



6 Misinformation thrives in Iraq's virtual battlegrounds



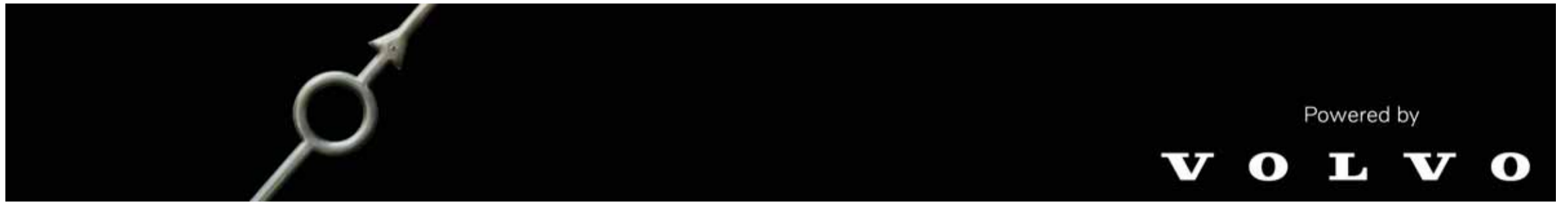
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WHO: Pandemic won't be over until 70% vaccinated

US says it is considering vaccine passport for travel abroad

Readers speak out on impact of travel curbs on expats

KUWAIT: Since February 2021, Kuwait has barred foreigners, including legal residents, from returning to Kuwait. Foreigners may leave but cannot return until further notice. The second lengthy period of the airport's closure to foreigners has had a devastating impact on expatriates, many of whom have family abroad or are stuck abroad.

Kuwait Times invited expatriates who have been affected by the travel restrictions related to COVID-19 to share their stories. Kuwait Times received more than a 1,000 responses via comments, direct messages and emails. (See Pages 4 & 5)



PARIS: People raise their hands before the start of a test concert of French rock band Indochine and French DJ Etienne de Crecy, aimed to investigate how such events can take place safely amidst the COVID-19 pandemic at the AccorHotels Arena yesterday. — AFP

COPENHAGEN/WASHINGTON: The WHO's European director warned that the COVID-19 pandemic won't end until at least 70 percent of people are vaccinated, and criticized Europe's vaccine roll-out as "too slow". The World Health Organization's regional director for Europe Hans Kluge said countries and their populations must not become complacent about the pandemic.

"Don't think the COVID-19 pandemic is over," Kluge told AFP in an interview, while adding that vaccination rates needed to increase. "The pandemic will be over once we reach 70 percent minimum coverage in vaccination," the regional director said. In the 53 countries and territories that make up the WHO's European region - including several in Central Asia - 26 percent of the population has received a first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

In the European Union, 36.6 percent of the population has received at least one dose and 16.9 percent have been fully vaccinated, according to a count by AFP. Kluge said one of his main concerns was the increased contagiousness of new variants. "We know for example that the B.1617

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News in brief

Saudi lifts ban on 11 countries

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia is lifting a ban on travelers arriving from 11 out of 20 countries that it imposed to curb the spread of coronavirus, but will still require quarantine procedures. Travelers from France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, UAE, UK and US will be allowed entry from today, SPA reported. The remaining nine countries from which travelers are still banned are Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Pakistan, South Africa and Turkey —KUNA

Missing girl feared dead

ROME: Police in Italy are searching for the body of an 18-year-old girl suspected to have been killed by her Pakistani family after refusing an arranged marriage. The girl's parents, an uncle and two cousins are under investigation for murder, lieutenant colonel Stefano Bove of the Carabinieri police said yesterday. All "are supposed to have taken part in the crime", he told reporters, while officers were combing through farmland to find the missing girl, Saman Abbas. — AFP

EU backs jab for adolescents

THE HAGUE: The EU's drug watchdog on Friday approved the Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus jab for 12 to 15-year-olds, the first vaccine to get the green light for children in the bloc. The vaccine was "well tolerated" in adolescents and there were no "major concerns" in terms of side effects, the Amsterdam-based European Medicines Agency said. The move will be a further boost for Europe's vaccination program. — AFP

Vaccine less effective against strain

PARIS: The Pfizer vaccine is slightly less effective but appears to still protect against the more transmissible Indian strain of the virus that causes COVID-19, according to a study by France's Pasteur Institute. "Despite slightly diminished efficacy, the Pfizer vaccine probably protects" against the Indian variant, according to laboratory test results, said Olivier Schwartz, the institute's director and co-author of the study that was published on the BioRxiv website ahead of peer review. — AFP

Vietnam discovers new hybrid COVID-19 variant

HANOI: Vietnam has discovered a new COVID-19 variant which spreads quickly by air and is a combination of the Indian and British strains, health officials confirmed yesterday. The country is struggling to deal with fresh outbreaks across more than half of its territory, including industrial zones and big

cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. More than 6,800 cases including 47 deaths have been reported in Vietnam, with the lion's share occurring since April.

"We have discovered a new hybrid variant from the Indian and the UK strains," Health Minister Nguyen Thanh Long told a national meeting on the pandemic yesterday, according to state media. "The characteristic of this strain is that it spreads quickly in the air. The concentration of virus in the throat fluid increases rapidly and spreads very strongly to the surrounding environment."

He did not specify the number of cases recorded with this new variant but said Vietnam will soon

announce the discovery in the world's map of genetic strains. Vietnam's Central Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology said in a statement yesterday that its scientists had detected gene mutations in four out of 32 patient samples through gene sequencing.

There were seven known coronavirus variants in Vietnam before Long's announcement, according to the Ministry of Health. The communist country has previously received widespread applause for its aggressive pandemic response, with mass quarantines and strict contact tracing helping keep infection rates relatively low.

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Tourists scarce as travel bubbles fail to inflate

WELLINGTON: Quarantine-free travel bubbles were hailed as tourism's "godsend" earlier this year, but cancellations and suspensions have deflated hopes they will herald a return to pre-pandemic normality. Perhaps the world's most high-profile bubble opened between Australia and New Zealand on April 19, leading to emotional scenes as families split when borders closed almost 400 days earlier were reunited. Since then, New Zealand has ordered partial shutdowns on four occasions due to virus scares in Australian states, the most serious of which forced

Melbourne into a snap lockdown this week. A spike of COVID-19 cases in Taiwan burst its bubble with the tiny Pacific nation of Palau last week, while Hong Kong and Singapore have been struggling to stand up a quarantine-free travel arrangement for six months.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison will take advantage of the trans-Tasman bubble this weekend, when he travels to New Zealand for the first time since the pandemic hit for talks with Kiwi counterpart Jacinda Ardern. The pair will meet in the South Island mountain resort of Queenstown, where Ardern has vowed to show him the sights, including adventure activities and glacier-fed lakes. Like tourist centers everywhere, the so-called "adrenaline capital of the world" struggled without overseas travelers, and Queenstown restaurateur Alex Boyes said the trans-Tasman bubble had not

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SYDNEY: In this file photo taken on April 19, 2021, a woman hugs a family member before his departure for New Zealand at Sydney International Airport. — AFP

Erdogan opens first mosque in Taksim Square

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday inaugurated the first mosque in Istanbul's Taksim Square, transforming the landscape of the area, eight years to the day after protests began there that shook his government. The mosque is Erdogan's mark on the square, the most famous area in Turkey's economic capital, and a fulfillment of a 30-year-old dream.

"Taksim Mosque now occupies a prominent place among the symbols of Istanbul," Erdogan said after performing Friday prayers at the site. "God willing, it will stay until the end of time." The opening was met with enthusiasm, with several thousand people praying outside in the square because the mosque filled so quickly, an AFP correspondent said.

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ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan speaks during the opening ceremony of Taksim Mosque in Taksim Square on Friday. — AFP

Local

Zain showcases its media platforms' role in supporting nation during pandemic

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced its strategic sponsorship of the 17th Arab Media Forum. The virtual event, which came in collaboration with the Ministry of Information, was held from 29 - 31 May via teleconferencing technology. The forum came under the patronage and presence of Secretary-General of the Arab League Ahmad Aboul Gheit and the participation of Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi.

Commenting on the sponsorship, Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Communications and Relations Officer Waleed Al-Khashti said: "we were keen on continuing our support to the Arab Media Forum in spite of the current circumstances because we strongly believe in the crucial role and powerful effects of the media in raising public awareness, especially during crises."

Khashti continued: "Zain had a pivotal role throughout the pandemic and since the very first days of the outbreak. We made our tech resources and media channels available and ready to support the nation's efforts. We have also collaborated with various ministries, most impor-

tantly the ministries of Health and Interior, to spread health awareness and introduce the public to the important new health measures imposed by the pandemic."

Khashti concluded by saying: "we hope that our annual support to this unique forum reflects our commitment in practicing our social responsibility. It is imperative to us that we lead the way in supporting and interacting with media, social, and cultural forums such as this one, especially that it is considered one of the most prominent events of its kind in the Arab region".

Director of the Arab Media Forum Madhi Al-Khamees commented: "We are proud of Zain's Strategic Partnership with us throughout the past decade. Without a doubt, this collaboration reflects the company's strong belief in supporting media programs and projects that contribute to elevating the cultural scene within the community. In fact, these are precisely the goals of the Arab Media Forum since its inception."

Khamees continued: "telecom companies play a decisive role in responding to efforts that tackle crises, and Zain has responded to the efforts of the nation with utmost efficacy. The company



Waleed Al-Khashti



Madhi Al-Khamees

played an important role in supporting initiatives and programs that contributed to alleviating the impacts of the pandemic. Zain also did not allow the current unprecedented circumstances to stop it from supporting media projects such as this one, something that further enhances its leading role as one of the biggest national companies that support media and culture programs in Kuwait."

The Arab Media Forum witnesses wide participation from all over the Arab world, where participants join the live video seminars via online plat-

forms and social media channels. This makes it the biggest virtual event of its kind in the region, hosting many media personalities, ministers of information, academics, students, media channel owners, and much more.

This year, the Arab Media Forum witnesses the participation of Secretary-General of the Arab League Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al Mutairi, Bahrain's Minister of Information Ali Al Rumaihi, Palestinian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Information Nabeel Abu Rudainah, Chief Executive of KSA's Radio and Television Authority Mohammed Fahad Al Harthi, and Assistant Secretary-General of Media and Communications at the Arab League Ambassador Ahmad Rasheed Khatibi.

The Arab Media Forum has proven itself to be one of the region's most prominent events that attend to Arab media. Since 2003, the event brought together many ministers, editors-in-chief of local and regional newspapers, media executives, journalists, academics, authors, actors, businessmen, and social figures from all around the Arab world.

ACK celebrates class of 2020 with virtual graduation

KUWAIT: The Australian College of Kuwait held its virtual graduation ceremony recently under the patronage of Dr Mohammed Abdullatif Al-Faris, the Minister of Oil and Minister of Higher Education. The traditional graduation ceremony was shifted due to the pandemic and scheduled to a virtual celebration with the attendance of ACK's Board of Trustees, International Partners, ACK academic and administrative employees, alumni, families and friends of graduating students.

The pandemic has not stopped ACK students from learning nor helping their peers and the community during the challenging days. At the ceremony, a short film was screened: giving ACK community a trip down memory lane about the obstacles and the challenges that we had to overcome from the beginning of the pandemic in order to pursue our mission.

The ceremony began with speeches given by Omar Ali Al-Kandari - Acting Secretary General of the General Secretariat of the Private Universities Council - on behalf of the Minister of Oil and Minister of Higher Education, Dr Saad Al-Omari - Chairman of Board of Trustees, Alastair Dawson - Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor and Vice President (International and Services Division) at Central Queensland University, and Prof Isam Zabalawi - President of ACK. Two of ACK honor graduates Shahad Dawara, and Ahmad Ashkanany also gave speeches.

Prof Zabalawi said, "Today marks a special day as we are celebrating the graduation of a new cohort of the Australian College of Kuwait students. We gathered to confer upon them the degrees they deserve. This is to acknowledge and endorse their dedicated work during the past few years. We are here to honor their achievements and to say to them congratulation we are proud of you."

"Over the years, I have presided over many graduations. While each ceremony is special, this year's graduation is incomparable and a remarkable one,"

he added. "You were determined and resilient. You adapted to difficult circumstances and succeeded. You realized the skills you will need to navigate your career and become acquainted. You have sought to do something and have done it. You overcame all the barriers and completed the founding phase in your career with success. I have every confidence that you are ready for the next journey ahead."

In his speech, Dr Omari thanked the Private Universities Council for their guidance, support, and Prof Isam for his exemplary leadership of the institution. "We are obliged tonight to celebrate the graduation of the class of 2020 virtually, one of the many adjustments we've had to make to our lives during these trying times. Indeed, we have had to respond with speed and flexibility to profound uncertainty since the pandemic struck. We adopted e-learning quickly and efficiently to provide a student-centered learning experience that is effective, adaptable and well suited to the needs of all learners and partners. Ensuring that our current graduates are well prepared with the skills they need to take their place in a brave new world."

"Our students, faculty, and staff have adapted quickly to enormous and a times surreal change with speed and agility and this is very much appreciated. To the entire ACK community... I salute you and I am proud to be one of you," he added.

In her speech, Bachelor graduate Dawara said: "Looking further back on my journey, entering ACK was exciting and strange for me all at the same time. At the beginning, I always wanted to achieve more as a student and ACK thankfully gave me the opportunity to do exactly that. ACK has empowered us by giving us the opportunity to participate in competitions, volunteer and work as part timers, which has increased our experience in life."

Meanwhile, Diploma graduate Ashkanany stressed on the importance of the dedication and addressing to fellow graduates concluded: "I would just like to say that if I can stand here today and address you all as valedictorian, you most definitely can accomplish great things and to a much larger extent. I am not exceptional. I am not a genius, however, dedication and focus was key throughout my journey here at ACK and I intend to carry these qualities forward with me in my next chapter. And so, to end this speech, I hope you all take advantage of what you have and I wish you a wonderful, successful and fulfilling life."

ball championship. "Let's finally give COVID-19 the red card, don't allow extra time for COVID-19," Kluge quipped, repeating advice to maintain social distances and wear facemasks.

He also underscored that speed is "of essence" during the pandemic. "Our best friend is speed, time is working against us, (and) the vaccination roll-out still goes too slow," Kluge said. "We need to accelerate, we need to enlarge the number of vaccines," and European countries needed to show more solidarity. "It is not acceptable that some countries start to vaccinate the younger, healthy part of the population, while other countries in our region still did not cover all the healthcare workers and the most vulnerable people," Kluge said.

Meanwhile, the United States said Friday it is seriously considering creating a vaccine passport for Americans traveling abroad. "We're taking a very close look at that," Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said of the idea of special documentation for vaccinated Americans who want to travel overseas, as inoculation drives allow Europe and other regions of the world to start opening up from pandemic restrictions. — AFP

help procure vaccines, while embassies and international organizations have been contacted for assistance, state media reported.

The country presently has close to two million doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine remaining, but said it is buying more than 30 million doses of the Pfizer shot. It is also in talks with Russia to produce Sputnik V, according to state media, and is working on a homegrown vaccine.

In nearby Thailand, the government yesterday took exception to media reports in Britain that labelled a new strain causing concern there as the "Thai variant". The strain was first detected in Thailand in a 33-year-old Egyptian traveler, UK health authorities said, but 109 cases have since been found in Britain. "Principally speaking, it should not be called the Thai variant because the infected person is from overseas," said Opas Kankawinpong, head of Thailand's disease control department. — AFP



Gulf Bank gold sponsor of AUM career fair

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank successfully wrapped up the American University of the Middle East's first virtual career fair, which was launched last week for university students. As a gold sponsor of the AUM career fair, Gulf Bank is affirming its commitment to creating job opportunities for Kuwaiti youth and realizing the national development plan, Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait."

During the course of the career fair, more than 1,000 AUM students and alumni visited the Gulf Bank booth. In addition, Gulf Bank's Human Resources team met with multiple ambitious young men and women wishing to join the banking sector. During the event, Gulf Bank employees described the nature of work at Gulf Bank, and touched on the multitude of opportunities available for applicants, answering any and all questions that applicants had. This year, over 170 people applied for jobs at Gulf Bank through the career fair.

Gulf Bank also held an educational webinar dur-

ing the exhibition on how to map your career and structure your professional life, which was attended by more than 200 participants. Regarding this year's virtual career fair, Gulf Bank's General Manager of Human Resources, Salma Al-Hajjaj, commented: "Each and every department at Gulf Bank is constantly striving to solidify Gulf Bank's position as the Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. At Gulf Bank, we also recognize that we cannot reach this position without the presence and assistance of a supremely qualified human capital force."

This is why we are always keen to be present in local career fairs due to their critical role in expanding our network of employees, and renewing and developing our competencies at the Bank. We are proud of our pioneering role in providing job opportunities for Kuwaiti youth and of the many efforts we are spearheading to achieve Kuwait Vision 2035 'New Kuwait' and create a more sustainable national economy."

Salma Al-Hajjaj

WHO: Pandemic won't be over...

Continued from Page 1

(Indian variant) is more transmissible than the B.117 (British variant), which already was more transmissible than the previous strain," Kluge noted.

Cases of the so-called Indian variant have been recorded in 27 of the region's 53 countries, while the number of new cases, and deaths, has fallen for five consecutive weeks, reaching their lowest levels since mid-October. Worldwide, new cases have dropped for four weeks in a row, according to an AFP tally. But while vaccines have proven effective against coronavirus mutations, people must still be vigilant, Kluge emphasized. The Belgian doctor said a major concern was that "people drop their guards that they become complacent," especially going into the summer months. In addition, large gatherings are on the horizon in conjunction with the European foot-

Vietnam discovers new hybrid...

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The new round of infections has made the public and government strict and authorities have quickly moved to place strict limits on movement and business activity. Cafes, restaurants, hair salons and massage parlors as well as tourism and religious spots have been ordered to close in various areas of the country. Vietnam - a country of 97 million people - has vaccinated a little over a million citizens.

It is now ramping up its jab rollout and hopes to achieve herd immunity by the end of the year, according to the health minister. Authorities have called on people and businesses to donate money to

Erdogan opens first mosque in...

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"There are too many people and not enough mosques. God bless those who made this happen," said Abuzer Koc, who had a Turkish flag draped across his shoulders and had come to take part in the inaugural prayer. Some 4,000 people will be able to pray inside the mosque, which combines Ottoman style with contemporary features.

When Erdogan served as Istanbul mayor in the 1990s, he lamented the absence of a mosque in Taksim Square, noting that the only visible religious site was an Orthodox church in an area not too far away. "There wasn't even a prayer room and the faithful had to make do with praying on newspapers on the ground," Erdogan said on Friday.

Although Turkey is a Muslim-majority country, the mosque's construction was criticized when it

began in 2017, with some opponents accusing Erdogan of seeking to "Islamize" the country and displace the founder of the secular modern republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. The new building eclipses the "Republic Monument" in the square, which depicts the important figures of the Turkish War of Independence, including Ataturk.

The mosque was initially intended to be inaugurated during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. But Erdogan, who pays strict attention to dates for events, finally opted to open the mosque on the day when anti-government protests started in 2013. The square was the center of the demonstrations known as the "Gezi movement" and were met with a heavy-handed response from police.

The opening also comes a day before the 1453 conquest of Constantinople by Ottomans, a special day for the president nostalgic for past glories. Erdogan said during the inauguration that he saw the Taksim Mosque as "a gift to celebrate the 568th anniversary of Istanbul's conquest". The president often presents himself as a builder who has transformed the country with airports, hospitals, roads and grand mosques. — AFP

Tourists scarce as travel bubbles...

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proved a panacea. Boyes had hoped the bubble would lift his business to about 70 percent of its pre-pandemic level but that has not yet happened.

