itself".

Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Maliki hit back at that claim, telling the council "we refuse to equate between the colonizer and the colo-



GENEVA: United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet is seen on a giant screen delivering her speech remotely at the opening of a UN Human Rights Council emergency meeting on occupied Palestinian territory and East Jerusalem, in Geneva yesterday. —AFP

nized." Accusing Zionist entity of instituting "an apartheid system based on the forced displacement of our people," he insisted that "the right to self-defense and the right to resist occupation is a right we have as the Palestinian people."

Open-ended investigation

If the resolution passes, it would create the council's first ever open-ended commission of inquiry (COI) — the highest-level investigation that can be ordered by the council. Other COIs, like the one on Syria, need their mandates renewed every year. And while the council has previously ordered eight investigations into

rights violations committed in the Palestinian territories, this would be the first one with a mandate to examine "root causes" in the drawn-out conflict, and also to probe systematic abuses committed within Zionist state.

It remains unclear if there will be enough support in the council to pass the resolution. Twenty council members were among the 66 countries that backed holding the special session. Yesterday's session marks the 30th extraordinary meeting since the Human Rights Council's creation 15 years ago. It will be the ninth focused on Zionist state, which has long complained it faces bias in the council. —AFP

More than 150 feared drowned in Nigeria boat tragedy

KANO, Nigeria: More than 150 people were feared drowned in northwest Nigeria on Wednesday after an overloaded boat ferrying passengers to a market sank in the Niger River, local officials said. The boat was travelling between central Niger state and Wara in northwest Kebbi state when it sank, National Inland Waterways Authority local manager Yusuf Birma told reporters. "The boat capacity was not up to the 180 passengers it carried," Birma said.

"As we speak, only 20 people

have been rescued alive, four dead confirmed while the remaining 156 people are still missing and they are believed to be underwater." President Muhammadu Buhari said the accident was "devastating" and offered his condolences to families, though his statement gave no official total of the number of casualties. Boat tragedies are common on Nigerian waterways mostly due to overcrowding, bad weather and lack of maintenance, but Wednesday's toll would be one of the deadliest recent accidents.

Birma said passengers were heading to a market in Malele in Borgu local government area of Niger state, when the boat sank an hour into the journey. "The boat involved was a wooden boat which was old and very weak but these people (skippers) would not listen when we sensitized them to reduce the number of passengers they carry in their boats," he said.

Local district administrator Abdullahi Buhari Wara earlier blamed the accident on overloading as the boat was meant to ferry no more than 80 passengers. The vessel was also loaded with bags of sand from a gold mine, he said. Early this month 30 people drowned when an overloaded boat capsized in Niger



NGASKI, Nigeria: Men carry the body of a man out of the water in Ngaski, Nigeria. — AFP

state. The boat ferrying 100 local traders split into two after hitting a stump during a storm as they were returning from a local market, according to emergency officials.

The Niger is West Africa's main river running in a crescent through Guinea to Nigeria's Niger Delta and is a key local trade route for some of the countries. — AFP

International

Afghanistan unlikely coronavirus stopover for Pakistani workers

Special flights available only to workers who have Saudi residency

ISLAMABAD: Afghanistan's capital has become an unlikely pandemic transit route for Pakistanis desperate to reach the riches of Saudi Arabia despite deteriorating security and the threat of bomb blasts. With most Gulf flights from Pakistan cancelled as the country is added to a growing number of coronavirus travel blacklists, thousands of workers are hoping to reach the kingdom after first spending two weeks in Kabul.

"I'm a little bit worried," said Sohaib Siddiqui, a 31-year-old electrical engineer from Lahore, in line at the Afghanistan embassy in Islamabad. But he added that he was "willing to take risks", explaining that a job in Saudi Arabia would allow him to send between 50,000 and 100,000 rupees (\$325-\$650) a month to his family of three.

The Gulf countries have long been a vital avenue of employment for Pakistanis, who send back billions of dollars in remittances every year, propping up the cash-strapped economy. In the past month alone, tens of thousands of Pakistanis have applied for transit visas at the Afghan embassy in Islamabad, according to an official at the mission.

Over the past week, hundreds have camped overnight to submit their paperwork. The plan is not foolproof, however, with the one direct flight

between Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia cancelled in recent days, according to a travel agent in Kabul. Special flights were available only to workers who already had Saudi residency—at a cost of around \$1,300.

Travel woes

The influx of travellers into Kabul comes as US troops are pulling out of the country following nearly 20 years of war, with violence surging. Large swathes of the population in Kabul also nurture a seething hatred for their Pakistani neighbors, with authorities there long blamed for supporting the Taliban insurgency. "We have no choice, what should we do?" said Tanweer Ahmad while waiting in line in Islamabad to file his application for an Afghan visa.

At a diagnostic center in Kabul, doctors have been mobbed with Pakistanis desperate for the Covid-19 tests needed to enter Saudi Arabia, doubling demand at the lab in recent weeks. "Saudis and the Pakistanis trust Afghan laboratories," beamed Sediqqullah Safi, a doctor at the testing center, saying he hoped the new batch of visitors would inject much-needed money into the capital's slumping economy. "They come here with benefits—they're spending money on shopping, transportation, and of course on coro-



ISLAMABAD: In this picture taken on May 19, 2021, Pakistani nationals, wearing facemasks wait in a queue to apply for a visa outside Afghanistan's embassy in Islamabad. —AFP

navirus tests."

For Anwar Khan — who spent two weeks in the capital and is hoping to fly to Saudi Arabia soon—the unnerving trip has been worth it. "One would of course worry about security," said Khan. "Thank God there has been no problem

(for) us so far." For those still hoping to make it to Afghanistan—where virus cases are also rising following the Muslim holiday of Eid Al-Fitr—any future change in the rules might make the trip impossible, or leave them stranded in Kabul after exhausting their savings. —AFP

Khamenei urges Iranians to ignore calls to boycott poll

TEHRAN: Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday urged Iranians to ignore calls to boycott next month's presidential election, after several hopefuls were barred from running against ultraconservative candidates. Iranians are set to elect a successor to President Hassan Rouhani on June 18 amid widespread discontent over a deep economic and social crisis, and after the violent repression of waves of protests in the winter of 2017-18 and in 2019.

The exiled opposition has for months run a campaign on social media networks calling on Iranians to stay away from the polls, using hashtags in Persian such as #NototheIslamicRepublic. "Do not pay attention to those who are campaigning and saying it is useless to go to the polls and that one should not go to the polls," Khamenei told lawmakers in a speech via videoconference, according to his official Instagram account. Khamenei's remarks appear to suggest that he does not intend to intervene and reverse the disqualification of any candidates, as he did in 2005.

His declaration comes a day after Rouhani said he had asked the supreme leader to intervene to ensure greater "competition" in the presidential election. Iran's candidate-vetting Guardian Council on Tuesday approved seven mainly ultraconservative hopefuls to run in the election from a field of about 600

hopefuls. The council—a conservative-dominated, unelected body—disqualified moderate conservative Ali Larijani and first vice-president Eshaq Jahangiri, as well as firebrand former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Its decision appeared to clear the way for a strong run by ultraconservative judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi, but it is also expected to see an increase in voter abstention. Rouhani is constitutionally barred from running for a third consecutive term.

Raisi 'unrivaled'

A record 57 percent of Iranians stayed away from legislative elections in February last year after thousands of candidates, many of them moderates and reformists, were disqualified. The poll comes at a critical time amid talks with world powers aimed at reviving a 2015 nuclear deal that offered sanctions relief in return for Iran's agreement to tight controls on its nuclear program.

The accord has been on life support since then US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from it in 2018 and imposed crippling sanctions on the Islamic republic. Iran, which retaliated to the US move by rolling back its nuclear commitments, is seeking the lifting of the sanctions. Larijani was seen as the only person capable of challenging Raisi, who is now considered the "unrivaled candidate", according to the reformist newspaper Etemad. Raisi won 38 percent of the vote in the 2017 presidential election but was defeated by Rouhani. The judiciary chief says the priority is to secure the lifting of US sanctions—implying that, if he wins, he will keep Iran in the nuclear agreement. —AFP

Crime boss's wild claims shake Turkish government

ANKARA: Millions of Turks have been glued to their screens, watching a crime boss tell wild stories about international drug smuggling, murders and the murky ties between politicians and the mafia. But the gang boss starring in these videos is real, and his claims have set off a political tsunami that has unsettled President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government, leaving his popular interior minister particularly exposed.

The accusations thrown by Sedat Peker at close Erdogan allies—including a former prime minister, top officials and their relatives—range from corruption and drug trafficking to rape and multiple murders. Peker's message, delivered with dramatic flair and punctuated by occasional tweets, appears to have gripped the imagination of so many because of his own reputed role in Turkey's underworld.

Speaking with the air of a man who knows everything about everyone, Peker is an ultranationalist convicted of multiple crimes, including fraud and running a crim-

inal organization. He fled Turkey last year to avoid prosecution and now claims to live in the United Arab Emirates, where he speaks into a camera from a carefully arranged desk and chuckles while telling a particularly juicy tale.

After only addressing the allegations obliquely, Erdogan on Wednesday forcefully defended his government's record on tackling organized crime. "We have crushed criminal organizations one by one for 19 years," Erdogan said in parliament. "We follow criminal gang members wherever they may flee to in the world." No heads have rolled and the position of Interior Minister Suleyman Soyulu—the anti-hero of Peker's stories—still seems to be secure. Erdogan has insisted he stands "side by side" with his nationalist minister. But while the allegations remain unproven, they come at an inopportune time for Erdogan, who is losing ground in opinion polls because of a depreciating currency and runaway inflation.

Peker, 49, has already posted seven videos to his YouTube account, each about an hour long—the latest, posted Sunday, has had more than 14 million views—and he says he is planning several more. They are all meticulously staged, with a big screen in the background showing still images and a different book on the table in each episode. One of them features a biography of Bob Dylan, entitled "Wicked Messenger". — AFP

International

Malian military releases president, prime minister

Crisis deepens as junta takes control

BAMAKO: The Malian military have released the country's interim leaders but taken control of the government, sources said yesterday, in moves that have fallen far short of international demands to resolve the deep crisis.

President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane were released overnight, a military official said, three days after they were detained and then stripped of their powers in what appeared to be the country's second coup in nine months. "The interim president and prime minister were released overnight around 1.30 am (0130 GMT). We were true to our word," the official told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Family members confirmed the pair had been freed and had returned to their homes in the capital Bamako, although the circumstances surrounding their release were unclear. "I am well. I was released last night and am at home," Ouane told AFP without giving further details. The transitional leaders had been tasked with steering the return to civilian

rule after a coup last August that toppled Mali's elected president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Keita was forced out by young army officers following mass protests over perceived corruption and his failure to quell a bloody jihadist insurgency.

But in a move that sparked widespread diplomatic anger, Ndaw and Ouane were detained on Monday by army officers who were apparently disgruntled by a government reshuffle. The two were held at the Kati military camp around 15 kilometres (nine miles) from Bamako.

Military influence

The interim government — installed under the threat of regional sanctions — has the declared aim of restoring full civilian rule within 18 months. But its appointments were heavily influenced by the military.

Colonel Assimi Goita, who headed the post-coup junta, was named vice president and other key posts were given to army officers. On Tuesday, Goita said Ndaw and Ouane had been stripped of their powers.

He accused Ndaw and Ouane of failing to consult him on the reshuffle, which amounted to "demonstrable intent to sabotage the transition." The following day, the pair resigned in the presence of mediators visiting the base at Kati as diplomatic pressure began to mount. The UN Security Council, staging an emergency meeting at the request of former colonial power France and others, demanded "the safe, immediate and unconditional release" of the duo and urged a restoration of the civilian-led transition. But Goita told the mediators that he intended to head the transitional government himself and name a prime minister, diplomats said.

Goita "is in charge of the transitional presidency until further orders," a senior military official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. The Security Council did not discuss imposing sanctions and refrained from calling the detentions a coup. In contrast, French President Emmanuel Macron, whose country has committed more than 5,000 troops to fighting jihadism in the Sahel, said the



BAMAKO: Commandant Baba Cisse, Special Advisor to the Vice-President addresses the press in Bamako on Wednesday announcing that Mali's President and Prime Minister will be gradually released after they had been arrested on May 24, 2021. —AFP

twin arrests were a "coup d'etat in an unacceptable coup d'etat." France, the United States and the regional bloc ECOWAS have also warned of sanctions, and US aid to the Malian armed forces has been suspended. Thousands of people have died, and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes, since a jihadist revolt began in northern Mali in 2012, later

spread to the center of the country and then into neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso.

Mali is one of the poorest in the world, and its armed forces suffer from lack of equipment and training. They are being supported by UN and French troops, as well as a combined force from four other Sahel nations. — AFP

Macron recognizes France's role in Rwanda genocide

KIGALI, Rwanda: French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday recognized his country's role in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, from backing a genocidal regime to ignoring warnings of the impending massacres. Macron kicked off a highly symbolic visit to Rwanda after three decades of diplomatic tensions, with a tour of the Kigali Genocide Memorial, where he paid tribute to some 800,000 mostly Tutsis who were slaughtered in the killings.

"Standing here today, with humility and respect, by your side, I have come to recognize our responsibilities," Macron said in a speech at the Kigali Genocide Memorial. His highly anticipated speech did not contain a formal apology, but he went further than his predecessors and said that only those who had survived the horrors "can maybe forgive, give us the gift of forgiveness." Rwandan President Paul Kagame hailed Macron's speech, speaking to reporters after the two leaders met. "His words were something more valuable than an apology. They were the

truth," Kagame said.

Macron is the first French leader since 2010 to visit the East African nation, which has long accused France of complicity in the killings. Macron said France "was not complicit" in the genocide. "But France has a role, a story and a political responsibility to Rwanda. She has a duty: to face history head-on and recognize the suffering she has inflicted on the Rwandan people by too long valuing silence over the examination of the truth".

Egide Nkuranga, president of the main survivors' association Ibuka, told AFP he was disappointed that Macron did not "present a clear apology on behalf of the French state" or "ask for forgiveness". However he said Macron "really tried to explain the genocide and France's responsibility. It is very important. It shows that he understands us." The French president is on a one-day leg to Kigali before flying to South Africa Friday for a visit devoted to the coronavirus pandemic and vaccine production.

The genocide between April and July of 1994 began after Rwanda's Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana, with whom Paris had cultivated close ties, was killed when his plane was shot down over Kigali on April 6. Within a few hours extremist Hutu militia began slaughtering Tutsis, and some moderate Hutus, with a scale and brutality that shocked the world. Victims were felled with machetes, shot, or massacred while seeking shelter in churches and schools, while sexual violence was rife. France, which provided political and military support to Kigali during a civil war preceding the genocide, has long been accused of turning a blind eye to the dangers posed by Hutu extremists in a country which had already seen several large scale massacres in its past.

"In wanting to block a regional conflict or a civil war, (France) in fact continued to support a genocidal regime. By ignoring alerts from the most clear-headed observers, France assumed an overwhelming responsibility in a chain of events that resulted in the worst scenario," said Macron. The question of France's role and responsibility in the genocide has burned between the two nations for decades, leading to a complete diplomatic rupture between 2006 and 2009. In 2010 Nicolas



KIGALI: French President Emmanuel Macron (left) and Rwanda's President Paul Kagame walk to hold a joint press conference at the Presidential Palace in Kigali yesterday. — AFP

Sarkozy attempted to break the ice by admitting to "serious mistakes" and a "form of blindness" on the part of the French during the genocide. His remarks fell short of expectations in Rwanda, and bilateral relations continued to fester. — AFP

International

Montenegro learns true cost of China-backed road to nowhere

Govt has already burnt through \$944m in Chinese loans

MATESEVO, Montenegro: Two sleek new roads vanish into mountain tunnels high above a sleepy Montenegrin village, the unlikely endpoint of a billion-dollar project bankrolled by China that is threatening to derail the tiny country's economy. The government has already burnt through \$944 million in Chinese loans to complete the first stretch of road, just 41 kilometers (25 miles), making it among the world's most expensive pieces of tarmac.

Chinese workers have spent six years carving tunnels through solid rock and raising concrete pillars above gorges and canyons, but the road in effect goes nowhere. Almost 130 kilometers still needs to be built at a likely cost of at least one billion euros (\$1.2 billion). "The construction looks impressive, but we must not stop at this," says 67-year-old Dragan who retired to the village of Matesevo.

"It's like buying an expensive car and just leaving it parked in the garage." Critics question how the rest of the road will be paid for and highlight environmental damage caused by the construction along with corruption allegations over the awarding of work contracts.

But locals are inclined to talk up the positives. "This story has some good sides for us villagers. Some managed to sell their land and leave, which was impossible before," said one villager, whose

two-storey home now sits meters from gargantuan concrete pillars propping up the four-lane highway.

