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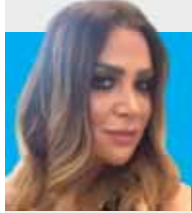
BEIRUT: Fighters from Shiite Hezbollah and Amal movements take aim during clashes in the area of Tayouneh, in the southern suburb of the capital Beirut yesterday. — AFP

Gunfight leaves 6 dead during Beirut protests

See Page 10

Local

My father is sick; will I reach home in time?



JUST KIDDIN', SERIOUSLY

By Sahar Moussa

Who doesn't have elderly parents that they think about all the time, constantly worrying about their health or how they are doing and what they need?

I am an expat living in Kuwait and due to a various of reasons hadn't been able to travel home to see my family for five years - until last week. I could not go to my home country, first because I was pregnant; then due to having a small baby and then due to the spread of COVID-19 that led to a total lockdown and closure of airports worldwide; then the difficult travel procedures and quarantine.

After such a long time not seeing my parents and family, I did not go on vacation, but on emergency leave because my father was critically ill and my presence was needed. I left my two-year-old son with my husband, took emergency leave and went to see my dad. I thanked God that the airports were open and I was able to travel back and forth easily. Maybe it was luck or fate, but I felt bad and could not stop thinking about all the people who weren't as lucky last year when their families got sick during the airport closure and could not see or bid farewell to their loved ones.

It is very hard when your loved ones are sick or in a critical condition and you are not able to do anything about it. By God's will, I was able to book the first flight and be with him, as I reached home in time. But what about domestic helpers or employees whose sponsors confiscate their passports and do not have the freedom to leave anytime they want? Even if their sponsors agree, will they reach home in time, since most of them come from faraway countries?

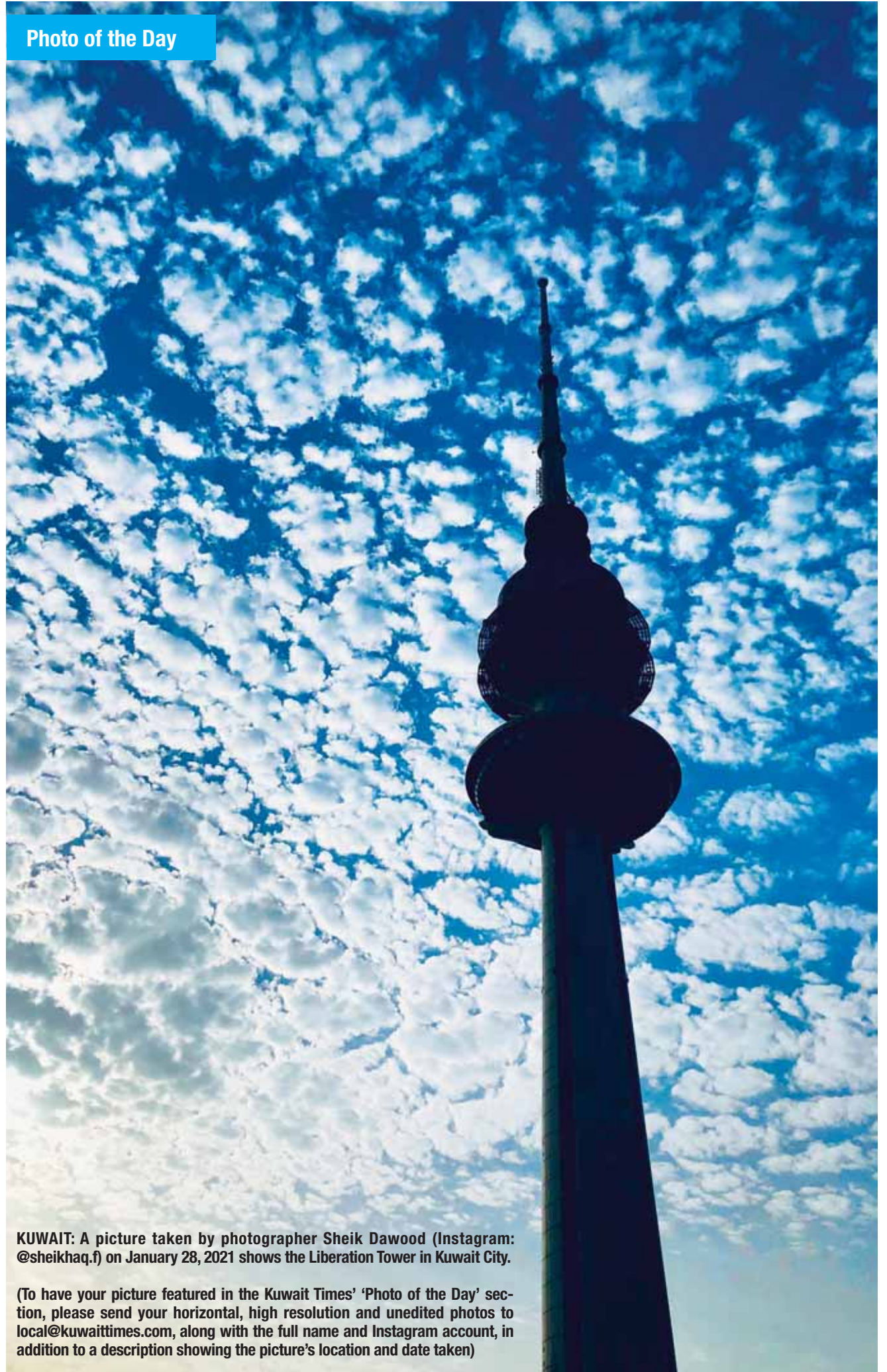
My father spent his childhood in Kuwait and went to school here, but later went back to Lebanon. He is in his late seventies and needs a lot of care, but due to the current situation, it was not easy to travel to see him frequently. This made me empathize with the elderly - how they must have felt regarding the decision issued lately banning expats aged 60 and above without university degrees from renewing their work permits and residencies.

The decision, affecting tens of thousands of expats who spent most of their lives in Kuwait, was harshly criticized by many MPs and local human rights bodies as "inhumane". They repeatedly called on the government to cancel it—and by the grace of God, the government's legal body, the fatwa and legislation department, announced the decision was illegal and scrapped it. But not before thousands of 60+ workers had left Kuwait for good. Now they will likely be separated from their families here with limited chance to return.

Nowadays, we are so busy trying to survive in this chaotic world - we go to work to provide basic necessities, put food on the table and pay our children's school fees - that sometimes we forget to check on our elders and parents who raised us, without realizing that any minute we could lose them. That's why we should stay in contact with them as much as possible. We should not postpone a phone call or visit, because the truth is, life is very tricky - it can steal your loved ones in the blink of an eye.

It is people's nature that during happiness and celebrations, they gather to rejoice, but what I have experienced lately is that also during pain, sickness and sorrow, people gather to console each other and share their experiences. This in my opinion is what makes us human, and if we lose this trait, we lose our humanity. During illness and death, humans are very weak, helpless and hopeless, and we are left with nothing but prayers. We must keep hoping and believing that God knows what is best for us.

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A picture taken by photographer Sheik Dawood (Instagram: @sheikhaq.f) on January 28, 2021 shows the Liberation Tower in Kuwait City.

(To have your picture featured in the Kuwait Times' 'Photo of the Day' section, please send your horizontal, high resolution and unedited photos to local@kuwaittimes.com, along with the full name and Instagram account, in addition to a description showing the picture's location and date taken)

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Getting ready for *camping season*

Closed in 2020, desert camping will be allowed this year

By Nawara Fattahova

The camping season starts in a month's time, but registrations for setting up camp have not opened yet. In August, the Municipality announced that this year, the camping season will start from Nov 15. After the season was canceled last year due to the coronavirus pandemic, the announcement led people to start buying camping equipment.

So far, no circular has been issued on the conditions for the new camping season or when registrations will commence. In previous years, campers were required to pay a deposit for a designated spot in the desert and to clean up the camping area, including all trash, equipment and other material when quitting the camping ground.

Municipality inspectors visit camping sites throughout the season, confirming registration permits and ensuring that camps adhere to regulations for safety and waste removal. A few years ago, after noticing the great damage to the desert environment and the negative effects on wildlife caused by camping due to the waste left over by campers, the government decided to organize the season by designating certain areas for camping.



FEATURE

PHOTO





Tent makers and sellers ready for the upcoming camping season at the tent souq in Alrai near the Friday market. Desert camping is an elaborate affair in Kuwait with families often camping in groups, setting up several tents on a compound including tents for cooking and bathing/showering as well as playgrounds, relaxation and other necessities.

— Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh and Yasser Al-Zayyat





Grab a snack and get the latest in gamer news, updates

By Nawara Fattahova

A group of young Kuwaiti gamers came together on social media and formed 'Gamer Snack' to provide gamers with information and news about new videogames, latest technologies, movies, youth activities and gaming conventions. Gaming has become a medium of entertainment the same way as movies, soap operas and other pastimes. Those interested in videogames can stay updated about everything related to gaming through the various channels of Gamer Snack.



Mohammed Al-Mutairi

"We started as amateurs with a blog in 2013 founded by my brother Khaled Al-Mutairi. Later we thought of presenting the experience that we gained during these years to the public. When we started, only English blogs were available in this field," Gamer Snack co-founder Mohammed Al-Mutairi, a computer engineer and graphics designer, told Kuwait Times.

Soon enough, Gamer Snack started getting popular. "Our team became influencers in GCC countries and the Arab world. Local

and even international companies working in the technology sector started contacting us to give us updates on their new products exclusively to review them before they reach the consumers. They also invite us to their events, which we cover for the benefit of the public," he said.

Gamer Snack gained public trust and a high number of followers on various social media networks. "We started on YouTube, on which we today have over 1.6 million followers. We then spread to other social media including Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and Facebook. We received a subscriber award from YouTube when we reached 100,000 subscribers, and another when we hit one million followers," Mutairi said.

Gamer Snack has other accounts on social media on movies and technology. "We present interesting and informative content for the youth. Unfortunately, in Kuwait, exposure is not very wide, and not many people here know about us, although we are popular internationally. The media in some countries in the GCC and the West have interviewed and carried reports about us, but in Kuwait they don't pay attention to us," he rued.

"We have organized many videogaming events and competitions. Our team has attended many local and international events and fairs, to which we were invited by the most famous tech and videogame companies. We have done professional coverage of these events that we presented

to our followers, who lived the experience as if they attended it," Mutairi said.

In Kuwait, almost every home has gamers. "We are specialized in all kinds of videogames including PlayStation, Nintendo and Xbox. After this space got larger and social media became popular, companies in this field became more diverse in their advertising. We are more professional than other social media influencers, and this is the reason we receive invitations from international companies to cover their events



and products. We do the coverage from an Arab perspective to reach our followers in Arabic. Videogames on mobiles are covered on Mobile Snack. This account specializes in mobiles, tablets and laptops and the games on these gadgets," explained Mutairi.

"The team started with two people - me and my brother. Today there are 10 people working on a daily basis. We have more people working during events. Our team is available for the public anytime. We will answer any question by people related to our content. The content on Gamer Snack is in Arabic presently, but we have a new English Instagram account and are currently working on translating all the videos on our Arabic accounts," he told Kuwait Times.

"We heard news that soon there will be an official team of gamers formed by the public authorities of youth and sports. This national team will include professionals of various games, similar to those in other countries," Mutairi revealed. According to him, the cost of producing videogames today can reach the cost of producing movies. "Popular actors are starring in some videogames today. Even the shooting is done with cinema technology and design. Videogame accessories are bestsellers too," he concluded.

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Local

Kuwait Prime Minister meets UNRWA's Commissioner-General for Near East



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah meets the Commissioner-General of the UNRWA in the Near East Philippe Lazzarini. — KUNA photos



Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets the Commissioner-General of the UNRWA in the Near East Philippe Lazzarini.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah met yesterday with the Commissioner-General of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Philippe Lazzarini during his official visit to the country. The Head of His Highness the Prime Minister's Diwan Abdulaziz Al-Dakheel, and the Assistant Foreign Minister for International Organization Affairs Abdulaziz Al-Jarallah attended the meeting.

During his meeting with Lazzarini, Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad expressed Kuwait's appreciation for UNRWA's efforts by providing educational, health, relief and protection services to more than 5.7 million Palestinian refugees. Meanwhile, Lazzarini valued Kuwait's firm position in supporting the agency, expressing his deep appreciation and gratitude for the distinguished humanitarian and pioneering role played by Kuwait to stand by the Palestinian refugees and everyone in need.

Kuwait's National Assembly Speaker Marzouq

Al-Ghanem also met with the UNRWA Commissioner-General in the Near East and his accompanying delegation. During the encounter, they addressed a host of key issues and subjects pertinent to the humanitarian conditions of Palestinian refugees and how to ease out their woes and facilitate UNRWA activities.

Meanwhile, the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) and UNRWA signed a couple of grant agreements in Kuwait yesterday. The grant deals were signed by UNRWA Commissioner-General Lazzarini and KFAED Director-General Marwan Al-Ghanem. Under the agreements, KFAED will provide a grant worth \$1.5 million for UNRWA's health program in Lebanon, targeting continuing health care services for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Ghanem said.

It is also meant to offer health care services and cover hospital treatment expenses for about 2,936 patients in need of medical care, including treatment for cancer, cardiovascular diseases, intensive care, burns and other specialized services, he said. The other grant valued at \$20 million aims to support the agency's program budget for 2021



National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem meets the Commissioner-General of the UNRWA in the Near East Philippe Lazzarini.

and 2022, he said, adding that this extraordinary financial support will help the Agency continue to provide vital humanitarian services to Palestine refugees in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, he added.