"Any foreigners we see is something new to us at the moment but this is a time when Queenstown's traditionally been quite quiet," he told AFP. "So we haven't been swamped by Australians, so to speak, but future bookings through the winter are looking healthy." While strong domestic tourism figures in Australia and New Zealand show holidaymakers remain keen to take a break in troubled times, the

data also shows many remain wary of using the international travel bubble. Bookings to Australia from New Zealand in the six week from the bubble's announcement on April 6 to May 18 were less than a quarter of the numbers during the same period in 2019, data from travel analyst ForwardKeys showed.

ForwardKeys' Olivier Ponti said bookings the other way were stronger but still less than 60 percent of what would be considered normal. "Since the two-way trans-Tasman bubble opened last month, bookings have generally been stronger out of Australia than New Zealand - we're seeing that Kiwis need a bit of encouragement," a Qantas spokeswoman told AFP.

The reason for the caution became apparent this week when New Zealand suspended the bubble with Victoria state and officials in Wellington made it clear that Kiwis stranded in Melbourne's lockdown were on their own. — AFP

Local



India's Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar (left) and Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah.

Kuwait reiterates support for India as it tackles COVID

KUWAIT: Kuwait will continue to provide assistance and support to India as it tackles a "worsening situation" as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said on Friday. In a phone call with his Indian counterpart, Kuwait's foreign minister, who doubles as State Minister for Cabinet Affairs, reiterated his country's commitment to providing New Delhi with "all the essential requirements" it needs during these "difficult circumstances" amid the ongoing spread of the COVID-19 variant. Meanwhile, India's Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar expressed his country's appreciation and gratitude for this supportive stance, saying it reflects the depth of historical relations between the two friendly countries. During the talks, the two officials also discussed their countries' solid bilateral relations, and means to enhance these ties. —KUNA

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A picture taken on Friday shows the sun rising in Kuwait City. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



KUWAIT: Ambassador of India to Kuwait Sibi George met recently with Sheikh Faisal Al-Humoud Al-Malek Al-Sabah, Advisor at the Amiri Diwan. The two sides discussed the inter-alia bilateral ties and ways of further enhancing them, the joint celebrations of the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Kuwait and India, COVID-19 developments, diaspora affairs and matters of mutual interest.

Ooredoo Kuwait gears up staff with first aid, CPR training

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, organized a two-day course for heart saver first aid, CPR and cardiac shock (AED) in association with Dasman Diabetes Institute. The course aimed to provide training for employees on how to react and respond to medical emergencies at work, and consisted of 10 employees from different departments who undergo intense training that covered various topics including: First Aid basics, medical and injury emergencies, environmental emergencies, adult CPR and AED use, adult and child choking, in addition to other aspects and details related to the course.

At the end of the course, all participants

obtained a certificate from Dasman Diabetes Institute and a license from the American Heart Association valid for two-years. Ooredoo Kuwait constantly strives to improve its employees' health and safety by providing trainings and development programs that are in line with the company's wellness strategy. Commenting on this occasion, Mijbil Alayoub, Senior Director, Corporate Communications, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "Such training courses that aim to provide the knowledge, educate and improve the skills of our employees that may help save a life; fall under the umbrella of Ooredoo Kuwait's wellness and social responsibility strategy".

"As one family, we are always keen on encouraging our employees to look after each other, and interfere when needed to save a life," Alayoub added. It is worth noting that the mission of the Dasman Diabetes Institute is to combat the diabetes epidemic in the State of Kuwait by focusing on diabetes, research, integrated prevention, training, education and treatment.



One injured in offshore collision

KUWAIT: A boat and a yacht collided near Kubbar Island Friday afternoon, the Fire Force said. Shuaiba and Salmiya Sea Rescue centers responded and found the boat with five persons on board and the yacht that had a family on it. The boat was severely damaged and water was seeping into it, so pumps were used to take the water out while securing the boat. One injured person was transported by the rescue boat and handed to paramedics.



News in brief

Arab FMs meet in June

CAIRO: The Arab League announced yesterday that the Arab foreign ministers would hold a "consultative meeting" on June 8 in Qatar, which chairs the current session of the League Council at the level of Foreign Ministers. In a statement, the League Assistant General Secretary Ambassador Hussam Zaki said that the meeting "comes within the framework of the League's Council at the level of Foreign Ministers to intensify consultation of common issues especially the political ones." He explained that the format of the "consultative meeting" is a "tradition at the level of the League Council that allows ministers to discuss and express their opinions informally without referring to any specific agenda or issuing any formal statements or document." —KUNA

Airport staff vaccinated

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health said that the mobile coronavirus pandemic vaccination campaign targeted employees at Kuwait International Airport. Some 10 units, spread across two sites at the airport and Kuwait Airways offices, are expected to immunize around 8,000 employees, ministry official Dr Dina Al-Dhabaib said in a statement. Alongside Kuwait Airways and other airlines at the airport, the targeted companies and bodies include National Aviation Services (NAS), Kuwait Aviation Services Company (KASCO) and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, amongst others. Employees of commercial retailers and restaurants at the airport are also being vaccinated. —KUNA

Clean Fuel Project complete

KUWAIT: Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) announced the completion of all units of the Clean Fuel Project after fulfilling successfully the hydrocracking unit No. 114 at Mina Abdullah Refinery, paving the way for full operation of the project. Ghanem Al-Otaibi, Acting Deputy CEO for projects, said it is the largest unit of its kind across the country, with a capacity of 70,000 low-sulfur diesel and high quality kerosene barrels per day. The unit has specifications that meet the European standards and requirements, Otaibi added. Unit 114 is the last of 70 as part of the second and third phases of the refinery, he said. It is one of the most important of Kuwait's oil schemes as it enables KNPC to produce high-quality oil and clean products, he stated. This contributes to boosting the company's profits through opening new global markets for Kuwaiti oil products, he asserted. —KUNA

In my view

Tobacco and e-cigs



By Abdellatif Sharaa

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If a mad man is given an ember, he will not pick it up! If he was asked to touch it, he will not! So what about him picking it with his hand and placing it in his mouth, then dropping it in his gut?! A mad man will not do that, so what about a sane person? Smokers do! Smoking is a repugnant habit that we hope our brothers and sisters can fight against and become free from this enslaving master.

I feel hurt and feel bad for days, and actually cannot forget the scene when I notice a boy or a girl who is barely 15 picking up a cancer stick and lighting it like a pro. It hurts because this kid may get stuck with it for years and years, and the worst of it, being underage, someone may have bought for them, but that is another story for another time.

Smokers are reminded of the health hazards smoking may bring to them and they are reminded of this by the manufacturers themselves, who place notes and scary pictures on the pack of cigarettes! The cost burden on the smoker is not light. An example: The National Cancer Institute said the average cost of a pack of cigarettes is \$6.28, which means a pack a day habit sets you back \$188 per month or \$2,292 per year. Of course prices vary from one country to another, but the cost is significant both on the pocket and well-being!

The tobacco industry is now openly admitting that their products are a health hazard and claim they are phasing out the traditional "cancer stick", but of course, they are not stopping there. They are researching and already manufacturing the so called e-cigarette, devices that deliver nicotine into the body. Yes, even employing technology does not make the devices risk-free!

A recent event held in the US touched on the likelihood that vaping increases smoking cessation and the principal concerns about youth vaping, among other topics. I felt that some of the speakers had worries that vaping may cause nicotine addiction in some youth - vaping by youth who have never smoked can cause some to try smoking.

The e-cigarette carries in it various chemicals including propylene glycol and vegetable glycerin, in addition to flavorings and chemicals. I personally believe the e-cig is not the alternative, and more so because it attracts younger generations. And although many experts say nicotine, though addictive, does not have significant adverse health risks, there are concerns that it interferes with prefrontal cortex maturation.

Health concerns with long term e-cig use may include addiction, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, oral disease, developmental and reproductive effects and of course cancer. In conclusion, regardless of the vehicle that delivers substances and products of tobacco into the body, it is still harmful and bad for one's health, and the sane ideal act is to quit smoking cigarettes of all types and shut the stick production lines down!



Readers Speak Out

Impact of Kuwait's 'travel restrictions' devastating for country's expatriate community

Since February 2021, Kuwait has barred foreigners, including legal residents, from returning to Kuwait. Foreigners may leave but cannot return until further notice. The second lengthy period of the airport's closure to foreigners has had a devastating impact on expatriates, many of whom have family abroad or are stuck abroad. Kuwait Times invited expatriates who have been affected by the travel restrictions related to COVID-19 to share their stories. Kuwait Times received more than a 1,000 responses via comments, direct messages and emails. Over several days, we will be sharing in print and online a selection of these responses (names withheld) to illustrate the breadth and depth of the impact the travel restrictions have had on Kuwait's 3.4 million+ expatriate community. You can read more on our social media @KuwaitTimes.

"My parents have been living in Kuwait for 40+ years. I grew up there and went to school there. I currently live and work in the UK. In the last year, my mother has had severe back problems and my father has been diagnosed with cancer. But I have no way to visit them because of the travel ban. Not even exceptional cases are allowed a visit visa even with a negative PCR test. I think this is a ludicrous handling of the travel ban situation by the Kuwaiti government."

"My aunt and uncle don't have kids ... and they have been living in Kuwait for 50 years. Just because of the age issue, they will have to leave Kuwait. They have worked and have been loyal to Kuwait. Starting something new in India is so difficult and impossible - it's like starting a whole new life again without any clue! They cannot even transfer their residency to their kids because they don't have any. They are working hard to meet their expenses here in Kuwait. The rest of my family is also here. My mum went for my grandfather's treatment and got stuck there. My grandpa passed away, and when she was heading back to Kuwait, that's when they came up with the whole banning rule. It's been seven months and I'm all alone. My cousin's parents are also stuck in India. We need to travel peacefully to see our parents and come back to our beloved Kuwait. What if we travel and they come with the rule that expats cannot travel back to Kuwait? We will be stuck there. We all need proper rights - not equal rights to Kuwaitis, but at least some exceptions. At the end we are all human."

"First of all thank you for giving us a platform to talk about our struggles. The mere act of letting us be heard gives some sort of relief to our problems. I was born in Kuwait and have Kuwaiti family in Kuwait (90 percent are Kuwaiti or stateless). I have a son in Kuwait whom I have not seen for over a year now. All of this is due to the travel ban that denies me entry into the country because my passport is of another nationality, even though every breath and every drop of blood

of mine is Kuwaiti and I have so much love for this land. It's taken such a huge toll on me that words fail to express. Sometimes I feel it will never get better, but I am hoping and waiting for the light at the end of the tunnel. How is it that the people who have not been abiding by the law are leaving Kuwait for humanitarian reasons by giving them an amnesty every month - that is a good thing, but why is there no one thinking about the people outside Kuwait who have not been able to see or feel or touch their family and loved ones? I'm actually tearing up right now as I am writing this and trying to express how painful it is being a single father and away from my son for so long, and also how I dearly miss my family in Kuwait. Words can't and won't describe how painful it is. I love Kuwait truly but I am sad about this, especially as I feel in my heart and blood that I am part of Kuwait. Not being able to come back due to travel restrictions is painful to say the very least."

"I honestly felt very safe because of the Kuwait government's restrictions, especially during 2020. The pandemic had just started and it was going crazy all around the world. Death tolls were much higher in a lot of countries, but in Kuwait things were stable and under control. A few weeks ago, I had a personal case that made travel restrictions on me as an expat hard to handle: Although I have legal custody of my only daughter, my ex-husband took her - she is only 2.5 years old - and went to Lebanon with her. My hands are bound as I can't travel to get my daughter back, or else I would lose my job, which is my only resource. I am an instructor at a reputable college in Kuwait and I always love how much I have also helped my students cope with the situation during the pandemic. This is hard on everyone, and many other countries have closed their airport, not only Kuwait. Now I might risk losing her custody if I can't make it to Lebanon to take her back and come with her to Kuwait."

"It's going to be two years soon since I last saw my parents back

home. The COVID situation in India is terrible and very scary. It's been a frustrating and stressful time, wondering when I'll be able to see my mum and dad again and if they're safe. The recent cyclone that hit the south of India only made matters worse. I spent two days not being able to contact them as the phone lines were cut due to the cyclone. It's not easy being the only child supporting parents who are senior citizens. What makes it a hundred times

there with his parents now. He is feeling so helpless that he cannot see his sick father - who knows what might happen to him anytime. We all are desperately praying that Kuwait government opens up the airport for all. Please show some mercy on us; everybody is desperate to see their families. Let only the vaccinated people land back in Kuwait even if there is quarantine. People are ready to accept any criteria."

“My husband works in Kuwait. He was one of the frontliners. He came to India because he couldn't stand being alone anymore. He said he had suicidal thoughts. Now he can't go back even though he has residency. I was living and working in Kuwait too but came to deliver my baby and now Kuwait has stopped issuing visas. I would like to humbly request Kuwait government to resume flights as well as start issuing family visas. We have taken the first dose of vaccine in India already.”

worse is feeling helpless because I can't even travel home to be with my family, let alone get them here where they can be safe with me. For now, I'm placing my hope and trust in the Kuwaiti government that they take into consideration people like me whose families are miles away and in danger. Enough people have lost loved ones and have not even been able to say goodbye!"

"My friend's parents are back in India and his father has cancer. He had an operation which was successful alhamdulillah, but he has one more now in two months. His mom is crying because they are alone there and because their son who is working here cannot come. If he comes, then obviously his job is at risk! This is a very terrible situation for him to not be

"In my opinion, as an expat who is vaccinated, taking care of all the things required and having a residence permit, we can travel too! It's so hard being stuck, especially if you have something urgent to do outside Kuwait. Because if you go you can't come back. If you go you need to let go of your home, work, etc. We are humans and as a human I have the right to travel. I know there is a pandemic, but why only expats cannot travel? With all respect, we are living here since we were small babies; Kuwait is our second home. It's not easy being in this hard situation. I hope they change the rules so we can travel again, especially since they said the coronavirus will not disappear, so we have to live with it! There is a vaccine, there is a PCR test. I can stay in home quarantine until the PCR test is negative!"

that can renew my passport. As a result, I have to renew it in Kuwait and I have to be present for the renewal. I got in contact with Kuwait's embassy here, but they were inconsiderate and told me it's not within their control to give me any approval and started directing me to speak to other organizations, who also didn't have any control. Isn't that inhuman? Not being able to say goodbye to my grandfather or be with my family during this time? What have we as expats done to deserve such treatment?"

"I am currently stuck in India and my family is in Kuwait. I want to meet them badly as I miss them a lot. However, I am unable to return due to the ban on expats, which is now in place for more than a year. I sincerely request the government through your esteemed newspaper to lift the ban."

Local

"I came to Kuwait in April 2019 on a dependent visa. I was living there with my husband. We got married in November 2018. After a few months I got pregnant, so I had to leave Kuwait and come back to India because of my condition at that time. We planned that once I gave birth, I will be there again with our baby. I gave birth on April 10. But due to the pandemic situation, India is on the ban list and I am not able to go to Kuwait. My iqama was renewed online last year in June. I could have come via Dubai, but the problem is that I don't have a visa for my child. Please cooperate and let us meet our families. Please lift the ban from India at least for families. Please start giving visas to families."



"I am in Turkey right now. We have many projects in Kuwait, but we cannot return due to the prohibition on travel. Hundreds of Turkish people are waiting. Turkey and Kuwait relations are very important for commercial activities and we expect the ban to be lifted in the shortest time."



"I travelled with my partner to the UK in Feb 2020. Fortunately, I was able to come back when the airport reopened in Aug 2020. My partner was told he wasn't able to return because his visa had expired and due to his nationality (Nigerian), he had to be in the country to renew it. It has been over a year and he hasn't managed to return. I came to visit him in February and again I am stuck outside Kuwait. I am stranded in Bahrain waiting for the airport to open. I am worried I won't be able to enter Kuwait when they open the airport as I'm not vaccinated. I'm unable to get the vaccine here in Bahrain as I'm not a citizen or resident. Here in Bahrain unvaccinated people are not allowed to enter malls, shops, restaurants, gyms salons, spas, etc. So everything has just got worse. Stuck inside a hotel not able to do anything. Not knowing when we can return or on what grounds."



"I'm an expat who has been living in Kuwait for eight years working for diplomatic and international organizations. I travelled to my home country in Jan 2020 after I gave birth in Kuwait to spend my maternity leave there, and I've been stuck there ever since! My husband has not seen our now 1.5-year-old as he's stuck in Kuwait as this is where he works. He missed all her baby milestones, and it breaks my heart that we don't even know when will we be allowed back. On a side note, I have valid residency as my workplace renewed it for me. My 6-year-old daughter also has valid residency and attends school in Kuwait all the way from Egypt. My baby was issued a visit visa in January 2021 and we actually travelled to Dubai to quarantine there, but the airport was closed to non-Kuwaitis and we were forced to go back home."



"I was working for the last four years in Kuwait and got stuck in India from Jan 2021. I am without pay here. It's been so difficult for me to support my family and pay my loans. I hope flights will resume soon."



"I'm a single female teacher living away from my family. My father recent-



People arrive at Kuwait International Airport in this April 21, 2020 file photo.

ly passed away and I desperately want to go home this summer to spend time with my elderly mother, who has become increasingly lonelier and dependent. I spent last summer locked up in my apartment, and for my own mental wellbeing, I'd like to go home and spend time with my family. Like all my colleagues, we are especially anxious about returning if we leave. It builds resentment when you see Kuwaitis able to travel to your home country and you are effectively trapped. The irony is that they are more likely to see your family than you. Freedom of movement is a right and not a privilege. Currently, expats are being treated like second-class citizens. This is not the Kuwait I have known and loved for more than a decade."

enter Kuwait. But due to the restrictions, it's been near impossible to do that, so we're stuck in each of our countries just praying the government will ease restrictions."



"Kuwait. A country with which I fell in love with time. I was quite small when my family relocated here. I did my schooling till grade 10 here. I shifted to India for my higher studies. Right now I'm in grade 12 living in a hostel, since my family which consists of my papa, mama and younger sister live in Kuwait. The last time I visited Kuwait was in December 2019. I celebrated the 2020 New Year's Eve under a fireworks show at Al-Kout Mall. I boarded



"I am a British national working in medical management. I lived in Kuwait for 16 years, then went back to the UK for two years for my son to finish high school. In the UK I met my now fiance. I came back to Kuwait two years ago, so now I've spent 18 years of my life in Kuwait. My children have spent most of their life living in Kuwait and went to UK to study. Before COVID, my fiance and I were working and living here and planning our wedding. When COVID happened, my fiance lost his job and had to return to the UK when his visa expired. It's now been a year since we saw each other. My children, who are also stuck outside Kuwait, cry because they miss me and their father and feel like they have no home even though they are British, because they love Kuwait and grew up here. My wedding is booked for August in the UK, but in the present situation I will probably have to postpone it because I'm afraid of not being allowed back."



"After flights were banned (last year), me and my father were stranded in our native country. My father was undergoing chemotherapy treatment, and the doctor told us he won't survive for more than six months. This was in August 2020. I kept trying to come back here with my father as my sister and mother were stranded here. Due to my mother's health conditions, even they couldn't travel and as my father was bedridden,



"My mother caught tuberculosis recently. And after months of checkups and treatment, we realized that there is no cure for this in Kuwait. We could have afforded treatment and tried the best of hospitals, but none of them could help. Eventually we had to send her back to Pakistan. She was treated there and was cured alhamdulillah. However, since then she couldn't come back to Kuwait, which is like our home since I was born and have lived all my life here in Kuwait. Now her visa is about to expire along with my little sister's. She can't come back and I haven't seen my mother for more than a year now. Eventually my father and rest of my family decided to leave Kuwait for a better lifestyle. Kuwait is a good country but laws here for expats are very difficult - it almost feels like slavery. Unfortunately, expats have no rights here. It would be a big help if someone could take care of these types of situation and allow expats to enter without difficulties."



"It's been two years since I've seen my family. I was born and raised in Kuwait and by all means, Kuwait is my first home. After completing my higher education, I came to India for further studies in 2015. Since then till 2019, I used to visit Kuwait every six months until COVID-19 happened. Now it's been two years since I've come to Kuwait or seen my family. If there's something you could do to lift this travel ban on expats, it would be much appreciated."