"I manage to sell some vegetables and chickens to the workers," added the man who did not want to be named, reflecting also that dirt mounds from the construction site stop the river from flooding.

'Big trouble'

The section linking Matesevo to a town near the capital Podgorica—the most difficult part to build—is set to open in November. But the road is meant to connect the Adriatic port of Bar in the south with the Serbian border in the north, with the intention that the Serbians will then extend it to their capital, Belgrade. It is unclear where the money will come from or how Montenegro—a country with a GDP of 4.9 billion euros—will repay its existing debt to China.

If Montenegro cannot pay, it faces arbitration in Beijing and could be forced to give up control of key infrastructure, according to a copy of the contract seen by AFP.

China has been widely criticized for saddling small countries with unmanageable debt as part of its global Belt and Road Initiative. Critics worry that it will use financial leverage to boost its political power, in what they dub "debt-trap



An aerial view shows a part of the new highway connecting the city of Bar on Montenegro's Adriatic coast to landlocked neighbor Serbia, (Bar-Boljare highway) near Podgorica. — AFP

diplomacy".

But Chinese officials have strenuously denied any ulterior motive to the investment in Montenegro and the wider region. "This cooperation is mutually beneficial and win-win," said China's Montenegrin embassy in a statement last month.

"If someone puts negative labels on China's investment, it is not only unfair to China, but also disrespectful to the countries of the western Balkans." With Montenegro's first repayment due in July, it could become the first European country to put those claims to the test. —AFP

UK PM hits back after ex-aide alleges lies and chaos

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday denied overseeing the needless deaths of many thousands of COVID patients, after his former chief advisor alleged the government's pandemic response was undermined by lies and incompetence.

Johnson declined to say whether Dominic Cummings was telling the truth in his incendiary claims to MPs on Wednesday, but said: "Some of the commentary I've heard doesn't bear any relation to reality." Cummings, an abrasive political strategist who masterminded the anti-EU campaign in Britain's Brexit referendum, called Johnson "unfit for the job" and said Health Secretary Matt Hancock was a serial liar.

Asked about Cummings' central claim that tens of thousands of people had died needlessly last year, including in care homes for the elderly, Johnson told reporters: "No, no, I don't think so. Of course this has been an incredibly difficult series of decisions, none of which we've taken lightly," he said, insisting the government did all it could to save lives and protect the state-run National Health Service (NHS).

Cummings said the health minister "should have been fired for at least 15, 20 things" after "lying to everybody on multiple occasions, in meeting after meeting in the cabinet room and publicly". Hancock claimed in May 2020 to have thrown a "protective ring" around care homes—but the main opposition Labor party noted that 30,000 elderly residents have died of COVID-19 and 20,000 older patients were discharged from hospitals without testing. Labor also highlighted Cummings' assertion that



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson (right) flanked by Alison Power, Director of Operations, visits Colchester hospital in Colchester, eastern England yesterday. — AFP

Hancock had dishonestly blamed NHS chiefs for the government's failure to procure adequate personal protective equipment for frontline medics.

The "unsubstantiated allegations around honesty are not true", Hancock responded in parliament yesterday. "I've been straight with people in public and in private throughout, every day since I began working on the response to this pandemic last January (2020)," he said.

Hancock received backing from colleagues including senior minister Michael Gove, who told parliament that he has "been doing a great job" and is a "dedicated public servant". —AFP

UK details plan to scrap 15-yr voting cap for expats

LONDON: Britain's government yesterday detailed plans to scrap a restriction that deprived expats of their right to vote after 15 years of living abroad, calling it outdated in a globalized world.

Long a bane of expatriate Britons, the limit will be replaced with "votes for life" in forthcoming legislation that will also controversially introduce voter identification for the first time in UK elections. "In an increasingly global and connected world, most British citizens living overseas retain deep ties to the United Kingdom," Cabinet Office minister Nicholas True said in a statement.

"These measures support our vision for a truly global Britain, opening up our democracy to British citizens living overseas who deserve to have their voices heard in our parliament, no matter where they choose to live." Expats will need to show proof of the last UK address at which they were registered on the electoral roll, and can also apply for an absentee ballot once every three years, rather than annually as now. The details fleshed out a brief announcement of Treasury funding for the plan given in early March, which was welcomed by expat campaigners such as Harry Shindler, a World War II veteran who moved to Italy four decades ago.

"It's very good news that the UK's 15-year voting rule is ending as part of #Budget2021," he tweeted at the time. "We fought to defend our right to vote in WW2 and now we will get to use it. This is an important day for freedom." —AFP

International

Latest India cyclone kills nine, thousands homeless

300,000 homes destroyed, thousands of people still marooned

DIGHA, India: Thousands of people were homeless yesterday after a cyclone battered COVID-ravaged India and neighboring Bangladesh, killing nine people including four children.

Cyclones are a regular menace in the northern Indian Ocean but many scientists say they are becoming more frequent and severe as climate change warms sea temperatures. Barely a week after Cyclone Tauktae claimed at least 155 lives in western India, Cyclone Yaas forced the evacuation of more than 1.5 million people in the eastern states of West Bengal and Odisha. The storm hit on Wednesday with torrential rain and howling winds gusting up to 155 kilometers (96 miles) an hour, equivalent to a category two hurricane. Waves the size of double-decker buses pounded the shore and swamped towns and villages along the coastline, exacerbated by a higher-than-normal tide because of a full moon.

Prabir Maity, a resident of a village close to the sea, told AFP: "I have lost my home, everything." Two people died in West Bengal, two in Odisha and five in neighboring Bangladesh, officials said.

In southern areas of Bangladesh, although not in Yaas's direct path, the sea smashed through water defenses and inundated thousands of homes, officials said. West Bengal chief

minister Mamata Banerjee said more than 300,000 homes were destroyed.

"The water level in the sea and rivers started to swell to over three to four meters (nine to 12 feet) above the normal level and breached embankments in 135 places," Banerjee said. "Thousands of people are still marooned. We have set up 14,000 cyclone centers to provide shelter to the homeless," she said. Low-lying areas of state capital Kolkata were also flooded after the Hooghly river rose. West Bengal disaster management minister Javed Ahmed Khan told AFP that rescue efforts were being "complicated" by villagers refusing to leave their homes because of fears about coronavirus.

"Water is everywhere. The situation is very grim," Arjun Manna, a resident of Kakkdip in the Sunderbans delta and nature reserve area, told AFP by phone. "The devastation is huge. Most hotels and markets are still inundated. The sea is still roaring," Diprodas Chatterjee from the Hoteliers' Association in the seaside town of Digha told AFP. "Employees who stayed back are telling a grim story," he said.

Milan Mondal, a senior forest official, told AFP that the high waves had also swamped a crocodile breeding centre and tiger reserve project area in the Sunderbans.

"At least five deer and a wild boar were res-



KOLKATA: Waves lash over onto a damaged shoreline after Cyclone Yaas hit India's eastern coast in the Bay of Bengal, at a beach in Shankarpur, some 180 km from Kolkata yesterday. — AFP

cued by forest officials," he said. "We are afraid that many crocodiles have left the breeding center." In Odisha hundreds of trees were uprooted, some bringing down power lines, relief official Pradeep Kumar Jena said. Some thatched homes

were also damaged during the storm, but telecommunication networks were not affected, he added. Yaas has since moved inland towards the state of Jharkhand, easing to a deep depression but bringing heavy rains. —AFP

Frantic bid to stem Sri Lanka ship fire as oil spill fears mount

COLOMBO: International salvage experts and Indian vessels yesterday joined a desperate bid to extinguish a huge blaze on a container ship off the Sri Lankan coast as fears grow that the vessel could cause a devastating oil spill. Strong Indian Ocean winds have hampered efforts to douse an inferno on the Singapore-registered X-Press Pearl that has now been burning for eight days.

Three Indian coastguard vessels bolstered the firefighting operation while the owners said they have called in experts from Dutch salvage specialists SMIT to help. A Sri Lankan military helicopter on Wednesday dropped fire retardant chemicals on the 186 metre (610 feet) long ship as the blaze spread.

The X-Press Pearl was carrying nearly 1,500 containers, including 25 tons of nitric acid, when the fire broke out close to Colombo port. Sri Lanka's Marine Environment Protection Authority (MEPA) now fears the vessel could break up and spew oil onto coastal beaches.

"The fire is covering the length of the vessel. The hull may not be stable for us to tow the ship away from our waters," MEPA chairman Dharshani Lahandapura said. The vessel, now anchored, is carrying 278 tons of bunker oil and 50 tons of marine gasoil, she said.

Acid fire

Lahandapura said a large quantity of oil now threatened to leak and hit the nearby tourist and fishing region of Negombo,



COLOMBO: Sri Lankan Navy soldiers work to remove debris washed ashore from the Singapore-registered container ship MV X-Press Pearl, which has been burning for the eighth consecutive day in the sea off Sri Lanka's Colombo Harbor, on a beach in Colombo yesterday. — AFP

40 kilometers (25 miles) north of the capital. "Given the very rough seas and the heavy monsoon winds, it is not possible to lay booms around the ship to contain a spill," she said.

"Our best option is to clean the beach and we suspect any clearing operation will take a few weeks, if not months." The fire is believed to have started when a container of nitric acid began to leak, she said, and authorities are investigating reports that the crew knew about the issue before entering Sri Lankan waters. "If the problem was addressed at that time, we wouldn't be having to deal with this crisis," the MEPA chief said. — AFP

Kids' bid to block Australian mine scores big victory

SYDNEY: Teenagers suing to block expansion of an Australian coal mine scored a "landmark" victory yesterday, with a judge agreeing the project would cause them climate-related harm. A group of eight high-schoolers-backed by an activist octogenarian nun-brought a class action against Australia's pro-coal conservative government over a planned mine extension near Sydney.

While a federal judge rejected the group's calls for an injunction to stop the project outright, he ruled the government must take into account the damage the project would do to the group's health, wealth and wellbeing. "The minister has a duty to take reasonable care to avoid causing personal injury to the children when deciding... to approve or not approve the extension project," Justice Mordy Bromberg found. Legal experts said the ruling was significant because it was the first time a court had accepted expert testimony about the vast potential impact of climate change on younger generations and the government's duty to consider that impact in weighing new fossil fuel projects.

In the ruling, Bromberg accepted harrowing expert evidence of a grim future on a warming planet. It was, he said, "what might fairly be described as the greatest inter-generational injustice ever inflicted by one generation of humans upon the next." —AFP

International

Twitter slams Indian police 'intimidation', new IT rules

Critics say govt wants to stifle online criticism

NEW DELHI: The Indian government's battle with social media giants escalated yesterday with Twitter accusing the police of "intimidation" and slamming new IT rules that have also alarmed its peers and privacy campaigners. Critics say that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration wants to stifle online criticism in what is a huge market for Twitter, Facebook and others. The government rejects the accusations. Late Monday Indian police visited Twitter's offices to serve a notice to the US company over its failure to remove a "manipulated media" label that it had placed on a tweet by the ruling party's spokesman.

It followed spats earlier this year when Twitter partially refused to comply with official requests to remove tweets critical of contentious new farming laws and of the government's handling of the pandemic. "Right now, we are concerned by recent events regarding our employees in India and the potential threat to freedom of expression for the people we serve," a Twitter spokesperson said in an emailed statement. It added that together with many in civil society in India and around the world, Twitter has "concerns with regards to the use of intimidation tactics by the police in response to enforcement of our global Terms of Service". The microblogging site also



NEW DELHI: Delhi police personnel sit outside a gate of the Twitter India's office at Crescent building in New Delhi as police served a notice at Twitter's offices over flagged governments tweets as 'manipulated media' a day before. —AFP

criticized "core elements" of new IT rules that came into force on Wednesday and which have prompted WhatsApp to launch legal action against the Indian government.

The regulations could require social media companies to trace the "first originator" of posts deemed to undermine India's sovereignty, state security or

"public order". The firms and privacy activists fear that the vagueness of the rules mean that the companies could be forced to identify the author of posts critical of the government.

'Strive to comply'

Twitter expressed particular concern about the

Millions in Australia's second city ordered into snap lockdown

MELBOURNE: Five million people in Melbourne were ordered into a snap week-long lockdown yesterday, with officials blaming Australia's sluggish vaccine rollout and hotel quarantine failures for yet another virus outbreak in the country's second-biggest city.

Facing a cluster of 26 cases linked to the "highly infectious" Indian strain of COVID-19, authorities issued stay-at-home orders for Melbourne and surrounding Victoria state from midnight.

It is the fourth time Melbourne has been plunged into lockdown since the pandemic began, including nearly four months of harsh restrictions last year. The cluster is believed to have begun with a traveller who returned to Australia from overseas despite a mandatory 14-day quarantine.

The latest outbreak has intensified criticism of flawed quarantine facilities and a national vaccine rollout that, according to acting state Premier James Merlino, is "not where it should be". "If more people were vaccinated, we might be facing a very different set of circumstances than we are today. But sadly we are not," he said, pointing blame squarely at the conservative federal government.

Some local residents rushed to get jabbed yesterday, as the state opened up mass vaccination hubs to people aged 40-49 for the first time. Jane Oliver-Read, 56, spent more than an hour in a queue that was "snaking around the building" in central Melbourne to receive her first jab.

"I'd always planned to come in this week to have it, so the outbreak in Melbourne has confirmed that

it's the right thing to do," she said. The virus has leaked out of make-shift hotel quarantine facilities across Australia 17 times in six months, according to the opposition Labor party.

"If we had an alternative to hotel quarantine for this particular variant of concern, we would not be here today," Merlino said.

'Circuit-breaker'

Before the lockdown was announced, thousands of people across Melbourne were already self-isolating after cases were detected at dozens of locations including two separate Aussie Rules football



MELBOURNE: People queue for a COVID-19 test in Melbourne after five million people in Melbourne were ordered into a snap week-long lockdown following another COVID-19 virus outbreak. —AFP

matches, a series of nightclubs and a medieval battle re-enactment. The "circuit-breaker" is designed to allow contact tracers to get on top of cases, with residents permitted to leave home only for essential reasons including getting vaccinated.

Schools, pubs and restaurants are set to close, while gatherings will be banned and mask-wearing made mandatory. But professional sporting fixtures can go ahead without crowds and people living alone can create a "single bubble" with another person.

New Zealand has already suspended its travel bubble with Victoria and while residents are now being shut out of other Australian states, prompting major airlines to slash Melbourne services.

'Wonderful and enviable'

In recent months, Australians had largely been enjoying few restrictions after the country successfully contained the spread of coronavirus. But outbreaks in Taiwan and Japan have underscored how initial success containing the virus can quickly be eroded without widespread vaccination.

So far Australia has administered about 3.7 million vaccination doses in a population of 25 million, with just a fraction of residents fully vaccinated. Prime Minister Scott Morrison batted away the criticisms, saying "no system is foolproof" and pointing to Australia's comparatively successful coronavirus response globally. "We will do everything we can to protect the lives and livelihoods of Australians, and we have lost 910 souls to COVID already during the course of this pandemic. Of course that is not anything near what we have seen in other countries," he said. Morrison urged eligible Australians to get vaccinated, saying the "wonderful and enviable" way of life Down Under during much of the pandemic had led to some vaccine hesitancy. Australia has recorded about 30,000 COVID-19 cases to date—the vast majority in Victoria during last year's devastating second wave. — AFP

requirement to name a compliance officer who would then be criminally liable for content, and requested at least three more months to comply. "(Just) as we do around the world, we will continue to be strictly guided by principles of transparency, a commitment to empowering every voice on the service, and protecting freedom of expression and privacy under the rule of law," the spokesperson said. For WhatsApp complying with the rules would mean breaking its cherished encryption that prevents anyone other than the sender and receiver from being able to read messages sent on the platform. WhatsApp in its court filing this week said that the rules "(infringe) upon the fundamental rights to privacy and free speech of the hundreds of millions of citizens using WhatsApp" in India.

A Facebook spokesperson said Tuesday it aims to comply but needed "to discuss a few of the issues which need more engagement with the government", adding that it "remains committed to people's ability to freely and safely express themselves on our platform." IT minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said yesterday the government fully recognizes and respects the right to privacy and that the new rules were only to prevent "abuse and misuse of social media." —AFP

Sanofi, GSK launch final phase of vaccine trials

PARIS: French pharmaceutical giant Sanofi and Britain's GSK announced yesterday the start of final tests of their belated COVID vaccine as they race to add their jab to the world's arsenal against the pandemic. The companies reported positive results from interim human trials earlier this month after a disappointing outcome from initial studies last year left France without its own vaccine, denting national pride.