The fresh grants are part of Kuwait's pledge during the Third Ministerial Strategic Dialogue on UNRWA, which was held on October 15, 2020 to support its objectives of protecting Palestinian Refugees and ensuring access to aid. Meanwhile,

the UN refugee official voiced thanks and appreciation to the State of Kuwait for this generous donation, saying that this aid extended by an Arab country gives a message that the refugees would not be left alone. He underlined the significance of this support from the Kuwaiti government, through its development arm (KFAED), noting that this timely aid would contribute to providing continued services to Palestinian refugees this and next year. — KUNA

Prime Minister receives Venezuelan Foreign Minister



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah meets Venezuelan Foreign Minister Felix Plasencia.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and the Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah received yesterday the Venezuelan Foreign Minister Felix Plasencia and his accompanying delegation. The meeting was attended by the Head of His Highness

the Prime Minister's Diwan Abdulaziz Al-Dakheel and the Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Americas Salah Suleiman Al-Haddad.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah held official talks with the visiting Venezuelan For-



Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and Venezuelan Foreign Minister Felix Plasencia are seen after signing an agreement between the two countries yesterday.

ign Minister. During the talks, they discussed bilateral relation between the two countries and their people, and ways to enhance these relations in all fields at all levels, especially trade, economy, and investment. After the discussion, both sides signed a cooperation agreement to boost the cultural and artistic fields in Kuwait and Venezuela. —KUNA

Local

Cabinet orders quick execution of coastline development projects

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Cabinet has instructed its Public Services Committee to urgently remove all obstacles impeding the execution of Sulaibikhat and Jahra coastline development projects. The decision was taken Wednesday at a meeting chaired by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. At the advent of meeting, head of Kuwait Municipality Ahmad Al-Manfouhi briefed the Cabinet about masterplans of the 38-kilometer-long Sulaibikhat coastline project and the 7.3-kilometer-long Jahra Corniche project, said Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Dr Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah in a statement following the Cabinet's meeting. According to Manfouhi's presentation, Sulaibikhat project comprises a sports area and creativity center. The Jahra project incorporates shopping centers, entertainment and sports facilities, an environment village and a garden, he noted. The Cabinet also reviewed the procedures taken by the national fund for small and medium sized enterprises, in coordination with relevant state agencies, to allocate a plot of land in Al-Subiya city for trucks of the small and medium size businesses. — KUNA



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs the Cabinet's meeting.



Ahmad Al-Mousa

Manpower Authority director suspended till investigation's end

KUWAIT: Minister of Commerce and Industry Dr Abdullah Al-Salman gave orders to suspend Director General of the Public Authority for Manpower Ahmad Al-Mousa for three months, or until the end of investigations concerning his decision to stop issuing or renewing visas for residents over the age of 60 who do not have university degrees, Al-Rai Arabic daily reported yesterday. The government's Fatwa and Legislation Department annulled the decision on the basis that Mousa was not authorized to issue such an order.

In other news, Deputy Director General of PAM Abdullah Al-Mutoutah said around 59,000 resident workers voluntarily left Kuwait during the coronavirus pandemic. In statements published by Al-Rai yesterday, Mutoutah said it is important to differentiate between the departee and those who could not enter Kuwait. He said those who left Kuwait voluntarily were 59,000, not including the numbers in shelters who were in violation and were deported by the interior ministry. He said since the start of the pandemic, 95 percent of PAM services became automated. According to statistics from January 1, 2021 and September 30, 2021, 666,000 renewal, 146,000 residency and 28,000 permanent cancellation of work permit transactions were processed online.

NBK visits schools as part of 'Safe Education' campaign

KUWAIT: As part of 'Safe Education' awareness campaign, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) visited Al-Wasem Kindergarten to ensure a safe return of students to their schools and a safe educational environment of the highest levels of prevention. The campaign came as a result of collaboration of the ministries of Education, Health, Interior and Information. It aims to raise awareness and encourage students and their families to support the governmental efforts for a safe return to the academic year 2021-2022.

Commenting on the school visit, Yaqoub Al-Baqer, NBK Public Relations Manager, expressed his sincere appreciation to the national efforts in this campaign and ensured that NBK will continue to fulfill its social responsibility and support to the government efforts in this initiative. "It's a shared responsibility to make sure that resuming pre-pandemic normal is endurable. It requires a strong commitment of students, parents and the entire society to apply the precautionary and health requirements and procedures, from the moment we leave our house until we return," Baqer noted.

"Today's visit was important to meet the children and make sure that their safety is a top priority. This campaign aims to provide a safe educational environment of the highest levels of prevention after an ab-



sence of almost a-year-and-a-half due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic," he added.

'Safe Education' campaign targets a safe start for the school year, making the school a place to learn and communicate with colleagues safely. It encourages students and teachers to abide by the health protocols put in place. The campaign comes from the keenness of the concerned authorities and sponsors about the health and safety of the students and an embodiment of cooperation, solidarity and coordination between the state ministries to provide a safe educational environment of the highest levels of prevention. NBK maintains its leading position among the private sector institutions through its commitment to fully support social programs in the areas of healthcare, childcare, social, environmental, sports and education.

Kuwait made huge progress in women empowerment: Official

NEW YORK: The State of Kuwait stressed that it has made great progress in women empowerment during the years 2020/2021, as for the first time in Kuwait's history, eight female judges were appointed in 2020. This came during the speech of the State of Kuwait delivered by First Secretary Fahad Mohammad Hajji in the virtual dialogue of the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly with the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers Diego Garcia Sian. Hajji pointed out that this number has doubled to this day, and women have recently been appointed to leadership positions. He also added that this step comes within the framework of the Kuwaiti women's empowerment agenda, based on Kuwait's full belief in the importance of supporting Kuwaiti women, enhancing their rights and increasing their participation in all fields. — KUNA



Fire in Jleeb school

KUWAIT: Firemen battled a blaze at the Khadeeja bint Al-Zubair girls high school in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh yesterday. No injuries were reported and investigations are underway to determine the cause of the fire, Kuwait Fire Force said.



Norway bow-and-arrow attack an 'act of terror'

Death threats, law suits: COVID experts targeted

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BEIRUT: A Shiite fighter reloads during clashes in the area of Tayouneh, in the southern suburb of the capital Beirut yesterday. — AFP

Lebanese protest turns violent

Exchanges of fire turn Beirut into a war zone; 6 killed

BEIRUT: Tank deployments and deadly exchanges of fire turned Beirut into a war zone yesterday after a demonstration organized by Shiite parties against the lead investigator into last year's devastating port blast turned violent. Heavy fire rang out as ambulances rushed the wounded through the deserted streets, a few blocks from the Palace of Justice, where hundreds of black-clad protesters had gathered moments earlier to demand Tarek Bitar's removal.

The judge has in recent days been in the sights of the Hezbollah and Amal parties in particular for insisting on subpoenaing top officials in his probe into last year's deadly explosion in Beirut port. According to Interior Minister Bas-sam Mawlawi, at least six people were killed, all of them by gunfire. They included a 24-year-old who was hit in the head by a stray bullet while inside her home, a doctor at the Sahel hospital in Beirut's southern suburbs told AFP.

The Lebanese Red Cross put the number of wounded at 30. AFP correspondents heard several loud bangs in the area, likely from heavy shelling, and saw plumes of black smoke rising from an apparent fire. A limp body lying

on a main street was carried away by rescuers as gunfire rained around them, the correspondents said.

Residents cowered in corridors away from windows, as some were shattered by the gunfire. Some scurried outside, running towards ambulances as civil defense volunteers tried to evacuate civilians, including young children. Pictures circulating on social media showed children in a nearby school ducking under desks and gathering on the floor outside classrooms. "I'm with my cousin and my aunt, and we're hiding in a two-square-metre space between rooms because we are afraid of stray bullets," said Bissan al-Fakih, who lives a few hundred metres (yards) away from the clashes.

"We're wondering if we could leave, but we're not sure if there is a way out". Another resident said he took shelter in a corridor for two hours before he managed to find a taxi to get him out. "I can't handle these loud sounds, especially the RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades), it's the trauma of the Beirut blast coming back all over again," said the resident, who gave his name only as Samer.

'Bursts of gunfire'

The army reported "bursts of gunfire in the area of Tayouneh - Badaro," a largely residential area of the capital. "The army rushed to cordon off the area and deploy in its neighborhoods and their entrance. Patrols started as did the search for the shooters to detain them," it said. In a follow-up statement, the army warned it would open fire at anyone firing live rounds, calling on civilians to evacuate the area.

Prime Minister Najib Mikati called for calm to be restored and warned against attempts to drag Lebanon into violence. In a statement, Hezbollah and Amal accused "armed and organised groups" of assaulting their supporters. "They were exposed to direct fire from snipers... followed by intense shooting," they said in a joint statement.

They said the violence was deliberate and aimed to drag the country into violence, while calling on their supporters to remain calm and de-escalate. Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV blamed the Lebanese Forces—a Christian party that is staunchly opposed to the Iran-backed group. AFP could not independently verify the claims.

Last hope

Seen as a last hope for justice by many Lebanese but condemned as biased and corrupt by political leaders, Bitar has sparked deep divisions within the government between those who want to keep him in his place and those who are pushing for him to go. The Court of Cassation yesterday turned down a lawsuit filed by two ex-ministers demanding his replacement, a court official told AFP on the condition of anonymity. "Bitar does not fall under the court's jurisdiction so it does not have the authority to consider requests for his dismissal," the official said.

It is the second time this month that the judiciary has ruled in favor of the judge, who is hailed by human rights groups and relatives of blast victims as a symbol of judicial independence in a country where political impunity has long been the norm. The ruling, which goes into effect immediately, would allow Bitar to resume enquiries into the August 4, 2020 explosion which killed more than 200 people and destroyed large swathes of the capital. But the investigator's fate is all but clear as Hezbollah and Amal press ahead with a campaign aimed at removing him. —AFP

International

Echoing Zionists, US hints at force if Iran diplomacy fails

US Secretary of State voices growing frustration

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden's administration hinted Wednesday it could resort to force if diplomacy fails on Iran's nuclear program, rallying more closely than ever behind warnings by Zionists. Amid a standstill in negotiations with Iran, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken voiced growing frustration as he held three-way talks with the top diplomats of Zionist entity and the United Arab Emirates, US allies that established relations last year amid shared alarm about Tehran.

Blinken renewed Biden's offer to re-enter a 2015 nuclear agreement, trashed by former president Donald Trump, in which Iran drastically scaled back nuclear activity in return for unfulfilled promises of sanctions relief. "We continue to believe that diplomacy is the most effective way," Blinken told a joint news conference. "But it takes two to engage in diplomacy and we have not seen from Iran a willingness to do that at this point," he said.

"We are prepared to turn to other options if Iran doesn't change course," he warned. He did not elaborate, but Zionist Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, without being contradicted, said of Blinken's comments: "I think everybody understands - here in Zionist entity and in the Emirates and in Tehran - what it is that we mean."

Lapid was more explicit, saying that both he and Blinken, as sons of Holocaust survivors, "know there are moments when nations must use force to protect the world from evil." "If a

terror regime is going to acquire a nuclear weapon, we must act. We must make clear the civilized world won't allow it," Lapid said. "Zionist entity reserves the right to act at any given moment in any way. That is not only our right; it is also our responsibility."

Plan B?

Enrique Mora, the EU envoy in charge of reviving the troubled deal, plans to visit Tehran on Thursday. He tweeted that he will "raise the urgency" of resuming talks. The Biden administration held six rounds of indirect negotiations with Iran, with Mora shuttling between the two sides in Vienna hotels, but talks broke off in June as ultraconservative Ebrahim Raisi took over as Iran's president. "We feel like coming back would still be the best outcome, but we're realistic," the US negotiator on Iran, Rob Malley, said at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "We know that there's at least a good possibility that Iran is going to choose a different path, and we need to coordinate with Zionists and with our other partners in the region," he said.

After taking part in the talks with Zionists and the UAE, Malley said he would head in the coming days to the UAE, as well as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. France, one of three Western powers that remain in the nuclear accord, on Wednesday joined the growing criticism of Iran. "Through its statements and actions, the new

administration of President Raisi is sowing doubts on its intention to return" to the deal, a French foreign ministry spokesperson said.

Iran has said repeatedly that it is ready to resume talks "soon," but no date has been announced. Iran denies it is seeking a nuclear

weapon, which the clerical state argues is religiously forbidden. But Tehran believes it needs to defend itself in a hostile neighborhood, with memories still vivid of the brutal 1980-88 war launched by Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein with backing from the West. — AFP



WASHINGTON: Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) and United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan (right) participate in a bilateral meeting at the State Department in Washington. — AFP

Tarek Bitar, Lebanon's judge with a grudge

BEIRUT: Tarek Bitar, the young and discreet judge investigating last year's devastating Beirut port explosion, is arguably the most exposed man in the country.

By daring to take on some of Lebanon's untouchable political barons, he has landed himself at the centre of a battle of wills that is bringing the country to the brink once again. To some of those seeking truth and justice after the deadly port blast, the 47-year-old is a white knight fighting a desperate and lonely battle against a corrupt and criminal elite.

For part of the establishment and its supporters, Bitar is politically biased and the biggest threat to the status quo since a wave of protests against the ruling class in 2019. For the relatives of the 215 people who were killed when a huge consignment of haphazardly stored fertilizer exploded on August 4 last year, Bitar is the only hope. "He is conscientious and bold at the same time. These are essential qualities for a judge," says Yousef Lahoud, one of the lawyers representing the victims' families.

His determination will be tested more than ever after a demonstration for his removal by supporters of the Shiite Muslim Amal and Hezbollah movements degenerated into deadly violence and scenes reminiscent of the 1975-1990 civil war. The man handling the biggest case since former prime minister Rafik Hariri's 2005 assassination is a little known figure who never talks to the press or even appears in public. The virulent hate campaign launched against him in recent days only has a couple of pictures of him

'Incorruptible'

Bitar has rocked the boat by summoning top politicians from a range of political parties for questioning, and even going as far as issuing an arrest warrant when one failed to show up. Former finance minister and senior lawmaker from the Shiite Amal party, Ali Hassan Khalil, lashed out after the arrest warrant against him, threatening a "political escalation" if the course of the investigation "was not rectified".

The group's ally, powerful Shiite movement Hezbollah, is also a prominent critic calling for his dismissal. The movement, blacklisted by the United States but present in Lebanese parliament, has accused Bitar of political bias and Washington of "interference" in the investigation.

The Shiite duo's supporters, at an anti-Bitar protest that escalated into deadly clashes yesterday, burnt images of US ambassador Dorothy Shea, alongside Bitar's. But the judge's supporters say he is independent and has managed to position himself outside a political system of patronage under which parties bank on sectarian allegiance to get their way. "He has no known political affiliation," said a person close to him who agreed to speak on the condition of anonymity.

"That's why politicians have a problem with Bitar—they have no means to pressure him." The politicians he is pursuing accuse him of being outspoken about the fact that the time has come to change the political class. Throughout his career, the Catholic judge from the north of Lebanon has managed to forge himself a reputation as an "upright and incorruptible" member of the judiciary, even to his detractors. — AFP

Iran warns Zionists against 'military adventures'

TEHRAN: Iran warned Zionists in a letter to the UN Security Council chief yesterday against any attack on its nuclear facilities after its arch-foe declared its right to use force. "We warn the Zionist regime against any miscalculation or military adventure targeting Iran and its nuclear program," Iran's ambassador to the UN Majid Takht Ravanchi wrote in the letter published by the Tasnim news agency. He accused Zionists of taking its "provocative and adventurous threats... to alarming levels" and said that the "systematic and explicit threats by the Zionist regime... prove that it is responsible for terrorist attacks against [Iran's] peaceful nuclear program in the past".