"I've been in Kuwait for 2.5 years as a figure skating coach. My parents were COVID positive last month (April) and I was supposed to go back to Indonesia as my mother was in critical condition. But as a breadwinner, I had to make sure I could come back to secure income for my whole family - so I didn't travel. On May 4 (Ramadan 21), Allah took my mother's life, and I could only pray from here. Inshallah, as soon as the airport begins working normally, will visit my family to heal myself."

my flight on January 3. Never did I know that this would be my last trip till date. I have been away from my parents for the last one and a half years now, and it is really painful to live alone at the age of 17 when other students like me are enjoying quality time with their families. My father's mother left for her heavenly abode and my father could not see her for the last time. Kuwait is as important to me as my family. There is a bond that has been formed. I miss being in Kuwait. I miss its beaches, towers and streets. I miss my home in Kuwait. I miss Kuwait so much. Every day I sleep with the hope to visit Kuwait soon. Kuwait has become a part of my identity now. No matter where I will be, I will always have a spot for Kuwait. I wish flights resume soon so I can reunite with my family at my home in Kuwait."



"I live here with my family - father, mother and two sisters. My younger sister has been stuck in Lebanon since the beginning of the pandemic due to her studies. She has been through so much with the port explosion and situation there, unable to reunite with us. We were all born here in Kuwait including my father, but now we are forced to leave due to him being over 60 years old. We have never lived in Lebanon before and are incapable of thinking how we can leave everything behind and just move suddenly to a strange and destroyed country. No one has any idea how hard these discussions were on us and I'm sure on many other families in Kuwait."



In this April 16, 2020 file photo, people board a bus after registering to leave Kuwait during a grace period the Interior Ministry had announced for expatriates with expired visas.



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COVID origins search 'being poisoned by politics': WHO

Germany admits Namibia genocide, but critics want more

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MOSUL: Iraqi men sit in the shade next to a building on May 26, 2021, destroyed during fighting with Islamic State in the 2017 battle for the city. —AFP

Fear as IS families return to Mosul

Departures mark 'first wave' of Iraqis to leave Al-Hol camp in Syria

MOSUL: The return of dozens of Iraqi families suspected of links to the Islamic State group from Syria to Mosul has sparked fears among residents who survived the horrors of IS rule. Around 300 people from some 90 families left the Kurdish-run Al-Hol camp in northeast Syria on Tuesday under Iraqi army escort, a Kurdish administration official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

It was the first repatriation of Iraqi families from the camp, which is home to more than 60,000 people including relatives of IS fighters, and came as part of an agreement between Baghdad and the multinational coalition battling the jihadists. But the move has stirred up nightmares for many Mosul residents.

For three years, Mosul was the heart of IS's self-proclaimed "caliphate". IS fighters imposed a strict interpretation of Muslim "sharia" law, banning music and smoking and meting out brutal punishments, including public beheadings, for those who violated their rules. "We are totally opposed to their return," said Omar, a 28-year-old soldier, whose father was

killed by IS fighter. "Our future is dark and dangerous because the jihadists will live near us," said Omar, who declined to give his surname for security reasons. "They are a time bomb."

'State's duty'

Iraq formally declared victory against IS in late 2017, a few months after ousting the jihadists from Mosul, the capital of Nineveh province. The Syrian Kurdish administration official said the departures marked a "first wave" of Iraqi families to leave Al-Hol. The families were sent towards Qayyarah, an area south of Mosul that is home to the Al-Jadada camp.

That camp hosts almost 7,500 displaced people and families of jihadists in two separate areas, the Iraqi ministry for the displaced says. "How can we accept their return while many people are still grieving for at least one member of their family who disappeared after being arrested by IS and whose body has never been found?" said Omar.

Syria's Kurds have repeatedly urged the interna-

tional community to repatriate foreign nationals held in the country's northeast, but the calls have largely fallen on deaf ears. Iraqis make up nearly half of Al-Hol's inhabitants, according to the United Nations. "It is the state's duty to receive repatriated Iraqis and settle them in existing camps before integrating them into their regions of origin," said Evan Gabro, minister for migration and the displaced.

Qayyarah district administrative director Salah Hasan Al-Jubburi sought to reassure residents. The families "do not represent a security danger, though I understand popular opposition since they come from Al-Hol," Jubburi said.

'Extremist ideas'

He said most of the arrivals were women and children, and almost all were originally from neighboring Anbar province, also a former jihadist bastion. "There are just four or five families that are originally from Nineveh," Jubburi said. Ali al-Bayati, member of Iraq's human rights commission, said the residents'

fears stemmed from a "lack of transparency". "Nobody knows if these people have been interrogated or if they were subject to an investigation," he said. "Before accepting them, (the authorities) should have ensured that none of them were charged or had committed crimes."

Omar Al-Husseini, a human rights activist from Mosul, expressed skepticism. "The government must be cautious" because the families have spent years in the Al-Hol camp under the influence of jihadists, he said. "Is the state able to integrate them and above all, protect society?" More than three years after Iraq declared IS defeated, nearly 1.3 million people remain internally displaced, one-fifth of them in camps, according to the UN. Iraqi authorities have accelerated the closure of camps in recent months, but the International Organization for Migration says many residents are unable to return home as they are often accused of links to IS. For Omar the soldier, life with the returnees will be "impossible". "They have kept their extremist ideas," he said. — AFP

Misinformation thrives in Iraq's virtual arenas

BAGHDAD: Conspiracy theories, fake reports and mudslinging - in Iraq, fake news thrives and risks real-life consequences as authorities struggle to counteract its spread. Misinformation about political, social, security and economic issues abound online in the country, said an official from the Tech 4 Peace collective, an Iraqi organization that tracks "fake news".

"There are hundreds of pages circulating false information on Facebook and Twitter," the official told AFP. "Iraq has become a virtual battleground of fake news" both in local politics and between major international players vying for influence in the tinderbox country, the official said. "And it is a free for all."

The official pointed to an incident that happened in January as tense relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq were easing with the opening of a bor-

der crossing between the neighbors. Radical groups loyal to Iran - regional rival of Saudi Arabia and heavyweight in Iraq - launched a campaign on social media accusing a Saudi national of carrying out a double suicide attack in Baghdad that killed 32 people.

His picture was published on Twitter and Facebook and widely shared, even though it was revealed that he had in fact blown himself up in a rare suicide attack in Saudi Arabia in 2015. The Islamic State group eventually claimed the Baghdad bombing.

Monitoring team

In the restive country that has seen almost two decades of conflict and crisis, concerns over the impact of misinformation prompted the authorities to set up a "surveillance service" tasked with tracking information. Staff from the interior ministry spend hours in an office full of computer and television screens monitoring endless streams of news on television and online.

"When a piece of information seems suspect, they raise the alarm" and an investigation is carried out to confirm or debunk the news, said General Nebras Mohammad, who



BAGHDAD: A member of Iraq's interior ministry's anti-"fake news" team, accompanied by policemen, speak to a pharmacist on May 20, 2021. — AFP

heads the misinformation department, which includes the surveillance service. About 25 million Iraqis use social media, according to DataReportal figures, but only 34,000 of them follow the surveillance service Facebook page, where debunked false news is posted.

The Tech 4 Peace official said that Facebook is "the main vehicle for false news in Iraq", and that there is a new trending fake story "almost dai-

ly". Some of it is ultimately harmless, like recent widely shared posts claiming a young man from Mosul had married four girls in one day that was shown by Tech 4 Peace to be a promotion for a beauty salon. But some cases are more insidious, such as using a blaze at a COVID-19 hospital in Baghdad in late April that killed 82 people to garner likes and follows by posting fabricated reports of more fires at other health centers. — AFP

Impasse on probe underscores angst over Capitol riot

WASHINGTON: By blocking creation of an independent, bipartisan Jan 6 commission, congressional Republicans have signaled they would rather approach next year's midterm elections unencumbered by potentially damning findings about the deadly US Capitol riot. Nearly five months after Donald Trump supporters stormed the citadel of American democracy, and four months after he left office, the former president retains an iron grip on his party.

So much so that Republican lawmakers are acting in fealty to - or as one Democratic senator said, in "fear" of - the brash billionaire whose loyalists appear eager to downplay the mob violence that transpired as rioters sought to overturn results of a presidential election. Senate Republicans on Friday filibustered legislation that would have greenlighted a 10-member panel devoted to uncovering the truth behind the insurrection and bringing closure to

what President Joe Biden called "the worst attack on our democracy since the Civil War."

Earlier the measure passed the House of Representatives with support from 35 Republicans. But efforts to broker a compromise failed in the evenly divided Senate. Even an 11th-hour personal plea by the mother of a US Capitol Police officer who died after battling with rioters on January 6 went unheeded. Ultimately just six out of 50 Senate Republicans voted for the bill, and it failed to secure the 60 votes needed to advance in the chamber.

Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski, one of the six to break ranks, said "it's important for the country that there be an independent evaluation. Is that really what this is about, that everything is just one election cycle after another?"

As frustration mounted among Democrats, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer took to the floor with a searing critique of Republicans' nothing-to-see-here messaging. "Senate Republicans oppose the commission because they fear that it might upset Donald Trump and their party's midterm messaging," he told colleagues. "Well too bad." After the vote he said that senators "should rest assured that the events of January 6th will be investigated" despite the Republican stance. Tensions have been so pro-



WASHINGTON: US Capitol Police Officer Eugene Goodman (left) talks with Republican Sen James Lankford on Friday after he voted against the formation of an independent commission to investigate the attack at the US Capitol. — AFP

nounced following the unrest that no Republicans supported a \$1.9 billion House package to improve security in and around the US Capitol. It recently passed by a one-vote margin, but is almost certainly doomed in the Senate by the same filibuster that sank the commission. — AFP

Haftar eyes December polls as support wanes

TRIPOLI: Libya's military strongman Khalifa Haftar is polishing his political image ahead of elections, after a crippling rout on the battlefield and with his support waning at home and abroad, analysts say. Haftar's eastern-based forces battled for more than a year to seize the capital Tripoli in the west, but their defeat last June set the stage for UN-backed peace talks, a unity government and a nationwide poll planned for December.

"He is hoping the elections will secure him a political victory after his military defeat," said international relations professor Miloud El-Hajj. Haftar has emerged as a key player during the decade of violence that followed the 2011 overthrow of dictator Muammar Gaddafi. The field marshal has battled Islamist militants and had built a solid base of support among eastern Libya's influential tribes - as well as neighboring Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia.

But two years since his self-styled Libyan National Army launched its offensive to overthrow a Turkish-backed unity government in Tripoli, the landscape is very different. A formal truce last October set in motion a UN-led process that led to the creation of an interim government tasked with unifying the country's divided institutions, launching reconstruction efforts and preparing for December polls.

Haftar kept a low profile throughout the talks, but in recent weeks he has made a comeback with public rallies and pledges to build three new towns and thousands of housing units for the families of "martyrs". "His tone and language have changed... He has dropped his military discourse" in favor of pledges to improve living conditions, said Hajj. — AFP



Khalifa Haftar

International

Germany admits Namibia genocide, but critics want more

Germany to support the 'reconstruction of Namibia' via financial program

BERLIN: Germany on Friday acknowledged it had committed genocide in colonial-era Namibia and promised a billion euros in financial support to descendants of the victims, a move Windhoek welcomed as a "first step" but which activists described as insufficient. "We will now officially refer to these events as what they are from today's perspective: genocide," said Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. "In light of the historical and moral responsibility of Germany, we will ask forgiveness from Namibia and the victims' descendants" for the "atrocities" committed, he added.

The announcement came after more than five years of negotiations between the two countries over events in the territory held by Berlin from 1884 to 1915. German colonial settlers killed tens of thousands of indigenous Herero and Nama people in 1904-1908 massacres-labeled by historians as the first genocide of the 20th century. The atrocities have poisoned relations between Namibia and Germany for decades.

'Doomed to fail'

In a "gesture to recognize the immense suffering inflicted on the victims", Germany will support the "reconstruction and the development" of Namibia via a financial program of 1.1 billion euros (\$1.34 billion), Maas said. The sum will be paid over 30 years, according to sources close to the negotiations, and must primarily benefit the descendants of the Herero and Nama. Yet Maas stopped short of referring to reparations, saying the payment did not open the

way to any "legal request for compensation".

Namibian President Hage Geingob's spokesman Alfredo Hengari told AFP an official recognition of genocide was "the first step in the right direction". "It is the basis for the second step, which is an apology, to be followed by reparations," he added. The agreement still has to be approved by the two countries' parliaments. But activist groups in both countries have already criticized it for the lack of direct reparations. The Germany-based initiative "Berlin Postkolonial" said the deal was "doomed to fail" and "not worth the paper it is written on".

The group, which organized a protest attended by around 50 people in the German capital on Friday, said the Herero and Nama communities had not been consulted enough during the negotiations. In Namibia, a Herero leader accused the government of being strong-armed into the accord. "We will not accept any outcome between these two governments," Mutjinde Katjua, secretary general of the Ovaherero Traditional Authority, told AFP. About a hundred activists protested against the agreement in front of parliament and the German ambassador.

Rebellion, reprisals

Namibia was called German South West Africa during Berlin's rule, then fell under South African sway for 75 years, before finally gaining independence in 1990. Tensions boiled over in 1904 when the Herero-deprived of their livestock and land rose up, followed shortly after by the Nama, in an insurrection that was crushed by German imperial



WINDHOEK, Namibia: This undated file photo taken during the 1904-1908 war of Germany against Herero and Nama in Namibia shows a soldier (right) probably belonging to the German troops supervising Namibian war prisoners. — AFP

troops. In the Battle of Waterberg in August 1904, around 80,000 Herero, including women and children, fled and were pursued by German troops across what is now known as the Kalahari Desert. Only 15,000 survived.

German General Lothar von Trotha, sent to put down the rebellion, ordered the peoples' extermination.

At least 60,000 Herero and around 10,000 Nama were killed between 1904 and 1908. Colonial soldiers carried out mass executions and forced men, women and children to flee to the desert where thousands died of thirst. They also established infamous concentration camps, such as the one on Shark Island. —AFP

France genocide acknowledgement a 'big step,' says Kagame

KIGALI, Rwanda: Rwandan President Paul Kagame says France's recent acknowledgement over its role in the 1994 genocide in his country is "a big step"—even if it didn't come with an apology. His counterpart Emmanuel Macron, during a historic visit to the east African nation this week, recognized France's role in the killing of 800,000 mostly Tutsi Rwandans and said only the survivors could grant "the gift of forgiveness". Stopping short of an apology—and stressing France "was not complicit" in the actual violence—Macron went further than his predecessors in acknowledging that Paris backed the genocidal regime and ignored warnings of looming massacres. Some survivors had been hoping for a formal atonement, and were left disappointed.

But Kagame, who led the Tutsi rebellion that ended the genocide, has regularly accused France of complicity in the crimes. He applauded Macron for "speaking the truth" and said his words were "more valuable than an apology". Expanding on his remarks in an interview with AFP and France Inter,

the veteran Rwandan leader expressed doubt about ever "getting an entirely satisfactory answer". "But I think it is a big step. We need to admit it, take it and work towards other steps, whenever and wherever they come," Kagame said late Friday in Kigali.

"Somebody can come and say 'I am sorry, I apologize'. Still, I think some people will remain and say 'that is not enough'. And they have the right to think so or to say so. In this case, I don't see a silver bullet, something that will come and settle everything. "Does it answer everything, every question that everyone has to raise? I don't think so. Do survivors have the right to question a number of things? They have the right."

Deliver justice

Macron's visit, the first by a French leader since 2010, sought to turn a new page on a tortured quarter century of acrimony between France and Rwanda over the unresolved questions of the genocide. Ahead of his symbolic trip, Macron had commissioned historians to pore over archives to re-examine France's involvement not just in the brutality of 1994 but the crucial years leading up to it.

France provided political and military support to Kigali during a civil war preceding the genocide, and long stood accused of turning a blind eye to the dangers posed by Hutu extremists in a country scarred by large scale massacres in its past. The



KIGALI, Rwanda: Rwanda's President Paul Kagame speaks during an interview with international media at the presidency office in Kigali, on Friday. — AFP

Duclert Commission report, handed directly to Macron, accused Paris of being "blind" to preparations for the genocide, and said it bore "serious and overwhelming" responsibility.

A Rwanda-commissioned report into the same events, released just weeks later, said the French government "bears significant responsibility" for enabling the genocide in Rwanda, yet refused to acknowledge its true role in the horror. Kagame said the two commissions "say almost the same things, but in different ways". — AFP

Mali constitutional court declares Goita transitional president

BAMAKO, Mali: Mali's constitutional court on Friday named Colonel Assimi Goita, leader of the post-coup junta, as the country's transitional president. The judgment stipulated that Goita would "exercise the functions of transitional president to lead the transition process to its conclusion", following his seizure of power this week. The constitutional court said it had made the decision due to the "vacancy in the presidency" following the resignation of caretaker president Bah N'daw. Soldiers detained N'daw and prime minister Moctar Ouane on Monday, before releasing them Thursday after they resigned.

But the twin arrests triggered a diplomatic uproar—and marked the second apparent coup within a year in the unstable country. N'daw and Ouane had led a transitional government 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, led by Goita, following mass protests over perceived corruption and his failure to quell a bloody jihadist insurgency. Goita had originally been named vice president with other key posts given to fellow army officers.

'We chose cohesion'

Earlier Friday, Goita explained that the army had had little choice but to intervene. "We had to choose between disorder and cohesion within the defense and security forces and we chose cohesion," he said. He added that a new prime minister will be appointed within days, in his first remarks since seizing power this week. The army officer made the announcement during a meeting with political and civil society figures in Bamako, according to an AFP journalist, as international



BAMAKO, Mali: In this file photo Colonel Assimi Goita (center), President of CNSP addresses the press during the ceremony of the 60th anniversary of Mali's independence in Bamako. — AFP

pressure rises on the country's ruling military administration.

"In the coming days, the prime minister who will be appointed will carry out a broad consultation between the different factions," Goita said. He asked those attending the meeting to support his prefer-

ence of a prime minister from the opposition M5 movement, a once-powerful group which the military sidelined after the August coup. "Either we accept joining hands to save our country, or we wage clandestine wars and we will all fail," Goita said. —AFP

Same COVID fate in Uruguay, Argentina

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay: Uruguay adopted a hands-off approach to the coronavirus pandemic while Argentina applied strict lockdowns but the fate of the South American neighbors was the same: They now have some of the world's highest COVID-19 death rates. Fifteen months after the virus first appeared on the continent much of South America is experiencing its worst moment yet, despite some countries making great headway in their vaccination programs.

Uruguay tops the list of the globe's worst death rates, followed by Paraguay, with Argentina coming in third. Over the last two weeks Uruguay recorded 21.62 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. Argentina notched 14.73. And three other South American countries fill out the top six: Colombia, Brazil and Peru. As a reference, the United States' figure is 2.46 deaths per 100,000. But the question is how

two countries with polar opposite approaches to the pandemic could deliver such startlingly similar and macabre results. An answer can at least partially be found in people's attitudes and behavior.

For much of 2020, Uruguay was lauded as a model for managing the pandemic without ever resorting to a lockdown, resulting in a low perception of risk and lax behavior. And despite strict lockdowns in Argentina, some bored people adopted erratic behavior, including going to social gatherings, as well as denial and rebellion, according to Elisa Estenssoro, a member of an expert panel advising President Alberto Fernandez.

Uruguayans 'don't believe'

People in Uruguay "don't believe" the virus is serious, Francisco Dominguez, who works in an intensive care unit, told AFP. "Until they have a family member here inside, they don't believe." Uruguay's indifference can be better understood considering the fact that half way through 2020, the country was down to fewer than 20 active cases and on many days recorded no new infections. Now, the country is seeing "historic" levels of occupancy in intensive care units.