Sanofi and GlaxoSmithKline yesterday started enrolment for Phase 3 of a clinical study that will include more than 35,000 adult volunteers at sites in the United States, Asia, Africa and Latin America, the firms said. The companies hope to launch their vaccine by the end of 2021 — one year after Pfizer and Moderna jabs were approved by regulators. The Phase 3 trial will initially investigate the vaccine's efficacy against the original coronavirus that was first detected in Wuhan, China and then look at its response to a variant found in South Africa.

Sanofi and GSK will also study their vaccine's ability to work as a booster shot in people who had previously received another vaccine. The Phase 2 trials already showed a strong immune response after a single shot in participants who had previously contracted the coronavirus.

"We have adapted our vaccine development strategy based on forward-looking considerations as the virus continues to evolve, as well as anticipating what may be needed in a post-pandemic setting," Sanofi executive vice president Thomas Triomphe said in a statement. —AFP

International

China slams US intelligence community over virus probe

Biden orders a probe into the COVID-19 origins

BEIJING: China hit out at the “dark history” of the US intelligence community yesterday, after President Joe Biden ordered a probe into the COVID-19 origins which threatens to set the course for relations between world’s top economies. Washington is reviewing its diplomatic position with China on issues spanning trade, technological supremacy and rights, while it steps up efforts to hook Western democracies into a united diplomatic front against perceived Chinese aggression.

The countries’ trade envoys have held “candid” phone talks on the progress of a deal plotted as a pathway out of a trade war sparked by former President Donald Trump, which saw tariffs lumped on tens of billions of dollars of the rivals’ goods. But on Wednesday, President Biden reopened a barely healed sore between the countries by ordering US intelligence agencies to report to him within 90 days on whether the COVID-19 virus first emerged in China from an animal source or from a laboratory accident. The lab-leak theory, initially trotted out by Trump then dismissed as “highly unlikely” by a delayed World Health Organization mission to China, has resurfaced in recent days, driven by Washington.

China is intensely sensitive to allegations it could have done more to stop the spread of a pandemic that has gone on to kill well over 3.4 million people and has eviscerated economies since

emerging in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019. Beijing rejects the theory the virus may have emerged from a virology lab in Wuhan and has instead accused the US of peddling “conspiracies” and politicizing the pandemic.

The Biden administration’s “motive and purposes are clear”, Zhao Lijian a ministry of foreign affairs spokesman said yesterday, rejecting the need for a new investigation into the pandemic. “The dark history of the US intelligence community has long been known to the world,” he added, referring to the US’ unfounded allegations of weapons of mass destruction which led to its invasion of Iraq.

Reviving the lab leak theory “is disrespectful to science... and also a disruption to the global fight against the pandemic”, Zhao said. But the idea of virus release from a Wuhan lab is gaining increasing traction in the United States. Citing a US intelligence report, The Wall Street Journal reported Sunday that a trio from the Wuhan Institute of Virology were hospitalized with a seasonal illness in November 2019, a month before Beijing disclosed the existence of a mysterious pneumonia outbreak.

The natural origin hypothesis—backed as the most likely by the WHO expert team who visited China—holds that the virus emerged in bats then passed to humans, likely via an intermediary species. This theory was widely accepted at the



A resident receives the Anhui Zhifei Longcom COVID-19 vaccine in Linquan county, Fuyang city, in China’s eastern Anhui province. — AFP

start of the pandemic, but as time has worn on, scientists have not found a virus in either bats or another animal that matches the genetic signature of SARS-CoV-2.

China is at pains to move on from the pandemic origin quest, driven by Western nations in-

cluding Australia and the UK. Instead it is focused on its economic rebound since squashing the pandemic inside its borders. The commerce ministry yesterday welcomed trade talks with Washington which are part of a deal to end the bruising trade war. — AFP

Hong Kong police ban Tiananmen vigil

HONG KONG: Hong Kong police yesterday banned next month’s vigil marking Beijing’s deadly Tiananmen Square crackdown, the second year in a row that authorities have refused permission.

The Hong Kong Alliance, which has organized the annual vigil for more than three decades, said police cited the ongoing coronavirus pandemic in their refusal.

“We will continue to fight for the right to mourn June 4 lawfully,” the alliance said, adding it planned to appeal. Security minister John Lee confirmed the ban, saying “anyone who participates in it (the vigil) will violate the law”, and warned a sweeping new national security law that Beijing imposed on Hong Kong last year could be used against those who defy the ban.

“The national security law clearly states that if anyone organizes, plans or carries out any illegal means to damage or overthrow the fundamental system under the Chinese constitution, it would constitute subverting state power,” he told reporters.



HONG KONG: Democratic Party chairperson Lo Kin-hei (right) speaks to the media regarding the local legislation on the city’s election overhaul, outside the Legislative Council in Hong Kong yesterday. —AFP

Hong Kong has regularly marked the anniversary of Beijing’s deadly June 4, 1989 repression of protests in Tiananmen Square with huge candlelight vigils.

Crowds have grown in recent years as many residents chafe under Beijing’s increasingly authoritarian rule.

Last year’s event was banned for the first time, with police citing the coronavirus pandemic and security fears following huge and often violent democracy protests that had convulsed Hong Kong

the year before. Tens of thousands defied that ban and massed peacefully at the vigil’s traditional site in Victoria Park.

Since then prosecutors have brought “unlawful assembly” charges against more than two dozen prominent democracy activists who showed up at the vigil, some of whom have already been jailed. They include Joshua Wong, Lester Shum, Tiffany Yuen and Janelle Leung—all young activists who were handed jail terms last month for attending the vigil. — AFP

Philippine mayor hopes cow raffle will boost COVID jobs

MANILA: The mayor of a rural town in the Philippines has come up with a bovine solution for COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in his farming community—a cow raffle.

Starting in July, anyone who gets a shot in San Luis in the northern province of Pampanga will go into a monthly draw for a cow worth about 30,000 pesos (\$624), Mayor Jayson Sagum told AFP. The raffle will be held for a year, which Sagum hopes will be long enough to get most adults in the town of 60,000 people vaccinated. “For us to attain our goal, we have to think of a strategy. And we know Filipinos like a game of chance,” said Sagum, who hopes to find donors willing to provide or pay for the beasts.

Only three percent of San Luis residents have received a job, mainly due to the lack of supply, he said, and surveys show about half of town’s elderly are worried about getting the vaccine due to reports of adverse side-effects. Officials had considered using giveaways of cash, food packs or even jewelry to motivate people to get the jab. In the end, a bovine prize was seen as more appropriate in a community where most people are involved in rice, duck and tilapia fish farming. “Cattle are the perfect fit for us,” he said, adding the raffles will be livestreamed on the town’s social media pages. “They want something with excitement.” — AFP

Friday Times Lifestyle

FRIDAY, MAY 28, 2021

www.kuwaittimes.net

An underground dancer dressed in Spiderman costume performs in the subway of Saint Petersburg. — AFP

Looming US intelligence report to address UFOs

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French horse master Joel Proust (center) rides horses during a training session with his team in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh. — AFP photos



French horse master Joel Proust (second left) rides along with his team during a training session with his team in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh.



Team members of French horse master Joel Proust (unseen) ride camels during a training session in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh.

Horse-whisperer hopes Morocco films return at full gallop

Horse master Joel Proust hopes his stallions will soon return to the movie sets in Morocco that made his name, ranging from Hollywood epics to “Game of Thrones”. The North African nation’s dramatic desert sands and palm-filled valleys traversed by camel herds have long provided stand-ins for big-budget film sets needing Middle East locations, but coronavirus restrictions have hit the industry hard. Last year was “difficult”, Proust said, at an equestrian center on the outskirts of Marrakesh, where the thundering of hooves announces the sudden arrival of a herd. The horses—including Arab-Barbs, Friesians and Spanish purebreds—gallop, trot and play dead as they follow their instructor.

The 65-year-old Frenchman has for four decades choreographed equestrian action scenes for some of the biggest movies shot in Morocco. They include Oliver Stone’s swash-buckling “Alexander” in 2004, and Ridley Scott’s Crusade-epic “Kingdom of Heaven” in 2005. Proust has fond memories of Stephen Sommers’ Egyptian horror fantasy “The Mummy” in 1999, which saw “200 horses galloping at full speed”. But amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Morocco’s borders remain closed to 54 countries, including Britain and France, until at least June 10, according to the civil aviation authority.

Last year, “we did a Moroccan tourism advert and a single film production, when normally we do 10 a year,” the former stuntman said, wearing a T-shirt and jodhpurs. He says he is readying for three big international productions, including Kevin Scott Frakes’ film adaptation of “The Alchemist”, by Brazilian author Paulo Coelho. “We hope that the country will open its borders,” Proust said. “If not, things will get complicated.”

Mother of Dragons

Since the 1950s, Morocco has welcomed international filmmakers, from Alfred Hitchcock to Pier Paolo Pasolini and Orson Welles. Proust arrived in the kingdom in the early 1980s as an equestrian instructor, and began his career as a stuntman not long after. For Martin Scorsese’s 1997 mega-production “Kundun”, on the life of the Dalai Lama, he faced a particular challenge. “I had to teach 40 Tibetans how to ride”, said Proust, who has a story to tell from every movie.

On location in southern Ouarzazate for smash-hit fantasy series “Game of Thrones”, he recalled a dramatic scene with

British actress Emilia Clarke, who played the “Mother of Dragons”, Daenerys Targaryen. “At the last minute, the director decided that an army of 200 extras had to strike the ground with their lances at the moment she passed through on her horse,” he said. “The terrible noise disoriented the animal.” In order to finish the scene, he suggested the actors “make it seem like they were hitting the ground” instead. The sound of the spears was added in later. He said he gave riding lessons to Johnny Depp and Robert Pattinson for *Ciro Guerra’s*



Team members of French horse master Joel Proust (unseen) ride camels during a training session in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh.

“Waiting for The Barbarians” (2019). And for “Alexander”, he said Irish actor Colin Farrell had to spend a fortnight doing military training in a camp near Marrakesh. “He managed to slip out one night to come and have a drink with us”, Proust said.

‘Hanging in there’

Morocco has sought to attract big international productions in recent years by capitalizing on its diverse natural landscapes and providing financial incentives. But as the pandemic squeezed the global film industry, Morocco took a hit.

Annual investment in international feature films in the country was down nearly 78 percent last year compared to 2019, according to a report from the Moroccan Centre for Cinematography (CCM). Only eight productions were filmed in the country.

Filming for “The Alchemist” is planned for mid-July said Proust, who is preparing horses and dromedaries for caravan and battle scenes. With a budget of around \$20 million, it is the biggest production for Morocco since the US series



A team member of French horse master Joel Proust (unseen) handles camels during a training session in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh.

“Homeland”, according to local media reports. Proust also manages equestrian centres in three holiday resorts and organizes tourist trips into the desert, but the pandemic brought all that to a halt too. The trainer, who appeared most at ease with his animals, said he had lost around \$120,000, due largely to staffing costs and the upkeep of the animals. “We’re hanging in there,” he said. “But things need to start up again.”-AFP

Looming US intelligence report to address UFOs

Are aliens watching us? That's what Americans hope to find out when a report on the US government's secret files on UFOs goes to Congress next month after years of sightings and videos suggesting that highly advanced extraterrestrials are, indeed, out there. But the report from the Director of National Intelligence, pulled together with classified military files, could fall short of explaining scores of purported unidentified flying object incidents over decades.

While not clearly rejecting the alien theory, Pentagon officials make clear their real interest is in whether UFOs, or unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP) in the US military's parlance, could represent actual threats from adversaries here on earth. Attention has mounted ahead of the report that the US spy chief is required to turn over to Congress by the end of June. An unclassified version will be made public, while a more detailed classified one will remain secret-likely frustrating hard-core "ufologists".

The CBS news journal "60 Minutes" interviewed US Navy pilots who said they had seen inexplicable aircraft that flew faster and were more maneuverable than anything seen before. Officials with access to classified intelligence drummed up the mystery. "What is true-and I'm actually being serious here-is that there's footage and records of objects in the skies that we don't know exactly what



This file video grab image obtained April 28, 2020 courtesy of the US Department of Defense shows part of an unclassified video taken by Navy pilots that have circulated for years showing interactions with "unidentified aerial phenomena". — AFP

they are," former president Barack Obama told "The Late Late Show" on May 17.

"There are a lot more sightings than have been made public," John Ratcliffe, who was director of National Intelligence for the last eight months of Donald Trump's administration, said on Fox News in March. "There are instances where we don't have good explanations for some of the things that we've seen."

Drones, party balloons

Last year the US Defense Department released three black-and-white videos taken by Navy aviators that appear to show UFOs. The pilots express amazement at what they are seeing, and no explanation is offered. For the department, though, it is not about aliens but about possible technology created by US rivals that they were unaware of. In August the Pentagon formed a task force "to detect, analyze and catalog UAPs that could potentially pose a threat to US national security."

But the military does not want to reveal the results of its internal investigations because it hopes to protect its own activities, technology and intelligence. If UAPs are from a potential adversary, the task force doesn't want to provide information that would give them details on what is known or unknown, a Pentagon official said. That leaves many incidents "unexplained," at least to the public. The official did say, however, that many UFO sightings can be everyday objects that increasingly clutter air space: weather balloons, metallic party balloons, amateur and professional drones, all with varying radar signatures. In addition, there are many variables that affect what pilots think they are seeing: their own speed, reflections from the sun, the weather and other issues. A pilot over the ocean might think an object is moving with extreme speed because it appears that way, and in reality it is moving as slowly as a car.

Moreover, sightings could also be of the Pentagon's own highly classified experiments and prototypes. "The Department of Defense takes reports of incursions into our airspace by any aircraft, identified or unidentified-very seriously, and investigates each one," said Sue Gough, a Department of Defense spokesperson. "As we collect additional data, we expect to close the gap between identified and unidentified and avoid strategic surprise regarding adversary technology," she said.

'We simply don't know'

The worry is that at least some of the incidents could represent technology that the United States does not have but that China or Russia might possess. "If somebody is up there trying to identify how we train and how we fight, that gives them an advantage," said the Pentagon official. Luis Elizondo, who worked in the Pentagon investigating UFOs, said on the ABC News program "This Week" on Sunday that some of the objects that have been sighted "can outperform anything that we have in our inventory." "We know that whatever it is in our skies is real. The question is, what is it?" he said. "The bottom line is, we simply don't know," he said. — AFP

Pitt lawyers say judge ordered change to Jolie custody deal

A California judge ruled that a custody order concerning Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's children must be modified in his favor, according to court documents filed by the "Fight Club" actor's lawyers. Superstars Pitt and Jolie, who have six children and were once Hollywood's highest profile couple, formally divorced two years ago but have remained locked in a private court battle since. The pair announced in 2018 they had reached an amicable settlement over the children-three biological and three adopted-which appears to have unraveled.

Documents filed by Pitt's attorneys at a California appeals court seen by AFP claim a privately appointed judge made a "tentative ruling" in which he found "the existing custody order between the parties must be modified, per Mr. Pitt's request." The papers also claim that the judge found Jolie's "testimony lacked



In this file photo Writer-director-producer-actress Angelina Jolie Pitt (left) and actor-producer Brad Pitt arrive for the opening night gala premiere of Universal Pictures' 'By the Sea' during AFI FEST 2015 presented by Audi at the TCL Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. — AFP

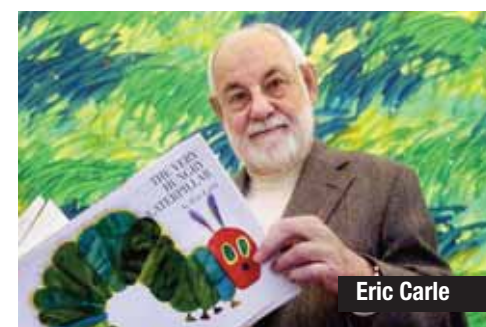
credibility in many important areas" and that her bid to challenge the new custody proceedings would "work grave harm upon the children, who will be further denied permanence and stability." Jolie, 45, is attempting to have the judge dismissed from the divorce case.

The terms of the pair's original childcare agreement were never publicly revealed, but US entertainment media has widely reported that Pitt has been seeking equal custody, while Jolie sought sole custody. — AFP

'Very Hungry Caterpillar' author Eric Carle dies aged 91

Eric Carle, author and illustrator of the beloved children's classic "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," has died aged 91, according to a statement from his official Instagram account on Wednesday. The book, first published in 1969, features a caterpillar who eats his way through many different foods on different days of the week before finally emerging as a butterfly. With its distinctive artwork and subtle educational concepts, the 224-word book has been translated into 66 languages and sold more than 50 million copies worldwide.