Speaking alongside US Secretary of State Antony Blinken Wednesday, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said that Zionist entity "reserves the right" to use force to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. He added that, as sons of Holocaust survivors, both he and Blinken "know there are moments when nations must use force to protect the world from evil". Blinken said: "We continue to believe that diplomacy is the most effective way," but added: "We are prepared to turn to other options if Iran doesn't change course." — AFP

International

Indonesia tackles call to prayer volume backlash

Piety or noise nuisance?

JAKARTA: Every night at 3:00 am, Rina is jolted awake by blaring speakers so loud she has developed an anxiety disorder: she can't sleep, she's too nauseous to eat – but she is also too scared to complain because doing so could see her jailed or attacked. The noisy neighbor is the local mosque in her Jakarta suburb, and the clamorous sound is the call to prayer.

Both are so sacred in Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim majority nation, that criticizing them can lead to accusations of blasphemy, a crime punishable by as much as five years imprisonment. "None dares to complain about it here," says Rina, a 31-year-old Muslim woman who is using a pseudonym in case of reprisals.

"The loudspeakers are not only used for call to prayer but they also use it to wake people up 30-40 minutes before the morning prayer time," she tells AFP, adding that she is at breaking point after enduring the noise for six months. Online complaints about noisy loudspeakers are increasing, but the lack of anonymity and fear of a backlash means there are no reliable official statistics. Aware of the growing discord, the Indonesian Mosque Council (IMC) is deploying teams to tackle mosque sound systems around the nation – but it's a delicate subject.

The Southeast Asian archipelago was once hailed for its religious tolerance with people of many faiths living alongside each other, but there are concerns its moderate brand of Islam is coming under threat from hardliners. In 2018, a Buddhist woman was jailed after saying the call to prayer "hurt my ears", and earlier this year ac-

tress and influencer Zaskia Mecca, who has 19 million followers on Instagram, was condemned online after the hijab-wearing Muslim criticized mosque speaker volume during the holy month of Ramadan.

Symbol of greatness

Around the Islamic world, the broadcast of the call to prayer and sermons via external loudspeakers are regarded as a key pillar of Muslim identity, but the issue is deeply divisive. In June, authorities in Saudi Arabia ordered mosques to limit the volume of their external loudspeakers to one-third of their maximum capacity, citing concerns over noise pollution. There was an immediate backlash.

There are around 750,000 mosques across Indonesia – a medium sized venue could have at least a dozen external loudspeakers that blare the call to prayer five times a day. For Rina the nightly interruptions are impacting her health. "I started having insomnia, and I was diagnosed with anxiety disorders after always being woken up. Now I am trying to make myself as tired as possible, so I can sleep through the noise," she explains.

Indonesian Mosque Council chairman Jusuf Kalla estimates around half the nation's mosques have poor acoustics, which exacerbates the noise problem. "There is a tendency to set the volume high so that the call to prayer can be heard by as many worshippers as possible from far away because they consider it a symbol of greatness in Islam," explained the IMC's acoustics program coordinator Aziz Muslim.

Ketsana, known in the Philippines as Tropical Storm Ondoy, that hit in 2009 and claimed hundreds of lives.

"This only proves the effect of climate change when it comes to the increasing magnitude of these natural hazards," Timbal said. "This continues to pose a challenge to our disaster management system — we always have to step up our preparations in view of the worst-case scenario for every natural hazard." Because a warmer atmosphere holds more water, climate change increases the risk and intensity of flooding from extreme rainfall.

Nineteen deaths have been confirmed so far, the majority in the northwestern province of Ilocos Sur where most of the victims were caught in flash floods. The disaster agency is also checking another 11 reported fatalities, mostly in the landlocked mountainous province of Benguet. A total of 14 people have been reported missing. Timbal said the "changing nature" of the hazards had made it difficult to achieve their target of zero casualties. "Each hazard is unique to the next one," he said. "It's a new normal caused by climate change." Timbal added that nearly 15,000 people fled their homes, but only about half stayed in evacuation centers. The rest sought shelter with friends or relatives due to fears of catching the coronavirus. — AFP



JAKARTA: Photo shows a mosque tower where speakers are placed in Jakarta. There are around 750,000 mosques across Indonesia — a medium sized venue could have at least a dozen external loudspeakers that blare the call to prayer five times a day. — AFP

The organization is battling to minimize community tension with a free door-to-door service to repair sound systems and offer training – some 7,000 technicians work on the project and have already fixed the audio at more than 70,000 mosques. Although the program is not manda-

tory, Jakarta's Al-Ihkwan mosque chairman Ahmad Taufik used it because he wanted to ensure social harmony. "The sound is softer now. That way it will not disturb people in the neighborhood, not to mention we have a hospital behind the mosque," he says. — AFP

Philippines storm death toll hits 19

MANILA: The death toll from a storm that triggered landslides and flash floods across the Philippines has risen to at least 19, authorities said yesterday, linking the extreme rainfall to climate change. Severe Tropical Storm Kompasu dumped more than a month's worth of rain in two days as it swept across the archipelago nation this week, national disaster agency spokesman Mark Timbal told AFP. Kompasu – named after the Japanese pronunciation of "compass" – intensified the southwest monsoon that had already saturated swathes of the disaster-prone country.

Provinces on the most populous island of Luzon were hardest hit by the storm, which caused more than a billion pesos (\$20 million) worth of damage to the agriculture sector and damaged hundreds of homes. Timbal said the rainfall was "even greater than the Ondoy experience", referring to the devastating Typhoon

Defectors sue North Korea's Kim in Tokyo

TOKYO: North Korean defectors in Tokyo symbolically summoned Kim Jong Un to court yesterday over a repatriation program they describe as "state kidnapping". The unusual case is a bid to hold Pyongyang responsible for a scheme that saw more than 90,000 people move to North Korea from Japan between 1959 and 1984. The program mainly targeted ethnic Koreans but also their Japanese spouses, lured by fantastical propaganda promising a "paradise on Earth".

Five participants in the repatriation scheme who later escaped from North Korea are demanding 100 million yen (\$880,000) each in damages as they make their case in the Tokyo District Court. They have accused Pyongyang of "deceiving plaintiffs by false advertising to relocate to North Korea", where "the enjoyment of human rights was generally impossible".

As there are no diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea, Kim has been sum-

moned as the head of the North's government. "We don't expect North Korea to accept a decision nor pay the damages," Kenji Fukuda, the plaintiffs' lawyer, said at a briefing last month. "But we hope that the Japanese government would be able to negotiate with North Korea" if the court rules in the plaintiffs' favor, he added.

In all, 93,340 people took part in the repatriation program carried out by the Red Cross Societies in Japan and North Korea, and paid for by Pyongyang. The Japanese government also backed the scheme, with media touting it as a humanitarian campaign for Koreans struggling to build a life in Japan. During Tokyo's 1910-1945 colonial rule of the Korean peninsula, millions of Koreans moved to Japan, either voluntarily or against their will.

When Japan surrendered, hundreds of thousands remained, reluctant to return to their devastated homeland. They were stripped of their Japanese nationality and became stateless, and many believed propaganda films portraying an idyllic life in North Korea. Part of the defectors' complaint concerns separation from their families still trapped in the isolated country. "I don't know what happened to my family. Maybe the coronavirus has hit them, maybe some of them have died of hunger," Eiko Kawasaki, one of the five plaintiffs, said last month. — AFP

International

Norway bow-and-arrow attack an 'act of terror'

Norway attacker converted to Islam, suspected of radicalisation

KONGSBERG: The killing of five people in Norway in a bow-and-arrow attack appears to be an "act of terror," the Norwegian security service said yesterday, with the suspect, a Danish Muslim convert, already on their radar over fears he had been radicalized. Four women and a man died and two others were injured on Wednesday in the south-eastern town of Kongsberg in Norway's deadliest attack in a decade.

"The events in Kongsberg currently appear to be an act of terror, but the investigation... will determine in closer detail what the acts were motivated by," Norway's intelligence service PST said in a statement. "We're talking about a convert to Islam," police official Ole Bredrup Saeverud told reporters yesterday, adding: "There were fears linked to radicalization previously." Saeverud said the 37-year-old suspect had confessed to the facts of the matter during questioning. Those who were killed during the attack were all aged between 50 and 70.

"We are investigating among other things to determine whether this was an act of terror," Saeverud added. Reports that linked him to radicalization predated this year, Saeverud said, and police had followed up at the time. "We haven't had any reports about him in 2021, but earlier," he said. "We're relatively sure that he acted alone." PST also confirmed that the suspect was known to them but added the couldn't give "further details about him."

It also said they didn't believe the threat level

in the country had changed, describing it as "moderate". "Our evaluation is that what happened in Kongsberg Wednesday October 13 does not change the national threat assessment," PST said. Murder in Norway is rare. It was the deadliest attack since far-right extremist Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people in 2011. Since then, Norway has seen one other far-right attack, carried out by a self-proclaimed neo-Nazi who opened fire into a mosque.

'Like Kabul'

Yesterday, it was largely quiet in Kongsberg, a picturesque town of 25,000 people with wooden facades and the foliage changing color for the autumn. Streets were almost empty with only a light police presence. A few police officers stood outside a store where part of the attack took place. A glass door there was chipped by a shot.

Two candles flickered outside the town's church. The suspect was due to appear before a judge on Friday for a custody hearing. He was undergoing a psychiatric examination yesterday, the prosecutor said. The victims have not yet been named publicly, but one of the wounded was an off-duty police officer who had been in a store. Norwegian media questioned why it took police more than a half-hour to arrest the suspect after the first reports of the attack.

Police were informed of the attack at 6:13 pm



KONGSBERG: Police officers cordon off the scene where they are investigating in Kongsberg, Norway after a man armed with bow killed several people before being arrested by police on October 13, 2021. —AFP

and the suspect was arrested at 6:47 pm. He fired arrows at police, who responded with warning shots, Saeverud said. Thomas Nilsen was at home when he heard the screams and said images of war came to mind. "I thought it was Kabul," he told AFP. "I heard children screaming, barking and then the sound of a helicopter circling around my house," Terje Kristiansen, another witness, said. "I didn't sleep much," he added.

Images in the media showed a black arrow

sticking out of a wall and what looked like competition-grade arrows lying on the ground. Police said yesterday the suspect had also used other weapons, but provided no details. "These events shake us," said Prime Minister Erna Solberg, who stepped down yesterday, replaced by Jonas Gahr Store, whose Labour Party won recent parliamentary elections. Store lamented the "horrible acts", while Norway's King Harald said he was "appalled by the tragic events". — AFP

Ten villagers killed in mosque attack in western Niger

NIAMEY: Suspected jihadists killed 10 villagers in an attack on a mosque earlier this week in western Niger's Tillaberi region, local sources said on Wednesday. The attack occurred Monday in the village of Abankor in the "Tri-Border" region where Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso meet. "The attackers arrived on motorbikes during evening prayers and the victims were in the mosque when they were killed," an official in Banibangou city told AFP.

A resident of the neighboring town of Tondiwindi confirmed the attack and the death toll. On local radio Studio Kalangou, an Abankor resident said one person was injured in addition to the 10 dead, adding that the attack happened in the early evening. Since early 2021, attacks by suspected jihadists have shot up in the area around Banibangou and nearby towns in the Tillaberi region, a vast area covering 100,000 square kilometers (38,000 square miles) home to ethnic groups such as

the Djerma, Fulani, Tuareg and Hausa.

The flashpoint area is frequently targeted by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims with deadly attacks against civilians and soldiers. Authorities on Wednesday reimposed a ban on motorbikes in several parts of the Tillaberi region. The interdiction, first decreed last year to combat jihadist attacks carried out by gunmen on motorbikes, had been lifted on September 1.

The initial decree also regulated the sale of fuel and shut down markets suspected of feeding the armed groups and hiding their informants. The tougher security measures - which have sparked sometimes violent protests - have had economic repercussions on local people, Tillaberi MPs said in August. Instead of motorbikes, attackers took to using pushbikes and camels, they said. Motorbikes are the primary means of transport for people in the Tillaberi region.

Meanwhile, the United Nations has warned that the Tillaberi region is facing a "major food crisis", with almost 600,000 people exposed to food insecurity. "Insecurity and recurrent attacks by suspected elements of non-state armed groups targeting farmers and civilians will have serious repercussions this year on the already precarious food situation," the UN Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs office warned in a report sent to AFP earlier this month. — AFP

Italy puts Egyptian officers on trial for student's murder

ROME: The trial of four Egyptian security officers for the brutal killing in Cairo five years ago of Italian student Giulio Regeni opened in absentia in Rome yesterday. The officers stand accused of kidnapping, conspiracy to murder and grievous bodily harm in the case, which sparked outrage in Italy and has strained diplomatic relations with Egypt.

Regeni's mother had her head bowed as she arrived with his father and Giulio's sister for the hearing, which was taking place in the bunker room of the Rebibbia prison, often the stage for mafia trials. Regeni, 28, was doing research for a doctorate at the University of Cambridge when he was abducted in January 2016. His body, bearing extensive signs of torture, was eventually found dumped on the outskirts of Cairo.

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio welcomed the opening of the trial as "a result un hoped for in the weeks following the

discovery of Giulio's body," when the case looked unsolvable. Prime Minister Mario Draghi's office announced late Wednesday that the government was joining the case as a civil plaintiff, in a symbolic show of support for the Regeni family. But the trial may collapse before it has begun.

The court will have to rule on whether the four suspects are aware of the judicial proceedings against them, as required by law. Egypt has refused to provide their contact details. At a preliminary hearing in May, a judge ruled that media coverage meant news of the investigation into the four would have reached them. That decision may be upheld or overturned by the court yesterday. The four are named in court documents as General Tariq Sabir, Colonels Athar Kamel and Uhsam Helmi and Major Magdi Ibrahim Abdelal Sharif, who is accused of carrying out the killing.

Investigators believe Regeni was abducted and killed after being mistaken for a foreign spy. Prosecutor Michele Prestipino told a parliamentary committee in December that there were "elements of significant proof" implicating Egyptian officers in the murder—an accusation rejected by Egypt. His team allege Sharif got informants to follow Regeni, had him arrested and caused him "acute physical suffering". Regeni's teeth were broken and his hands and feet fractured. He died of suffocation. — AFP

International

Death threats, law suits: COVID experts targeted

A rise in abuse related to the pandemic

PARIS: Marc Van Ranst, a virologist famous in Belgium for providing expertise about the COVID-19 pandemic, was at home for his first afternoon off in months in May, unaware that his life was under threat and that he would soon be forced to go into hiding. Jurgen Conings, a soldier aligned with right-wing extremist movements who had stated his intent to harm Van Ranst was sitting in a car nearby armed with four rocket launchers.