"Never in the history of the country's intensive

medicine were there 600 beds occupied before the pandemic," Julio Pontet, president of Uruguay's Intensive Medicine Society, told AFP. President Luis Lacalle Pou has prioritized "responsible freedom" in a bid to keep the economy functioning and has consistently resisted pressure from the health sector to impose a lockdown. Shows and performances have been suspended since March and the borders remain closed but gyms were allowed to reopen while restaurants and shops are operating normally. Even a hugely successful vaccination program with 29 percent of the population totally immunized and 47 percent having had at least one dose, has not slowed the rise in cases and deaths.

Last Saturday, Argentina began a nine-day lockdown after daily new infections rose to 30,000 and deaths to 500. According to Estenssoro, irresponsible behavior, a tardy adoption of tougher restrictions, a lack of vaccines and new more aggressive virus strains are causing the country's latest wave. "This terrible and unstoppable circulation of the virus is strengthened by people's behaviors that aren't coherent: social gatherings, people without masks... some people are following (restrictions) and others are in denial or rebelling," she said. — AFP

News in brief

Turkey slams Austrian 'Islam map'

ANKARA: Turkey on Friday hit out at the Austrian government's "Islam map" showing the location of mosques and associations across Austria, which religious groups said would stigmatize Muslims in the Alpine country. "The presentation by Integration Minister Susanne Raab of a map listing all Muslim associations in Austria... is inadmissible," the Turkish foreign ministry said in a statement. Ankara urged Vienna not "compile a register of Muslims", but to adopt "a responsible policy". —AFP

Endangered lynx population jumps 10-fold

MADRID: Once on the verge of extinction, the Iberian lynx population in Spain and Portugal has risen more than 10-fold over the past 18 years, the Spanish government said Friday. A total of 414 lynx were born in 2020 bringing their total number in the two countries to 1,111, a record high since monitoring of the species began, the ministry for ecological transition said in a statement. That is up from fewer than 100 in 2002, when the first census of the spotted nocturnal cat was carried out, thanks to a program of captive breeding and release of the animals into the wild. —AFP

New York to build homeless shelter

NEW YORK: New York City is to build a homeless shelter in an expensive Manhattan area known as "Billionaire's Row" following a lengthy legal battle. Mayor Bill de Blasio's government announced in 2018 that it planned to turn the former Park Savoy Hotel on West 58th Street into a shelter for 150 people. A coalition of residents sued to stop the move, but on Thursday an appeals judge rejected their objections, paving the way for the proposal to proceed. "(We) look forward to opening our doors at this location as soon as possible," Isaac McGinn, a social services department spokesperson said following the ruling. "Billionaire's Row" is a set of ultra-luxury residential skyscrapers off the southern end of Central Park that include some of the world's most expensive homes. —AFP

New York to build homeless shelter

NEW YORK: New York City is to build a homeless shelter in an expensive Manhattan area known as "Billionaire's Row" following a lengthy legal battle. Mayor Bill de Blasio's government announced in 2018 that it planned to turn the former Park Savoy Hotel on West 58th Street into a shelter for 150 people. A coalition of residents sued to stop the move, but on Thursday an appeals judge rejected their objections, paving the way for the proposal to proceed. "(We) look forward to opening our doors at this location as soon as possible," Isaac McGinn, a social services department spokesperson said following the ruling. — AFP

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International

COVID origins search 'being poisoned by politics': WHO

Science should be separated from politics to find answers in positive atmosphere

GENEVA: The World Health Organization warned Friday that efforts to uncover the COVID-19 pandemic's origins were being hampered by politics, insisting scientists needed space to work on solving the mystery. "We would ask that we separate the science from the politics, and let us get on with finding the answers that we need in a proper, positive atmosphere," WHO emergencies chief Michael Ryan told reporters. "This whole process is being poisoned by politics," he warned. The UN health agency has been facing intensifying pressure for a new, more in-depth investigation of where COVID-19 came from, but so far there is no timeline for the next stage in the probe.

US President Joe Biden this week ordered the US intelligence community to investigate whether the COVID-19 virus first emerged in China from an animal source or from a laboratory accident. The move hints at growing impatience with waiting for a conclusive WHO investigation into how the pandemic that has killed more than 3.5 million people worldwide began. During an ongoing meeting of WHO member states, European Union countries and a range of others also pressed for clarity on the next steps in the organization's efforts to solve the mystery, seen as vital to averting future pandemics.

'No timeline'

But the UN health agency said earlier Friday it was still waiting for recommendations from a team of WHO technical experts on how to move forward. "The technical team will prepare a proposal for the next studies that will need to be carried out and will present that to the director-general," spokes-

woman Fadela Chaib told reporters. "He will then work with member states about the next steps," she said, acknowledging "there is no timeline".

The WHO finally managed to send a team of independent, international experts to Wuhan in January, more than a year after COVID-19 first surfaced there in late 2019, to help probe the pandemic origins. But in their long-delayed report published in late March, the international team and their Chinese counterparts drew no firm conclusions, instead ranking a number of hypotheses according to how likely they believed they were.

'Impossible position'

The report said the virus jumping from bats to humans via an intermediate animal was the most probable scenario, while a theory involving the virus leaking from a laboratory was "extremely unlikely". But the investigation and report have faced criticism for lacking transparency and access, and for not evaluating the lab-leak theory more deeply—a mere 440 words of the report were dedicated to discussing and dismissing it. WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has also continued to insist that all theories remain on the table and further investigation is needed.

Long dismissed as a right-wing conspiracy theory, and vehemently rejected by Beijing, the idea that COVID-19 emerged from a lab leak in Wuhan in China has been gaining increasing momentum in the United States. While not suggesting that a lab leak was necessarily the source, a number of prominent international scientists have said a deeper, more scientific look at the theory was needed. "Every country and every entity is free to



GENEVA: This file photo shows a sign of the World Health Organization (WHO) at the entrance of their headquarters in Geneva amid the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak. —AFP

pursue their own particular theories of origin... It's a free world," Ryan said.

But he complained that the discourse around the origins search, and around WHO's role in it, was making it difficult to focus on the science.

"Putting WHO in a position like it has been put in is very unfair to the science we're trying to carry out," he said. "It puts us, as an organization, frankly in an impossible position to deliver the answers that the world wants." —AFP

News in brief

Canadian MP naked during telework

OTTAWA: A Canadian MP has stepped down from some of his duties and said he is seeking "assistance" after being caught on camera urinating during a video conference in Parliament, a month after appearing naked in another virtual session. "Last night, while attending House of Commons proceedings virtually, in a non-public setting, I urinated without realizing I was on camera," MP William Amos wrote on his Twitter account Thursday night. "I am deeply embarrassed by my actions and the distress they may have caused anybody who witnessed them," he added. "While accidental and not visible to the public, this was completely unacceptable, and I apologize unreservedly." —AFP

Neighborhood in S China under lockdown

BEIJING: A neighborhood in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou has been locked down as officials rush to quell an uptick in cases in the area. The industrial hub north of Hong Kong home to nearly 15 million people has reported 20 new cases of the coronavirus in the past week. A notice by the Guangzhou municipal health bureau issued yesterday identified five streets in Liwan district in the city center as "high-risk areas" and ordered residents to stay indoors until door-to-door testing is completed. Markets, schools and entertainment venues in the area were shut. The city government has rushed to conduct mass testing and about 700,000 people had been tested by Wednesday. —AFP

Hamis fighters display weapons

GAZA CITY: Thousands of Hamas fighters held a military parade Friday in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, a week after a ceasefire with Zionist entity took effect in the devastated coastal enclave. Holding weapons, the masked members of the Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed branch of Hamas—the Islamist group that runs Gaza—paraded through the southern city. AFP reporters said. Riding pick-up trucks, the fighters showed off a military arsenal including rocket launchers and a drone as groups of people, including women and children, cheered them on. —AFP

Remains of 215 children found

OTTAWA: The remains of 215 children have been discovered on the grounds of a former boarding school set up more than a century ago to assimilate Canada's indigenous peoples, according to a local tribe. A specialist used ground-penetrating radar to confirm the remains of the students who attended the school near Kamloops, British Columbia, the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc tribe said in a statement late Thursday. "Some were as young as three years old," said chief Rosanne Casimir, calling it "an unthinkable loss that was spoken about but never documented" by school administrators. Its preliminary findings are expected to be released in a report next month, she said. —AFP

Malaysia announces national lockdown

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia announced on Friday it will impose a nationwide lockdown for the first time in over a year as it battles a rapidly escalating coronavirus outbreak that has strained the country's health-care system. Officials believe more infectious variants have contributed to the surge, as well as gatherings in the Muslim-majority country during the holy month of Ramadan and Eid El-Fitr holiday earlier this month. After a new daily record of 8,290 infections Friday, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's office announced the entire country would enter a "total lockdown" from Tuesday. This involves the "complete shutdown of all social and economic sectors", with only businesses deemed essential allowed to operate, it said in a statement. The restrictions will be in place initially until June 14. —AFP

HK activist Chan says jail will make him 'a better man'

HONG KONG: Hong Kong democracy campaigner Figo Chan wore an "Avengers" hoodie into court for his jail sentence in a nod to his love of the comic series and its tale of heroic redemption. He says prison will make him a "better man". Chan, 25, was one of eight activists jailed on Friday for taking part in 2019's huge pro-democracy protests, the latest in a long line of democracy figures now behind bars. It was a prospect Chan was sanguine about. "It's better for me to be jailed when I am still young," he told AFP ahead of his sentencing.

"I can do sports and train my muscles. Isn't that great? I will work out and read in jail then I will be a better man when I am out." Few would have been surprised to see Chan chose to wear his beloved "Avengers" hoodie to court. It was what he wore a few weeks ago when he went into detention ahead

Coronavirus sweeps through Thailand's overcrowded prisons

BANGKOK: A coronavirus surge sweeping through Thailand's prisons has thrown the spotlight on the kingdom's overcrowded penal system, where some inmates have less space to sleep than the inside of a coffin. As of yesterday, almost 25,000 people have tested positive inside jails, where inmates living cheek by jowl have been encouraged to keep wearing their masks even while they sleep. Authorities have floated plans to give early releases to prisoners with underlying medical conditions and have announced funding for more testing and medical care in recent days. But former inmates say those behind bars have been kept in the dark about the seriousness of the outbreak. "Prisoners don't have the knowledge to protect themselves," said Somyot Prueksakasemsuk, a high-profile activist facing charges

Delhi announces 'very, very slow' easing of lockdown

NEW DELHI: Indian authorities Friday announced a tentative easing of the lockdown in the capital New Delhi as coronavirus infections fall in major cities after weeks of restrictions. Rural areas of the country are now seeing the brunt of a surge in cases that has overwhelmed the health care system and killed at least 160,000 people since the start of March.

Lanka faces marine disaster as waves of plastic wash ashore

NEGOMBO: Sri Lanka faces an unprecedented pollution crisis as waves of plastic waste from a burning container ship hit the coast and threaten to devastate the local environment, a top environment official warned yesterday. Thousands of navy ratings using mechanical diggers scooped tons of tiny plastic granules on the beaches that had come from the

of his sentencing. The movie franchise's story of superheroes battling seemingly insurmountable odds has always been popular in Hong Kong.

But it has taken on extra significance in recent years, especially among younger generations, as Beijing cracks down on freedoms. Hong Kong's democracy movement is on its knees. Most of its leaders are under arrest, jailed or have fled overseas. "I think we are at a low point," Chan said. But he is adamant Hong Kongers still want the right to choose their leaders and will one day hit the streets again. "I look forward to one day reading while I am in jail that two million Hong Kongers marched," he remarked.

From pride to politics

Like so many of Hong Kong's young pro-democracy figures, Chan became an activist as a teenager. He recalled beaming with patriotic fervor as a child when Beijing held the 2008 Olympics. "I really wanted to travel in mainland China and I believed I was a proud Chinese person". But that patriotism dissipated as he went through adulthood. "Nothing can give me that recognition of (Chinese) identity anymore," he said.

Chan became a key figure within—and later led—the Civil Human Rights Front, the group that organ-

under Thailand's harsh royal defamation law.

Somyot was bailed last month and told AFP that he had not been tested for COVID-19 once during his 10-week stint in custody. He was not worried about contracting the disease while in jail because he had no idea about the level of risk. "But after this I'm so scared (for everyone still inside) ... if you are inside the prison you are at risk, it's unavoidable," he said. Thailand's prison outbreak has skyrocketed from just 10 publicly announced cases a month ago and sparked growing public concern after a handful of prominent activists contracted the illness. Among them was student leader Panusaya "Rung" Sithijirawattanakul, who helped lead a series of rallies last year demanding political reforms in the kingdom, and who tested positive after she was released on bail.

'Less room than a coffin'

The Thai prison population stood at around 311,000 earlier this year, the International Federation for Human Rights said—more than two and a half times the system's official capacity. Four inmates in every five are serving time for drug charges because of harsh anti-narcotics laws that can see offenders jailed for a decade for pos-

Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi's chief minister, said that from Monday construction work and factories can resume, "keeping the poorest section of our society, the labourers and daily wage workers, in mind".

"We are starting the process of reopening very, very slowly. We will reassess it after a week based on experts and people's opinions," he said. Daily infections reported across India have more than halved from more than 400,000 earlier this month, according to official statistics. Deaths per day have also fallen but by much less, with 3,660 reported on Friday in the previous 24 hours. This is widely seen as a major underestimate. Delhi reported Friday about 1,100 new infections, down from about

Singapore-registered MV X-Press Pearl that has been smoldering on the horizon for ten days. Sri Lanka's Marine Protection Authority (MEPA) said the microplastic pollution could cause years of ecological damage to the Indian Ocean island. "This is probably the worst beach pollution in our history," MEPA chairman Dharshani Lahandapura said.

The tiny polyethylene pellets threaten tourism beaches and fish-breeding in shallow waters. Fishing has been banned along an 80-kilometre (50-mile) stretch of coast near the ship that has been burning for 10 days despite an international firefighting operation. "There is smoke and intermittent flames seen from the ship," navy spokesman Captain Indika de Silva told AFP. Orange-coloured plastic booms were set up in



HONG KONG: Pro-democracy activist Figo Chan (center) gestures as he walks to a Hong Kong Correctional Services van before being driven to the District Court in Hong Kong on Friday. —AFP

ized some of the massive rallies that took place in 2019 which hundreds of thousands of Hong Kongers attended. The CHRF was not a radical organization and was far removed from the masked front liners who routinely battled police. It espoused non-violence and always sought permission for its marches. —AFP



BANGKOK: In this handout photo health workers administer doses of vaccine for the COVID-19 coronavirus for inmates at Minburi Remand Prison in Bangkok, amid a surge in cases of the virus in Thai prisons. —AFP

sessing just a few methamphetamine pills. Many cells are so packed with bodies that some inmates only have half a meter (less than two feet) of space. —AFP

25,000 daily cases when the lockdown was announced six weeks earlier.

Even as he announced reopening from Monday, Kejriwal urged people of Delhi to "not step out of your homes unnecessarily". "This is a very sensitive time and we have to function with full responsibility so that we can together save our Delhi and our country," he said. The devastating surge was blamed on new virus variants and the government having allowed most activity to return to normal including mass religious and political gatherings. Coronavirus patients died in droves outside hospitals or at home because of a lack of beds, medical oxygen and drugs, prompting a flood of desperate pleas on social media. —AFP

case oil leaks from the crippled ship reaches the Negombo lagoon that is famed for its crabs and jumbo prawns. Thousands of small boats were beached at Negombo Saturday because of the fishing ban.

Naval rating Manjula Dulanjala said his team had almost cleared the beach on Friday evening, but were shocked to find it covered again the following morning. "This is like the coronavirus. No end in sight. We removed all the plastic yesterday, only to see more of it dumped by the waves overnight," he said. The pellets and waste were packed into green and white polythene sacks and taken away by trucks. An officer leading another team said that in certain parts of the beach the microplastics and charred debris was 60 centimeters (two feet) deep. —AFP

Business

SUNDAY, MAY 30, 2021

Biden pitches \$6 trillion budget

President seeks to 'reimagine' US economy • Republicans unimpressed

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden on Friday proposed a \$6 trillion budget to "reimagine" the US economy and stave off Chinese competition, though driving the United States into record debt - and with Congress first needing to give approval. Announcing the proposed spending, Biden said a post-pandemic United States "cannot afford to simply return to the way things were before". "We must seize the moment to reimagine and rebuild a new American economy," he said.

The president's annual budget is more a wish list or a message on his priorities than anything else. Congress ultimately decides what money goes where, and the current Congress has only the narrowest Democratic majority. Opposition Republicans are leery of any big new role for the central government.

Congressman Kevin McCarthy, leader of the Republican minority in the House of Representatives, called it "the most reckless and irresponsible budget proposal in my lifetime". Even some of Biden's supporters warn that an economy already set to roar back from the COVID-19 shutdown risks getting swept up into an inflationary spiral.

But the massive plan signals the White House's determination to put hard numbers on Biden's campaign to rethink the relationship between government and business in what he says is an existential contest with China. Under the Biden blueprint, the federal spigot would unleash \$6.011 trillion in 2022, with increases gradually rising to \$8.2 trillion in 2031. Debt as a percentage of annual GDP would

be expected to quickly surpass the level seen at the end of World War II.

The Democrat made clear where the lion's share of that expected \$6 trillion price tag should go. One huge chunk would be an infrastructure bill originally proposed at \$2.3 trillion but since whittled down to \$1.7 trillion in negotiations with Congress. Another \$1.8 trillion would go on increased state-funded education and social services - all, Biden argues, part of building a better 21st century workforce. The overall aim, Biden said, is to grow the US middle class, while positioning "the United States to out-compete our rivals."

Can it pass?

The budget proposal is being unveiled just ahead of the long Memorial Day weekend and with Congress heading out on a week's recess. The timing may dampen the immediate furor on Capitol Hill, where many Democrats want Biden to use his control of Congress to push transformational legislation but Republicans are playing hardball in trying to block most of what the president proposes.

Spending priorities are just one area of division. For example, Republicans are pretty much unanimous in opposing Biden's broad definition of infrastructure to include green energy and social programs. But there's even less agreement on how to pay for it. Biden wants to raise money by ending a corporate tax cut Republicans passed under his predecessor Donald Trump. He also wants to go aggressively after tax loopholes used by the ultra-wealthy and large corporations.



HAMPTON, Virginia: US President Joe Biden poses with service members at Joint Base Langley-Eustis on Friday. —AFP

Republicans refuse to accept this and say their own, more modest, infrastructure spending plans could be paid for by reallocating unspent money already budgeted. "President Biden's proposal would drown American families in debt, deficits, and inflation," the senior Republican senator, Mitch McConnell, said. Despite the standoff - and the sheer scale of Biden's mega budget - the White

House still has a potential ace up its sleeve in that slim Democratic majority.

Ordinarily, Biden needs at least 10 Republicans to cross over in the evenly split Senate, a tall order at the best of times. However, if Democrats remain unanimous - which is also not guaranteed - they may be able to pass the budget through a fast-track procedure known as reconciliation. — AFP

In US, tipped workers still feel pandemic crunch

WASHINGTON: As the number of COVID-19 cases soared in Washington through the fall and winter, Tizoc Zarate waited tables at a local restaurant - but struggled to put enough food on the table for himself and his girlfriend. Zarate, 22, says he is angry about the health risks he faced, especially given the low pay - and the lack of support from his bosses. "I felt as if I couldn't say anything to management," Zarate told AFP, adding that at the time, he and his co-workers felt lucky to be working at all.

The Mexican-American server is not alone - hundreds of restaurant workers and activists protested this week at lunch-hour "wage strikes" across the United States, demanding an end to what they say is unacceptable pay for tipped workers. In the United States, restaurant and other service industry employees who earn more than a certain amount per month in tips can be paid far less than the standard minimum wage.