"It is with heavy hearts that we share that Eric Carle, author and illustrator of The Very Hungry Caterpillar and many other beloved classics, passed away on Sunday, May 23rd at the age of 91," the statement read, without elaborating. It continued: "When asked why he thinks The Very Hungry Caterpillar has remained popular for so long, Carle said, 'I think it is a book of hope. Children need hope. You, little insignificant caterpillar can grow up into a beautiful butterfly and fly into the world



with your talent.'

"Thank you, Eric Carle for sharing your great talent with so many generations of young readers," it said. Carle wrote and illustrated more than 70 books for young children, including "The Grouchy Ladybug," "The Very Busy Spider" and "The Very Lonely Firefly."

"Our hearts are heavy tonight with the loss of our beloved co-founder Eric Carle who has passed away," read a tweet from The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Massachusetts. The museum described Carle as "our friend, our inspiration, and a creative visionary for generations of artists and children." Carle's distinctive collage illustrations are mostly acrylic paint on plain tissue paper. The paint however goes on in different ways - via bushes of different sizes, sometimes fingers, and sometimes stamped on with sponges or even carpet pieces. — AFP



A view of the red carpet is seen during the Los Angeles premiere of Disney's "Cruella" at El Capitan Theatre in Los Angeles, California.

Backdrops and signage are seen at the premiere for Cruella at the El Capitan Theatre in Los Angeles, California. — AFP photos

'Cruella' pits Stone vs. Thompson in punk Disney fashion duel

Pitting one of its most memorable villains against a fearsome new foe, Disney's devilishly fashionable "Cruella" is one of the studio's darkest movies yet, according to star Emma Stone. The live-action "101 Dalmatians" origin story, out today, is set in a Vivienne Westwood punk-inspired London world, complete with a 1970s rock-influenced soundtrack and all manner of Afghan coats, maxi skirts and wet-look boots. Stone plays a young Cruella De Vil, whose rebellious streak has not yet reached the point of skinning Dalmatians in the name of haute couture.

An ambitious, upstart designer, Cruella quickly crosses paths with the formidable Baroness von Hellman—played by Emma Thompson—who thinks nothing of using her power, influence and even violence to crush youthful pretenders to her fashion empire. "I spent decades playing what my mother used to call 'good women in frocks,'" Thompson told a virtual press conference. "Now I got to play an evil woman-in frocks. But oh boy, the frocks." Lavish costumes not only provide on-screen flair, but also chart Cruella's transformation through the movie, from rebellious schoolgirl to a bitter rival bent on sabotaging the Baroness's imperious designs.

Spectacular fashion set-pieces include a punk-inspired 60-foot (18-meter) long dress train flowing behind a garbage truck through central London. "It was just phenomenal—I mean, nothing you would ever be able to even remotely wear in real life," said Stone. "That really is the moment where you're like, 'I am in a movie right now... this is never happening in reality,'" she added. Double Oscar-winner Thompson—known for works from



Kristin Burr arrives at the premiere for Cruella at the El Capitan Theatre.

"Sense and Sensibility" to the "Harry Potter" films—told journalists she had been "asking for quite a number of years" to play a villain.

"I am very interested in the dark side of female characters, because they're so rarely allowed to be dark," she said. "We're all supposed to be nice and good, aren't we?" "It's definitely dark for a Disney movie," added Stone, who is also an executive producer alongside a former Cruella, Glenn Close. "It was darker than I've seen a Disney movie for a long time."

'Mean and hardened'

Asked about her real-life inspirations for the character, Thompson explained that while "my experience of people who are truly mean and hardened and narcissistic is quite rare...



(From left) Jessica Virtue, Sean Bailey, President, Walt Disney Studios Motion Picture Production, Alan Horn, Chief Creative Officer, Disney Studios Content, actor Emma Stone, and Alan Bergman, Chairman, Disney Studios Content, arrive at the premiere for Cruella.

there are quite a number of them in show business." "Mentioning no names, but... some of those people have come to light recently," added Thompson, an outspoken activist on causes including the #MeToo movement that continues to rock Hollywood and the entertainment industry worldwide. Thompson was praised at the start of the #MeToo movement for slamming the sex crimes of Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein as part of "the crisis of extreme masculinity." She publicly withdrew from animated film "Luck" in 2019 after its studio hired former Pixar boss John Lasseter, who is accused of sexual harassment.

"Cruella" does not stray into subjects such as sexual abuse—and contains plenty of humor

thanks to Paul Walter Hauser and Joel Fry's turns as the film's protagonist's gruff, odd-couple henchmen. But along with its depiction of a take-no-prisoners fashion world packed with vanity, jealousy and snobbery, there are plenty of moments to frighten younger viewers. Even the Dalmatians themselves have a menacing edge. The real dogs on set were "very sweet," said Thompson—but were given computer-generated snarls in post-production to make them "a bit nasty." "Cruella" hits theaters and Disney+ today. — AFP



Marsai Martin arrives at the premiere for Cruella.



Emma Stone arrives at the premiere for Cruella.



Kirby Howell-Baptiste arrives at the premiere for Cruella.

Italian ballet star Carla Fracci dies age 84

Carla Fracci, Italy's most celebrated ballet dancer, has died at the age of 84, Milan's La Scala theatre announced yesterday. Best known for her performances as Giselle, Fracci danced with some of the biggest names in the business, notably Rudolf Nureyev. A tram driver's daughter, she entered the ballet school of La Scala in 1946 before rising to become one of its top stars. She formally parted ways with the theatre in 1963, in search of more money and opportunities, but was always drawn back, most recently giving two online masterclasses there in January.

"We will always think of her with affection

and gratitude, remembering the smile of the final days we spent together, where she felt she had come home," said La Scala Director Dominique Meyer. Elegant to the last and always dressed in white, the dancer known in Italy simply as "La Fracci" died in Milan after suffering for some time from a tumour, La Repubblica newspaper reported. "Farewell, lady of infinite grace," tweeted Nazzareno Carusi, a member of La Scala's board of directors.

A New York Times profile in 1981 revealed that Fracci's early start was not promising—she wanted to be a hairdresser, not a dancer, and almost failed the entrance exam. "School was a crashing bore and a terrible chore, until one day when I was cast as the girl with the mandolin in 'Sleeping Beauty,'" she told the newspaper back then. "Once on stage, next to Margot Fonteyn, I suddenly changed my mind. Dancing to an audience was something entirely different from dancing at school. I started working very hard to catch up for the lost time."—AFP



In this file photo taken on September 08, 2007 Italian ballet dancer Carla Fracci pays her homage to Luciano Pavarotti at Modena's Romanesque cathedral. — AFP

Jean Paul Gaultier returns to ready-to-wear fashion

Jean Paul Gaultier is returning to ready-to-wear fashion, six years after he stopped designing off-the-peg clothes to focus on haute couture, the house said on Wednesday. The "enfant terrible" of French fashion bowed out after five decades in the business with a final Paris haute couture show 16 months ago. The house still bears his name and is owned by Barcelona-based Puig and will work with rotating teams of young collaborators for new collections. The first collection—which reinterprets his trademark striped sailor tops—will be available online at the end of the week.

It arrives just in time for the LGBTQ Pride festival season, the house said. US model Bella Hadid features in the collections campaign, sporting the new "unisex, inclusive" collection "that exudes sea air", the house said. The creative team have "revived" Gaultier's ready-to-wear lines, it added. Nicola Lecourt Mansion has created a black body mesh, strassed with stripes, while Spanish stylist Palomo Spain designed a floral corset.

And German house Ottolinger has reworked the sailor shirt in a tight-fitting jumpsuit with distorted zebra stripes. The conical bra made famous by Madonna has been reinterpreted by London-based Brazilian punk jewelry designer Alan Crocetti. Frenchman Marvin M'Toumo is in charge of the "shellfish and crustaceans" accessories. The haute couture shows,



Jean Paul Gaultier

also with guest stylists, will resume in Paris in July, a spokesman for the house told AFP. The first guest designer for Gaultier's couture collection is Japan's Chitose Abe, of the Sacai brand. The catwalk was supposed to have taken place last July, but was cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP



View inside British-Mexican artist Leonora Carrington's (1917-2011) house and studio in Mexico City. — AFP photos

Artist Leonora Carrington's Mexico home becomes museum



View inside British-Mexican artist Leonora Carrington's (1917-2011) house and studio in Mexico City.

The Mexico City home of renowned British-born Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington will open to the public as a museum displaying some of her works and possessions, the managers announced Monday. "This space contains the daily life of the Weisz Carrington family, who lived here for more than 60 years. We have cata-

logged more than 8,600 objects," said Alejandra Osorio, cultural director of the Autonomous Metropolitan University. Pablo Weisz Carrington, son of the late painter and sculptor, sold the house to UAM for half a million dollars on the condition that it be converted into a museum.



Views inside British-Mexican artist Leonora Carrington's (1917-2011) house and studio in Mexico City.



A sculpture by British-Mexican artist Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) called 'Night Jaguar' is seen at her house and studio in Mexico City.

In exchange, on May 19 he donated works of his mother valued at three million dollars. The museum in Colonia Roma houses 45 sculptures and hundreds of objects that Carrington used while living there, including her food seasonings and makeup. The intention is "to preserve the intimate character of the dining room, bedroom, kitchen and study with the idea of presenting them as closely as they were in the artist's daily life," Osorio said. The opening date will depend on the evolution of the coronavirus pandemic in Mexico, she added. Born in Lancashire, England into an aristocratic industrial family at the cusp of the Surrealist movement, Carrington moved to Paris aged 20 where she



View inside British-Mexican artist Leonora Carrington's (1917-2011) house and studio in Mexico City.



View of letters received by British-Mexican artist Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) at her house and studio in Mexico City.



View of sculptures and plants inside British-Mexican artist Leonora Carrington's (1917-2011) house and studio in Mexico city.

began a love affair with painter Max Ernst.

After Ernst was arrested by the Gestapo in Nazi-occupied France, Carrington fell into a deep depression before being committed to a psychiatric hospital in Spain. She managed to escape, and in Lisbon married the Mexican poet and journalist Renato Leduc, who in 1942 took her to Mexico. She settled there permanently, befriending painter Frida Kahlo and future Nobel laureate Octavio Paz. Carrington died in May 2011 in Mexico City at the age of 94. —AFP



View of British-Mexican artist Leonora Carrington's (1917-2011) typewriter and other personal objects at her house and studio in Mexico City.



View of British-Mexican artist Leonora Carrington's (1917-2011) portrait at her house and studio in Mexico City.



A sculpture by British-Mexican artist Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) called 'Woman with Pigeon' is seen at her house and studio in Mexico City.



Visitors view 'Material Culture' curated by Achim Menges and Jan Knippers University of Stuttgart at Germany's pavilion, on a press day at the 17th Venice Architecture Biennale in Venice. — AFP photos



Visitors view "Entanglement" curated by Annex at Ireland's pavilion.

Venice Architecture Biennale explores post-pandemic living

The world's most prestigious architecture event, the Venice Architecture Biennale, opened last Saturday for a six-month show exploring the question of coexistence in a post-pandemic world. Postponed from last year, the 17th International Architecture Exhibition is titled "How will we live together?" with curator Hashim Sarkis asking architects to reflect on the future and its challenges. "The hardest question is how to resolve the problems that led us to the pandemic. How are we going to solve climate change, poverty, the huge political differences between right and left," he told AFP.

Sarkis, a Lebanese architect and dean of MIT's School of Architecture and Planning, believes the city of the future will be born from the need to share collective spaces, consume less and create or encourage new forms of solidarity. There would be "spaces to assemble, where people pass by, seeing the daily life of others... places where economic, ethnic differences are revealed", he said. In allowing different people to come together in spaces, Sarkis hopes to start a dialogue, hoping that "in this way architecture can help transform" society.

'Most innovative'

Sarkis has brought together 112 architects and studios for the biennale, almost all of them working on the event for the first time and the majority of aged between 35 and 55. As a new and more diverse generation challenges existing models and shows off a better mastery of the latest technology, does it mean the end of big-name architects? "I looked everywhere for the solutions that were most innovative and creative. That was my criteria to choose the participants. It's not a question of stars," Sarkis said.

There are 63 national pavilions set up

among the vast gardens on the eastern edge of Venice, as well as within the immense halls of the Arsenal, Venice's former shipyard and armory, and some areas of the city's historic center. In the exhibition open through November 21, strict sanitary measures will remain in place, as Italy makes its first tentative steps towards normalcy amid a drop in new COVID-19 cases.

With Grenada, Iraq, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan participating for the first time, this year's show boasts a high number of participating countries from Africa, Latin America and Asia. The Biennale poses the question



Visitors view 'How will we live together, Chileans and Mapuche Building places to get to know each other (Kunu) Building places to parley (Koyau-we)' at Chile's pavilion, curated by Alejandro Aravena, Gonzalo Arteaga, Victor Oddo, Diego Torres, Juan Cerda, at the 17th Venice Architecture Biennale.



A visitor views "Rural Nostalgia - Urban Dream" by Meng Fanhao at China's pavilion.



A visitor views 'Eco to Eco: Learning from Nature' at Denmark's pavilion by Sinus Lyngø and Tue Hesselberg Foged.



A visitor views the Chilean pavilion entitled "Testimonial Spaces", a curatorial work led by Emilio Marin and Rodrigo Sepulveda.



A visitor views "Rural Nostalgia - Urban Dream" by Meng Fanhao at China's pavilion.



Visitors view an installation made with the sheets of all the portfolios of Spanish architects that were submitted for selection.

whether the post-pandemic age is the start of a new era or just a passing phase. Walking through the Arsenal's 3,000 square meters (32,300 square feet) and the garden pavilions, that question is addressed through installations, videos, projects and ideas.

Virtual maps, giant wooden models, inter-

active machines, designs for poor neighborhoods—all of them proposals that question the model of coexistence for the future. The Biennale will award its Special Golden Lion to the late architect Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992), an Italian-Brazilian modernist who designed Sao Paulo's Museum of Art. Sarkis has said

Bardi's work best illustrates the themes covered in the 2021 exhibition.

"She exemplifies perseverance in difficult times, whether wars, political conflicts or immigration, and her ability to remain creative, generous and optimistic at all times," he said in April at a press conference. The liv-

ing architect to be awarded this year the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement will be Spanish architect Rafael Moneo, 84. — AFP

Stephen Hawking's office and archive to be preserved in UK

Papers and a diverse range of personal items belonging to the late British astrophysicist Stephen Hawking have been acquired by Cambridge University and a UK museum group. Under an agreement between Cambridge University Library, the Science Museum Group and the UK government, the entire contents of the world-renowned scientist's office and archive will be preserved for future generations. The £4.2 million (\$5.9 million, 4.8 million euros) deal means 10,000 pages of Hawking's scientific papers and other documents will remain in the university city of Cambridge in eastern England where he died in 2018.

Objects including his wheelchairs, speech synthesizers, and personal memorabilia including his entire Cambridge office will be housed at London's Science Museum and selected highlights will go on display next year. The Cambridge archive, which includes documents dating from 1944 to 2008 including his academic papers and TV scripts from appearances on shows like "The Simpsons", will be housed alongside papers from Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin. The ashes of Hawking, who died in March 2018, aged 76, were interred along-

side the graves of Newton and Darwin in London's Westminster Abbey.

Hawking, a theoretical physicist, dedicated his life to unraveling the mysteries of the universe, including the nature of time and space-relativity-and quantum theory, how the smallest particles behave. He popularized the obscure science surrounding the governing rules of the universe and black holes in his best-selling 1988 book "A Brief History of Time".

'Legacy upheld'

As his stature grew, he became an instantly recognizable popular figure. Motor neurone disease left him using a wheelchair and unable to speak except through a voice synthesizer. However, the rare amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) that gradually robbed him of mobility did nothing to dull his mind or trademark wit. "We are very pleased that these two important institutions will preserve our father's life's work for the benefit of generations to come and make his legacy accessible to the widest possible audience," his children Lucy, Tim and Robert Hawking said in a statement.

"Our father strongly believed that everyone should have the chance to engage with science so he would be delighted that his legacy will be upheld by the Science Museum and Cambridge University Library," they added. Cambridge University librarian Jessica Gardner said it was "profoundly important" his archive was preserved in the city where "alongside the work of his hero, Newton, and so many other scientists". "It's a really important part of the legacy," she added. — AFP

Macron visit could boost French-speaking in Rwanda

Rwandan comedian Herve Kimenyi was forced to abandon his stand-up nights in French because no one would turn up, and focused instead on the English-language routine that drew audiences in Kigali. "We realized that whenever we have an anglophone comedy night, everybody was there. But when we have a francophone night, attendance was low," said Kimenyi of his "Comedy Knights" troupe and their shows in the Rwandan capital.