It wasn't until the following day Van Ranst learned he was in danger. "They called me at noon and half an hour later they came with heavily armored cars," Van Ranst said. "They took my son from school and my wife from the hospital and me... to a safe house. We were in several safe houses over the course of about a month." Van Ranst has given hundreds of interviews on COVID-19 since the pandemic began and says he has a file of over 150 threats related to his pandemic expertise.

"Some are minor—they compare you to Hitler or Mengele," he said. "And then some are death threats." He is one of dozens of scientists harassed over the pandemic, according to a survey by scientific journal *Nature*. Of 321 experts who responded to the journal, 81 percent reported some experience of "trolling or personal attacks after speaking about COVID-19 in the media". Fifteen percent reported receiving death threats and over half had their credibility attacked.

'They find different ways'

In its article on the survey, *Nature* said it reached out to scientists in the US, the UK, Brazil, Canada, Taiwan, New Zealand and Germany who had given interviews about the pandemic. The prestigious journal acknowledges that harassment of scientists speaking on hot-button issues such as gun violence, vaccines and

climate change is not new. But they say even experts who were already prominent noted a rise in abuse related to the pandemic.

The survey's respondents described threats by email, online comments, phone calls and more. French virologist Karine Lacombe rose to prominence during the pandemic for her expertise lent during regular television and radio appearances and in articles. She told AFP that attacks on her—largely driven by French right-wing media supportive of controversial doctor Didier Raoult—began in earnest once she spoke out publicly against Raoult's advice to use hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID.

She describes being insulted in the street, getting anonymous letters threatening rape, and having her inbox flooded with disparaging personal messages. "It was totally new to me and extremely violent," she told AFP. She left Twitter and even spent several days with friends, imagining people might be waiting for her in front of her home. "I had a kind of breakdown," she said.

Both Lacombe and Van Ranst report being targeted by right-wing extremists in their countries, which are often aligned against pandemic measures and vaccines. Van Ranst describes being repeatedly summoned to Belgian court by anti-vaxers. "They find different ways of harassing us," Van Ranst said. He says he makes a point of defending himself at the mandatory court appearances and that he has never lost—but fighting the suits has taken over 400 hours of his time. "They're not keeping me from my job but I have literally no free time," he said. "This is the third one and they said they would keep doing it."

'They want to silence us'

Nature describes a "chilling effect", with experts who experienced the most harassment also reporting the biggest influence



LOS ANGELES: A syringe is filled with a first dose of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine at a mobile vaccination clinic in Los Angeles. —AFP

on their willingness to speak to the media. While Lacombe says she has heard similar feedback from colleagues, that it is not the case for her. For with support from psychologists and groups fighting bullying and disinformation online, she says she was able to return to Twitter after a month and a half. "It has reinforced my convictions," she said. "They want to silence us, we who have the knowledge and expertise. I'm trying not to give in." Van Ranst feels the same. "I'm not more careful," he said, "I'm equally outspoken against anti-vaccination messages or fake news or whatever. 'Otherwise they win.'" —AFP

Biracial women taken from African mothers by Belgium go to court

BRUSSELS: Five biracial women taken from their mothers in Congo 70 years ago demanded reparations from the Belgian state yesterday, which is accused of "crimes against humanity" for acts committed during the colonial era. Lea, Monique, Simone, Noille and Marie-Josée, who are now more than 70 years old, sued Belgium demanding reparations from central Africa's former colonial power. The trial is the first in Belgium to shed light on the fate of biracial children born in the former Belgian colonies (DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi), whose number is generally estimated at around 15,000, though there has never been an official count.

The women, who are now grandmothers, were forcibly removed from their maternal families at the age of two, three or four years old and placed in religious institutions "sometimes hundreds of kilometers away", said Michele Hirsch, their lawyer. They are each asking for an initial

sum of 50,000 euros and the nomination of an expert to determine moral damages. Most of the children born of a union between a black woman and a white man were not recognized by their father and were not allowed to mix with either whites or Africans.

As a result, many were placed under state guardianship and placed in orphanages in return for subsidies to these institutions, which were usually run by the Catholic Church. "At school, we were called 'milk coffee'. We were not accepted," recalled one of the complainants, Simone Ngalula, in an interview with AFP in September 2020. "We were called 'children of sin'. A white man could not marry a black woman. The child born of this union was considered a child of prostitution," said Lea Tavares Mujinga, who was born to a Portuguese father and abducted at the age of two in the 1940s.

In the eyes of the complainants, the apology made in 2019 on behalf of the Belgian state must be followed by reparations. Then prime minister Charles Michel acknowledged "targeted segregation", and deplored a "loss of identity" with the separation of siblings, including when the children were repatriated to Belgium after Congo's independence in 1960. "We were destroyed. Apologies are easy, but when you do something you have to take responsibility for it," said Monique Bitu Bingi at a press conference with the other four plaintiffs before the trial. —AFP

Report shows racial disparity in doctor recruitment in UK

LONDON: White doctors are six times more likely than black applicants to be successful when applying for posts in London, the British Medical Journal (BMJ) said on Wednesday. Data obtained under the Freedom of Information Act showed white doctors were also four times more likely to be get a job than Asian candidates or those from a mixed ethnic background.

The figures emerged after a senior NHS human resources professional asked all 18 NHS acute hospital trusts in London for a breakdown by ethnicity for 2020-21 of applicants for medical jobs, shortlisted candidates, and those offered posts. The BMJ report is based on responses from 12 of the 18 trusts in the state-run NHS that shared full unredacted data with the BMJ.

The report found wide disparities, with Barts Health NHS Trust 15 times more likely to ap-

point white applicants than black applicants. "The NHS is not making a significant shift in D&I (diversity and inclusion)," said Sheila Cunliffe, the HR director who made the data request. A spokesperson for the NHS in London responded: "The NHS in London is built on the skill and dedication of its diverse workforce and is committed to ensuring fair and equal opportunities for all."

"After listening to the experiences of NHS staff, work is underway to improve recruitment and selection processes as well as the accessibility and visibility of new roles." Government statistics about ethnic diversity in public sector jobs, published in 2019, indicated that the NHS had the most ethnically diverse workforce in the country. Some 44.4 percent of medical staff in the NHS were from an ethnic minority, and 18.4 percent for non-medical staff.

But within the workforce, it found that while nearly one in three NHS doctors were Asian, those from a black, mixed or other background was far lower. The findings comes as the state-run National Health Service (NHS) is seeking to address inequalities in ethnic minority recruitment, as well as discrimination. An NHS Workforce Race Equality Standard report, published last year, found that white applicants were 1.61 times more likely to be appointed from short-listing than those from a black or minority ethnic background. —AFP

International

WHO unveils new team to investigate pandemic

Pandemic has killed over 4.85 million

GENEVA: The World Health Organization unveiled Wednesday a team of scientists it wants to investigate new pathogens and preventing future pandemics-plus reviving the stalled probe into COVID-19's origins. The group of 26 experts will be charged with producing a new global framework for studies into the origins of emerging pathogens of epidemic and pandemic potential-and their remit includes SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 disease. Besides the COVID-19 crisis, a growing number of high-risk pathogens have appeared or reappeared in recent years, including MERS, bird flu viruses, Lassa, Marburg and Ebola.

The WHO announced earlier this year that it would set up a Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO). "The emergence of new viruses with the potential to spark epidemics and pandemics is a fact of nature, and while SARS-CoV-2 is the latest such virus, it will not be the last," said WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "Understanding where new pathogens come from is essential for

preventing future outbreaks."

'Rapid advice'

The 26 members that the WHO has put forward were chosen from a field of more than 700 applications and are drawn from a range of scientific disciplines. And the team the WHO has named is subject to a two-week public consultation. They include Christian Drosten, the head of Berlin's Institute of Virology; Yungui Yang of the Beijing Institute of Genomics; Jean-Claude Manuguerra of France's Institut Pasteur; and Inger Damon from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Several of the experts were on the joint WHO-China scientific mission investigating the origins of COVID-19: Vladimir Dedkov, Farag Elmoubasher, Thea Fischer, Marion Koopmans, Hung Nguyen and John Watson.

The terms of reference say the group must give the WHO an independent evaluation of all available scientific and technical findings from global studies on the origins of COVID-19. It must also advise the UN health agency on de-

veloping, monitoring and supporting the next series of studies into the origins of the virus. That could include "rapid advice" on the WHO's operational plans to implement the next series of studies into the pandemic's origins, and advice on additional studies.

Lab leak theory

The pandemic has killed more than 4.85 million people and battered the global economy since the virus was first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019. After much delay, a WHO team of international experts went to Wuhan in January 2021 to produce a first phase report, written in conjunction with their Chinese counterparts. Their March report drew no firm conclusions, but ranked four hypotheses. Most probable was that the virus jumped from bats to humans via an intermediate animal, it said. It judged a leak from the Wuhan virology laboratories was "extremely unlikely". However, the investigation faced criticism for lacking transparency and access, and for not evaluating the

lab-leak theory more deeply. In August, China rejected the WHO's calls for a renewed probe on the ground into the origins of COVID-19.

No time to waste

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's technical lead on COVID-19, said SAGO would urgently assess what was now known, what still remained unknown, and what rapidly needed to be done. "I anticipate that the SAGO... will recommend further studies in China and potentially elsewhere," she told journalists. "There's no time to waste in this." Michael Ryan, the WHO's emergencies director, said it may be the "last chance to understand the origins of this virus" in a collegiate manner. Earlier Wednesday, Chen Xu, China's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, told the UN correspondents' association that SAGO's work should not be "politicized". "If we are going to send teams to any other places, I believe it's not to China because we have received international teams twice already," he said. "It's time to send teams to other places." — AFP



ARLINGTON: A person looks at a smart phone with a Facebook App logo displayed on the background, in Arlington, Virginia. — AFP

Embattled Facebook releases new curbs on harassment

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook unveiled fresh protections Wednesday against online attacks on journalists, activists and celebrities as the social media giant battles a crisis over its platforms' potential harms. The company has faced a storm of criticism and a Senate panel hearing since a whistleblower leaked internal studies showing Facebook knew its sites could be harmful to young people's mental health. Frances Haugen, an ex-worker at the company, alleged the leading social network put profits before the safety of its users. Facebook head of safety Antigone Davis announced the new protections, writing

"we do not allow bullying and harassment on our platform, but when it does happen, we act."

Facebook expanded its range of banned "attacks" on public figures to include a range of sexual or degrading images of their bodies. Davis, who defended the company's work in a hearing before lawmakers, said "attacks like these can weaponize a public figure's appearance." Facebook also added journalists and human rights defenders to the list of people considered public figures because of their work.

New policies included derailing coordinated efforts to use multiple accounts to harass or intimidate people considered at heightened risk of harm in the real world, such as government dissidents and victims of violent tragedies. Davis said Facebook will also start removing state-linked and "adversarial networks" of accounts at the social network that "work together to harass or silence people" such as dissidents. "We remove content that violates our policies and disable the accounts of people who repeatedly break our rules," she wrote. — AFP

Climate change could sink world's smallest states

ROME: Some of the world's smallest countries could "disappear" without action at an upcoming UN summit to contain climate change, the secretary general of the Commonwealth warned in a Wednesday interview. "The threat to the 42 small states in existential," Baroness Patricia Scotland told AFP. "People say that as if it does not mean what it says - namely these small states will disappear."

The Dominica-born lawyer and former British government minister, who leads the Commonwealth association of former countries of the British empire, was speaking during a visit to Rome that included talks with Pope Francis. She said some of the Commonwealth's smallest members, like the low-lying Pacific islands of Tuvalu and Nauru, were "looking for new places to go" because "the sea level rises are so dangerous now". She also decried the devastating impact of more frequent hurricanes, including in her native country.

"Dominica usually looks like a Garden of Eden," she said. But after 2017's Hurricane Maria "even the bark of trees had been stripped, there was not one green leaf left. It was like Armageddon". UN climate talks in the Scottish city of Glasgow from October 31 to November 12 are aimed at securing a global deal on decarbonising world economies and charting humanity's path away from catastrophic global warming. Scotland insisted that humanity had "no choice" but to act, noting that poor nations exposed to climate change also need extensive debt and vaccine relief.

"We are all in the same storm, but we're definitely not all in the same boat," she said. The Commonwealth brings together 54 countries and 2.6 billion people, and the baroness is its first female leader. Her term was supposed to end in 2020, but a summit to decide whether to reappoint her or replace her has been postponed twice due to the coronavirus pandemic. "I certainly have so much work still to do that I would very much expect to still be in my position, but it is a matter for member states to decide," she said. — AFP

International

McSurgery: An Indian hospital restoring eyesight to millions

An estimated 10 million blind people in India

MADURAI: Black ticks on their foreheads marking the eye to be operated on, dozens of patients in green overalls wait in line, beneficiaries of a pioneering Indian model that is restoring sight to millions. With a highly efficient assembly line model inspired by McDonald's, the network of hospitals of the Aravind Eye Care System performs around 500,000 surgeries a year—many for free. More than a quarter of the world's population, some 2.2 billion people, suffer from vision impairment.

Of which one billion cases could have been prevented or have been left unaddressed, according to the World Vision Report by the World Health Organization. There are an estimated 10 million blind people in India, with a further 50 million suffering from some form of visual impairment. Cataracts—clouding of the eye lens—is the main cause. “The bulk of this blindness is not necessary because a lot of it is due to cataract which can be easily set right through a simple surgery,” said Thulasiraj Ravilla, one of the founding members of Aravind.

The hospital was set up by doctor Govindappa Venkataswamy who was inspired by McDonald's ex-CEO Roy Kroc and learned about the fast-food chain's economies of scale during a visit to the Hamburger University in Chicago. “If McDonald's can do it for hamburgers, why can't we do it for eye care?” he famously said. Aravind started as an 11-bed facility in 1976 in Madurai, a city in the southern state of Tamil Nadu but has expanded to care centers and community clinics across India.

Grit and gratitude

The model has been so successful it has been the subject of numerous studies including by Harvard Business School. But it is the outreach camps which have been the cornerstone of its no-frills high-volume work—nearly 70 percent of India's population lives in rural areas. “It is the access that is the main concern, so we are taking the treatment to people rather than waiting for them to come for us,” Ravilla told AFP.