With the number of diners vastly reduced due to coronavirus-related restrictions in most US cities, those

workers saw their take-home salary plummet. "During the pandemic, tips were down 60-70 percent and there were increased incidents of customer hostility and aggression," says Yamila Ruiz, the communications director for One Fair Wage, which organized the protests. "We've been holding strikes since last summer."

In Washington, the "wage strike" - staged by a handful of industry workers - took place Wednesday outside the Old Ebbitt Grill, a historic bar and restaurant not far from the White House that is popular both with politicians and tourists. "Low wages stop America's recovery," read one sign.

COVID-related stress on the job
Over the course of the pandemic, more than 2.5 million restaurant jobs were lost in the United States, according to the National Restaurant Association, and over 110,000 restaurants were closed. But now, some restaurants have said they are struggling to fill positions as businesses gradually reopen across the country, and activists say low wages



WASHINGTON: Activists take part in a protest outside of the Old Ebbitt Grill to call for a full minimum wage with tips for restaurant workers on May 26, 2021. — AFP

are to blame.

"In January, eight percent of restaurant operators rated recruitment and retention of workforce as their top challenge," National Restaurant Association Senior Vice President Hudson Riehle said. "By April, that number had risen to 57 percent." The One Fair Wage organization surveyed restaurant workers and found that more than half reported they were considering leaving their job due to low wages.

The second most popular reason? COVID-related health risks. Zarate said

during his drive home from his shift, he would agonize over whether he had been infected - or if somehow he had unwittingly infected someone else. "Probably half of the people were not wearing masks when I would come (to the table), some were not following the rule about the number of people at the table, and management would overlook things like that," he said. When Washington imposed tighter dining restrictions in December, the restaurant where he worked closed and Zarate was laid off. — AFP

Rolls-Royce drives up car luxury with 'Boat Tail'

CHICHESTER, United Kingdom: Rolls-Royce Motor Cars, which along with the wider luxury goods sector is recovering strongly from pandemic fallout, has launched a "Boat Tail" automobile - tailor-made for just three ultra-wealthy clients. With a rear resembling a yacht deck and opening up for alfresco dining, the Boat Tail's opulent design features also hand-crafted aluminum panels and Swiss timepieces.

Fashioned by Rolls' Coachbuild unit, the blue-painted car has been made for three clients who drove its design, according to Rolls-Royce Motor Cars chief executive Torsten Muller-Otvos. "The client comes to us with an idea in mind, exactly what happened 100 years ago when clients commissioned the bodies they wanted to see," Muller-Otvos told AFP during the car's launch this week at the company's Goodwood headquarters near Chichester in southern England.

"It's not us defining what the car should look like, it really is as it was in the past, that the client defines what they want to see," he added. Rolls-Royce Motor Cars, owned by German car giant BMW, revived the art of coachbuilding in 2017 with the Boat Tail's precursor "Sweptail". Speculation about Sweptail costing some \$13 million was "pretty close", Muller-Otvos confirmed, while reports suggest Boat Tail could be twice the price. "We are never talking about prices in agreement with our clients," he stressed.

Record sales

The launch of Boat Tail comes after Rolls deliv-



CHICHESTER: Rolls-Royce CEO Torsten Muller-Otvos speaks by a Rolls Royce Boat Tail on show at the company's Goodwood headquarters on May 27, 2021. —AFP

ered its highest-ever first quarter sales in the marque's 116-year history. Sales hit 1,380 cars across its models which include the Phantom and Ghost, up 62 percent on the same period last year before the pandemic began to take hold worldwide. "We were massively hit by the pandemic," recalled the German boss, noting that sales dropped by around a quarter last year.

"Production for this year is fully booked. Demand continues to be very strong and not only Asia-driven. It is also very much United States-driven, Europe-driven," Muller-Otvos, who has led the company since 2010, described the global picture for the entire luxury goods industry as "very promising" with "quite some money around to be spent" by the wealthy following lockdowns. "Quite a lot of our clients said that COVID taught them that life can end easily tomorrow and now is time to enjoy your life." He said the company is looking at launching a new coachbuilding project every other year. — AFP

US targets Belarus with sanctions amid outcry over plane

WASHINGTON: The United States on Friday announced punitive measures against Belarus targeting the regime of strongman President Alexander Lukashenko, who met with Russian leader Vladimir Putin amid a global outcry over the forced diversion of a European plane. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki called for "a credible international investigation into the events of May 23," which she called "a direct affront to international norms".

Belarus scrambled a military jet to divert a Ryanair plane and arrested 26-year-old opposition journalist and activist Roman Protasevich who was onboard, triggering a global outcry. The White House announced it was working with the European Union on a list of targeted sanctions against key members of Lukashenko's regime.

Meanwhile, economic sanctions against nine Belarusian state-owned enterprises, reimposed by Washington in April following a crackdown on pro-democracy protests, will come into effect on June 3. Further US moves on Belarus could target "those that support corruption, the abuse of human rights, and attacks on democracy," Psaki said. The White House also issued a "Do Not Travel" warning for Belarus to US citizens, and warned American passenger planes to "exercise extreme caution" if considering flying over Belarusian airspace. The European Union has also urged EU-based carriers to avoid Belarusian airspace. — AFP

California shooter an employer's worst nightmare

WASHINGTON: A disgruntled, heavily-armed employee shows up at work and murders nine of his colleagues: Last week's carnage at a California rail yard is every American employer's worst nightmare come true. Samuel Cassidy, a 57-year-old white man, fired around 40 shots Wednesday at the public transport rail yard where he worked as a maintenance man in San Jose, California.

He was not the first US employee to commit mass murder at work, and in a country awash with guns he is unlikely to be the last. From 1970 to 1990, employees or ex-employees of the US Postal System alone killed around 40 people in a series of shooting at mail facilities. Americans invented the term "going postal" to describe spasms of violence in the workplace.

The coronavirus pandemic provided a pause in this violence. But as many companies reopened, with this came a return of shootings. In April an employee at a furniture store in Texas shot and killed one person, and a former employee killed eight people at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis, Indiana. When police arrived at the rail yard on Wednesday, Cassidy killed himself. Three semi-automatic pistols and 32 magazines were found on him.

"He was very deliberate, very fast; he knew where employees would be," Sheriff Laurie Smith told NBC television. A search this week of Cassidy's home - which was set ablaze shortly before the attack - discovered 12 guns, some 22,000 rounds of ammunition, and suspected Molotov cocktails, Smith said in a statement Friday. His motive has yet to be determined.

But Cassidy "has been described by fellow co-workers as being disgruntled", and detectives are investigating his relationship with his employers and co-workers, said Smith. He may have chosen his targets carefully. He reportedly told one co-worker, "I'm not going to shoot you." Cassidy's ex-wife said that during their marriage, which ended in 2005, he complained a lot about his job.

"He just thought that some people got more easygoing things at work, and he'd get the harder jobs," Cecilia Nelms told the Mercury News, a San Jose daily, as she described a man with violent mood swings. When he returned from a trip to the Philippines in 2016 Cassidy's luggage was searched. Customs agents found "books on terrorism" and notes about how much he hated the company he worked for, according to a memo from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that was revealed by the Wall Street Journal. A spokeswoman for the agency declined to comment on the case saying the probe was under way. She highlighted the department's efforts to identify "behavioral indicators associated with targeted violence and policy to improve information sharing with our partners". — AFP

Business

Energy giant Total rebrands as shareholders back climate plan

Pledges include reaching net-zero emissions in global businesses by 2050

PARIS: French oil and gas major Total on Friday won near-unanimous shareholder support for its climate strategy along with a new name, TotalEnergies, marking its shift - but NGOs dismissed it as "bogus". Only a tiny minority rebelled against the company's plans at a shareholders' meeting, saying they fell short of what was needed to fight global warming.

Management's non-binding resolution, which followed similar moves at energy peers Chevron, ExxonMobil and Shell, secured 91.88 percent backing at the assembly. Total's pledges include reaching net-zero emissions in its global businesses by 2050, as well as for all its customers in Europe. It also won 99-percent support for a motion to change its name to TotalEnergies as the company wants to show that it is diversifying into renewable energies, which will account for 20 percent of investments this year.

Shareholders had recognized "a true and sincere transformation process" and had backed "an audacious and demanding strategy", said chairman Patrick Pouyanne, who also won approval for a renewed term for himself at the helm of the company. The new name, he said, "marks our collective desire to create a new Total, a multi-energy company and major actor in energy transition," Pouyanne said as he unveiled the new, multicolor logo.

'Climate chaos'

NGOs and other investors were disappointed, having announced ahead of the assembly that they hoped 15 percent of shareholders would call out management on their targets seen as too

modest. In a joint statement, Reclaim Finance and Greenpeace France cheered shareholders who opposed "the 'bogus' climate plan, while furiously condemning the large majority who backed Total's plan for increased fossil fuel extraction".

"By supporting Total's greenwashed strategy, shareholders have voted willingly for climate chaos," said Reclaim Finance founder Lucie Pinson. In the run-up to the gathering, asset management firm Meeschaert AM had urged Total to refrain from any new drilling for oil and gas, echoing an appeal by the International Energy Agency to all energy giants. Pouyanne rejected the call on Friday, saying "radical solutions are not the answer" and reminding his audience that "80 percent of our economy runs on fossil fuels".

Dutch fund ACTIAM meanwhile said that Total's emissions strategy "falls short as it remains unclear how it will meet its goals given its current pace of fossil fuel production and investments that still significantly outpace those in renewables". Meeschaert Asset Management, which also voted against the plan, said other shareholders had voiced their opposition by abstaining from the vote, though the number was not immediately known.

Eleven investors at last year's meeting put forward a motion for more ambitious climate targets-prompting Pouyanne to remark on "those who act like activists, not like shareholders"-but still won nearly 17 percent in a vote at the time. In the United States, investors put pressure on two oil giants to do better on climate change, installing activist board members at ExxonMobil and directing Chevron to deepen emissions cuts.



PARIS: Total Chief Executive Officer Patrick Pouyanne and Total employees remove a cover to reveal the new TotalEnergies logo during its unveiling ceremony in La Defense on Friday. —AFP

Shell, meanwhile, was ordered by a Dutch court this week to slash its greenhouse gas emissions by 45 percent by 2030. Last week, Shell shareholders backed a controversial climate strategy to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and

become carbon neutral by 2050. Another resolution, put forward by the environmental organization Follow This, which called on Shell to set more ambitious targets, was supported by just over 30 percent. —AFP

Biden follows Trump, shuts door on airspace treaty with Russia

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden's administration announced Friday it will not return to the Open Skies Treaty, which Donald Trump withdrew from, signaling a toughening stance against Russia. The post-Cold War treaty was meant to foster trust by allowing the two powers and their allies to monitor one another's airspace, but Trump left the pact in November citing Russian violations.

Biden, who has said he is open to working with Russia on some international security issues, ruled out a return to the treaty in the run-up to his summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin on June 16 in Geneva. "The United States regrets that the Treaty on Open Skies has been undermined by Russia's violations," a State Department spokesman said.

"In concluding its review of the treaty, the United States therefore does not intend to seek to rejoin it, given Russia's failure to take any actions to return to compliance." Moscow announced in January it would leave the treaty, saying there was no progress in making it work in light of Trump's withdrawal.

Russian lawmakers on May 19 voted to uphold Moscow's exit, but Putin's government said it was still prepared to honor the deal if the Americans proposed a "constructive solution". Open Skies was signed soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992 and came into force in 2002.

The treaty allowed its nearly three dozen signatories to carry out short-notice flights over one another's territory to monitor potential military operations. Members include countries across Europe, the former Soviet Union and Canada.

Trading blame

Moscow and Washington had long accused each other of breaching the terms of the Open Skies agreement, and Trump was reportedly outraged by a Russian flight over his New Jersey golf course. Biden has wavered over the treaty and, in May 2020, castigated Trump for his plan to pull out, saying the then-president had "doubled down on his short-sighted policy of going it alone and abandoning American leadership."

At the time, Biden acknowledged Russian violations but said they should be addressed by "seeking to resolve them through the treaty's implementation and dispute mechanism". The pact allows its members to request copies of images taken during surveillance flights carried out by other members. The country under surveillance is given 72 hours' warning ahead of a flight and 24 hours' notice of the flight path, to which it can suggest modifications.

Hot and cold

Since taking office, Biden has been more open to international accords after Trump dumped a slew of agreements - moving swiftly to rejoin the Paris climate accord, to resume support for the World Health Organization, and to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal. Days into office Biden extended the New START nuclear treaty - the last remaining arms reduction pact between the former Cold War rivals.

Regarding other accords linking the United with Russia however Biden has appeared to blow hot and cold - having assumed the presidency vowing a firmer line towards Moscow. The Open Skies pact was one of several major treaties Washington abandoned under Trump. He also pulled out from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia, further straining already tense relations between Moscow and Washington that have reached their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. —AFP

Milk float brings Londoners zero plastic groceries

LONDON: Ella Shone's small electric truck used to deliver milk but now she drives it around London, selling groceries and household goods that are free of plastic packaging. The 32-year-old bought her "top-up truck" last year after the first coronavirus lockdown got her thinking about innovative ways to reduce waste. She has found plenty of demand for her service, with customers scooping up dry groceries such as lentils or filling bottles from large dispensers of vinegar or washing detergent.

On a rainy day in May, the 32-year-old plied a route to eight stops in the up-and-coming district of Hackney in northeast London. "It's very straightforward: it's a bit like a go-cart ride," she said of driving the truck, which has a top speed of 48 km per hour. But she admitted the steering can get "a bit bumpy".

At one stop, three customers bought dried mango, pasta, raisins and shampoo. The mobile shop was created to bring "packaging-free"

shopping to people's doors, tapping into a growing demand for deliveries during the stay-at-home restrictions. "I felt that there was a need to make it easier, to make it more accessible, more visible," she said.

Nevertheless, she wasn't immediately sure her idea was viable. "When I started this, I thought I'd gone a bit mad on furlough leave", she admitted. During lockdown, Shone was on government-subsidized leave from her job in sales at a company producing sustainable condiments. She decided to buy the truck with the money she saved during lockdown, wanting to offer a "community shopping experience".

The truck deliveries launched in August last year and customers can book a stop online. The electric vehicles - known commonly as milk floats - were once commonly used by milkmen and women to deliver pint bottles of fresh milk on household doorsteps. Customers returned them for reuse and Shone says her truck prompts a "nostalgic" reaction. But she is responding to very current concerns over plastic packaging, which disintegrates over time, creating ubiquitous microplastic pollution. Activism targeting governments and corporations can help, she said, but added: "I think there's a lot that needs to be done at consumer level."

Mexico accuses brands of cultural appropriation

MEXICO CITY: Mexico has blasted major clothing brands Zara, Anthropologie and Patowl for using patterns and other elements of Mexican indigenous textiles in their collections without permission, the ministry of culture said Friday. The ministry has sent

letters to the three labels asking them to publicly clarify on what grounds "the collective property" of indigenous peoples of the southern state of Oaxaca had been privatized, and to indicate how they intended to compensate the communities affected.

Minister Alejandra Frausto told the brands not to undermine the cultures' "identity and economy", and called for changes that put indigenous designers from Mexico's 56 ethnic groups on an equal footing with major labels. The protection of their rights, "which have his-



LONDON: Founder of Topup Truck, Ella Shone serves a customer from her electric milk float converted into a zero waste shop which brings "packaging-free" shopping to people's doors on May 21, 2021. —AFP

Pandemic 'awakening'

The UK is the world's second biggest producer of plastic waste per person behind the United States, according to Greenpeace. A study published in January by Greenpeace and the Environmental Investigation Agency found that the 10 largest supermarket chains in the UK reduced their use of plastic by just 1.6 percent in 2019, despite promises of change.

Shone is nevertheless optimistic about people's motivation to cut down on wasteful packaging. "During the pandemic, there has been a bit of a step back towards single-use (plastic) just because people are fearful of reusing something that might entail passing on COVID-19," she said. "But against that tide, I think there has been a bit of an awakening in terms of our responsibility towards the environment." —AFP

Patowl, also American, is accused of making a "faithful copy" of the traditional garments of the Zapotec people for its Tops printed T-shirt range.

It is not the first time Mexico has taken a stand against the issue. In November, it challenged French fashion designer Isabel Marant over her latest collection which it said commercially exploited indigenous motifs. Designer Carolina Herrera, and Spanish companies Rapsodia and Mango have also been singled out for appropriating designs from Mexico. —AFP

Millions in Myanmar struggle to buy food as coup price hike bites

YANGON: Aye Mar sits with her seven children in their Yangon kitchen and worries whether their meal of rice and stringy vegetables - all she can afford in coup-stricken Myanmar - will satisfy their hunger. The national economy and banking system have been paralyzed since a military power-grab which pushed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi out of office in February.

Livelihoods have been lost after strikes and factory closures, fuel prices have shot up and those lucky enough to have bank savings face day-long queues to withdraw their cash. Venturing out in public to earn a living has also become a safety hazard against the backdrop of an indiscriminate and brutal crackdown on dissent that has killed more than 800 civilians, according to a local monitoring group.

In a country which in normal times exports rice, beans and fruit, millions will go hungry in the coming months, the World Food Program has warned. "We have to feed our children so they don't starve," Aye Mar says, sitting barefoot in the commercial capital, a baby swinging in a hammock overhead.

The 33-year-old is out of work, along with her hus-

band who has been forced to take any odd job on offer - including digging septic tanks. Food vendor Wah Wah, 37, says price increases since the coup mean customers can no longer afford something as modest as a bowl of dried fish. "I can't sell it because customers cannot afford to buy it... even if I sell it at 500 kyats (US\$0.33) per bowl," she told AFP. "Everyone has to spend money carefully to be safe because no one has jobs. We live with fear because we don't know what will happen."

'We are in trouble'

Father-of-three Win Naing Tun, 26, said those who could previously afford to eat pork regularly have been forced to turn to fish paste and vegetables. And those who survived on that limited diet before "now can only afford to eat white rice with salt," he told AFP. Price hikes have hit remote areas particularly hard - near the Chinese border in Kachin state, rice is almost 50 percent more expensive, according to the WFP.

The cost of transporting produce from farms to cities has also jumped after an estimated 30 per cent fuel price hike since the coup. The WFP estimates that within the next six months, as many as 3.4 million more people will go hungry in Myanmar and it is poised to triple its emergency food assistance. A grassroots community food donation program is proving to be in high demand in Yangon, Myanmar's commercial capital. "They are happy when we donate food. Some even cry," volunteer May, not her real name, told AFP.



YANGON: In this photo taken on May 21, 2021, a girl pushes a wheelbarrow with a bag of rice distributed by the World Food Program (WFP) as part of food aid efforts to support residents living in poor communities. —AFP

Ni Aye, 51, said she and her husband now have no income at all and depend on handouts for the food they eat. "We are in trouble... If these conditions continue we will starve," she told AFP. Aung Kyaw Moe, 47, is considering returning to his home village after the Yangon factory he worked in shut down. He told AFP he had no money saved up and was in despair over how to support his family of nine, who are squatting illegally with him in the commercial capital. "Everything is outside our control," he said. —AFP

Business

NBK receives 2021 Best Financial Innovation Lab in Kuwait award

KUWAIT: NBK's Group Digital Office won the award of Best Financial Innovation Lab in Kuwait for 2021 in the annual survey conducted by the international Global Finance magazine based on the input from a large panel of experts, analysts, consultants and corporate executives around the world.

NBK is the first bank in Kuwait to receive this prestigious award, which comes in recognition of the successful initiatives launched by the bank as part of its digital transformation roadmap with a view to uplift the services provided to its customers. This year's awards honor the leading players and emerging trends in fostering FinTech innovation including labs run by banks, governments, venture capitalists, universities and NGOs.

Global Finance announced the winners from innovative institutions, exceptional labs, banks and FinTechs, as well as the innovations in original new products and services from seven global regions (Africa, Asia Pacific, Central & Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, North America and Western Europe).