French, once the foreign language of choice in the former Belgian colony, could get a much-needed boost this week when President Emmanuel Macron visits the East African country where English has gained favor in recent times. Macron's trip, the first by a French leader since 2010, follows a quarter-century of diplomatic tension between the two countries over France's role in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. In the frosty intervening years, French language and culture fell out of official favour.

Though still widely spoken, and intermingled with the national language Kinyarwanda, French was formally replaced in schools by English more than a decade ago, and many young Rwandans cannot speak it. Etienne Gatanazi, a former French-language news

anchor on national television, said most channels no longer broadcast in French "because they consider English programs more attractive". "Even the national radio no longer reads news in French, while on national TV French news was pushed to air after 10 pm when people are already asleep. This definitely has had an impact," he told AFP. Kimenyi, the comedian and director, said they made the business decision to ditch their French-language skits in 2017 because of low turnout. "We still perform in French but for specific audiences," he said.

Out of favor

After Rwanda won independence from Belgium, French remained in widespread use as the country fostered close ties with France. But its influence waned after the genocide, when Rwanda accused France of supporting the radical Hutu regime and not doing enough to stop the killing of some 800,000 Rwandans mainly from the Tutsi minority. The accusations lingered for years, straining bilateral relations to breaking point. Diplomatic ties were cut off in November 2006, not resuming until three years later.

In the post-genocide era, French found itself in competition with English, the language spoken by many of the Tutsi refugees returning to Rwanda from other anglophone parts of Africa who formed the country's new administration. President Paul Kagame, himself educated in Uganda, designated English an official language in Rwanda's 2003 constitution, along with Kinyarwanda and French. Then in 2008, French was replaced by English as the compulsory language of instruction in schools. Rwandan officials have rejected suggestions that politics drove French from favor. —AFP

Kids Page

Word Search

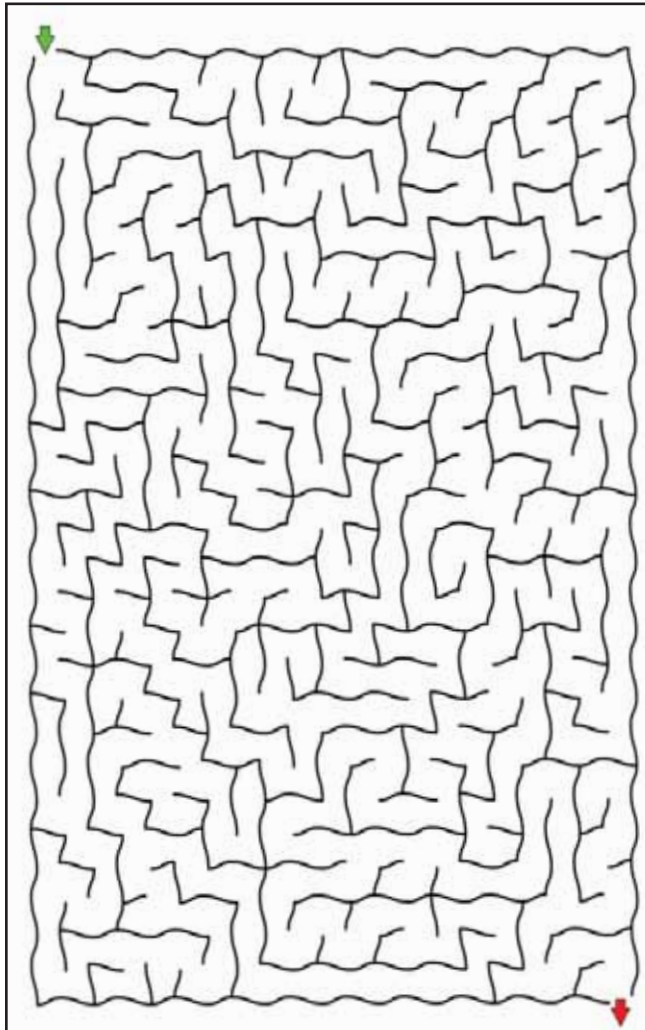
Light as a Feather

Find all of the hidden words and the letters that remain spell out a funny saying about our feathered friends.

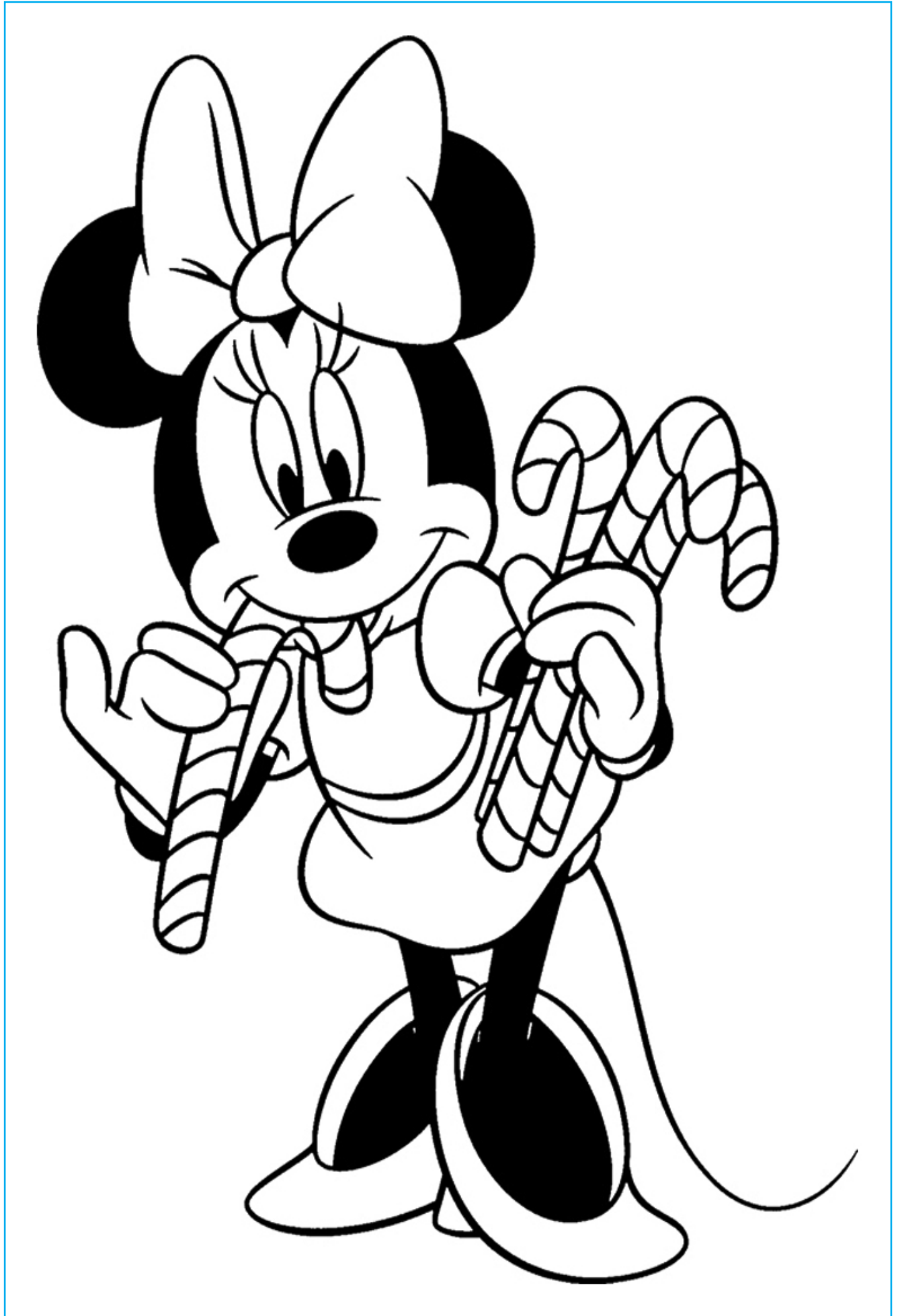
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| CANARY | IBIS | QUETZAL |
| CRANE | KINGFISHER | RAVEN |
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| DOVE | LARK | STORK |
| DUCK | LOON | SWALLOW |
| EAGLE | MACAW | SWAN |
| EGRET | MAGPIE | TERN |
| EMU | ORIOLE | TOUCAN |
| FALCON | OWL | TURKEY |
| GOOSE | PELICAN | WREN |
| GULL | PENGUIN | |
| HAWK | PUFFIN | |

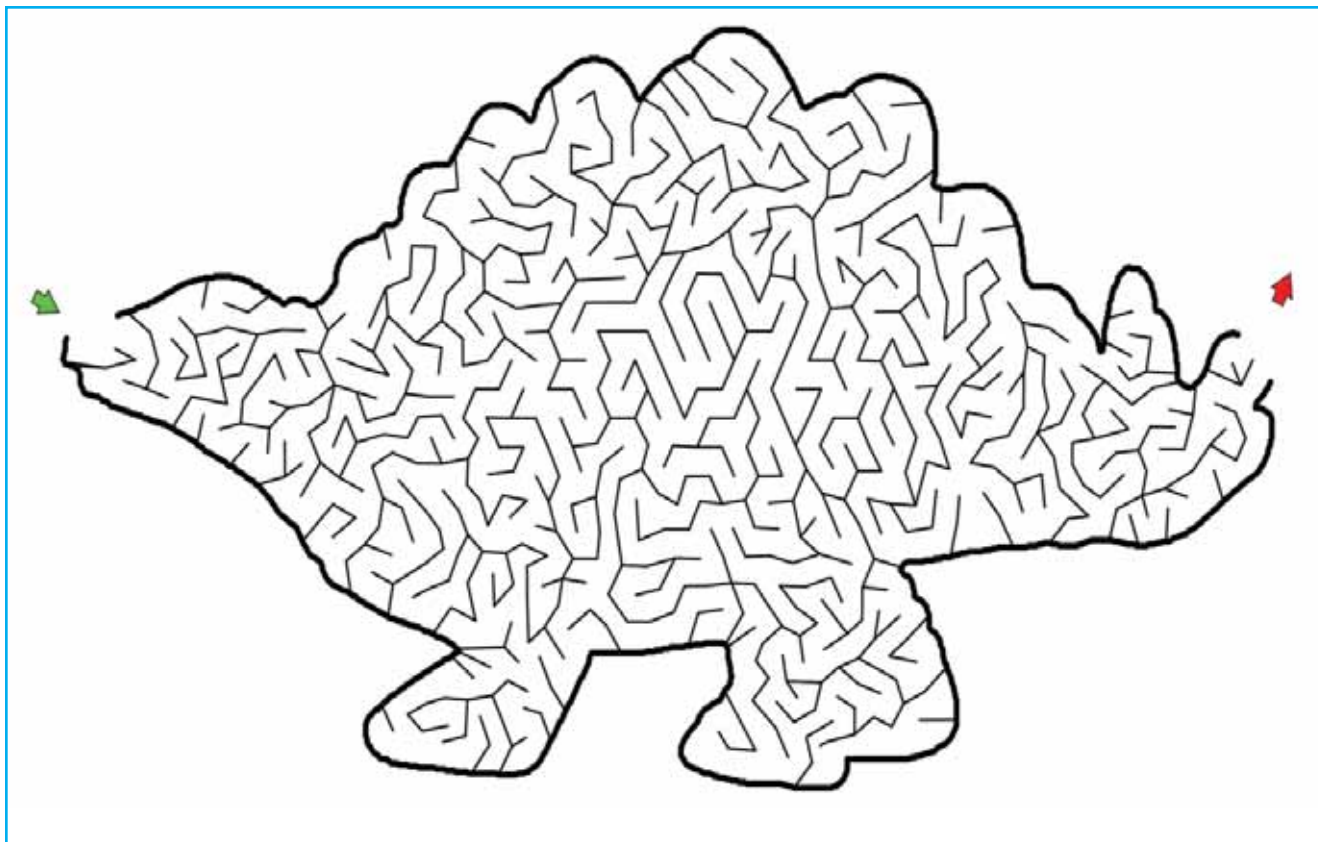
Kids Mazes



Color It




Find the way



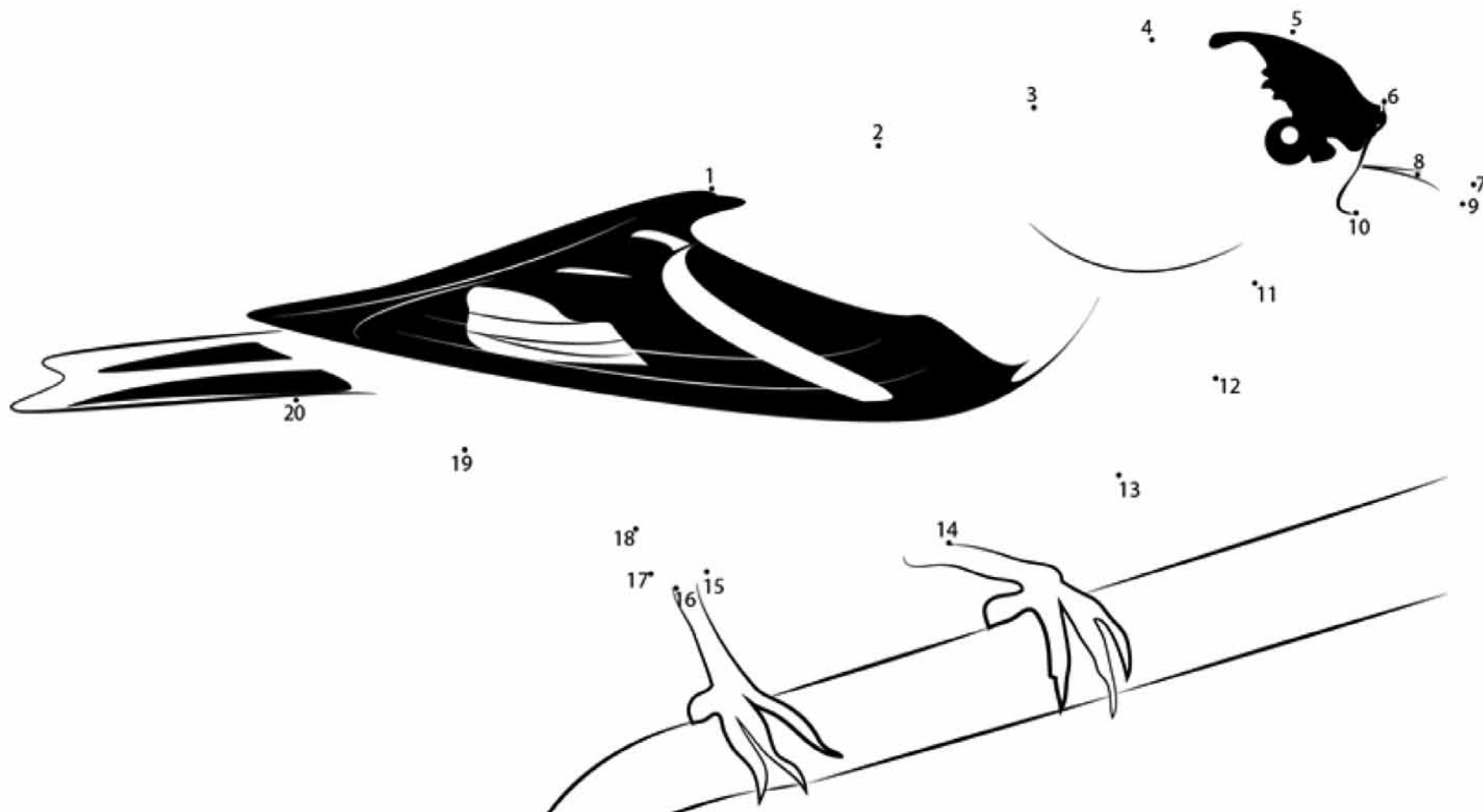
Word Scramble

ON THE FARM
Word Scrambles

DIRECTIONS: Write the name for each picture on the dotted line using the scrambled letters.

		
cduk	oegos	ohesr
		
rtoesor	rutyek	ratbbi
		
cwo	ncceihk	hepse

Join the dots



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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Hot with light to moderate north westerly wind with speed of 12 - 38 km/h .