The free eye camps are a boon for those like Venkatachalam Rajangam who received care close to home. Rajangam said he had to stop working because he was unable to see the money customers at his provisions store gave him, and also stumbled on the stairs or when out after dark. The 64-year-old found out about a camp next to his village in Kadukarai, some 240 kilometers from Madurai, where doctors screened his eyes and detected a cataract in the left one.

Rajangam was taken in a bus with some 100 others to a shelter run by the hospital, which also provides basic meals and mats to sleep on free of charge, and underwent a procedure to remove the cataract. “I thought the operation would be for an hour but within 15 minutes everything was over. But it didn't feel rushed. The procedure was done properly,” Rajangam said after the bandage roll covering his eye was removed. “I didn't have to spend even a penny... God has created eyes, but they are the ones who restored my eyesight,” he gushed, clasping his hands in gratitude.

'Practice on goat eyeballs'

Aravind eye surgeon Aruna Pai said the doctors receive rigorous training to make sure they can perform surgeries quickly. The complication rate is less than two per 10,000 at Aravind compared to Britain or the United States where it ranges from 4-8 per 10,000, according to the hospital. “We have wet labs where we are taught to operate on goats' eyeballs. This helps us to sharpen our skills,” said Pai, who performs some 100 surgeries in a day.

Aravind said it does not take charity money but instead uses the revenue generated from paying customers to help cover the cost of those who need free treatment. It reduces costs further by manu-

facturing lenses for cataract treatment at its own facility called Aurolab. Aurolab currently produces more than 2.5 million of these lenses a year at a sixth of the cost of those previously imported from the US, the hospital said. Rajib Dasgupta, a community health expert based in New Delhi, lauded the clinics: “The Aravind model has emerged as an important one in blindness prevention.” But he warned that India still needed to look at root causes—including diet, hygiene, and sanitation—that could help avoid preventable blindness. Dasgupta warned: “The communicable causes of blindness due to infectious conditions still exist and remain significant challenges.”—AFP



MADURAI: Medical staff prepares to conduct a free cataract eye surgery on patient Venkatachalam Rajangam at Aravind eye hospital in Madurai in India's Tamil Nadu state. - AFP

EU won't accept UK's North Ireland Brexit red line: Ireland

LONDON: The European Union will not accept London's demands for an alternative arbitrator to settle post-Brexit disputes involving Northern Ireland, Dublin said yesterday after the EU offered other concessions. The EU put forward a host of proposals on Wednesday, including reduced customs checks and paperwork on British products intended for Northern Ireland, in a bid to solve problems caused by the Brexit deal signed last year. But there was no movement on what Britain says is one of its red lines: the role of the EU's European Court of Justice (ECJ) as arbiter in any post-Brexit disputes involving the province.

“There should not be a role for the ECJ in any part of the UK, including Northern Ireland,” British Health Secretary Sajid Javid told Sky News yesterday, calling it “one of the most important issues”. But when asked by Britain's Times Radio if the EU would consider an alternative arbitration

system, Ireland's European Affairs Minister Thomas Byrne said: “No, I don't think so. “It is not a question of the European Court of Justice having any sovereignty over Britain or any part of Britain.

“It is simply the fact that the European Court of Justice arbitrates on the single market of the European Union, in which Northern Ireland has been allowed to remain,” he added. A team of EU negotiators on Wednesday delivered the plans to London a day after the UK's Brexit minister David Frost said the current deal - known as the Northern Ireland Protocol - should be ripped up. “We are looking forward to engaging earnestly and intensively with the UK government, in the interest of all communities in Northern Ireland,” said European Commission Vice President Maros Sefcovic.

The UK said it would look at the proposals “seriously and constructively” and called on both sides to engage in “intensive talks” rapidly. “We need to find a solution which all sides can get behind for the future, which safeguards the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, and which puts the UK-EU relationship on a stronger footing,” a UK spokesperson added.—AFP

In Rome hospital, the unvaccinated patients fill coronavirus beds

ROME: In one Rome hospital, the vast majority of Covid-19 patients in intensive care are unvaccinated - and many are urging Italian anti-vaxxers to get the jab. A 41-year-old patient at the ICC Casalpalocco COVID hospital, who gave his name as Francesco, said he was opposed to the vaccine but that if he could go back, he would get jabbed. “The vaccine doesn't inspire confidence but unfortunately we've got to do it, because in any case it's the only thing that can help at this precise stage of the pandemic,” he told AFP.

At the hospital, there are currently 19 patients in the intensive care unit (ICU) for coronavirus, of whom 17 are unvaccinated, according to medical director Roberto Mezzanotte. “Almost 90 to 95 percent in our ICU are non-vaccinated,” he told AFP. In September, an analysis by the hospital found that 69 percent of its coronavirus patients were not vaccinated. “Patients in the ICU for the most part are not vaccinated. And these are the most at risk, those whose condition worsens more readily and need intubation and assisted breathing,” Mezzanotte said.

Scared of COVID

Breathing oxygen through a mask, another patient, Salvatore, said he was a big supporter of vaccines but had not yet had his coronavirus jab before he felt gravely ill. “In the space of a few hours, I went from being a person full of vitality to an empty sack, deprived of force,” the 55-year-old said. He said he had little patience for violent protesters who took to the streets of Rome last weekend against Italy's coronavirus health pass. “When I see these demonstrations against the Green Pass, they don't understand, they don't realise,” said Salvatore. From this Friday, the pass - showing proof of vaccination, a negative test or recent recovery from COVID-19 - will be required for all employees, in public and private workplaces. The announcement of the measure helped push up vaccination rates in Italy, one of the European countries hardest hit by the pandemic, but provoked anger. More than 85 percent of over 12s have now received at least one shot.—AFP

International

4 dead as deadly violence erupts in Bangladesh over 'desecration'

Hindu temples vandalized

DHAKA: Bangladesh police shot dead four people as hundreds vandalized several Hindu temples across the Muslim-majority country, police said yesterday. Police opened fire on a mob of over 500 people late Wednesday following furor over footage of a Quran being placed on the knee of a figure of the Hindu god Hanuman during a religious festival.

In the main incident, the mob attacked a Hindu temple and clashed with police in the southern town of Hajiganj, leaving four dead and nearly two dozen injured, including 15 police officers, local police chief Milon Mahmud told AFP. A police inspector confirmed the four were shot dead. Police said the local magistrate had ordered a ban on gatherings in the area and seven people had been arrested.

Bangladesh's government ordered a probe into the violence, saying in a statement that anyone involved would be punished and asking people to maintain order: "The government has urged everyone to keep religious harmony, peace and security". Another Hindu temple was attacked in the eastern district of Comilla, where the alleged desecration of the Islamic holy book took place, police inspector Monir Ahmed told AFP. "The situation is peaceful now. Hundreds of policemen, elite Rapid Action Battalion and the border guards have been deployed," he said, adding at least 40 people had been arrested.

Police also clashed with hundreds of people in the northeastern town of Zakiganj after a crowd gathered in the town centre to protest. "Several people and a couple of police officers were injured. The mob attacked and vandalized police and local administrators' cars. We have deployed extra police," deputy police chief Lutfar Rahman said. Mass-circulated The Daily Star newspaper reported that idols of Hindu gods and temples were vandalized in two northern rural districts while authorities increased security in the southern city of Chittagong, which is home to a sizable Hindu population.

Hindus, who make up some 10 percent of Bangladesh's 169 million population, have faced sporadic violence in recent years, often sparked by rumors spread on social media. Mobs



COMILLA: A vandalized temple is seen in Comilla yesterday, after hundreds vandalized several Hindu temples across the Muslim-majority country. — AFP

vandalized at least five Hindu temples and attacked property in 2016 over a Facebook post mocking one of Islam's holiest sites. Over the past week, the community has been celebrating

their largest annual festival, the Durga Puja, which culminates with devotees immersing the idol of the goddess Durga in a river on Friday. — AFP

Taiwan building inferno kills 46, dozens injured

TAIPEI: An overnight fire tore through a building in the southern Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung yesterday, killing 46 people and injuring dozens of others in the island's deadliest blaze in decades. The fire broke out in the 13-storey, mixed-use building in the small hours of yesterday morning, according to officials, raging through multiple floors before firefighters finally got it under control.

Pictures published by Taiwan's official Central News Agency showed smoke billowing out of the building's windows as firefighters desperately tried to douse the flames using extendable hoses. Kaohsiung's fire department said it sent more than 70 trucks to tackle the blaze, which took four hours to put out.

As daylight broke the sheer scale of the fire became clear, with every floor of the building visibly blackened and most of its windows shattered. The fire department said the blaze "caused 41 injuries and 46 deaths", officials adding that most of the fatalities occurred on floors seven to 11, which housed residential apartments. The first five floors were for commercial use, but were unoccupied. Residents reported hearing a number of loud noises when the fire first broke out on the lower floors.

"I heard many loud bangs—bang, bang, bang—on the ground

floor and came down to investigate," an unidentified man who lived in the building told Formosa TV. "That's when I realized there was a fire and called the police," he added. An unnamed female survivor, describing the scene on her floor, said: "When I opened the door to get out, the hallway was full of black smoke." A constable at the Kaohsiung police department told AFP the building was 40 years old and mostly occupied by low-income residents. Survivors had estimated about 100 people lived in the apartment block, the constable added, giving only his surname Liu.

Officials had not yet ruled out arson, he added. Forensics teams were on site and further searches of the building were planned before sunset. The fire looks set to be Taiwan's deadliest in years. The last fire of a similar magnitude was in 1995, when 64 people perished inside a packed karaoke club. As an island frequently battered by earthquakes and typhoons, Taiwan has strict building codes and a generally good safety record.

But there is often a gap between what the rules state and how safety standards are applied, especially in older buildings. Some of the highest death tolls in recent earthquakes have come when older buildings have collapsed, with subsequent investigations occasionally showing their designs were not up to code. Earlier this year 49 people were killed when a train hit a truck that had slid onto the tracks, in the island's worst railway disaster in decades. Subsequent investigations revealed government agencies had ignored repeated warnings that such an accident was possible on that particular stretch of mountainside track.— AFP

Woman, 77, found beheaded in France

MARSEILLE: French authorities have found the decapitated body of a woman aged 77 at her home in a southern resort, police said yesterday. A police source, who asked not to be named, told AFP that the authorities were not at this point looking at terrorism as an explanation and the case has not been referred to national anti-terror prosecutors. The body of the woman was found in the Mediterranean resort of Agde in the Hérault region of southern France, the police source said.

Police had visited her home after the woman's son raised concern he had not heard from her despite usually making daily calls. He was also connected to her home via video link and said he had seen a shadow on the ground. According to another source, the victim's head was on a table next to the body. There was no sign of a break-in, the outside gate was closed and the front door of the house unlocked. There were no immediate further details and police did not at present favor one particular theory over what happened, police said — AFP

Afghan amputees recover alongside former enemies

‘The problems between us belong to the past’

KABUL: Just months ago they were fighting each other as mortal enemies, but today they are amputees dealing with their new disabilities, together. At this Red Cross-run rehabilitation centre in Kabul, former Afghan government soldiers and Taliban fighters adjust their new prostheses, living side by side.

Khair Mohammad, a 32-year-old sergeant in the ousted government army who saw both his legs amputated in February, rests after taking his first hesitant steps between two parallel metal bars. “The Taliban were our enemies, and I fought them when I was healthy,” said the sergeant with a neatly trimmed beard and a Real Madrid T-shirt. “But the situation has changed,” he told AFP in the long, narrow room equipped for walk training. “The problems between us belong to the past.”

Just a few meters away sits Mullah Yacoub, a 44-year-old Taliban fighter who lost his left leg before being shipped off to Guantanamo two decades ago. Wearing a jet-black turban and with a face mask over his disheveled, henna-dyed beard, the Islamist insisted he was mistaken for someone else when he was sent to the US prison base in Cuba, where he spent more than four years. Upon his return, he spent several more years in an Afghan jail. Here, he is getting fitted for a new artificial leg.

‘All equal’

Despite the hardship he has endured, Yacoub

told AFP the Taliban “have no beef with anyone” since the movement seized control of the country on August 15. “We have forgiven everyone and no longer consider anyone an enemy.” The International Committee of the Red Cross, which has run this centre for more than three decades, has never questioned the affiliations of the amputees it welcomes for rehabilitation. In a country with poor health services and where the disabled typically become heavy burdens on their families, being equipped with new limbs and learning to walk again is a privilege.

“This is an international clinic open to all,” said Mohammad, the ex-government soldier. “We all have the same problem, so we get along.” Fahd, a 20-year-old former Taliban fighter who did not provide his last name, lost both of his lower legs in an explosion four months ago in the eastern province of Paktiya. Wearing a traditional, embroidered cap and shawl and with a friend in tow for support, he has come to try his prostheses for the first time. “Here, we are all equal,” he said. “There is now peace in our country.”

‘Magic’

The Kabul centre - one of seven run by the ICRC across the country - is headed by Alberto Cairo, a charismatic 69-year-old Italian physiotherapist who arrived in Afghanistan more than 30 years ago and never left. With his hands



KABUL: A man helps a boy put on shoes on his new prosthetic leg at the International Committee of Red Cross Rehabilitation Centre in Kabul. — AFP

plunged into the pockets of his white lab coat with “Alberto” embroidered on the front, he smiles warmly at the new arrivals. “Former soldiers, Taliban, old communists, they are all together,” he said, adding: “They talk, sit, drink tea,

sometimes they take selfies together.” Cairo, who has been mentioned in the past as a possible Nobel Peace Prize candidate for his work teaching some 200,000 Afghan amputees to walk again, said the centre was “magic”. — AFP

PIA suspends flights over ‘unprofessional’ Taliban

KARACHI: Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) said yesterday it had suspended flights to Kabul over the “unprofessional attitude” of Taliban authorities. PIA resumed special flights to the country after the Taliban seized power in mid-August, and was a lifeline for many Afghans trying to flee the new regime and economic crisis.

“Our flights frequently faced undue delays because of the unprofessional attitude of the Kabul aviation authorities,” Abdullah Hafeez Khan, the PIA spokesman told AFP. The route will remain suspended until “the situation becomes conducive,” he added. A source at the airline told AFP Taliban officials were often “derogatory” and on one occasion “physically manhandled” a staff member. PIA had faced criticism for charging more than \$1,200 for a one-way, 40-minute flight from Kabul to Islamabad.

The special flights have been used mostly by NGOs and charities, some of which have helped at-risk Afghans to flee, but have been irregular

and tickets difficult to purchase for ordinary passengers. But the airline said the flight operation was “not very lucrative financially” and it was only operating flights on “humanitarian grounds”. “We would pay more than \$400,000 as insurance premium which could only be possible if 300 passengers are available,” Khan said.