It is worth mentioning that NBK's Group Digital

Office with the Digital Factory organization under its umbrella is the largest financial technology accelerator in the region, which plays a key role in driving the bank's digital transformation strategy by enabling it to foresee future growth opportunities related to FinTech domain. With a broad network spanning 4 continents and 15 countries worldwide, NBK acts as an incubator and meeting point for innovators and emerging companies in the FinTech ecosystem through the new Digital Factory established as per the highest standards adopting the creative thinking approach as a key basis.

Digital innovation is also a key pillar of the bank's strategy to maintain its leading position in digital banking services, regionally and globally, by transferring and implementing the most advanced technologies in banking services across all its operations.

Global Finance, founded in 1987 and headquartered in New York, is one of the most reputable magazines specialized in finance and economics. It has a circulation of 50,000 readers in 191 countries around the world, including senior corporate and



financial officers responsible for making investment and strategic decisions at multinational companies and financial institutions.

The magazine conducts various surveys annually about innovation and profitability for banks and financial institutions all over the world, based on which it selects top performers on the regional and international levels.



KFH launches summer campaign with KFH Visa cards

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House "KFH" launched "Ready for summer?" campaign. New and advantageous cards giving customers a unique experience and several chances to win valuable prizes when using KFH Visa Cards and giving KFH products and services an added value and a pioneering position.

The campaign shall continue for three months till August 18 this year, thus providing unique chances to win Fliteboard or Sea Ray boats to 13 of KFH customers. The customer shall get a chance to enter the draw upon using KFH Visa Credit or Prepaid cards as follows: One chance to enter the draw for every KD 1 of total local purchases, where Debit, Credit & Prepaid VISA cards holder will get 10 chances to enter the draw for every KD 1 of total international purchases (including online purchase transactions in foreign currency).

KFH shall, under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce & Industry representative, conduct 10 weekly draws on Fliteboard boats and three monthly draws on Sea Ray Boats.

The Group GM - Retail Banking Khaled Al-Shamlan emphasized that the launch of the campaign "Ready for summer?" reiterates KFH keenness and interest in enhancing KFH customers banking experience and

achieving a pioneering position in the banking cards market in Kuwait. The bank seeks always to provide easy and safe payment solutions to customers and grant them prizes for using the cards locally and externally.

He added in his speech during the press conference held to announce the launch of the campaign that KFH is keen on designing a fully integrated campaign to fulfil customers' aspirations during summer considering summer difficulties and the wish of many customers to spend their vacation in Kuwait. Accordingly, KFH has taken the initiatives to study market and society requirements and introduce products that would achieve customers' aspirations.

He noted that the campaign shall contribute to the enhancement of cards usage in the local market and increase sales while prizes shall give fair and equal opportunities to customers. He reiterated that efforts shall continue, in cooperation with Visa, to plan and execute several similar campaigns which shall reflect positively on customers' satisfaction, usage ratios and expansion of KFH market share in the field of all types of cards.

Efforts shall continue to enhance payment solutions and execute KFH strategy to go ahead with digital banking and to adopt FINTECH solutions in banking transactions as per the highest quality and security standards.

The Group Acting DGM - Banking Cards, Talal Al-Arbeed indicated that "Ready for summer?" campaign is just a continuation of the series of campaigns which KFH has launched and which have achieved remarkable success among customers eg the campaign "KFH Key Visa in Europe", the campaign "Discover the world with



KFH Visa Cards", the campaign "Enjoy a unique experience in London", the campaign "KFH Key Card in Turkey" and many other campaigns which have made remarkable success and participated in enhancing customers satisfaction and rewarding them.

Al-Arbeed noted in his speech during the press conference that KFH has achieved outstanding distinction in the digital banking aspect, referring to the "Digital Wallet" service on smart phones and watches, thus providing the most modern smart digital payment methods at the highest levels of security in cooperation with "Samsung", "Fitbit" and "Garmin. KFH cardholders of all types are now able to enjoy the smart payment methods easily and safely only by passing the device or smart watch to the POS compatible with NFC technology locally and globally.

DHAMAN continues supporting MoH COVID vaccine efforts

KUWAIT: Health Assurance Hospitals Company (DHAMAN) launched an initiative to further support the Ministry of Health's (MoH) continued efforts to expedite vaccinating as many members of the population against COVID-19.

DHAMAN Acting



Dr Mohammad Al-Qenai



CEO Dr Mohammad Al-Qenai said: DHAMAN introduced a number of tangible initiatives to support the efforts of MoH and the medical sector as a whole in Kuwait, which are part of social responsibility and the Company fulfilling its role towards the society.

Al-Qenai added: As part of these initiatives, the

to be a fundamental demand driver for AVEVA's software. Strong Subscription growth continued, and the Group also delivered Software as a Service (SaaS) to customers at increasing scale. Despite the challenging macro-economic environment, AVEVA continued to invest in its future growth by increasing investment in areas of its world class technology and software, such as AI and Cloud.

While digital transformation remains at the core of customers' decisions to adopt AVEVA's solutions, the company is also making a strong contribution to sustainability through its products. For example, the remote deployment of AVEVA Unified Operations Centre enabled Saudi Aramco to monitor emissions and optimise energy usage; while Neste, the world's leading producer of renewable diesel and sustainable aviation fuel, used AVEVA's Unified Supply Chain to drive collaboration between its remote teams, boosting efficiency. Several of AVEVA's EPC customers used AVEVA Unified Engineering to help pioneer hydrogen production designs while other engineering companies use our software for offshore windfarms.

Strong Customer Business Strengthens AVEVA's Market Leadership

Whilst the pandemic had a direct impact on planned capital projects being postponed, demand shift from 3D design software to project execution software grew:

- Engineering, which contributed 42 percent of revenue during the year, saw significant contract wins with EPC's such as Wood, Worley, and Petrofac. Likewise, demand shift to plant operations led to an increase in orders from owner operators managing engineering information as the

core of the digitalization strategy within their existing plant facilities. There were a number of significant wins including with Shell and BHP Group, while we also had an increase in orders from the Power End market with significant contract wins from companies including EDF.

- Monitoring & Control represented 32 percent of AVEVA's total revenue as customers continued to focus on operations efficiency, remote operations, and collaboration. AVEVA also saw strength in mid-stream Oil & Gas with as a result, there were several O&G wins including from SoCalGas. In other sectors AVEVA also achieved significant order wins from customers including BHP Group.

- Asset Performance Management represented 14 percent of total revenue with AVEVA winning its first mining customer in APM and continued a substantial global roll out with an Energy major.

- Planning & Operations represented 12 percent of total revenue with growth supported by sales of Supply Chain planning solutions to help customers in the Energy sector operate efficiently in the context of the disrupted market. There was also growth in the Food & Beverage and Metals and Mining sectors for Manufacturing Execution software.



Peter Herwek

perspective. We clearly felt that we had to revisit various aspects of how we communicate with consumers and sharpen the way we reach them in an optimum and impactful manner. We saw this appetite to challenge the status quo in the BPG team. What excited us the most was their strategic approach backed by data and logic. We look forward to this partnership."

Avi Bhojani, CEO, BPG, added: "Wipro is a well-known brand with great products that deserves to reach every household in the region. It is an innovative company and we share a similar DNA with our ideas-driven approach. We believe in simple yet impactful solutions that work as a huge multiplier for our clients'

AUB congratulates winners of Al-Hassad weekly draw

KUWAIT: In accordance with full preventive guidelines and measures set by health authorities, Ahli United Bank (AUB) held the weekly draw of May 26, 2021 of Al-Hassad Islamic account, which is the very first draw account in Islamic banking in Kuwait and has won the "Best Savings Product in Kuwait 2019" by the prestigious Banker Middle East Magazine for the numerous unique features it provides. Al-Hassad Islamic account offers over 750 prizes over a 12-month period and has reshaped the lives of thousands lucky winners.

The Bank had announced 20 winners of KD 1,000 as follows: Sabeeha Abduljabbar Ahmad, Fares Mohammed Al-Saadah, Fareedah Qablan Al-Shammari, Qadreyah Abdulrazzaq Ahmadi, Hazaah Saad Shbairam, Abdulrazaq Khtheir Kamal, Lulwa Mohamed Al-Dakhil, Hilal Eskandar Muawad, Hamad Mohammad Al-Hay, Kholoud Suliman Al-Ajiri, Mansour Dhaidan Al-Otaibi, Sadaq Sulaiman Al-Sairafi, Mariam Ali Hasan, Sadaq Sulaiman Al-Sairafi, Mariam Ali Hasan, Nasser Karem Humaidan, Fatemah Hasan Shah, Mohammad Sid Al-Shakhs, Elham Hamad Al-Hasan, Ahmad Yousef Al-Failakawi, Saritha Alix Monteiro and Latifah Abdulwahab Al-Muhaini.

The draws of Al-Hassad include several cash prizes, such as KD 100,000 each Eid and the grand quarterly draw of KD 250,000 prize which continues to be a key aspiration for customers who are wishing to fulfill their dreams. Al Hassad offers 20 weekly prizes of KD 1,000 for each winner. In addition to this attractive package of rewards, Al-Hassad Islamic account incorporates a Wakala contract for projected annual profits, making this account beneficial to all customer segments that are aspiring to build their short and long-term savings through a unique savings account with many advantages.

Furthermore, for the first time in Kuwait, the AUB Al-Hassad presents the "Privilege Draw", which is a quarterly draw of KD 25,000 exclusively for Al-Hassad customers who maintained their balances for more than one year and have not won a prize in the past five years. For all draws, the clients are eligible for one draw chance for each KD 50 deposited in their Al-Hassad account.

It is worth mentioning that Al-Hassad Islamic account has won the "Best Savings Product in Kuwait 2019" by the prestigious Banker Middle East Magazine for the numerous unique features it provides. Such features include the simplest and easiest program, highest number of winners, largest prize value, unique draws during Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha, loyalty multipliers, unique online account opening feature, transparent draws held during radio shows with live broadcast on the Bank's social media platforms.

2020/2021 proves transformational for AVEVA

DUBAI: AVEVA, a global leader in industrial software, driving digital transformation and sustainability, announced its results for the year ended March 31, 2021 (FY21). The results showed that AVEVA had made strategic, financial, and operational progress in the face of the pandemic.

The last year proved transformational for AVEVA. The Group was quick to react to the COVID crisis, rapidly moving employees to remote working and conducting business transactions virtually. Evolving how it operated it demonstrated the resilience and strength of both the business and its relationships with customers. Today, AVEVA is a stronger and better positioned business, with a more diversified customer base. It has a fundamental role to play in supporting customers' energy transition and environmental efficiency journeys.

Alongside the successful navigation of the global pandemic, AVEVA completed the transformational \$5bn acquisition of OSIsoft in March 2021. This acquisition established AVEVA as a clear global leader bringing together industrial software applications with the market leading industrial data platform.

Industrial Digitalisation Driving Significant Growth as well Sustainability

The ongoing digitalisation of the industrial world continues

Wipro appoints BPG Dubai as media strategist

DUBAI: WIPRO Yardley FZE, the Middle East arm of the consumer products business, a significant player in personal care and home care consumer product segments in the region, has appointed BPG Dubai to lead media planning and buying for its Middle East brand

campaigns. Wipro products have a large consumer base across Arab and Asian communities in the region, and navigating this complex space has always been a challenge and an opportunity for growth. The company also has ambitious expansion plans that required an agile, innovative and disruptive partner such as BPG.

Addressing the appointment, Arun Giridhar, Vice President-MENA Wipro Yardley FZE, said: "We have a very steep growth agenda in the region with our uniquely positioned brands in categories across body care, home and hygiene segments. With rapidly changing consumer trends in a prolonged disruptive phase, we felt the strong need to bring in a fresh and disrupt-



efforts. Our strength lies in our people at BPG, as well as our experience within multiple product and consumer segments. We are looking forward to supporting Wipro through this exciting and rewarding journey."



Adventure-lovers defy gravity on the tallest Chinese TV tower

Walking tightropes, rappelling down a four-storey-high rope tunnel, sitting in a dangling basket 58 floors high—tourists have been steeling their nerves for adrenaline-filled challenges in a new assault course at the top of China's tallest TV tower. Thrill-seekers in Guangzhou are rewarded with a rare panoramic view of the cityscape along the Pearl River through the steel structure of the tower, with a sweeping night breeze to break the stifling heat of the southern city. Wearing helmets and a harnesses, tourists can scramble and climb between the distinctive twisting metal structure, accompanied by a coach who shouts instructions while demonstrating techniques to go through each challenge, pausing occasionally to find the best position to take

photos for the challengers.

"I've never had a more exciting experience anywhere," a glowing Peng Xin told AFP, wiping sweat from his brow after finishing the challenge on the 33rd floor, 198 meters off the ground. "I came here mainly to challenge myself and get a taste of new things," he added. Costing over 80 million RMB (\$12.5 million) and taking over a year to build, the "Landmark Alpha" adventure park opened in January this year on the 600-metre high Canton Tower.

It offers extreme sports enthusiasts three different courses at heights ranging from 198 meters to 298 meters. Adventurers in Guangzhou spend up to 688 RMB (\$108) per person on a single course in the tower. "The coaches gave very detailed and thorough instructions,"

one adrenaline junkie surnamed Li told AFP after jumping off a ladder on the 58th floor. China's mega structures have come under scrutiny after a towering skyscraper in the nearby city of Shenzhen swayed without explanation and was evacuated earlier this month.

However, Li said: "The safety measures are good. It is only under this pre-condition that we can fully enjoy the challenge." The adventure park typically welcomes two to three hundred tourists during public holidays—but not all have the courage to finish the full challenge. "I thought I was brave enough to do it, but my legs just gave out," confessed one ashen-faced climber, retracing her steps along a rope tunnel. — AFP



These photos show visitors walking on a tightrope at the adventure park of Canton Tower in Guangzhou, China's southern Guangdong province. — AFP photos

1,000-year-old 'stolen' artefacts to return to Thailand from US

Two ancient sandstone artefacts believed to have been stolen from Thailand during the Vietnam War are set to return from the United States Friday night, officials say. The temple support beams with their exquisite carvings of the Hindu deities Indra and Yama date back to the late 10th or 11th century and had been on show for decades at the San Francisco Asian Art Museum. They are expected to touch down in Bangkok on Friday night and will be put on display at the National Museum for three months from Tuesday, following a special ceremony.

Thai Fine Arts Department Director General Prateep Pengtako said the two lintels are about 1,000 years old and show the influence of the ancient Khmer Kingdom, which had its capital in modern-day Cambodia. "Lintels are part of the structure of ancient Cambodian temples," he told AFP. "The lintels were assessed to be taken away sometime between 1958 and 1969. In particular,

1965-66 saw a lot of Thai artefacts go missing." The lintels were among 133 Thai artefacts on display at museums and galleries in the US. "The return of these antiquities holds great importance in terms of history, archaeology, and culture to the Thai Government and the Thai people," the Thai foreign ministry said, after a handover ceremony earlier this week between US authorities and the Royal Thai Consulate General in Los Angeles.

"It is believed that both of the sacred lintels were illegally exported from Thailand around the 1960s during the Vietnam War." The repatriation comes after a three-year investigation by the US Department of Homeland Security. The California museum insisted it had long planned to return the artefacts, but disputed investigators' allegations that they were stolen. "We are very pleased that these lintels are going back to their country of origin," Jay Xu, the museum director, said in a statement.

US museums are not the only ones to be embroiled in art provenance scandals in recent years. Australia has repatriated at least eight looted statues to India since 2014. France has vowed to return items taken from Senegal and Benin. The Netherlands is moving to repatriate artefacts stolen from its former colonies. And Germany has promised to give back artefacts to Nigeria. — AFP



A lintel originally from the Nong Hong Sanctuary in Thailand is displayed during a ceremony to return it to the Thai government in Los Angeles. — AP

Ballet leaps back in UK with Acosta world premieres

Cuban ballet star Carlos Acosta is staging world dance premieres at one of Britain's top ballet companies to welcome audiences back after the "nightmare" of the pandemic lockdowns. The 47-year-old, who took over as director of the Birmingham Royal Ballet early last year, said that he could not wait to "connect" with ballet-goers again through a mixed program of both modern and classical dance.

Acosta grew up in poverty in Cuba but his prodigious talent propelled him into major roles at dance companies, including The Royal Ballet in London. He hung up his ballet shoes in 2016 and in January 2020 took over the reins of the Birmingham company, based in the UK's second largest city. However, soon after his appointment, the country was plunged into a series of lengthy lockdowns due to the coronavirus pandemic.

'Very traumatic'

"It was very traumatic," Acosta told AFP, after leading a class at his studio. "This institution is very large. It was all new to me." He had the task of keeping the company's finances afloat and chose to reduce his own salary so all 60 dancers could be paid in full. The Birmingham Royal Ballet was one of the first British companies to go back to live performances in October, between two lockdowns.

The first live show programmed by Acosta was a one-act ballet called "Lazuli Sky". Dancers obeyed rules on social distancing by performing in voluminous skirts, inspired by the crinolines worn in the 19th century when this was believed to prevent cholera transmission. "I wanted to leave a record behind of the pandemic," Acosta said, of the show's concept. But the lockdown rules on dancers not touching each other

were "very unnatural", he admitted. "With no contact, there are limited things that you can do."

'False hope'

Later, the company started rehearsing with dancers in "bubbles" to reduce the risk of the entire company having to self-isolate if one fell ill. Soon afterwards, the UK locked down again, with theatres only briefly reopening in December before closing again until early this month. "It was like a false sense of hope," said Rosanna Ely, a 25-year-old dancer at the company. The pandemic "has been a nightmare for everyone", Acosta agreed.

For dancers, "the body suffers" but the lockdowns and reopenings were also "very damaging" psychologically, he said. For the company, closing down during the normally lucrative festive season was financially disastrous, too.

The cancellation of Christmas performances of "The Nutcracker" meant it lost around £1 million (1.2 million euros, \$1.4 million), Acosta said. To welcome audiences back, Acosta is putting on "Curated by Carlos: Triple Bill", a performance made up of three short ballets, two of which are world premieres, from June 10. One of the premieres—"City of

a Thousand Trades" from Havana-born choreographer Miguel Altunaga-celebrates Birmingham's industrial heritage. The other, "Imminent", by Brazilian-British choreographer Daniela Cardim, is inspired by themes including climate change. "It's very eclectic, it's fresh... it's what I think is the way forward for a ballet company of the 21st century," Acosta said. The company will also be staging a traditional favorite, "Cinderella", later in June.

'Not easily defeated'

Acosta's programming reflects his vision of dancers embracing both modern dance and classical ballet. "I'm loving so much this contemporary stuff at the moment because it's so different and it's so much out of my comfort zone", said Ely, after a rehearsal of "City of a Thousand Trades", Birmingham's nickname during the Industrial Revolution.

Darel Jose Perez, a 22-year-old Dominican dancer, joined the Birmingham ballet as an apprentice dancer in November, thanks to the Carlos Acosta International Dance Foundation, which aims to give opportunities to dancers from disadvantaged backgrounds. "It was really hard to come to a country I didn't know," he said. He added that he "felt alone" during the pandemic but was still very grateful for the "great opportunity". Acosta himself is of mixed Spanish and African heritage. He grew up as the 11th child in his family, but his truck driver father pushed him to study ballet.

His career saw him perform with the world's top companies, making him a trailblazer for black dancers. While at The Royal Ballet, he was the only black principal dancer and one of only two non-white dancers. "I think now this has changed," he said. Acosta has set up projects to help young dancers in his native Cuba: the Carlos Acosta Dance Academy and the Acosta Danza company, launched in 2015. He said that his background had given him "tremendous resilience" and he was "not somebody that gives up or gets defeated very easily". He hopes there will not be another lockdown but added that "if it does (happen), then we'll have to adapt". — AFP



Cuban ballet star Carlos Acosta poses at the Birmingham Royal Ballet in Birmingham. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



This illustration shows the title of "Friends: The Reunion" on a screen as a person checks the HBO MAX app on their smartphone in Los Angeles. — AFP photos



This illustration photo shows the title of 'Friends: The Reunion' on a smartphone in front of a HBO Max logo in Los Angeles.