BY NIGHT: Rather hot with light to moderate north westerly wind to light variable wind with speed of 08 - 28 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

WEATHER WARNING			No Current Warnings	
STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.	SFC. CHART 27/05/2021 0000 UTC	
KUWAIT CITY	43 °C	31 °C		
KUWAIT AIRPORT	44 °C	25 °C		
ABDALY	44 °C	26 °C		
BUBYAN	- °C	- °C		
JAHRA	45 °C	28 °C		
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C		
SALMIYAH	37 °C	32 °C		
AHMADI	37 °C	30 °C		
NUWAISIB	41 °C	25 °C		
WAFRA	43 °C	23 °C		
SALMY	42 °C	24 °C	MSL Analysis (hPa) Valid 0000 UTC 27 MAY 2021	

4 DAYS FORECAST

DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Friday	05/28	Hot and Relatively humid over coastal areas and some scattered clouds will appear	45 °C	27 °C	VRB-SE	08 - 32 km/h
Saturday	05/29	Very hot and Relatively humid over coastal areas	47 °C	27 °C	VRB-SE	08 - 30 km/h
Sunday	05/30	Very hot	47 °C	28 °C	VRB-NW	10 - 28 km/h
Monday	05/31	Very hot with a chance for rising dust over open areas	48 °C	28 °C	NW	12 - 40 km/h

PRAYER TIMES

Fajr	03:17
Sunrise	04:50
Zuhr	11:45
Asr	15:20
Sunset	18:40
Isha	20:10

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

MAX. Temp.	41 °C
MIN. Temp.	27 °C
MAX. RH	30 %
MIN. RH	08 %
MAX. Wind	N 46 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

All times are local time unless otherwise stated.

UP.0

Business

FRIDAY, MAY 28, 2021

32 US orders of big-ticket goods fall 1.3% in April**33** LuLu Hypermarket launches 'Food is Great 2021' festival**34** China, US trade officials hold 'candid' first talks

EU mulls to curb 'killer' Big Tech deals

France, Germany push for agreement on global corporate tax rate

BRUSSELS/PARIS: The EU's biggest powers Germany and France as well as the Netherlands want the bloc to secure beefier powers to stop startups from being snapped up by big tech companies. The joint call came as EU ministers meeting in Brussels on Wednesday laid out ambitions for two landmark laws being negotiated that could fundamentally change the way companies like Facebook, Google or Amazon do business.

Ministers from the three countries said a current proposal "lacks ambition" and asked negotiators to toughen the law.

"In order to prevent gatekeepers from continuing to acquire innovative start-ups and thereby eliminating future competitors, it is .. very important that all mergers and acquisitions... are assessed by an EU regulator," a statement said. At issue is Big Tech's use of "killer acquisitions"—buying up nascent competitors that have come up with technology that fast becomes essential but which could threaten a giant's existing dominance.

EU regulators believe that Facebook's buyouts of Instagram or WhatsApp, or Google's purchase of Fitbit, are potential examples of big companies buying out a high-potential startup before it developed into a rival. The EU ministers were discussing the Digital Markets Act, a law being hammered out at European Parliament and among the 27 member states that will take years to come into force.

It would create a list of special rules for the handful of big technology companies on how they can operate, including stricter obligations on informing regulators of their buyouts and mergers.

Meanwhile, France and Germany pushed for a "historic" agreement among major economies on a minimum tax rate for multinational corporations Wednesday, hoping to shore up support after skeptical European countries expressed opposition to the plan.

Spearheaded by US President Joe Biden, the proposal for a 15 percent minimum tax rate has hit turbulence after Ireland's finance minister expressed "significant reservations" over it.

"The change of (US) administration offers a historic opportunity... and we have to seize opportunities when they present themselves. It's now. It's now that we must act," insisted French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire at a joint press conference ahead of the upcoming Franco-German Economic and Financial Council. His German counterpart Olaf Scholz said he was "optimistic" about the chances of sealing an agreement he said would end "disastrous fiscal competition" between countries.

"We are very close to concluding an international agreement" which will lead to "a revolution in international corporate taxation," Scholz added.

Biden's administration last week called for agreement on a uni-



The icon of the mobile messaging service application WhatsApp is seen on the screen of a smart phone. —AFP

fied tax rate of a minimum of 15 percent in negotiations with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the G20. But on Tuesday Ireland's Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe said the country had "a really significant concern" about a global rate that meant "only certain countries, and certain size economies can benefit from that base".

Eyes on G7

The objection carries weight because Ireland hosts an outsized number of technology and pharmaceutical firms that were attracted to the country for its lower tax rate. Last month, Dublin's finance ministry released a projection saying it could lose two billion euros (\$2.4 billion) each year in revenue starting in 2025 if a global minimum tax rate is enacted. Donohoe's concerns were

echoed by Hungary's foreign minister on a trip to Dublin on Tuesday. "Like Ireland, Hungary is in favour of a low level of tax," Peter Szijjarto said.

Ireland's corporate tax rate is currently 12.5 percent and Hungary's is nine percent—whereas France and Germany impose rates of almost 30 percent, according to OECD calculations.

Luxembourg, also home to myriad multinational companies, said it was in favor of "minimum taxation" in order to create "conditions for fair competition" between countries—but has not commented specifically on the proposed 15 percent rate. Finance ministers from the G7 group of advanced nations—consisting of Germany, Canada, the United States, France, Italy, Japan and Britain—are set to meet next week in London, where they could endorse the US proposal. —AFP

Business

US orders of big-ticket goods fall 1.3% in April

Unemployment filings reach new pandemic low

WASHINGTON: Orders of big-ticket US manufactured goods fell in April for the first time after 11 months of increases, dropping 1.3 percent, according to government data released yesterday.

The \$3.2 billion decline, which defied expectations for another increase, was driven by a 6.7 percent drop in transportation equipment, the Commerce Department reported. The drop marks a disappointing start to the second quarter after the US economy grew 6.4 percent in the first three months of the year as the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic picked up speed, the Commerce Department confirmed in a separate report. That result was unchanged from the initial estimate.

"Despite disappointing economic data in April, we still foresee the US economy's first quarter bloom turning into a summer boom," said Gregory Daco of Oxford Economics, who predicts US growth this year of 7.7 percent, the strongest since 1951. "While the economic environment is ripe for naive and misguided narratives, we should remember the economic recovery from the pandemic-induced shutdown will be bumpy," he said.

Excluding the often volatile transportation sector, new orders for durable goods increased 1 percent in April, according to the data. The transportation component was dragged down by falling orders for motor vehicle and parts as well for military aircraft, which were offset by the 17.4 percent jump in civilian aircraft and parts. Auto manufacturing has been held back this year by a global shortage of semiconductors, and Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon

Macroeconomics said "it's a fair bet that chip shortages are responsible for much of weakness in the vehicle sector."

Meanwhile, new filings for US unemployment benefits slid lower for a fourth straight week, reaching a new pandemic low as COVID-19 vaccines help the economy rebound, the government said yesterday. The Labor Department said 406,000 new seasonally adjusted claims for jobless benefits were made last week, 38,000 fewer than the previous week's unrevised total and fewer than analysts had expected.

The report brings the closely watched indicator of labor market strength closer to the pre-pandemic level of 256,000 seen on the week of March 14, 2020 — before the spreading coronavirus forced businesses to close and unemployment filings skyrocketed into the millions. The data also said the insured unemployment rate, indicating workers receiving benefits, ticked down slightly to 2.6 percent, with more than 3.6 million people receiving regular aid as of the week ended May 15.

However that was 96,000 fewer than the week before, the biggest one-week drop since March. "While the recovery in the labor market may be uneven at times, the declines in both initial and continuing claims are a clear sign that progress is ongoing," Nancy Vanden Houten of Oxford Economics said.

The data showed another 93,546 people, not seasonally adjusted, made new claims last week for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, which gives aid to freelancers who are not normally



WASHINGTON, DC: White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki gestures to chart showing the rate of unemployment insurance claims during a press conference in the James Brady Press Briefing Room of the White House in Washington, DC. —AFP

eligible, slightly less than the week prior. Despite the improvements, more than 15.8 million people were receiving benefits under all programs as of the week ended May 8, a reminder of that unemployment remains widespread. —AFP

AppGallery at the forefront of gaming industry

KUWAIT: The gaming industry is considered one of the most evolving industries nowadays as it has seen a booming of users, developers, and app publishers worldwide. Big tech companies like Huawei starts to adapt their hardware offering to fit better the gamers' needs, especially when mobile gaming makes up about 45 percent of the total market share.

Huawei offers a wide choice in terms of hardware to its mobile gamer's community and has launched various smartphones to make the gaming experience on Huawei phones the most smooth and enjoyable, taking into consideration the rise of live streaming. The company flagship phone, Huawei Mate 40 Pro for example includes 24-core Mali-G78 GPU, it's the most powerful GPU ever seen on a Huawei device. This delivers advanced graphics performance and is complemented by an amazing audio visual experience for immersive gaming. The 90Hz display works together with 240Hz touch sampling rate for greater responsiveness and now provides haptic feedback to correspond with the visual experience. This entertainment set-up is completed with dual stereo speakers to create experiences with super bass stereo. All to offers an immersive gaming experience to users.

Other smartphones like the Huawei Y6p, the Huawei Y8s, Huawei nova 7i, and Huawei nova 7 SE are also perfect for gamers, they boasts incredible features like blistering processor and comprehensively optimized software, best quality display, long lasting battery, super 5G permanence and smart assistant. Specific technologies, introduced by Huawei like the GPU Turbo technology dramatically increases the graphics processing efficiency of smartphones, thereby allowing devices to run graphically intensive applications without significantly affecting battery life. The GPU Turbo is able to increase graphics processing efficiency by 60 percent and reduces SoC power consumption by 30 percent.

Moreover, Huawei has recently launched its Huawei GameCenter in more than 33 countries, including the Middle East and Africa. GameCenter creates a one-stop game service platform and unique



experience for users, providing game players with richer experience through two core services: content service and user welfare. With GameCenter, users can get access to the pre-order games, new games and popular games. Also, users can take advantage of exclusive online game packages and offers when playing the games, through which users can grow their profile, unlock further discounts and enjoy incredible benefits.

On the AppGallery, Huawei's official distribution platform and one of the top three marketplaces globally, gaming apps, among 18 other app categories, represents one of the largest verticals within the store portfolio. Gaming is at the forefront of its expansion, with over 500 percent more games now available on the platform compared to last year. Huawei customers are the first to experience innovative new gameplay globally, with many launches from the past year, including AFK Arena, Asphalt 9: Legends, Clash of Kings, and many more. In the Middle East and Africa region, AppGallery started to integrate more local gaming apps that resonate better with the local culture and are very popular among users. Local gaming app portfolio has grown by 240 percent since last year and includes games such as Tamatam, Rababa, Jawaker, UMX, Babil Games, Yalla, Ahena Studio, Inspired Square and much more. AppGallery has concentrated its efforts in working with developers on both a local and global scale to bring the most relevant apps to users, boosting the number of developers working with the platform and delivering more choices to consumers around the world. Also, developers are increasingly looking to AppGallery to reach local audiences and tap into its growing global audience.

HSBC to exit US retail banking sector

SAN FRANCISCO: HSBC announced Wednesday that it is exiting the retail and small business banking market in the United States, in line with its strategy to refocus on corporate and investment banking in Asia. The London-headquartered, Asia-focused giant intends to "focus on the banking and wealth management needs of globally connected affluent and high net worth clients," it said in a statement.

Of its 148 US branches, 90 are to be sold, including to Citizens Bank and Cathay General Bancorp. The bank plans to turn about 20 locations into international centers dedicated to high net worth individuals, and gradually wind down the remaining 35-40 branches. "They are good businesses, but we lacked the scale to compete," said Noel Quinn, the group's chief executive, in the statement.

"This next chapter of HSBC's presence in the US will see the team focus on our competitive strengths, connecting our global wholesale and wealth management clients to other markets around the world."

HSBC had announced earlier this year that it intended to restructure its US retail and small business operations. In France, according to the daily Les Echos, it is preparing to pay more than one billion euros to the American fund Cerberus to sell all of its retail banking activities, a network of 230 bank branches and 4,000 employees. After a year plagued by the coronavirus and geopolitical tensions with China, the company reported last month that it had doubled its net profit in the first quarter. —AFP

Business

LuLu Hypermarket launches 'Food is Great 2021' festival

Festival from 26 May to June 1 features British food products



KUWAIT: British Ambassador Belinda Lewis inaugurates 'Food is Great 2021' festival at the Al-Qurain branch of the LuLu Hypermarket in the presence of senior management of LuLu Hypermarket in Kuwait.



KUWAIT: LuLu Hypermarket, the regional leader in retailing, celebrates the best of British foods with the 'Food is Great 2021' festival, featuring British products during a week-long festival from 26 May to 1 June. The promotion, which was held across all LuLu Hypermarket outlets in Kuwait, was inaugurated at the Al-Qurain branch by the newly-appointed Ambassador of the United Kingdom to Kuwait Belinda Lewis, in the presence of senior management of LuLu Hypermarket in Kuwait.

In view of the ongoing pandemic, the ceremonial ribbon-cutting ceremony, as well as the entire festival, was organized in full adherence to all health and safety guidelines issued by the authorities. However, the festive atmosphere of the promotion was maintained by special decorations in all the hypermarket's outlets. That includes large cut-outs and images of historic monuments and iconic structures of the United Kingdom, which provided an exciting backdrop to the campaign.

The week-long "Food is Great 2021" festival showcased the finest food products from the United Kingdom, with special prices offered on all UK products. More than three dozen leading British food companies, including popular brands such as Actiph Water, Aunt Bessie's, Baxters, Bespoke London, Bisto, Delamere Dairy, Doves Farm and Encona, Goodfella's, Ice King, Kettle, Mars UK, Meridian, Mornflake, Morrisons, Onken, Patak's, Robinsons, Rowntrees, Rowse, Sea Magik, So Delicious, Surcare, Tate Lyle, Unilever, Vimto, Walkers, Whole Earth, Wing Yip, Young's and others, were on offer at very special prices during the festival.

The "Food is Great 2021" festival was part of LuLu Hypermarket's ongoing endeavor to bring high-quality food products from around the world to shoppers in Kuwait, and to offer customers with the widest selection of best of the world products at competitive prices.



Business

China, US trade officials hold 'candid' first talks

Washington scrutinizes if Beijing is sticking to a key agreement

BEIJING: Top US and Chinese trade officials have held their first "candid" talks since Joe Biden became president, the two sides said yesterday, as Washington scrutinizes whether Beijing is sticking to a key agreement forged during a bruising tariffs battle between the economic superpowers.

Trade relations between the two will be a major plank in the new US leader's foreign and economic policy as he looks to maintain the pressure on China imposed by predecessor Donald Trump, while looking to tread a more diplomatic line.

The countries signed a so-called "phase one" pact in January last year, in which Beijing pledged to increase its purchases of American products and services by at least \$200 billion through 2020 and 2021. The deal came at the end of long-running negotiations during a trade war that saw each hit the other with punitive tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars worth of goods and damaged relations.

But top US trade negotiator Katherine Tai has said she is analysing whether the terms of the pact have been met by China, with some experts saying Beijing is falling up to 40 percent short on its agreement. Yesterday, China's commerce ministry said Vice Premier Liu He and Tai

held "candid, pragmatic" talks and "constructive exchanges in an attitude of equality and mutual respect".

Under the agreement, the pair are meant to check in every six months on the progress of the agreement. It commits China to buying tens of billions of dollars' worth of American agricultural goods—from pork and beef to blueberries and avocados — energy and services in exchange for slashing Trump's tariffs on \$120 billion of imports from China. The deal also knits China into guarantees to protect intellectual property—addressing a major US gripe that patents, trademarks and copyright are routinely flouted by Chinese businesses—while also ensuring American banks and insurers have wider access to China's financial markets.

However, it did not deal with a 25 percent levy on a further \$250 billion of Chinese goods remains, which is potential target of a long-trailed "phase two" deal. A short statement from the Office of the US Trade Representative confirmed the "introductory virtual meeting" between Tai and He.

"During their candid exchange," Tai laid out the "guiding principles of the Biden-Harris Administration's worker-centered trade policy... while also raising issues of concern," the state-



NANTONG: A worker produces manufacturing machine at a factory in Nantong, in China's eastern Jiangsu province yesterday. — AFP

ment added. The White House has not rowed back on Trump's tough trade position, insisting it will keep tariffs in place for now as it looks to

reboot the US economy after the pandemic crisis. On its side, China has maintained duties on some imports from the United States. — AFP

Airbus to raise plane production

PARIS: Airbus said yesterday it will produce more single-aisle planes in 2023 than before the coronavirus crisis as the European aerospace giant sees the aviation sector ascending from the pandemic. The aircraft maker had slowed its production early on in the pandemic last year as COVID-19 and border closures caused a massive drop in air traffic, severely denting the earnings of airlines.

But Airbus said yesterday that it expects the commercial aircraft market "to recover to pre-COVID levels between 2023 and 2025, led by the single-aisle segment".

"The aviation sector is beginning to recover from the COVID-19 crisis," Airbus chief executive Guillaume Faury said in a statement. Airbus shares soared at the Paris stock exchange following the announcement. Airbus is currently producing 40 planes of the A320 family per month but the company said it would increase the average rate to 45 during the last three months of this year.