The price was around \$150 before the Taliban takeover. The Taliban had earlier threatened to block half of the airline’s flights if the ticket price was not slashed. But Afghanistan’s own Kam Air has been charging up to \$1,600 for a single ticket. Facilities at Kabul airport were badly damaged in the chaotic evacuation of more than 120,000 people that ended on August 30 with the withdrawal of the last US troops. Pakistan was the chief backer of the Taliban’s 1996-2001 regime and has long faced US allegations that its intelligence service fuelled the Islamist insurgents.

Prime Minister’s Imran Khan’s government has called on the world to engage with the Taliban and provide economic support to the aid-dependent country which has seen funding frozen by Western donors since the takeover. Pakistan, however, has stopped short of recognizing the Taliban government - a step opposed by Western countries. The Taliban last week closed one of its border crossings with Pakistan over the allegation that Afghan citizens were being mistreated by the Pakistani border officials. — AFP

Over 100 Yemen rebels killed south of Marib

RIYADH: More than 100 Yemeni rebels have been killed south of Marib, the Saudi-led coalition said on Wednesday, reporting a heavy toll for the third straight day in fighting for the strategic city. The Iran-backed Houthis’ latest casualties in the Abdiya district “exceeded 108”, the coalition said, after announcing more than 156 dead on Monday and over 134 on Tuesday. That brought the unconfirmed toll to about 400 in the area this week as an analyst said the rebels have made significant advances.

The coalition, which relies heavily on air strikes to combat the Shiite Houthis, did not reveal how it arrived at those figures. They could not be independently verified by AFP. “We have conducted 19 operations targeting (Houthi) militia members in the past 24 hours in Abdiya, destroying 12 of their military vehicles and their losses exceeded 108 members,” the coalition said in a statement carried by state-run Al-Ekhabariya television.

Fighting for Marib, the internationally recognized government’s last bastion in oil-rich northern Yemen, has left heavy casualties since the

rebels renewed their campaign to seize Marib last month. The Houthis said they were “on the edges of the city” in a video statement on Tuesday. Adam Baron, a political analyst focused on Yemen and the wider region, said the rebels had made “significant” territorial gains. “The advances are quite significant on both a strategic and psychological level — these are areas that were seen as quite secure just a year or two ago,” he told AFP.

Yemen has been devastated by a seven-year war pitting the rebels against the government supported by a Saudi-led military coalition. The rebels overran the capital Sanaa, just 120 kilometers to the west of Marib, in 2014, prompting the Saudi-led intervention to prop up the government the following year. Tens of thousands of people have been killed and millions have been displaced since then. Many fled to Marib, whose population has ballooned since the war began.

As well as the deaths in Abdiya, six people were killed in a car-bombing on Sunday that targeted the governor of Aden, the government’s provisional seat of power. He survived the attack. Prime Minister Maen Abdulmalek Saeed called the Aden blast an “escalation” by the rebels. Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of supporting the Houthis with weapons and drones, but Tehran says it only provides political support to the rebels. The Houthi insurgents have also repeatedly targeted Saudi Arabia in cross-border attacks, using drones and missiles. — AFP

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The Egyptian modeling agency 'decolonizing beauty standards'

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(From left) Egyptian fashion models Zeina Ehab and Mariam Abdallah pose during a photo session at the studio of UNN Model Management agency in Cairo. —AFP



Egyptian fashion model Mariam Abdallah poses during a photo session at the studio of UNN Model Management agency in Cairo. —AFP photos



(From left to right) Egyptian fashion models Zeina Ehab and Mariam Abdallah pose during a photo session at the studio of UNN Model Management agency in Cairo.



(From left to right) Egyptian fashion models Mariam Abdallah and Zeina Ehab try on clothes during a photo session.

The Egyptian modeling agency ‘decolonizing beauty standards’

Between the frenzied rush of wardrobe changes and photographers readying for shoots, Iman Eldeeb’s agency is slowly breaking new ground for Egypt’s fashion scene by hiring a diverse line-up of models. Eldeeb forged an international career in European fashion capital Milan, where photographers told her she was “the first Egyptian model they had ever seen”. Seven years later, she returned to Egypt in 2018 and set about shaking up a fashion scene where old stereotypes prevail. In the Arab world’s most populous nation, modeling has long been dominated by “girls from Eastern Europe, with fair complexions,” said Eldeeb.

The 28-year-old said such “obsolete” standards have made it difficult for Egyptian and Arab models to break into the industry. “Beauty cannot be limited by the appearance and shape of a face and so on. I feel this is a misconception of beauty,” Eldeeb told AFP. “Hair color, eye color, all these things were part of a very old understanding of beauty and this is something we are moving away from as much as we can.” According to The Fashion Spot, a website specializing in the industry, “models of colour” accounted for more than 43 percent of those on global catwalks in fall 2021 — making it “the most racially diverse season on record”.

Travelling the world as a model, Eldeeb said she sensed a new trend of more diverse faces and bodies was emerging. Back in Egypt, she and her sister Yousra then founded UNN Model Management—the name meaning “rebirth” in the language of the black Nubian minority. The agency offers a platform for budding talents in Egypt who lack support in the fiercely competitive industry. “The fashion industry is still developing in the Arab world,” said Eldeeb. Today, UNN

oversees around 35 contracts with top brands including Louis Vuitton, Adidas and Levi’s, making it a leader on the nascent Egyptian scene.

Race issues

Mohsen Othman, a freelance photographer also known as Lemosen who works with UNN regularly, praised the agency for its “daring” approach. In the industry in Egypt, “we have creative people but we lack the means, and training remains old-fashioned,” he said. For Sabah Khodir, an Egyptian activist against gender-based violence, UNN is a force for “decolonizing beauty standards” and “deconstructing internalized racism”.

“Being more represented in fashion, on-screen or elsewhere, can save lives. It humanizes you in the eyes of the world,”

Khodir said of the situation for under-represented women. Adhar Makuac Abiem, a model from South Sudan, has long endured racial taunts and insults in the unforgiving streets of Egypt’s bustling capital Cairo. When she settled in Egypt as a refugee in 2014, she never imagined she would be hired by a local agency. Often she was told that she was “too black” or “too ugly” to get any work, she said. But since 2019, the 21-year-old has managed to build a career as a model working with UNN.

Egypt is similar to “the West where prejudices persist about dark-skinned” people, said Marie Grace Brown, a University of Kansas researcher who authored a book on women’s fashion in Sudan. But that has not stopped Abiem from trying to “become a positive role model” for young black women in the industry.

‘A form of healing’

Mariam Abdallah, 22, who was busy styling her hair before a photoshoot, said she has been doing more modeling overseas than in Egypt. “We’re not very interested in ‘exotic’ top models,” she told AFP. Beyond battling discrimination in a highly predatory industry, where there have been high profile cases of sexual misconduct, getting parental consent is another challenge in the conservative Muslim country. According to Eldeeb, three-quarters of parents fear images of their model daughters could be “misused” online.

There are also concerns about revealing clothing, as well as working “inappropriate hours” for young women. “Whatever the profession, parents always try to decide for the girls,” she added. The World Bank says that fewer than 20 percent of Egyptian women had a job in 2019. But Eldeeb has managed to secure work visas for some of her models in France, a first for home-grown talent. Abdallah left Egypt for the first time recently thanks to the contracts she now has with around a dozen agencies in Europe and the United States, giving her a sense of independence and purpose. For the activist Khodir, the emphasis on developing Egyptian talent for global fashion houses is much more than just good business. “It’s a form of healing that we badly need,” she said. —AFP



Egyptian fashion models Mariam Abdallah (second right) and Zeina Ehab (left) attend a photo session at the studio of UNN Model Management agency in Cairo.

Lifestyle | Music & Movies



This file photo taken on February 7, 1964 shows English band the Beatles (from left) John Lennon, Ringo Starr, Paul McCartney and George Harrison arriving at John F Kennedy Airport in New York. — AFP photos

THE BEATLES ARE BACK WITH A HAPPIER ENDING

The Beatles are back this autumn with a new book, reworked final album and much-anticipated documentary that sheds new light on their fraught final days. “Let It Be”, released in 1970, has long been considered the legendary group’s breakup album. That is partly because it was the last album they released, and also because it was followed by a making-of documentary that showed deep tensions among the fab four. However it’s not that simple: “Let It Be” was actually recorded before 1969’s “Abbey Road” but sat on the shelf for a year because the band weren’t satisfied with it.

In fact, Paul McCartney was never satisfied, having been left out of the mixing sessions by fabled producer Phil Spector. A new remix of the album by Giles Martin-son of The Beatles’ usual producer George Martin-aims to bring it closer to the band’s wishes. But speaking to NME this week, Giles Martin admitted that “Paul’s main issue with what happened is that he normally had a lot of input into the arrangements, and he didn’t with Spector.”

‘Ups and downs’

More important to the band’s history may be the new documentary “The Beatles: Get Back” coming next month from “Lord of the Rings” director Peter Jackson. He went through the many hours of outtakes from the original film to show a much more upbeat side of the “Let It Be” sessions. Ringo Starr is a fan.

“We had ups and downs, but even around all that-which you’ll see with the Peter Jackson edit-we were having fun, which (the original documentary) never showed, joy and fooling around and shouting at each other. It’s what four guys do,” Starr told Ultimate Classic Rock. Roger Stormo, editor of The Daily Beatle, said there were definite tensions, with George Harrison storming out for several days because he felt sidelined by Paul McCartney and John Lennon. “But they were having fun at

the same time as being angry,” he told AFP.

“Because of the well-publicized argument between George and Paul in the original movie, people have interpreted the mood of the period as being a downer, but I never saw it that way. “They were having fun, especially at the rooftop concert.” That was the famous moment when the band gave an impromptu gig on the roof of their headquarters in central



This file photo taken on July 4, 1964 shows (from left) Brian Epstein, English band The Beatles Ringo Starr, John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and George Harrison speaking during the premiere of “Hard day’s night” in London.

London-which ultimately proved to be their final performance. Conversations from the documentary have also been reproduced for a glossy new book.

Rock historian Michka Assayas said it should put the nail in the coffin of the idea that the group was falling apart at the time of “Let It Be”. “I was the first to believe in all sorts of myths like ‘Paul and John hated each other, didn’t speak much’. But what we see from the conversations is that they were extremely close... things were working well in early 1969,” Assayas told AFP. “Every band has arguments in the studio. It was just shocking (when the original film came out) because no one had

seen them argue before,” he added.

‘Lazy buggers’

It may also be time to re-evaluate who was responsible for the split, often pinned on McCartney since it was his announcement that finalized things in April 1970. But Stormo says John had effectively sounded the death knell the previous September. Paul was often the



This file photo taken on July 29, 1965 shows English band The Beatles (from left) Paul McCartney (bass), George Harrison (guitar), Ringo Starr (drums) and John Lennon (guitar) performing on stage during a concert, in London.

most demanding, and openly critical of Harrison’s songwriting.

But he was also the workhorse of the group, and the one who played on Harrison’s songs while Lennon largely sat them out. “If Paul hadn’t been in the band, we’d probably have made two albums because we were lazy buggers,” Starr told the BBC recently. “But Paul’s a workaholic. John and I would be sitting in the garden taking in the color green from the tree, and the phone would ring, and we would know: ‘Hey lads, you want to come in? Let’s go in the studio!’” — AFP

Pan-African film fest defies pandemic and jihadists

Africa’s biggest film festival kicks off on Saturday in Burkina Faso’s capital Ouagadougou, delayed eight months by the COVID-19 pandemic and overshadowed by a brutal six-year-old jihadist insurgency. Seventeen feature-length works are in the main competition for the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), the biggest date in the continent’s cinema and TV industry. Held every two years, the hugely popular festival was initially set for February 27-March 6 but was postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic. The impoverished landlocked country is also battling jihadist gunmen who have killed around 2,000 people since 2015 and forced 1.4 million to flee their homes.

“We are aware of the (safety) situation and every measure has been taken,” the festival’s director Alex Moussa Sawadogo said. To stage the event, he said in remarks last month, demonstrates that Africa “continues to create, to dream, to be able to confront the ills that sap our societies.” Launched in 1969, FESPACO is closely followed by the US and European movie industries, which scout the event for new films, talent and ideas. Under its rules, films chosen for competition have to be made by Africans and predominantly produced in Africa. The 17 full-length films, selected from among 1,132 entries, are vying for the coveted Golden Stallion of Yennenga—a trophy named after a mythical beast in Burkinabe mythology. Their directors hail from 15 countries across Africa, although there is just one from the host nation.

Egypt has two contenders, and there is one each from Angola, Cameroon, Chad, Ivory Coast, Lesotho, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia, Tanzania and Tunisia. A 17th is from Haiti-reflecting this year’s theme “Cinemas of Africa and the Diaspora.” The short film category includes 29 entries, both fiction and documentaries, with five from Burkina Faso and four from Senegal.

One of the documentaries is especially timely. “Thomas Sankara, the Human,” by Burkinabe journalist Richard Tiene, takes a look at the life of the country’s revolutionary icon, who was gunned down during a coup in 1987 — a traumatic episode that reverberates today. The piece is being screened just days after Sankara’s alleged killers went on trial in Ouagadougou. The accused includes ex-president Blaise Compaore, Sankara’s friend and comrade-in-arms, who ruled for 27 years before being toppled by a popular uprising and fleeing to Ivory Coast. — AFP



This photo shows a man in a small shop making dalgonas, a crisp sugar candy featured in the Netflix series Squid Game, in Shanghai. — AFP photos



Customers waiting at a small shop for dalgonas, a crisp sugar candy featured in the Netflix series Squid Game, in Shanghai.

Illegal streams, merch bonanza: Squid Game craze hits China

It is not available in China but Netflix's global sensation Squid Game has already built up a huge following in the country, with fans dodging strict internet controls to stream the show and snapping up merchandise such as its unique outfits. The dystopian South Korean thriller has become the most popular Netflix series launch ever, the streaming giant said Tuesday, but it is unlikely to pass China's censors because of its brutally violent content.

Yet it is already a hit in cities such as Shanghai, where a crowd formed Tuesday at an eatery selling dalgonas—the crisp sugar candy featured in one episode—with customers gathering at its Squid Game-themed sign to take photos. “People were sending jokes related to the show in group chats when I started watching,” a customer surnamed Li told AFP. “It’s rather fast-paced and therefore, quite thrilling,” the video producer said of the series.