'FRIENDS' REUNION REVEALS ROSS AND RACHEL STARS' CRUSH

Jennifer Aniston and David Schwimmer almost hooked up on the set of "Friends"—but their characters Rachel and Ross nearly didn't. Those were among the revelations diared "Friends" fans were treated to Thursday as a one-off reunion special of the beloved 1990s sitcom streamed on the HBO Max platform. Asked by host James Corden if any of the six stars had real-life chemistry, both Aniston and Schwimmer confessed to "crushing hard on each other" early in the smash hit show's run. "I remember saying, one time, to David, 'It's going to be such a bummer if the first time you and I actually kiss is going to be on national television,'" recalled Aniston. "Sure enough, first time we kissed

Elsewhere in the reunion episode, Matthew Perry surprised his co-stars by admitting to having suffered severe anxiety "every night" during filming. The creators said Monica and Chandler's romance was intended to be a one-night stand before positive audience reactions changed their minds, and that Matt LeBlanc nearly lost out on the role of Joey to the actor who would play his fake twin in a later episode. And a parade of celebrity fans showed up. Cara Delevingne, Cindy Crawford and Justin Bieber modeled famous comedy outfits from the show on a catwalk, while Lady Gaga sang a duet of "Smelly Cat" with Lisa Kudrow. Reviews were lukewarm, with Deadline calling the special "more filler than killer, to put it kindly,"

the ruling Communist Party were removed from all versions. Lady Gaga was banned from touring China in 2016 after she met with the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama, who has been labeled as a separatist by Beijing. Bieber has been blocked since 2014 when he posted a photo of himself at the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo that honors Japan's war dead, including convicted war criminals from World War II. Boyband BTS angered the party last year when they omitted any reference to Chinese fighters who died during the Korean War when speaking about the "history of pain" in the region.

Chinese fans were also quick to point out that local versions of "Friends: The Reunion" expunged all LGBTQ references from the special, which was several minutes shorter than the 104 minute show released worldwide on HBO Max on Thursday. Chinese streaming services iQiyi, Youku and Tencent Video did not answer AFP queries about what prompted the censorship. The sitcom about six white New Yorkers has a huge following among Chinese millennials and is even recommended in schools as a way to learn English.

The show's popularity has also spawned Central Perk cafes in several Chinese cities, styled after the hangout regularly featured in the show. Angry fans took to social media to vent out their frustration at the censorship. "I was waiting for weeks to watch the Friends reunion only to find that the version streamed in China was all mangled," wrote one user. "Why can't the censors just let us enjoy a sitcom?" asked another. Earning the wrath of Chinese authorities has become costly for entertainers after China became the world's box office last year surpassing the United States. Earlier this week, American wrestler and actor John Cena apologized after stirring a hornet's nest by referring to Taiwan as a country while promoting his latest movie "Fast and Furious 9." Beijing considers the democratic island a renegade province. — AFP



In this file photo taken on September 22, 2002 cast members from "Friends," which won Outstanding Comedy series pose for photographers at the 54th Annual Emmy Awards at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. — AFP

was in that coffee shop," she said, referring to the New York-based show's famous "Central Perk" set. "So we just channeled all of our adoration and love for each other into Ross and Rachel." The two characters' on-off relationship was a cornerstone of "Friends" throughout its 10-year, 236-episode run—which ended with a romantic reconciliation. Co-creator David Crane said in an interview that the writers had asked themselves if the pair really should end up together. "We discussed perhaps sort of ambivalent endings," he said. "And we went 'No, this is 'Friends,' people have been waiting 10 years to see this couple get together, we've got to give them what they want."

but Variety praised "a glossy, poignant, careful trip down memory lane." Still, it was all too much for some die-hard fans. "I am not crying... You are crying!" tweeted one, with a clip from the reunion of Aniston drying her eyes.

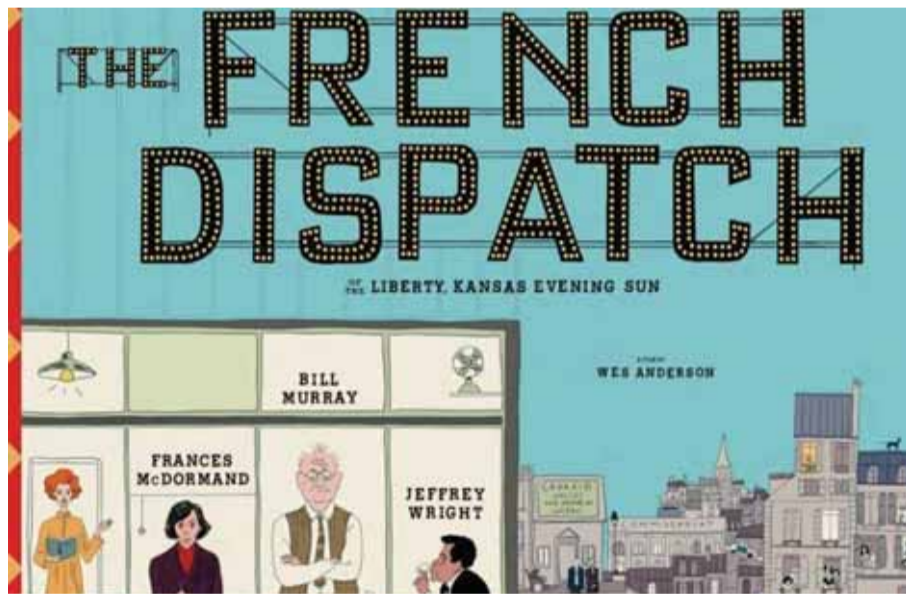
China Censors Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber

Chinese fans of the popular sitcom "Friends" were furious after censors cut guest stars Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber and Korean boyband BTS from the much-awaited reunion episode. When the one-off special of the beloved 1990s sitcom was streamed on three Chinese video platforms, cameos by the celebrities who have all incurred the wrath of

Indian YouTuber arrested over flying dog

An Indian YouTuber with more than four million subscribers has insisted he loves his pet dog after he was arrested for letting it float into the air tied to balloons and posting the video on his channel. "Whoever is angry with me, I apologize with folded hands. I understand this was a big mistake," Gaurav Sharma said in a new video after being released from custody late Thursday. But he added that the viral clip of Dollar rising skywards attached to a mass of multicolored balloons gave the wrong impression about his feelings for his pooch. "I'm unmarried and Dollar is like my child," the 32-year-old said.

"In my old videos on YouTube you can see, I shop for Dollar for summers, winters. I buy him treats, I take him out. I even celebrate his birthday by inviting other dogs." According to media reports, police said they arrested Sharma after a complaint from animal welfare organization People for Animals. —AFP



Wes Anderson film to compete for Palme d'Or at Cannes

The latest film by US director Wes Anderson, "The French Dispatch", will premiere at this year's Cannes film festival in the official competition, organizers said Friday. The film's star-studded cast includes Bill Murray, Tilda Swinton, Timothee Chalamet, Adrien Brody, Benicio del Toro and Saoirse Ronan, as well as French actors Lea Seydoux and Mathieu Amalric. The film—initially planned to screen at Cannes last year before the festival was cancelled because of COVID-19 — "will have its world premiere in the Cannes competition", the festival tweeted. It follows events at the French foreign

news bureau of a Kansas newspaper set in a fictitious 20th-century French city. Two other films have already been confirmed for the official selection which groups movies competing for the Palme d'Or, one of global cinema's top awards. One is "Annette", a musical film scheduled to open the festival, by Frenchman Leos Carax starring Marion Cotillard and Adam Driver and with 70s pop duo Sparks contributing the score and, in collaboration with Carax, the screenplay. The other is "Benedetta" by Dutchman Paul Verhoeven—famous for "Basic Instinct"—about the life of a novice nun in the 17th century who has a love affair with another woman.

The full line up of the official competition will be released on June 3. At the last Cannes festival in 2019 the Palme d'Or went to South Korean film "Parasite" by Bong Joon-ho. The festival, the world's biggest film gathering usually held in May, was this year postponed by nearly two months because of COVID restrictions and is now scheduled for July 6 to 17. US director Spike Lee will head up the main jury. — AFP

With trademark grit and poetic soul, posthumous DMX album a moving coda

The rapper DMX was priming for a career comeback in the months before his shock death, ready to release his first studio album in nearly a decade. But the 50-year-old who reigned over the late 1990s and early 2000s with five albums debuting atop the US songs chart did not live to see the release of "EXODUS," his posthumous album out Friday with Def Jam Recordings. A sentiment of redemption streaks the 13-track record, a heart-breaking theme after the artist's death.

He died in hospital on April 9 after nearly a week on life support following a heart attack. His eighth official album features cameos from hip hop's upper echelons, including Jay-Z, Nas and Snoop Dogg, along with appearances from Alicia Keys, Usher and Bono. DMX's trademark bark fierce as ever, the New York rapper's raw, hard-driving delivery is showcased on tracks, including "That's My Dog," "Hood Blues" and "Bath Salts." But his soulful, poetic vulnerability is also on full display, with the song "Hold Me Down" set to fervent piano. In "Letter to My Son" the father of 15 raps of his inner pain and life of

tumult over the moving tones of a violin. A longtime friend and producer of the rapper born Earl Simmons, Swizz Beatz shepherded "EXODUS" to completion. "My brother X was one of the most purest and rare souls I've ever met. He lived his life dedicated to his family and music," Swizz Beatz said in a statement ahead of the album's release. "Most of all, he was generous with his giving and loved his fans beyond measure."

Addiction and jail

Raised in the New York suburb of Yonkers, DMX endured a grim childhood, growing up in housing projects with his mother and siblings where he suffered abuse. At 14, he began suffering from addiction and entered a cycle of incarceration, both of which would persist throughout his life. But as an artist who exuded both hypermasculine swagger and simultaneous tender sincerity, DMX's powerful, gravelly voice left an indelible mark on hip-hop and gained him legions of fans.

DMX's death sparked weeks of emotion and tributes, especially in his native New York, where his music blared from car radios. Many people said his openness concerning his personal struggles helped them accept and handle their own inner turmoil. "This album, X couldn't wait for his fans all around the world to hear and show just how much he valued each and every single person that has supported him unconditionally," Swizz Beatz said. — AFP



Marilyn Manson hit with new rape, abuse allegations

US goth rocker Marilyn Manson was Friday hit with new allegations that he raped an ex-girlfriend and forced her to watch a video of him abusing a young fan. The latest lawsuit against Manson—real name Brian Warner—on behalf of an anonymous woman comes after "Game of Thrones" actress Esme Bianco last month accused him of rape, sexual abuse and violence. The new lawsuit alleges that Manson "raped and repeatedly sexually abused" Jane Doe. Manson allegedly showed the plaintiff a video in which he could be seen tying a young fan to a chair, where he



In this file photo Marilyn Manson attends the Season 10 Premiere of 'The Walking Dead' at Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, California. —AFP

"humiliated and berated her," removed her T-shirt, forced her to drink a glass of urine, and threatened her with a gun. A member of Manson's team strongly denied the accusations Friday. A source close to Manson said the video was a "scripted short film" featuring an adult actor that was never released. Manson's lawyer Howard King described the previous claims by Bianco as "provably false" and accused Bianco and her attorney of making "outrageous financial demands based on conduct that simply never occurred." Los Angeles police in February confirmed they were investigating domestic violence allegations against the singer between 2009 and 2011.

"Westworld" star Evan Rachel Wood has also accused Manson of years of abuse starting when she was a teenager—allegations Manson called "horrible distortions of reality" in an Instagram post. Manson, who has long cultivated a controversial image with his ghostly make-up and stage name evoking serial killer Charles Manson, has parted ways with his record label Loma Vista Recordings and Hollywood agency CAA since the allegations became public. — AFP

Oscars delayed by a month as pandemic rules extended

The Oscars have been postponed for a second consecutive year, and relaxed eligibility rules allowing films to skip movie theaters will be kept in place due to the pandemic, the Academy said Thursday. The 94th Academy Awards will now take place on March 27, 2022, exactly a month later than originally planned, and are set to return to their traditional venue at Hollywood's Dolby Theatre. After ratings nosedived for this year's unusual, pandemic-affected Oscars—which were held at a Los Angeles train station—the postponement avoids potentially costly clashes with the Super Bowl and Winter Olympics.

American football's biggest event takes place in Los Angeles next year on February 13, while the global winter sports extravaganza is due to be held in Beijing from February 4-20. But the impact of Covid-19 — which transformed Hollywood's award season last year, shuttering movie theaters, delaying dozens of major films and forcing many ceremonies to go online—also continues to be felt. Traditionally the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences requires at least a seven-day run in Los Angeles theaters for movies to be eligible for Hollywood's biggest prize.

With big screens closed, those rules were relaxed last year, in what was widely seen as a boost for movies on streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon's Prime Video. "This year, which is still impacted by the pandemic, eligibility requirements for the 94th Academy Awards will be consistent with the addendums made for the 93rd Awards season," said the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in a statement. —AFP



In this file photo an Oscars statue is displayed on the red carpet area on the eve of the 92nd Oscars ceremony at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

Sports

Tatum blitzes Nets for 50 points, Celtics claw back into East series

LOS ANGELES: Jayson Tatum busted out of a mini-slump, exploding for 50 points Friday as the Boston Celtics clawed their way back into their Eastern Conference first-round series with a 125-119 win over the Brooklyn Nets. Tatum, who had just 31 points on nine-of-32 shooting in the first two games of the series, shot a blistering 16-of-30 from the floor and drained five threes as the Celtics cut the Nets series lead to 2-1.

Tatum also scored 50 points in a win over Washington in a play-in game making it the second time this month he has put the team on his back for a much needed post-season win. "I just tried to be better," said Tatum. "I had a tough two games so I tried to redeem myself and do anything I can to win."

The Celtics' win over the Nets played out in front of a crowd of 4,700 at the Boston Garden. "It felt good to finally play a playoff game at TD Garden and it is great being back in front of our fans," said Tatum. Game four is Sunday in Boston.

Marcus Smart scored 22 points and Tristan Thompson finished with 19 points and 13 rebounds in the win. James Harden delivered 41 points and 10 assists while Kevin Durant finished with 39 points and nine rebounds for the Nets, who were trying to take a 3-0 series lead for the first time since their first-round sweep of the New York Knicks in 2004.

Kyrie Irving was playing in front of Boston fans for the first time since leaving the Celtics under a cloud of controversy after the 2018-19 season. He was showered with boos from Celtic faithful every

time he touched the ball. Irving scored just two points in the first half to tie a career low in a play-off game. He finished with 16 points on six-of-17 shooting.

The Celtics led 33-32 at the end of the first and 61-57 at the half, then held on down the stretch as Tatum nailed a clutch pull up jumper with 40 seconds left to make it 122-115. "It's just one of those nights," Tatum said. "A tough shooting night the first game and I didn't get to play much the last game because I got poked in the eye."

His jumper came just 18 seconds after Irving had sunk two free throws to cut the Boston lead to five points. Tatum joined John Havlicek, Isaiah Thomas, Ray Allen, Sam Jones and Bob Cousy as Celtics with 50 points in a playoff game.

Irving booed

"He was just locked in mentally," teammate Marcus Smart said. "We're going up against a juggernaut of a team." Also, Trae Young scored 21 points and had 14 assists as the Atlanta Hawks beat the New York Knicks 105-94 to grab a 2-1 lead in their Eastern Conference first-round series.

The Hawks shot a sizzling 59 percent from the three point line and took command with a 22-5 burst to close out the second quarter. Game four is Sunday in Atlanta. Bogdan Bogdanovic scored 15 points, John Collins added 14, Clint Capela finished with 13 points and 12 rebounds. Former Knick Danilo Gallinari sank all four of his three-point



BOSTON: Jayson Tatum #0 of the Boston Celtics shoots the ball against Kevin Durant #7 of the Brooklyn Nets during Round 1, Game 3 of the 2021 NBA Playoffs on Friday at the TD Garden in Boston, Massachusetts. — AFP

attempts to finish with 12 points in the win.

Derrick Rose shot 13 of 21 from the floor and scored 11 of his 30 points in the first quarter for the Knicks. Julius Randle finished with 14 points in the loss. Elsewhere, Kawhi Leonard scored 36 points

and the Los Angeles Clippers rallied from a first half deficit to beat the Dallas Mavericks 118-108 in game three of their playoff series. The Mavericks lead the best-of-seven series 2-1 heading into game three on Sunday. — AFP

Racquet man: How lifelong link powers Nadal at French Open

CORBAS: For Rafael Nadal, it's a lifelong association with Babolat, for Roger Federer, it's a Wilson while world number one Novak Djokovic is powered by Head. Tennis amateurs may dream of emulating the stars by using the same racquets as their idols, but the 'Big Three' of the sport are very specific when it comes to their needs. Suppliers, too, keep the tricks of the trade close to their chests.

"The racquet is vital for the career of any player, it's an extension of the arm," Nadal, about to embark on his bid to win a 21st Grand Slam, told AFP. "It is through it that sensations pass and at the end of the day, without a good feeling with your racquet, it's very difficult to get success. If I try another racquet today I won't be comfortable at first. Whereas with my racquet I feel good because I know it inside out, I know where to hit, I know what I can do. At all times, I know how the ball can react to the movement I am making."

Nadal has been firing forehands and backhands all over the world with a Babolat racquet in his hand. His relationship started when he was just nine when he and his Uncle Toni, his coach for the major-

ity of his greatest triumphs, walked into a sports shop in his home town of Manacor.

With his 35th birthday just around the corner, he has never changed his equipment supplier. It's a partnership for "his entire career and even beyond", said Babolat chief executive Eric Babolat who is as starstruck as many as the Spaniard's fans. When they saw Nadal play, the company's top brass said to themselves "a UFO has arrived, what can we do?," he said.

At Roland Garros in 2020, when Nadal captured his 13th French Open title, he was using his personally-branded racquet. Developed over the years in close collaboration with Nadal, the result was a carbon composite frame weighing 300 grams without the strings, which anyone can buy.

But from there, the made-in-China frames go through the lab at Corbas, near Lyon, where they are then tailored to suit Nadal. To customize a racquet, it takes 20 to 90 minutes of work for an additional cost estimated between 150 and 200 euros.

First, there is a personalization of the handle-size can be refined, shape adapted even to the point of carving a slot for a finger. Technical customization will follow—the addition of material on the frame or in the handle to modify the racquet for power or its center of gravity for precision.

"It's tailor-made, we work on different sizes, different playing intentions, to adapt the racquet to the player's needs," said Sylvain Trinqueaux, engineer at Babolat's performance laboratory. The set-



CORBAS: An employee of Babolat, a racquet sports company, prepares a racket for Spanish tennis player Rafael Nadal at Babolat factory in Corbas on May 6, 2021. — AFP

tings remain confidential.

"Involving all our players in research and development would be ideal, but it's impossible," added Trinqueaux. "However, Rafa is Rafa. His feedback is super interesting and super enriching. Ditto for Dominic Thiem." However, for those players, professional or amateur, looking for a factory-made magic wand, Trinqueaux has bad news. "The ideal racquet does not exist." — AFP

News in brief

Champions League 'Final Four'?