It added that suppliers should "prepare for the future by securing a firm rate" of 64 A320 planes by the second quarter of 2023. The cadence will increase to 70 per



The logo of European aircraft manufacturer Airbus outside the entrance of the site of Airbus' Wings Campus in Blagnac following a European company council. — AFP

month in 2024 and possibly 75 by 2025. The company was producing 60 planes per month before the pandemic and had planned to increase the rate to 63 in 2020 until Covid-19 changed those plans.

The aerospace firm also cut 15,000 jobs out of 135,000 posts, though the company avoided layoffs in France, Germany, Britain and Spain, its main locations.

The A320 jet is made at assembly lines in France, Germany, the United States and China. Airbus will also step up production of its smaller, single-aisle A220 airplane.

The recovery of wider-bodied planes is less bright as long-haul flights have been the most affected by the pandemic.

Airbus said it would increase production of its A350 twin-aisle planes from five to six per month by autumn 2022 compared to 10 before the crisis. A330 production will remain at two per month compared to three before the pandemic.

Airbus has posted profits for two consecutive quarters and expects to deliver 566 planes in 2021, the same as last year. —AFP

SAS narrows loss, pins hopes on summer flights

STOCKHOLM: Scandinavian airline SAS narrowed its losses in the second quarter, the company said yesterday, as it set its hopes on an easing of coronavirus restrictions this summer.

The earnings report came a day after the governments of Sweden and Denmark announced another round of aid to the ailing carrier. From February to April, SAS booked a net loss of 2.43 billion Swedish kronor (\$292 million, 240 million euros) — 30 percent smaller than in the second quarter last year.

The company also reported an improved operating profit "for the first time since the pandemic's outbreak, both year-on-year and compared with the previous quarter," pointing to its cost cutting efforts. However, the number of passengers in the period declined by 140,000 compared to the first quarter, to 857,000.

This caused revenue to fall to 1.93 billion kronor, a 15 percent drop from the preceding quarter and 63 percent from a year earlier. "The increase in vaccination rates provides some hope for the relaxation of restrictions, and an increase in demand ahead of the important summer season," chief executive Karl Sandlund said in a statement.

However, the CEO also noted that "many customers are now increasingly choosing to book their tickets much closer to their travel dates, which makes it difficult to predict demand during the summer."

SAS also said it expected claims from passengers of up to 150 million kronor after a European court ruled in March that customers should be compensated over disruptions due to a pilots' strike in 2019. —AFP

Sports

76ers rout Wizards to seize control, Jazz bounce back against Grizzlies

LOS ANGELES: Ben Simmons silenced the critics with a 22 point, nine rebound, eight assist performance as the Philadelphia 76ers routed the Washington Wizards 120-95 to grab a 2-0 playoff series lead on Wednesday.

Joel Embiid also scored 22 points and grabbed seven rebounds as the heavily-favored Sixers got contributions from a number of players including starting power forward Tobias Harris, who had 19 points and nine rebounds.

Simmons scored 12 of his 22 in the first quarter, delivering a breakout playoff performance after being criticized for scoring just six points in Sunday's game one of the series. "I'm here to win and I'm doing what I need to do to help my team win, whatever it is. I'm not trying to prove anybody wrong or anything like that. I'm trying to do my job to win," Simmons said.

The top-seeded 76ers now have a firm lead in the best-of-seven East series with game three scheduled for Saturday in Washington. "I told him, 'You've got all the space and all the time in the world. Just attack,'" said Embiid of Simmons. "He's physical and he's athletic and he can make plays."

The Wizards weaved their way into the post-season by grabbing the eighth and final seed, but it hasn't been an easy road. Their frustrations mounted on Wednesday when Russell Westbrook left the game with an injury and then had a run-in with a Philadelphia fan as he was walking down the tunnel.

Less than two minutes into the fourth, Westbrook appeared to injure his right ankle and headed to the locker room. A Philadelphia fan dropped popcorn on Westbrook, who then had to be restrained. "It is very disrespectful," said Wizards coach Scott Brooks of the fan who, was escorted out by security. "Philadelphia is better than that ... hopefully that fan is banned from games. They wouldn't do that down the street."

Bradley Beal scored a team-high 33 points and Rui Hachimura chipped in 11 points for the Wizards, who have been unable to slow down the 76ers' high-powered offense that boasts plenty of playoff experience.

Westbrook scored 10 points and handed out 11 assists. But the all-star point guard struggled Wednesday, shooting just two-of-10 from the floor and missing all three of his attempts from beyond the arc. "They were attacking in high efficiency shots and we couldn't make a bucket," said Brooks.

Elsewhere, Donovan Mitchell returned from an injury to score 25 points as the Utah Jazz withstood a 47-point performance from Ja Morant to beat the Memphis Grizzlies 141-129 and level their series at one game apiece.

Mitchell made his much-anticipated return from a sprained ankle to drain five threes in 26 minutes of playing time. Rudy Gobert had 21 points, 13 rebounds and four blocks for the top-seeded Jazz, which rebounded after losing game



PHILADELPHIA: Ben Simmons #25 of the Philadelphia 76ers, Joel Embiid #21 of the Philadelphia 76ers, and Tobias Harris #12 of the Philadelphia 76ers high-five during a game against the Washington Wizards during Round One Game Two of the Eastern Conference Playoffs on Wednesday at Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. — AFP

one to eighth-seeded Memphis. Mike Conley had 20 points and a career-high 15 assists, and Bojan Bogdanovic added 18 points in the win. Morant broke the Grizzlies' franchise playoff scoring

record which was held by Conley. He now has 71 points in his first two career playoff games. Dillon Brooks ran into foul trouble but still managed to score 23 points in the loss. —AFP

NHL Playoffs: Lightning, Islanders both advance

LOS ANGELES: Steven Stamkos had a goal and an assist and Andrei Vasilevskiy recorded his second career playoff shutout as the defending Stanley Cup champion Tampa Bay Lightning ousted Florida with a 4-0 win on Wednesday.

Vasilevskiy stopped 29 shots for the Lightning, who wrapped up the East playoff series in six games. It marked the second shutout for Vasilevskiy in 59 playoff games. Pat Maroon, Brayden Point and Alex Killorn also scored for the Lightning, who are trying to become the first team since the Pittsburgh Penguins in 2017 to defend their Stanley Cup title.

Maroon is trying to win a Stanley Cup title for the third straight season, having won with the Lightning last season and with the St. Louis Blues in 2019. Panther goaltender Spencer Knight made 20 saves in his second consecutive start.



TAMPA: Andrei Vasilevskiy #88 of the Tampa Bay Lightning stops a shot from Carter Verhaeghe #23 of the Florida Panthers during Game Six of the First Round of the 2021 Stanley Cup Playoffs at Amalie Arena on Wednesday in Tampa, Florida. —AFP

Elsewhere, Ryan Pullock and Brock Nelson scored just 13 seconds apart in the second period as the New York Islanders beat top seeded Pittsburgh 5-3 to close out their playoff series in six games. Nelson finished with two goals and an assist, and Anthony Beauvillier and Kyle Palmieri also scored in front of a pandemic-limited crowd of 9,000 as the Islanders wrapped up a playoff series at the Coliseum arena for the first time since 1993.

The Islanders, seeded fourth in the East Division, advance to face the third-seeded Boston Bruins in the semi-finals. Ilya Sorokin made 34 saves for the Isles and Penguins goaltender Tristan Jarry stopped 19 shots. Jeff Carter, Jake Guentzel and Jason Zucker scored for the Penguins, who have won just one playoff series since winning their back-to-back Stanley Cups. The Islanders have not made the Stanley Cup finals since 1984. —AFP

Angels coach suspended, fired over harassment claims

LOS ANGELES: Los Angeles Angels pitching coach Mickey Callaway was fired by the team and suspended for the next two seasons on Wednesday after a Major League Baseball investigation into allegations of sexual harassment.

Callaway, who has been suspended by the Angels since the allegations first emerged in February, has been placed on the MLB's ineligible list until the end of the 2022 season. "Having reviewed all of the available evidence, I have concluded that Mr Callaway violated MLB's policies, and that placement on the ineligible list is warranted," MLB commissioner Rob Manfred said in a statement. "Harassment has no place within Major League Baseball, and we are committed to providing an appropriate work environment for all those involved in our game."

The Angels swiftly announced Callaway's dismissal following the MLB announcement. "Effective immediately, we are ending Mickey



Mickey Callaway

Callaway's employment with the Angels," the team said. "We appreciate Major League Baseball's diligent investigation and support their decision." The Athletic website had first reported allegations against Callaway in February, with the coach accused of sexually harassing multiple female journalists over a period spanning several years. —AFP

Sports

'No-one is invincible', Rafael Nadal says ahead of French Open

PARIS: Rafael Nadal said "no-one is invincible" in an interview yesterday as he targets a 14th French Open title and record-setting 21st Grand Slam crown. "No-one is invincible, anywhere," said Nadal whose career record at Roland Garros stands at 100 victories against just two losses since his title-winning Paris debut in 2005. "This year I lost (early) in Monte Carlo and Madrid. I hope not to lose here at Roland Garros. What I can do is fight."

Victory in the final in Paris on June 13 will take Nadal past the record of 20 majors he currently shares with Roger Federer. Despite his remarkable history in Paris, Nadal, who turns 35 on June 3, admits he remains stunned at his longevity in a sport where he has been an ever-present in the world top 10 since 2005. When asked if he could have imagined still playing in his mid-30s, Nadal said: "Ten years ago, no. But if you had asked me the question two years ago, maybe I would have answered yes."

"Ten years ago, I had so many physical problems that it was difficult for me to imagine that my career would last so long," added the Spaniard, whose career has been plagued by a series of knee injuries. Nadal will start this year's French Open as the overwhelming favorite once again, boosted by his recent win over world number one Novak Djokovic in the Rome Masters final.

62 clay court titles

Of Nadal's 88 career titles, 62 have come on clay. He has won at least 10 times each at Roland Garros, Monte Carlo, Rome and Barcelona. Between 2005 and 2007, he went on an 81-win streak on clay. In his great ri-

valry with Djokovic, which stands at 29-28 in the Serb's favour, Nadal holds the upper hand on clay. He has a 19-7 record on the surface against the world number one and is 9-4 in finals.

Three of those championship match wins came at Roland Garros in 2012, 2014 and then last year where Nadal swept to victory 6-0, 6-2, 7-5. However, he will still be wary of Djokovic, the 2016 champion in Paris. The Serb handed Nadal one of his two losses at the French Open, in 2015, six years after Robin Soderling had been the first man to achieve the feat. Apart from Djokovic and Soderling, only injury has defeated Nadal in Paris when a wrist problem forced him to withdraw after the second round in 2016.

'Cathedral of clay'

That helped pave the way for Djokovic's lone title at the tournament. "Roland Garros is a very special place for me," said Nadal. "But favorite or not, that is not the question. What matters is to play well, and the one who plays the best will be whoever has the most chances of winning the tournament. My goal is to be the one who plays the best."

Nadal describes Roland Garros as "the cathedral of clay" but he admitted to AFP that other clay court events were a more natural fit at the start of his career. "At the beginning, I think I played better in Monte Carlo or in Rome, to be honest," he said. "It is more difficult to have a good feeling at Roland Garros, the court is very big and there are different sensations. I never had bad feelings here, but it is also true that I had very good feelings in other tourna-



Rafael Nadal

ments on this surface."

Nadal said it is impossible to pick out which of his 13 titles in Paris is the most memorable as "each one has had a particular resonance in my career". However, he has no hesitation in pinpointing the low points. "My worst memories are without a doubt 2009 and the loss to Soderling, but also 2016, when I had to give up due to a wrist injury." This year at the "cathedral" of clay court tennis in Paris' leafy western

suburbs, a statue of Nadal has been erected in the grounds. While thankful for the gesture of the French Tennis Federation, such very public recognition is hard to square with the decidedly unstarry Nadal.

"It's true that what I accomplished in Paris, even if I don't like to say it, it's something very, very special. I am grateful and I understand the gesture: I accomplished something that was very difficult to imagine," he said. —AFP

NBK signs partnership agreement with Rafa Nadal Academy Kuwait

KUWAIT: As part of its commitment to its social responsibilities and its endeavors to achieve sustainable development, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is keen to promote public health and the practice of sports activities. In this context, the bank signed a partnership and sponsorship agreement with Rafa Nadal Academy Kuwait (RNAK), the leading sports institution specializing in tennis and fitness, to sponsor all their exquisite sports activities and events.

The signing ceremony was attended by Mohammed Al-Othman, General Manager of Consumer Banking Group at National Bank of Kuwait, Mohammed Mustafa Al-Marzouq, CEO of Tamdeen Sports, Hisham Al-Nusif, Deputy General Manager of Consumer Banking Group at National Bank of Kuwait, and Martijn Belgraver, General Manager, Rafa Nadal Academy Kuwait.

The Academy provides members with a wide range of activities including professional training for those wishing to play tennis, fitness classes under the supervision of a specialized interna-

tional team of professional athletes.

On this occasion, Othman said: "At NBK, we are committed to offer our customers a holistic banking experience, including top-notch banking services, advanced technological solutions, and exceptional benefits and offers allowing a unique lifestyle for all their segments."

NBK seeks to establish partnerships with leading institutions in all fields, in a way that contributes to support its efforts to meet all its customers' needs and expectations, he pointed out. Othman emphasized that NBK encourages its customers to do sports and follow a healthy lifestyle in line with its leading strategy to achieve sustainability.

Meanwhile, Marzouq said: "Rafa Nadal Academy Kuwait is delighted and proud to be partnering with NBK Group and to be sharing this journey together in creating an impact for the future generation in Kuwait."

"The Academy's vision is to lead the way for tennis in the Middle East, and develop a unique, high-end sports facility with the highest level of



KUWAIT: Mohammed Al-Othman, General Manager of Consumer Banking Group at National Bank of Kuwait, Mohammed Mustafa Al-Marzouq, CEO of Tamdeen Sports with officials from NBK and the Academy.

service and care. Our greatest asset in achieving this is our partners, and we are thrilled that NBK leadership is playing an important role in helping us become the leading tennis Academy in the Middle East and redefine sport, fitness, health and leisure across the region," he added.

Rafa Nadal Academy hosts a variety of world-class sports facilities, including 15 tennis

courts, a swimming pool, a 1500 sqm Gym, 2 squash courts, a boxing ring, a padel court, in addition to a members' lounge. NBK strives to provide customers with an array of offers, rewards and prizes all year round which are designed to suit their interests, as well as to offer them top-notch, highly advanced and secure banking services.

Sports

Zidane resigns as Real Madrid coach

MADRID: Zinedine Zidane has resigned as Real Madrid manager with immediate effect, the Spanish club said yesterday just days after they were beaten to the La Liga title by Atletico Madrid. The Frenchman's departure comes at the end of a disappointing campaign for the 13-time European champions, who also lost to Chelsea in the Champions League semi-finals, as they failed to win a trophy for the first time in 11 seasons.

"We must now respect his decision and express our gratitude for his professionalism, dedication and passion over the years and what he means to Real Madrid," a club statement said. "Zidane is one of Real Madrid's great icons and his legacy extends beyond what he has achieved as a coach and player at our club."

Only 10 days ago Zidane, who has a contract until 2022, denied press speculation he had already told his players he would be leaving at the end of the season. "How am I going to tell my players that I am going now? It's a lie," he said

after a 1-0 win at Athletic Bilbao.

"I'm focused on this season. There is a game left and we are going to give everything. I only care what happens in this finale," he said at the time. But, perhaps tellingly, he added: "The rest, we will see at the end of the season."

The announcement marks the end of Zidane's second spell in charge of the Spanish giants. The 1998 World Cup winner first took the helm in January 2016 and guided Real to the 2017 La Liga title and an unprecedented hat-trick of Champions League titles before abruptly quitting on May 31, 2018, saying the club needed "a different voice". He returned in 2019 after Julen Lopetegui and Santiago Solari were sacked as managers in quick succession.

Big boots to fill

During his second stint as Real coach, Zidane's task was to rebuild the club after Portuguese star striker Cristiano Ronaldo moved to Juventus. Real Madrid president Florentino Perez then

opened the coffers, signing Eden Hazard from Chelsea as well as several other rising stars such as Eder Militao, Luka Jovic and Ferland Mendy. But playmaker Hazard has been injured for most of the season and most of the other new recruits disappointed, with Zidane forced to rely on veteran players such as Sergio Ramos and Raphael Varane in defence and Karim Benzema in attack. The squad was also plagued with a lot of injuries and eight cases of COVID-19.

Zidane has a history of making surprise announcements: as a player, he initially announced his retirement from international football in 2004 before coming back for the 2006 World Cup, after which he retired for good. He may now take another break from football although there has been talk of him either taking charge of the French national team or taking the helm at Juventus, where he spent five years as a player.