After buying the candy, Li and his friend filmed their attempt at a challenge from the show, where contestants try to cut shapes from the snack without cracking it. Squid Game features a group of society's most marginalized and indebted people who are forced to compete in a series of children's games until all participants are dead except one. The “winner” gets \$38 million. As the show became an international hit, China's ever-nimble manufacturers raced to tap into demand, with products—including the bright pink uniforms and eerie masks worn by anonymous guards—popping up across the giant online shopping platform Taobao.

Vendor Peng Xiuyang told AFP his sales had spiked by around 30 percent thanks to demand for Squid Game merchandise. He had never heard of the show when a customer asked last month if he sold the masks—a plain

black full-faced covering printed with squares, triangles or circles. But now vendors like him and plastics manufacturers in the eastern hub of Yiwu are all rushing to meet demand—from both domestic and international buyers. “Our customers are those who have seen the series and want to join in the trend,” he added. With Halloween coming up, the spine-chilling masks have become his most sought-after product.

Illegal distribution

The lack of official availability has not stopped Chinese audiences from finding ways to watch the show—including easily available unofficial streaming sites or file-sharing. The piracy problem is so widespread that South Korea's ambassador to China, Jang Ha-sung, recently told a parliamentary audit that he had asked Chinese authorities to take action. “Our

assessment is that Squid Game, which is gaining global popularity, is being illegally distributed on around 60 sites in China,” Jang said, testifying remotely from Beijing.

As fascination with the show swirls among China's tech-savvy youth, the hashtag “Squid Game” got nearly two billion views on social media, and related topics have been trending for weeks. Users discussed how they would pass the challenges featured in the show, and wondered what a Chinese version of Squid Game would be like. But one user said: “It's not like it would pass censors if we made such a show ourselves... if it were too violent, it would just get taken down.” For now, fans just want to have fun. A customer in Shanghai surnamed Yang said: “I've seen (the snack) being sold online, but it's my first time finding it in real life.”—AFP



A customer with a dalgonas, a crisp sugar candy featured in the Netflix series Squid Game, in Shanghai.



A man in a small shop making dalgonas, a crisp sugar candy featured in the Netflix series Squid Game, in Shanghai.



Customers taking photos of a dalgonas, a crisp sugar candy featured in the Netflix series Squid Game, in Shanghai.

Shredded Banksy goes under the hammer in London

A partially shredded canvas of one of British artist Banksy's most celebrated works is expected to sell for millions when it goes under the hammer yesterday. The artwork—now called “Love is in the Bin”—will be offered by London auction house Sotheby's at its contemporary arts sale. The work, formerly called “Girl With Balloon”, has an estimated selling price of £4-6 million (\$6-8 million, 5-7 million euros). The original canvas sold for nearly £1.1 million at the same location in October 2018 when it dramatically passed through a shredder hidden in its frame moments after bidding ended.

The stunt, which poked fun at the staid world of fine art, is typical of the graffiti artist's irreverent style after his work began appearing on the streets of Bristol in southwest England in the 1980s. It was the latest in a long history of unpredictable moves for the provocative guerilla artist, whose work has appeared across Britain and around the world. The partially shredded canvas shows a small child reaching up toward a heart-shaped red bal-

loon. The original, which first appeared on a wall in east London, has been reproduced endlessly in prints and online, and appropriated by some of the world's best-known brands.

It had been called one of the most significant artworks of the early 21st century in the British press, before the shredded version was granted a new certificate and date by Pest Control, Banksy's authentication body, and given the new title. Alex Branczik, Sotheby's contemporary art chairman, said Banksy's stunt at its last sale “did not so much destroy an artwork by shredding it, but instead created one”. “Today, this piece is considered heir to a venerated legacy of anti-establishment art,” he added, calling it “the ultimate Banksy artwork and a true icon of recent art history”. His latest works have appeared recently in several British seaside towns. Meanwhile in March, a work honoring caregivers during the coronavirus pandemic fetched a record £14.4 million at auction, which was donated to the state-run National Health Service (NHS). — AFP



In this file photo assistants pose alongside an artwork titled ‘Love is the Bin’ by British street artist Banksy during a photocall at Sotheby's auction house in central London. — AFP

Rolling Stones drop hit ‘Brown Sugar’ from US tour

The Rolling Stones have cut their popular track “Brown Sugar” from their US tour, at least for now, in the wake of criticism over its lyrics referring to slavery. “You picked up on that, huh?” Keith Richards told the Los Angeles Times in a recent interview, when asked about the song's absence at the British band's stadium shows. “I’m trying to figure out with the sisters quite where the beef is. Didn’t they understand this was a song about the horrors of slavery? But they’re trying to bury it. At the moment I don’t want to get into conflicts,” the superstar told the paper. “I’m hoping that we’ll be able to resurrect the babe in her glory somewhere along the track,” Richards, 77, added.

The gritty rock chart-topper officially

released in 1971 opens with the lyric “Gold coast slave ship bound for cotton fields” and references beating enslaved people, and sex with young enslaved women. In recent years magazine critics and others in the industry have criticized the song as “racist,” including one writer for New York Magazine who called the track “gross, sexist, and stunningly offensive toward black women.” “We’ve played ‘Brown Sugar’ every night since 1970, so sometimes you think, We’ll take that one out for now and see how it goes,” frontman Mick Jagger told the LA Times.

“We might put it back in,” he said, adding “the set list in a stadium show, it’s kind of a tough one.” In 1995 Jagger told Rolling Stone magazine that “I never would write that song now.” “I would probably censor myself. I’d think, ‘Oh God, I can’t. I’ve got to stop’. God knows what I’m on about on that song. It’s such a mishmash. All the nasty subjects in one go.” The Stones resurrected their “No Filter” tour in September after a long pause due to the coronavirus pandemic. They will play a string of dates into November 2021 including in Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Detroit. — AFP



(From left) Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, and Ronnie Wood of The Rolling Stones touch down at Hollywood Burbank Airport ahead of their shows at SoFi Stadium on October 14, 2021 and October 17, 2021 for their NO FILTER Tour. — AFP

Adele's new album out November 19

The much-anticipated new album from Adele, her first in six years, will be released on November 19, the British singer announced on Wednesday. The recording of “30” began three years ago, she wrote on Twitter, at a time when her life was “a maze of absolute mess and inner turmoil”. Given that Adele has sold millions of albums around the world and won a slew of awards, including an Oscar and 15 Grammys, the release is arguably the most anticipated of the year. She broke a five-year silence with an interview for Vogue, published last week, that spoke of her “year of anxiety” and living like a recluse.

It began with two cancelled shows at London's Wembley Stadium in 2017 due to problems with her voice, and led to her retreating completely from the public glare. It was also during this time that her marriage fell apart. “I’ve learned a lot of blistering home truths about myself along the way. I’ve shed many layers but also wrapped myself in new ones,” she wrote in the Twitter post. — AFP

Bali reopens to international flights but no tourists in sight

Bali reopened to international flights from select countries yesterday, including China, Japan and France, as the pandemic-struck Indonesian holiday island took a step toward welcoming back tourists. But authorities in Bali, which lost its primary source of income as tourism dried up, said there was no international flights expected yesterday. Foreign visitors must be vaccinated, quarantine in a hotel for five days and follow strict visa requirements under new entry rules for travellers.

“We’re ready and waiting for international flights,” said airport spokesman Taufan Yudhistira. “But so far there’s nothing scheduled today.” Bali's Ngurah Rai International Airport was open to travellers from 19 countries including South Korea, China, Japan, France, the United Arab Emirates, Dubai and New Zealand, authorities said. The partial reopening, however, does not include Australians—a key source of the millions of tourists who flocked to the palm-fringed island before the pandemic. — AFP



This undated image courtesy of the Museum of Natural History of Vienna (NHMW), shows a 2,600 year-old-human excrement from the Hallstatt salt mines in which beans, millet and barley are clearly visible. — AFP photos



This undated image shows a 2,600-year-old human excrement from the Hallstatt salt mines in which beans, millet and barley are clearly visible.

Humans were already enjoying blue cheese and beer 2,700 years ago

Humans' love for cheese and beer goes back a long way. But according to a scientific study published Wednesday, workers at a salt mine in Austria were already enjoying blue cheese and beer as far back as 2,700 years ago. Scientists made the discovery by analyzing samples of human excrement found at the heart of the Hallstatt mine in the Austrian Alps. The study was published in the journal Current Biology on Wednesday. Frank Maixner, a microbiologist at the Eurac Research Institute in Bolzano, Italy, who was the lead author of the report, said he was surprised to learn that salt miners over two millennia ago were advanced enough to "use fermentation intentionally."

"This is very sophisticated in my opinion," Maixner told AFP. "This is something I did not expect at that time." The finding was the earliest evidence to date of cheese ripening in Europe, according to researchers. And while alcohol consumption is certainly well documented in older writings and archaeological evidence, the salt miners' feces contained the first molecular evidence of beer consumption on the continent at that time.

"It is becoming increasingly clear that not only were prehistoric culinary practices sophisticated, but also that complex processed foodstuffs as well as the technique of fermentation have held a prominent role in our early food history," said Kerstin Kowarik of the Museum of Natural History

Vienna. The town of Hallstatt, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has been used for salt production for more than 3,000 years, according to Maixner. The community "is a very particular place, it's located in the Alps, in the middle of nowhere," he explained. "The whole community worked and lived from this mine."

The miners spent their entire days there, working, eating and going to the bathroom right there, at the mine. It is thanks to the constant temperature of around 8C (46F) and the high concentration of salt at the mine that the miners' feces were preserved particularly well. Researchers analyzed four samples: one dating back to the Bronze Age, two from the Iron Age, and one from the 18th century. One of them, about 2,700 years old, was found to contain two fungi, *Penicillium roqueforti* and *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. Both are known today for their use in food making. —AFP

In this undated image archaeologists work in one of the Iron Age mining areas inside the Hallstatt salt mountain.



Prince William tells space tourists: Fix Earth instead

Britain's Prince William ignited controversy yesterday by blasting space tourism and saying that more attention should be paid to problems closer to home ahead of the COP26 climate summit. The comments by Queen Elizabeth II's grandson aired in a BBC interview yesterday, a day after 90-year-old "Star Trek" star William Shatner became a real space traveller on Blue Origin's second crewed mission.

The company's maiden human flight in July had included its founder Jeff Bezos of Amazon and was seen as a breakthrough for the emerging space tourism sector. But Prince William said: "We need some of the world's greatest brains and minds fixed on trying to repair this planet, not trying to find the next place to go and live." Virgin Galactic, which offers a similar experience of a few minutes of weightlessness and a view of the Earth's curvature from the cosmos, launched its founder Richard Branson in July, a few days before Bezos. The comments by William, second in line to the UK throne, were rebuffed by critics who pointed to the scientific value of mankind's decades-old forays into the final frontier.

British space scientist and broadcaster Maggie Aderin-Pocock said she agreed with William that humanity had made a "mess" of Earth, and had to learn the lessons. "But it can't be our only focus. Space is inspirational. Because of 'Star Trek', I became a space scientist, now I work on climate change," she said on ITV. "I'm going to COP26 next month to talk about how space is helping us with climate change. So yes, we need to focus on climate change, but it can't be the only thing." The group Republic, which campaigns to abolish Britain's monarchy, said William should "keep his ill-informed opinions to himself".

"This is politics, and while space tourism is questionable, science benefits from space exploration," it tweeted. "We may agree or disagree, but lectures from a hypocrite who can't be properly challenged are a real problem."

'Ahead of the curve'

William was speaking ahead of the inaugural Earthshot Prize awards ceremony on Sunday, his initiative to honor those working on environmental solutions. Looking ahead to the COP26 summit in Glasgow, which begins on October 31, he warned world leaders against "clever speak, clever words, but not enough action".

"It would be an absolute disaster if (son) George is sat here talking to you... in like 30 years' time, still saying the same thing, because by then we will be too late." William's father Prince Charles, a lifelong environmentalist, has also spoken out on the need for action from the leaders rather than words in the build-up to the UN climate summit. —AFP



Visitors walk past an artwork by German artist Olaf Nicolai entitled MARX during the Frieze Art Fair.

Frieze London art fair returns after pandemic break

Britain's prestigious annual art fair, Frieze London, reopened on Wednesday, for the first time since the coronavirus pandemic forced it online. Staged in giant tents in Regent's Park, as well as across the 410-acre (170-hectare) green space, the event showcases both contemporary art and earlier works, including Old Masters. The organ-

izers cancelled the physical event last year because of the challenges thrown up by the pandemic, instead creating a platform for commercial galleries to show art online. This year, with the art market returning to physical shows, more than 150 galleries are involved, but visitors have to show proof of vaccination or a negative test.



Exhibitors work at the Frieze Art Fair in Regents Park in London. — AFP photos



A visitor uses a phone next to sculptures by Belgian artist Johan Creten entitled Wargame Tondo VI, Wargame Tondo IX and Wargame Tondo VIII during the Frieze Art Fair.



Visitors admire the It's Always You Cutouts by Canadian artist Sin Wai Kin during the Frieze Art Fair.



Visitors admire artworks during the Frieze Art Fair.

“Everyone is just so excited and happy,” said Nathan Clements-Gillespie, artistic director at Frieze Masters. “It’s been nice seeing all these friendly faces, seeing the exhibitors back in the tent. “Everything about the last few years has been challenging,” he added, noting that enthusiasts had adapted “but equally people want to see and experience art in person”.

At Frieze Masters, the dapper, east London-based artists Gilbert & George posed in front of one of their prints. The besuited duo put themselves centre-stage in photographic works exploring the sometimes seamy sides of British life,

often set in London’s East End. The Thaddaeus Ropac gallery, which has branches in London, Paris, Salzburg and Seoul, is showing their works as part of a project recreating a groundbreaking 1982 show, which also includes photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe.

“We hadn’t seen this picture for maybe 40 years,” said George, dressed in a rust-coloured suit with a yellow button-hole, admiring a print called “Street Meet”. It features a heroic young male figure against the backdrop of the central Spitalfields Market.



A visitor walks past an artwork called Piccadilly Circus by Brazilian artist Vik Muniz.



A visitor works on a laptop during the Frieze Art Fair in Regents Park in London.



A visitor walks past the sculpture ‘Event Horizon’ 2019, by Bulgarian artist Stoyan Dechev during the Frieze Art Fair.



A visitor admires an artwork by British artist Rachel Maclean in the Josh Lilley gallery during the Frieze Art Fair.