PARIS: UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin said he was "in favor of a Champions League Final Four" by 2024 in an interview published in France on Saturday. "Personally, I would like to see it happen," he told sports daily L'Equipe ahead of last night's Champions League final in Porto. "It could be great. And effective in terms of revenue if it is well done." Although he is in favor, Ceferin added that "there are advantages and disadvantages". "There is no urgency. We can decide this in a year's time," said Ceferin. He said he was attracted to the idea after last year's competition ended with a Final 8. In response to the coronavirus crisis, the eight quarter-finalists assembled in Lisbon and the final three rounds were played out over a fortnight. Ceferin also expressed his dismay at Real Madrid, Barcelona and Juventus, the three clubs who have refused to abandon the aborted Super League project. — AFP

Real Madrid sign Alaba

MADRID: Austrian defender David Alaba will join Real Madrid on a five-year contract after leaving Bayern Munich, the Spanish giants confirmed on Friday. The announcement of the signing of the 28-year-old, who had also been linked with several English Premier League clubs, comes a day after Zinedine Zidane quit as Real coach. Alaba will be presented as a Real player after Euro 2020, the club said. The Austria international has been hugely successful at Bayern, having won two Champions League trophies and 10 league titles among other silverware. Alaba had said in February that he would leave Bayern when his contract expires at the end of the season after 13 years with the German club. Alaba and Bayern were in talks about a new contract but the club said in November 2020 that the negotiations had broken down, reportedly over the player's salary. — AFP

Liverpool add Konate

LONDON: Jurgen Klopp boosted Liverpool's center-back options by signing RB Leipzig defender Ibrahim Konate on a "long-term" contract on Friday. France Under-21 international Konate will compete for a position at the heart of Klopp's defense after they suffered a host of center-back injuries this season. Liverpool triggered the reported £36 million (\$50 million) release clause in the 22-year-old's Leipzig contract to seal his switch to Anfield. The move is subject to international clearance and a UK work permit. Konate is Klopp's first major signing ahead of next season as the Reds boss looks to avoid a repeat of the defensive crisis that ruined their Premier League title defense. — AFP

First woman referee

FLORENCIO VARELA: Brazilian referee Edina Alves has made history by becoming the first woman to officiate a match in the Copa Libertadores, South America's top club competition. The group match between Argentine side Defensa y Justicia and Independiente del Valle of Ecuador on Thursday had an all-woman refereeing team. Alves was supported by assistant referees Neuza Back, also from Brazil, and Cindy Nahuelcoy of Chile, with another Chilean, Maria Belen Carvajal, as the fourth official. The Group A match in Florencio Varela near Buenos Aires ended in a 1-1 draw. Alves had already achieved a landmark when she became the first woman to officiate at a major men's competition when she served as a fourth official at the World Club Cup in Qatar in February. In Europe, French referee Stephanie Frappart was the first woman to take charge of a UEFA Champions League match when she officiated the group game between Juventus and Dynamo Kiev in December 2020. — AFP

Kuwait's Malallah wins gold at Archery Arab Cup

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti archer Abdullah Yacoub Malallah won the gold medal at the Archery Arab Cup final held in Baghdad. The archer broke the Arab and Kuwait record by scoring 687 points. Meanwhile, Kuwaiti archer Amer Al-Hajiri placed sixth. This achievement will help place Kuwait in a distinguished spot in the Arab ranking, as the championship is on the international association's agenda. Kuwait Shooting Sport Club introduced the sport of archery recently, and progressed quickly as archers with the help and support of able technical departments and the board of directors worked hard and reached levels that qualified them to participate in international championships.



BAGHDAD: Kuwait's archer Abdullah Malallah participates in the Archery Arab Cup Final in Baghdad, Iraq.

GAZOO Racing claims victory with incredible finish at Croatia Rally

ZAGREB: The GAZOO Racing (GR) World Rally Team claimed another one-two finish recently in a thrilling conclusion to the first-ever Croatia Rally held as part of the FIA World Rally Championship. In a final-stage decider that went right down to the final meters, Sebastien Ogier and Julien Ingrassia raced to victory in the No. 1 Toyota Yaris WRC. They ended the race just 0.6 seconds ahead of their teammates Elfyn Evans and Scott Martin in the No. 33 Toyota Yaris WRC, making it one of the WRC's closest-ever finishes. Only 10.4 seconds separated the top three vehicles going into the final day of the rally, with Ogier 6.9 seconds in front of Evans. In the opening two stages of the fourth and final day, Evans was the fastest driver in No. 33 Toyota Yaris WRC and took the lead from Ogier in the No. 1 Toyota Yaris WRC.

The pair began the deciding Power Stage separated by just 3.9 seconds, and needed to push to secure the one-two result with only a narrow margin back to third place. In the end, Ogier was fastest through the stage and claimed the victory in the No. 1 Toyota Yaris WRC, with Evans finishing 4.5 seconds slower in the No. 33 Toyota

Yaris WRC - the third closest winning margin in WRC history. The result saw Ogier move back to the top of the drivers' standings with a maximum points haul, while the team extended its lead in the manufacturers' championship to 27 points.

Akio Toyoda, President, Toyota Motor Corporation, commented: "I'm very proud that our crews delivered victory to the team in this new Croatia Rally. To Seb, Julien, and the team, congratulations! Elfyn and Scott also did great by finishing so close behind. It's wonderful that we achieved a one-two finish. Led by Jari-Matti, the team shows its strength in every rally with all team members working together. To our fans, please continue cheering for the GR World Rally Team. We always appreciate your support and encouragement. Thank you very much!"

Sebastien Ogier, Driver of the No 1 Toyota Yaris WRC, said: "It has been a real rollercoaster of emotions. I think everybody knows that I never give up and I tried to keep fighting until the end. I feel for Elfyn who did a good job during this race and was especially strong on the final day. But we had good pace and it's nice to share the podium in



another one-two for the team."

Over the years, Toyota has been participating in many different forms of motorsports, including Formula One, the World Endurance Championship (WEC), and the Nurburgring 24 Hours endurance race. Toyota's participation in these events was overseen by separate entities within the company until April 2015, when Toyota established GR, to consolidate all of its motorsports activities under one in-house brand. Representing Toyota's belief that 'the roads build the people, and the people build the cars,' GR highlights the role of motorsports as a fundamental pillar of Toyota's commitment to making 'ever-better' cars. Harnessing years of experi-

ence gained under the extreme conditions of various motorsports events, GR aims to forge new technologies and solutions that bring the freedom, adventure, and joy of driving to everyone.

The FIA World Rally Championship heads to Portugal for the first gravel event of the year. Based in Matosinhos near Porto in the north of the country, Rally de Portugal features classic stages on sandy and rocky roads. Grip can be difficult to find on the soft roads during the first pass through the stages, while rocks can be exposed and deep ruts can form during the second pass, creating a challenging weekend for the teams and an exciting event for motorsports fans.

Sports

Fraser-Pryce storms to 100m victory at Doha Diamond League

DOHA: Jamaican sprint star Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce raced to victory in the 100m at the Diamond League in Doha on Friday in a confidence boost in the run-up to the Tokyo Olympics. The 34-year-old four-time world champion timed an impressive season's best of 10.84 seconds for the win, another important step in her quest to become the first female athlete to win three Olympic 100m golds after previously topping the podiums in 2008 and 2012 in Beijing and London respectively.

Fresh from finishing fourth in the opening elite meeting in a wet, wind-swept Gateshead last week, Fraser-Pryce made no mistake in the much balmy surroundings of the Qatari capital. Fraser-Pryce, who also won 200m silver at the 2012 London Games and 100m bronze in Rio in 2016, beat home Nigerian Blessing Okagbare (10.90) and American Javianne Oliver (11.03).

"I'm happy that I put together a good race, and of course I'm happy that I won because it's far away from the fourth place that I did last time," the Jamaican said. "It's going to be my final Olympic appearance so I hope it will be good. The last three Olympics I went to I was able to stand on the podium and I'm hoping to be able to make it there again."

Doha is the second stop on the 13-leg Diamond League circuit, with now only five more elite meetings before the Olympic Games in Japan, which start on July 23 after being postponed for a year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Arguably the highest-quality field of the night was in the women's triple jump, which had the top three from the 2016 Rio Olympics and 2019 Doha worlds in the field. Coming out on top was in-form Venezuelan Yulimar Rojas, whose first effort of 15.15m was enough



DOHA: Jamaica's Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce (center) competes in the Women's 100M final during the Diamond League athletics meeting at the Qatar Sports Club stadium in the capital Doha on Friday. — AFP

for victory ahead of Jamaican pair Kimberly Williams and Shanieka Ricketts.

Rojas, the Olympic silver medalist in Rio who took the world titles in Doha and in London in 2017, jumped a personal best of 15.43m in Spain last week — the furthest jump in the world this year to date and the second furthest of all time.

On the 'right path'

"We are on the right path," said Rojas. "I feel good physically and it's good for me, I'm happy to leave a footprint here in Doha. I enjoy this path and when it's Tokyo's turn, I'll be prepared and try to win the gold medal."

Reigning Olympic champion Caterine Ibarguen of

Colombia, a former world champion and multiple world medalist, including bronze in 2019, opened her summer campaign with an eighth place (13.86m). There were victories for Kenya in the men's 800m and 1500m, and women's 800m.

First Faith Kipyegon, world 1500m silver medalist, won the two-lap race in 1:58.26 before world champion Timothy Cheruiyot blasted to a win in the 1500m in 3:30.48 and Wyclife Kinyamal won the 800m in a rapid 1:43.91. American Kenny Bednarek stormed to victory in the men's 200m, edging Canada's Andre de Grasse by one-hundredth of a second to win in 19.88sec.

Bednarek's compatriot Justin Gatlin, the five-time Olympic medalist and a 12-time world medalist who served a four-year ban for doping, came in fifth in 20.49sec. "I felt good, I was a bit nervous, but I'm excited that I got first place," said Bednarek. "I'll try to be even better again the next time."

American Rai Benjamin, the joint third fastest man in the event in history and 2019 world silver medalist behind Norwegian sensation Karsten Warholm, scorched to a meeting record in the men's 400m hurdles, clocking 47.38sec. Arch rival Abderrahman Samba of Qatar could only finish fourth, albeit in a season's best of 48.26sec, as Brazil's Alison dos Santos and British Virgin Islander Kyron McMaster rounded out the podium.

There was an upset in the women's pole vault as American Katie Nageotte outclassed the world championships podium trio of neutral athlete Anzhelika Sidorova, American Sandi Morris and Greece's Katerina Stefanidi, the reigning Olympic champion. Nageotte claimed the win with a best of 4.84m. Another American, Michael Norman, set a world leading time of 44.27sec in winning the 400m. — AFP

Laporta 'moderately optimistic' Messi will stay at Barca

MADRID: Barcelona president Joan Laporta said on Friday he is "moderately optimistic" Lionel Messi will stay but would not guarantee the future of Ronald Koeman, with further talks planned between club and coach next week.

Laporta also remained defiant over Barca's continuing membership of the European Super League, insisting they will not apologize and will take UEFA to court if fines are imposed on the three remaining clubs. Messi's contract expires this summer, allowing the Argentinian to leave for free. Laporta admitted Barca's offer will be curbed by the club's financial problems but insisted talks are "going well".

"We can make an offer within our means," said Laporta in his first press conference since being voted in as president in March. "He deserves more and could get a better contract somewhere else but I'm convinced he appreciates the efforts we are making. I think he is keen to stay. For Leo, it's not about money, it's about winning. And that's what we are working on."

Asked how optimistic he is that Messi will stay, Laporta answered: "Moderately optimistic." He added: "The new contract is going well but it's not done yet." Laporta has also been talking to Koeman this week, with the Dutchman's future in doubt after a disappointing end to the season. Koeman has a year left on his contract after only being appointed last year.

"We've always worked with great respect for Koeman," said Laporta. "He still has a contract in place. We don't believe in transitional projects or seasons. We spoke to Koeman and we will continue to talk to him next week before making a decision."

Laporta said Koeman had recently gone to hospital



BARCELONA: FC Barcelona president Joan Laporta holds a press conference at the Auditorium 1899 of the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona, on Friday. — AFP

for a heart problem and that it was important not to rush decisions. "We are trying to come to an agreement over what we want for next season," Laporta added. Pep Guardiola and Xavi Hernandez have both been mentioned as possible successors if Koeman leaves. Asked if it was his dream to bring back Guardiola, Laporta said: "I am not here to talk about dreams, I am here to talk about reality."

'We won't apologize'

He was also asked about Barcelona's continued involvement in the European Super League, despite nine of the 12 founding clubs quitting the project. Real Madrid and Juventus also remain attached. The nine clubs that left accepted fines and agreed to commit to UEFA's current competitions but European football's governing body has opened separate disciplinary proceedings against Barca, Madrid and Juventus.

"We are not going to apologise nor do we have any intention of paying a fine," said Laporta. "It has no justification. If they fine us we will go to CAS (Court of Arbitration for Sport) and I'm sure we will win. European law means we are legally allowed to create new competitions." — AFP

been suspended through the end of the 2022 MLS season, the league said in a statement. MLS had already determined the French World Cup winner had been paid more than allowed under the league's roster and budget rules, effectively giving Miami four "designated players" last season rather than the allowed three.

"The integrity of our rules is sacrosanct, and it is a fundamental principle of our league that our clubs are responsible for adhering to all league regulations," MLS commissioner Don Garber said. "Our rules will not be compromised."

MLS also imposed a reduction of \$2,271,250 in allocation dollars available for salaries for the 2022 and 2023 seasons. That could prove a more significant blow to the club's on-field efforts than the \$2

Neymar says Nike claim of split over sex assault probe a 'lie'

RIO DE JANEIRO: Neymar said Friday Nike's claim that it parted ways with him last year because he refused to cooperate with its internal investigation into an employee's accusation he sexually assaulted her was an "absurd lie."

The allegation is the latest to stain the image of the Brazilian superstar, whose 222-million-euro (\$270 million) transfer from Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain in 2017 makes him the world's most expensive footballer. Nike said Thursday it had ended its sponsorship deal with Neymar over an employee's claim he tried to force himself on her and his failure to cooperate with its investigation.

"(To) state that my contract (with Nike) was terminated because I did not contribute in good faith to an investigation is an absurd lie," Neymar wrote on Instagram. "I was not given the opportunity to defend myself. I was not given the opportunity to know who this person was that was allegedly offended. I don't even know her. I've never had any kind of relationship or approach with this person."

Nike said the alleged assault happened in 2016, but was only reported to the company in 2018. The US sportswear giant had sponsored Neymar, 29, since he was a 13-year-old prodigy. It did not give a reason when it terminated its deal with him in August 2020. The superstar is now a poster boy for Puma. His deal with the German sportswear giant was announced in September 2020.

'They did nothing'

The Nike employee accused Neymar of trying to force her to perform oral sex on him in a New York hotel room during a promotional trip for a new line of sneakers, according to the Wall Street Journal, which

first broke the story. Neymar denied the accusation, and said Nike had nevertheless continued sending him on promotional tours.

"In 2017 I traveled again to the USA for another advertising campaign, with the same people, and nothing was told to me, nothing changed!" he wrote. "In 2017, 2018, 2019 we made trips, advertising campaigns, countless shooting sessions. And they told me nothing. Such a serious matter and they did nothing."

In a previous statement, a Neymar spokeswoman said he and Nike had split for commercial reasons. The player's father accused the company of "blackmail." "It's all very strange" that the accusation only came to light years later, after Neymar left Nike, he told Brazilian newspaper Folha de Sao Paulo. — AFP



RIO DE JANEIRO: Handout picture released by the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) of Brazil's football team player Neymar during a training session at the Granja Comary training center, city of Teresopolis, Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil, on Thursday, ahead of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualifier matches against Ecuador and Paraguay. — AFP

MLS fine Inter Miami \$2 m over salary rules violation

LOS ANGELES: Major League Soccer handed David Beckham's Inter Miami a league-record \$2 million fine on Friday for violating roster and salary rules in its signing of French international Blaise Matuidi. Managing owner Jorge Mas was also fined \$250,000 and the club's former chief operating officer and sporting director Paul McDonough has

million fine, which dwarfs the previous biggest fine ever handed out by the league of \$150,000, to Real Salt Lake owner Dell Loy Hansen for comments about the collective bargaining agreement negotiations in 2015.

"These sanctions reflect the severity of Inter Miami's violations, should encourage complete cooperation by all parties in future investigations, and will serve as a deterrent for clubs from violating roster rules," Garber said.

MLS revealed in March it would be investigating Inter Miami's signing of Matuidi and in April the league said it had determined his deal violated roster and salary rules. Each team in MLS is allowed three designated players whose wages do not count against the salary cap. The rule is sometimes called

the "Beckham Rule" as it was introduced when it was adopted shortly before the former England and Manchester United star joined the league in 2007.

MLS said Friday that its investigation found violations involving the player categorizations of Matuidi and former Miami defender Andres Reyes, as well as the underreporting of salary budget amounts for players Leandro Gonzalez Pirez, Nicolas Figal and Julian Carranza.

However, the league stressed that none of the club's players was the subject of the investigation, committed any violation or were aware of the violations. "Their current contracts with MLS remain in full force and effect," the statement said. Mas issued a statement acknowledging that the club violated MLS roster rules in their inaugural season. — AFP

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Japan extends virus emergency until month before Olympics

TOKYO: Japan's government on Friday extended a coronavirus emergency in Tokyo and other parts of the country until just a month before the Olympics, fuelling doubts about whether the Games can go ahead safely. Organizers said they would now wait to make a decision on whether to allow local fans at the Games until the emergency ends on June 20, just weeks before the opening ceremony. Overseas fans have already been barred, in an unprecedented decision as organizers battle to convince Japan's skeptical public that the Games can go ahead and will be safe.

Japan has seen a comparatively small virus outbreak, with around 12,500 deaths, and has avoided tough lockdowns. But a fourth wave has prompted the government to put emergency measures in place in 10 regions including the capital. The measures mostly limit the sale of alcohol in bars and restaurants and ask them to close early, while encouraging telework and capping audience numbers at events. "The number of new cases has been declining since the middle of the month but the situation continues to be uncertain," said Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, announcing the extension. Experts fear lifting the restrictions too soon could create a surge in the run-up to the Games.

The decision means Tokyo and nine other parts of the country will be under states of emergency until June 20, casting fresh doubt on the prospects for the pandemic-postponed Olympics. Tokyo 2020 chief Seiko Hashimoto told reporters that with the measures being taken "we expect the infection situation to improve". But she acknowledged that a decision on local fans, originally expected in early June, would now not be taken until the end of the month.

"Once the state of emergency is lifted, we will assess how many spectators we can allow in," she said, adding that there could be different

rules for indoor and outdoor venues and the decision would be based on government guidelines. Even under the current state of emergency, sports venues in Japan are allowed to seat 5,000 spectators or 50 percent capacity, whichever is smallest.

'Disaster' warning

Organizers are pressing ahead with arrangements for the Games, and the first athletes — Australia's softball team — will arrive next week. Opposition in Japan remains strong, with medical experts and business leaders calling for cancellation.

On Thursday, Naoto Ueyama, chair of a small doctors union, warned the Games could produce a "Tokyo Olympic strain" of coronavirus and urged a cancellation to prevent a "disaster". Haruo Ozaki, head of the larger Tokyo Medical Association with more than 20,000 members, said organizers would have to bar all spectators at a "minimum".

Suga, speaking at a press conference, said he was "aware that many are voicing their worries and concerns over the Olympics". He said the number of overseas participants would be kept to a minimum and athletes would have no interaction with the Japanese public. "We're listening to those voices and preparing for a safe and secure Olympics," he told reporters.

Officials have been trying to drive home the message that the Games are on and will be safe, announcing recently that the vast majority of those in the Olympic village will be vaccinated. And despite the negative polling and warnings against the Games, protests against the event tend to attract just a few dozen people.

Japanese athletes and Olympic staff will start receiving vaccines from June 1. They will be jumping the queue in Japan's slow vaccine roll-



TOKYO: Buildings are seen at dusk as a shinkansen, or high-speed bullet train, passes by in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

out, with jabs currently only available to medical workers and the elderly. Just over six percent of the population has so far received a first dose, with less than 2.5 percent fully vaccinated.

Suga said Friday that the country was on track to be administering a million doses a day from mid-June, up from around 400,000 a day at the

moment on average. The slow pace has piled pressure on Suga, who was appointed after Shinzo Abe's resignation last year and faces his first election as prime minister in the autumn. His government has faced criticism for its pandemic response, and polls show strong dissatisfaction with the vaccine rollout in particular. — AFP



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