However, Didier Deschamps is likely to remain France coach until the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, barring a disastrous performance at the



Zinedine Zidane

European Championship that kicks off next month. As to who will fill his boots at Real Madrid, several names have come up: former Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri, ex-Madrid striker Raul Gonzalez or Joachim Loew, who steps down as Germany coach at the end of this summer's European Championships. — AFP

Title-winning Conte says 'ciao' as Inter Milan dream ends

MILAN: Antonio Conte parted company with Inter Milan on Wednesday just days after lifting their first Serie A title in 11 years amid clashes with the club's cash-strapped Chinese owners on the way forward. The ambitious Italian refused Suning's planned cost cutting which would have prevented him building the team he wanted to challenge at home and in Europe.

The former Chelsea and Juventus boss took over in May 2019 on a three-year contract worth a reported 12 million euros (\$14 million) annually. But the 51-year-old leaves the San Siro one year early, Inter confirming "an agreement has been reached with Antonio Conte for the termination of his contract by mutual consent".

"Antonio Conte will forever remain a part of our club's history," the statement added. Severing Conte's contract has cost the club a reported seven million euros (\$8.5 million), while his final year's salary would have been around 12 million.

As part of the deal Conte will not be allowed to coach another Serie A club next season, according to reports. Among the names being touted to replace him are Lazio boss Simone Inzaghi and former Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri, who has also been linked with a return to the Turin club. For Conte, future destinations could include Tottenham Hotspur and Real Madrid.

'Like a war zone'

A demanding coach, whose training sessions were described by Belgian striker Romelu

Lukaku as 'like a war zone,' Conte leaves Inter at the summit of Serie A, a feat last achieved by Jose Mourinho, who won the treble with the club in 2010.

It was a fifth league title for Conte having won three with Juventus between 2012 and 2014 and the Premier League with Chelsea in 2018. But tensions had been ongoing, having already threatened to leave last summer after losing the Europa League final to Sevilla and finishing second in the league to Juventus.

Despite a second Champions League group stage exit this season Inter clinched their 19th Scudetto with a 12-point lead on AC Milan and with four games remaining. "This is one of the most important successes of my career," Conte said. "Deciding to join Inter was not easy, the team was not equipped to win immediately. Furthermore, the opponent was Juventus for whom I had worked for a long time. Today we can say that our sacrifices have paid off."

Conte rebuilt the 'Nerazzurri,' getting the best out of players including former Manchester United star Lukaku, Lautaro Martinez and Nicolo Barella, while others like Christian Eriksen and Ivan Perisic overcame initial difficulties to adapt to Conte's style.

Captain Samir Handanovic and Lukaku both paid tribute to Conte on social media. "You came at the right time and basically changed me as a player and made me even stronger mentally," said Lukaku, Inter's top scorer the past two seasons. "Winning is all that matters to you. Thank you for all you did. I owe you a lot."

Slovenian Handanovic, 36, who won his first trophy after nine years with the club, added: "You were the one who always raised the bar and put the right pressure on everyone... the one who made the difference. Thanks mister."

Financial woes

Inter registered losses of 100 million euros (\$122 million) last season mainly due to the



MILAN: (From left) Inter Milan's Vice-President Javier Zanetti, President Steven Zhang, Coach Antonio Conte, Sports Coordinator Gabriele Oriani and CEO Giuseppe Marotta hold the Scudetto Trophy as Inter players and staff celebrate winning the Serie A 2020-2021 championship after their last Italian Serie A match on May 23, 2021 at the San Siro stadium in Milan. —AFP

coronavirus pandemic. The Suning Group shut down their Chinese club Jiangsu FC in February months after winning the Chinese Super League title.

Five days ago, Inter secured a cash injection worth 275 million euros with US investment firm Oaktree, in the form of a loan reported to be over three years. In this context, Suning wants to save as much as possible both on the purchase of new players and salaries, and possibly selling those with the highest value, an approach

unacceptable for Conte.

Conte's three-year spell at Juventus remains the longest of a career already spanning seven clubs, and the Italian national team. He took Bari and Siena into Serie A, began Juventus' nine-year domination of the Italian top-flight, guided an unfancied Italy to the semi-finals of Euro 2016 and won the Premier League in his first season at Chelsea. But he has never tasted European success, falling short with both Juventus and Chelsea before his near-miss with Inter. — AFP

Sports

Man City's Guardiola on the brink of exorcising Champions League demons

LONDON: A decade on from when he last lifted the Champions League trophy, Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola is once again in the final and is looking to back up his claim to being the greatest coach football has ever seen.

Victory over Chelsea in Porto would take Guardiola level with Zinedine Zidane, Carlo Ancelotti and Bob Paisley as the only men to win three European Cups as coach. The 50-year-old's record in 12 seasons at Barcelona, Bayern Munich and City speaks for itself. Among his 26 major trophies are nine league titles, three in each of Spain, Germany, England, and nine domestic cups.

At his boyhood club Barca he also conquered the Champions League in two of his first three seasons. But since masterminding one of the greatest ever performances in a European final to sweep aside Manchester United 3-1 at Wembley in 2011, Europe's top club competition has been the one blot on Guardiola's record.

Newly-crowned European champions Bayern expected a dynasty when the Catalan arrived in Bavaria fresh from a year's sabbatical in 2013. Instead, Guardiola's Bayern suffered semi-final heartache to Spanish opposition in each of his three seasons in charge.

City's determination to create the perfect project to lure him to Manchester by appointing his former colleagues at Barcelona, Txiki Begiristain and Ferran Soriano, to top jobs at the Etihad Stadium has been fully vindicated with three Premier League titles in the past four years. "They have an incredible squad and the best manager in the world and that makes it a good recipe," said Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp after City dethroned his side as

English champions.

Chelsea manager Thomas Tuchel is also a Guardiola disciple, labelling City "the benchmark" for the Blues to aim for. Guardiola has been so revered because he brings a style to go with the substance of hoarding trophies.

"He's had, arguably, the most positive influence of anyone, ever on our game," said former England striker Gary Lineker on how Guardiola has shaped a change of style in English football more reliant on technique than tenacity.

Overthinking

Yet the Champions League continued to bring out the worst in Guardiola as persistent tinkering and surprise team selections saw him labeled as a coach guilty of overthinking a series of knockout ties. City did not even make it beyond the quarter-finals in his first four seasons in charge as a combination of wasteful finishing, defensive errors and controversial refereeing calls repeatedly combined to cost them.

That has all changed this season with the signing of Portuguese center-back Ruben Dias helping City to boast the tightest defense in the Champions League, while Guardiola's use of a system without a natural striker has not stopped City scoring four goals in each of their knockout ties against Borussia Monchengladbach, Borussia Dortmund and Paris Saint-Germain.

"We are quite a similar team from in the past when we were out," said Guardiola this week. "The margins are little details. This year it fell on our side when for many years it was the opposite. Now we are quite satisfied to get to the final but we know if you don't have a huge desire to win it, a huge desire to know what we

Munich in Lisbon.

At Chelsea, he took over a team that was underperforming under Frank Lampard and had an immediate impact — Tuchel has turned the London club into a supremely well-drilled machine with a three-man defense led by his old captain in Paris, Thiago Silva. They kept 18 clean sheets in his first 24 matches in charge, culminating in the semi-final victory over Real Madrid.

'Great connection'

"He came in and from the first minute the players felt a great connection with him, from the first meeting," said midfielder Mateo Kovacic this week. "It was like he had been here for two years so it came quite naturally, everything. I think the team completely changed, how we approach games, like we were more confident, solid at the back, not conceding anything in the last two or three months."

After the difficulties of dealing with a Paris team built around Neymar, Tuchel has been effusive in his praise of the Premier League and the mentality of the players he inherited at Stamford Bridge. "It is different here, it's like we play a Champions League game every weekend and I think in the end it means we are better prepared," Silva, who spent eight years at PSG, said after the Madrid semi-final.

Silva joined in August but when Tuchel came in, he took over a team that looked unlikely to qualify for next season's Champions League before leading them to a top-four finish. Now they



Pep Guardiola (left) and Thomas Tuchel

have to do, it will not be possible to win the game, to win the Champions League."

Winning the Champions League has been the long-term goal for City's Abu Dhabi owners since Sheikh Mansour's takeover transformed

the club 13 years ago. In their 10th season in the competition, City have finally made it to the final. A decade of disappointment for both the club and their manager will be quickly forgotten if they make history tomorrow. — AFP

Tuchel earns second crack at Champions League glory

PARIS: Whatever happens in tomorrow's Champions League final against Manchester City, Chelsea's Thomas Tuchel can already claim a small bit of history by becoming the first coach to make it to the showpiece game in European club football in successive seasons with different clubs.

Tuchel's impact on Chelsea, at least up until the last few matches, has been little short of remarkable and, it can be argued, hardly reflects well on his old side Paris Saint-Germain. The French giants' gratitude towards Tuchel for leading them to the Champions League final for the first time in their history last season was not enough to stop them sacking him in December.

PSG have since gone on, under Tuchel's replacement Mauricio Pochettino, to finish second in Ligue 1 to Lille while going out of the Champions League in the semi-finals to Pep Guardiola's City. In any case Tuchel came out of that sacking with his reputation intact, in large part thanks to the job he did in taking PSG to last season's final where they lost narrowly to Bayern

have the chance to cap it all if they can win tomorrow's final in Porto to give Tuchel the medal he missed out on last year.

Chelsea have already beaten City twice under their new coach, a 1-0 FA Cup semi-final victory being followed by a 2-1 away success in the league. It has not all been a bed of roses though, with Chelsea losing three of their last four games, including the 1-0 defeat by Leicester City in the FA Cup final. "It concerns me because it always concerns me when we lose, and it's not so easy to get a grip on these losses and analyze them," Tuchel said this week.

Back in Portugal

Now he is back in Portugal, where he took PSG through two knockout ties against Atalanta and RB Leipzig in the 'Final Eight' last season before succumbing to Bayern. Tuchel followed in the footsteps of Jurgen Klopp when he took the coaching job at Mainz at the start of his career and again at Dortmund.

He is now hoping to match Klopp's achievement in winning the Champions League final in 2019 with Liverpool, 12 months after his side lost at the same stage to Madrid. However, the 47-year-old is not convinced his experience last season means much to the players who will step out at the Estadio do Dragao against City.

"If I was a player, I am not sure I would love to hear the story from my coach who was there last year with a different team," Tuchel admitted. "If we had it together as a team we would clearly use it but now we arrive for the first time together." — AFP

Sports

Villarreal edge Man Utd in epic shootout to win Europa League

GDANSK: Villarreal defeated Manchester United 11-10 on penalties to win their first major trophy after a 1-1 draw in the Europa League final as goalkeeper David de Gea missed the decisive spot-kick in a remarkable shootout.

Gerard Moreno gave Villarreal the lead 29 minutes into the Spanish club's first European final, but Edinson Cavani equalized early in the second half before Unai Emery's team prevailed on spot-kicks, extending United's four-year trophy drought.

"It's a disappointed dressing room. That's football for you. Sometimes it's decided on one kick — and that's the difference between winning and losing," said United boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer. "We have to learn from it, taste this feeling and make sure we don't get it again." He added: "We didn't turn up. We didn't play as well as we know we can." Villarreal midfielder Francis Coquelin was delighted that the victory also led to a place in next season's Champions League.

"It feels really good. To play against a very good side like Manchester United, we knew it would be tough," Coquelin told BT Sport. "We didn't manage to get to the Champions League through the league so to get it through the Europa League is something special — and a first title for the club as well — something amazing."

Eric Bailly replaced the injured Harry Maguire in central defense, with the United captain surprisingly named among the substitutes despite suffering ankle ligament damage two weeks ago. De Gea started ahead of Dean Henderson in goal,

while Paul Pogba took up a more orthodox midfield role as Fred was only deemed fit enough for a spot on the bench. An early collision between Juan Foyth and Pogba left the former Tottenham defender bloodied but both sides were slow to click into gear on a damp and chilly night on the Baltic coast.

Carlos Bacca's clever rabona cross created an opportunity for Pau Torres, the center-back linked with a summer move to United, while Marcus Rashford tested Geronimo Rulli with a dipping effort from distance. Jeremy Pino, who at 18 years and 218 days broke Iker Casillas' record as the youngest Spanish player to start a major European final, scuffed wide on the counter, but Villarreal were soon ahead.

Moreno's 82nd goal

Dani Parejo swung in a free-kick from the left and Moreno peeled away from Luke Shaw and Victor Lindelof, steering beyond De Gea as the Swede desperately tugged at his shirt. Moreno's 82nd goal for Villarreal equalled the club record of former Manchester United forward Giuseppe Rossi.

But it also sparked a reaction from United, as a battling Scott McTominay watched his shot deflected over before Mason Greenwood burst into the area and sent in a fizzing cross that Raul Albiol nearly diverted into his own net. Another Parejo set-piece caused panic in the United box right after half-time, Manu Trigueros crossing back towards goal before



GDANSK: Villarreal's players lift the trophy after winning the UEFA Europa League final football match between Villarreal CF and Manchester United at the Gdansk Stadium in Gdansk on Wednesday. — AFP

the ball was scrambled clear with Moreno and Carlos Bacca lurking dangerously.

Alfonso Pedraza was perhaps fortunate no further action was taken when he appeared to catch Greenwood in the Villarreal area, although

United benefitted from a slice of luck to level. A headed clearance at a corner dropped to Rashford, whose dragged volley ricocheted into the path of Cavani to stab home with Rulli unable to recover after anticipating the initial shot. — AFP

Solskjaer's Man Utd rebuild mission laid bare by Europa League agony

GDANSK: Manchester United's gut-wrenching defeat on penalties by Villarreal in the Europa League final re-emphasized the magnitude of the rebuilding task for coach and club hero Ole Gunnar Solskjaer at Old Trafford.

Exactly 22 years to the day since the Norwegian struck his famous winner for United in the Champions League final against Bayern Munich, he was made to swallow a bitter pill after watching his side lose a match they largely controlled while, crucially, lacking bite. David de Gea bowed his head after missing the decisive spot-kick, having seen the first 21 successfully converted, but Solskjaer's refusal to make a change until the 100th minute suggested little faith in a bench that included his injured captain Harry Maguire.

After steering United to successive top-three finishes in the Premier League for the first time since Alex Ferguson retired as champion in 2013, Solskjaer had earmarked the final in Gdansk as the "stepping stone for something better to come".

Despite clearing the semi-final hurdle at the fifth attempt with a high-scoring win over Roma, Solskjaer's side mustered just two attempts on target against Villarreal, organized superbly by Europa League maestro Unai Emery.

While United have move forward each year under Solskjaer, at least in terms of league position, since his appointment in December 2018, catching Pep Guardiola's Manchester City next season still appears a distant prospect.

"It's not a successful season and those are the fine margins in football. Sometimes one kick can define a season as successful or a good one, and it can define it as not one," said Solskjaer. "Trophies matter and that's what matters at this club." The 11-10 loss on penalties came after a 1-1 draw following extra time and extended United's four-year run without a trophy — the club's longest since the 1980s in the early days of the Ferguson era.

Calls for reinforcement

Solskjaer, who took the job with limited top-level management experience, has been forced to drown out the critics and naysayers while reconstructing a team that hasn't properly challenged for the title in almost a decade.

"I've been delighted with the effort, determination and desire of the players. We've probably done as well as anyone could imagine but we need to do better," he said. "Two or three players to strengthen the starting XI and squad altogether is important for us to go further and improve."

Solskjaer overcame the disappointment of a Champions League group exit to lead United to the top of the table in January, despite having overseen the club's worst home start in 48 years. United became just the fourth team to go through an English top-flight campaign undefeated away from home, indicating the progress that is being made under his guidance.

"We need to use that disappointment. It is the worst feeling, these are the moments you remember most in your career as a player and a manager," said Solskjaer. "You can either go on holiday and do nothing about it, or go home and come back and do



GDANSK: Manchester United's Uruguayan striker Edinson Cavani reacts after receiving his medal at the end of the 2021 UEFA Europa League football final between Spain's Villarreal and England's Manchester United at the Gdansk Stadium in the Polish city of Gdansk on Wednesday. — AFP

better, come back hungrier."

Marcus Rashford, one of three players who started United's 2017 Europa League final win over Ajax, vowed the pain of defeat would drive the team on even more next season. "Second doesn't count for nothing," an impassioned Rashford told BT Sport. "I don't want to hear 'they were so close' because it means nothing. One winner, one loser. Today we lost. We have to find out why and make sure next time we don't lose. We have to get rid of the disappointment and look back at the game and see what we did wrong. The team will not give up - no chance. The manager won't allow us to give up. We will come next season with bigger desire." — AFP



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