“We think it looks quite modern”, added Gilbert, wearing a green tweed suit. Despite the pandemic, the artists, who are both in their 70s, have been busy creating new work and staging solo shows around the world. “We feel always guilty because there’s all this horrific bereavement all over the world, and during the same period we did London, Paris, New York, Brussels, Frankfurt and Berlin,” said George. They are also building a gallery to show their art on London’s Brick Lane. “Full steam ahead. It’s going to be finished in February, I think,” said Gilbert. — AFP



A visitor walks past an artwork entitled Beauty Lying in the Heat of the Summer Night by Czech artist Vojtech Kovarik during the Frieze Art Fair.



Visitors look at artwork entitled Ru k' ox k'ob'el jun ojer etemab'el (The Echo of An Ancient Form of Knowledge) by Guatemalan artist Edgar Calel during the Frieze Art Fair.



Visitors contemplate the sculpture 'Muamba Grove #1,#3 & #4', 2019 by Brazilian artist Vanessa da Silva during the Frieze Art Fair.



A visitor takes a photograph of the sculpture 'Quantum Shift (Parabolic Monolith Sirius Titanium)', 2021 by American contemporary artist Gisela Colon during the Frieze Art Fair.



Visitors contemplate the sculpture 'Environnement de Transchromie Circulaire', 1965-2017, by Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz-Diez during the Frieze Art Fair.



A visitor contemplates the sculpture 'Untitled', 2021 by Portuguese artist Jose Pedro Croft during the Frieze Art Fair.

Word Search

Autumn

P	U	D	S	R	V	T	O	S	C
E	L	D	E	A	E	K	E	M	H
O	E	R	P	H	S	C	V	B	O
C	B	R	T	R	T	A	O	E	O
T	O	E	E	A	I	B	N	R	L
R	S	B	M	N	N	F	A	L	L
U	E	A	S	O	E	L	G	N	I
B	H	A	L	L	A	V	E	S	C
B	S	T	O	O	W	E	E	N	O
E	R	B	O	E	Z	A	M	N	R

Find all the words from the word list:

BACK TO SCHOOL

CORN MAZE

FALLING LEAVES

HALLOWEEN

HARVEST

NOVEMBER

OCTOBER

PUDDLE

RAIN

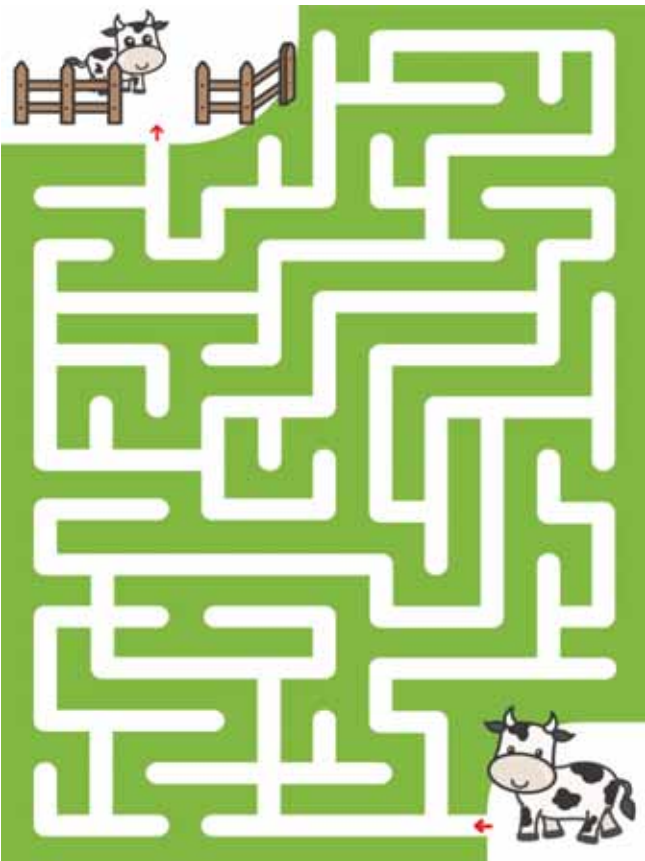
RUBBER BOOTS

SEASON

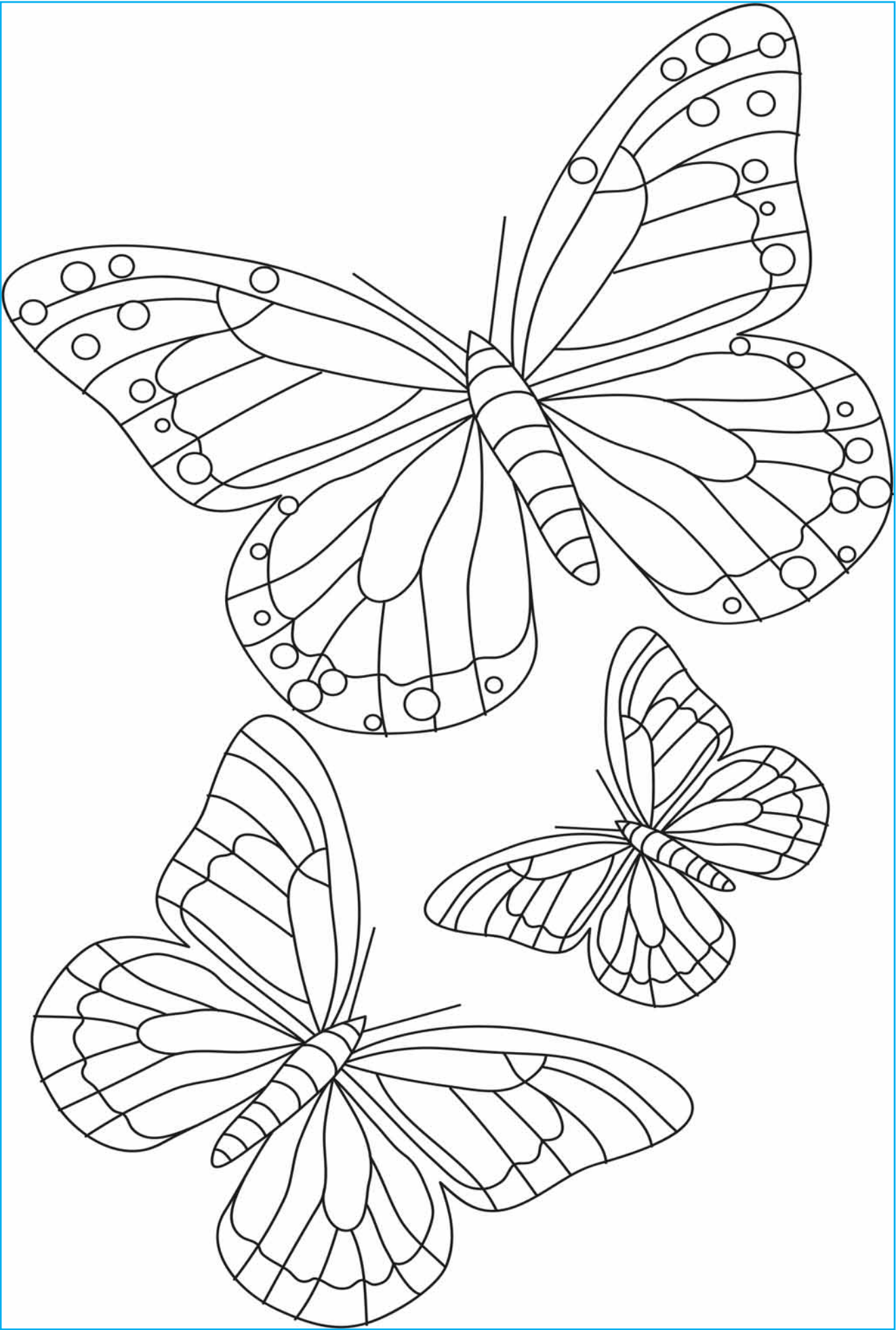
SEPTEMBER



Kids Mazes



Color It



Find the objects






FIND THESE ANIMALS IN THE PICTURE

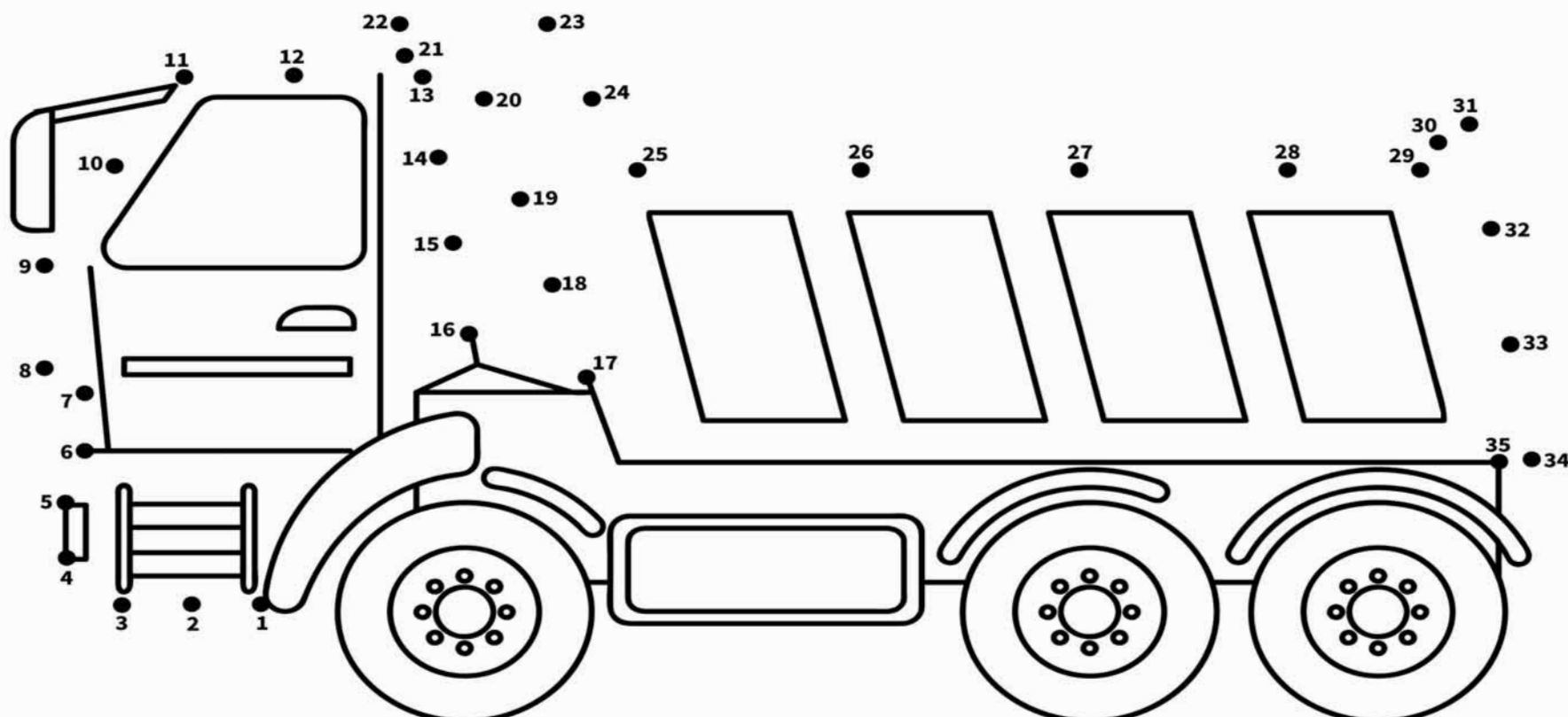


Word Scramble

HALLOWEEN WORD SCRAMBLE

	TAB	_____	
	RENTLAN	_____	
	LUSKL	_____	
	PIRAVEM	_____	
	HOGST	_____	
	CHTIW	_____	
	NEVAR	_____	
	RONDLAUC	_____	

Join the dots



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2021

Business

33 China's factory inflation hit 25-year high in September**34** Turkish lira hits record low as Erdogan sacks central bankers**35** Global shortages crimp growth in economic powerhouse Germany

Afghan pomegranate pickers left jobless

Thousands of tons of the juicy red fruit rot at shuttered border



KANDAHAR: A vendor selling pomegranate juice waits for customers at his stall in Kandahar. — AFP

KANDAHAR: Afghanistan's festive pomegranate season has begun, but this year thousands of tons of the juicy red fruit risk rotting on trucks blocked at Pakistan's frequently shuttered border-leaving thousands of farm workers unemployed. With its tart and crunchy, ruby-red seeds locked inside a leathery red rind, the pomegranate is renowned for its health benefits, and is one of the most important crops in the country's south.

But the fruit is ripening as Afghanistan finds itself engulfed in a multitude of crises that have metastasized since the Taliban seized control two months ago. "We have 15,000 farm workers in this region who have been laid off because the trade has been paralyzed and the fruit is rotting," Haji Nani Agha, who heads the Fresh Fruits Union in Kandahar, said. In the shade of pomegranate

shrubs, the melon-sized fruits fill burlap bags and crates being loaded onto trucks soon to head towards the Spin Boldak border with Pakistan.

But there their voyage comes to a halt. Islamabad has cut sales tax on imported fruits to zero in a bid to boost trade from its neighbor, but also tightened controls on ordinary Afghans trying to cross over, fearing illegal entries. It has caused a tug-of-war between Pakistani authorities and Afghanistan's new rulers, who have frequently closed the border in protest. Exporters hoping to sell their wares have found themselves stuck for days and even weeks in scorching heat. "It is a catastrophe for all of Afghanistan, because all of Afghan trade goes through this border," Agha said.

Usually, between 40,000 and 50,000 tons are exported across

this border to Pakistan, and also on to India and the Gulf states each year. But so far, only 4,490 tons have left the country, according to Abdul Baqi Beena of the Chamber of Commerce in the southern city of Kandahar.

"These products are waiting to be sold, but the more they are delayed, the more their quality deteriorates and the more their sale value plummets," he said. Even before the dramatic power shift, Afghanistan's agriculture sector had been hard-hit by drought and intense fighting in a number of provinces. For years, the previous Western-backed Afghan governments and international donors tried to convince farmers to give up farming poppies for illegal opium production and instead grow fruit—such as pomegranates. —AFP



شركة الصفاة للاستثمار
AL SAFAT INVESTMENT COMPANY

PREMIER MARKET WEEKLY TECHNICAL BULLETIN

WEEK ENDED ON 14 OCTOBER 2021

No.	Ticker	Sector	Price Movement & Performance											Valuation Multiples *			
			Open Price	Close Price	Week High	Week Low	Range	Volume	WTD Change	WTD %	YTD %	Support Level	Resistance Level	P/E	P/B	Yield	Beta
101	National Bank of Kuwait	Banking	956	947	956	934	22	15,105,389	-6	-0.63%	12.74%	939	951	23.0	2.04	2.0%	1.27
102	Gulf Bank	Banking	239	237	239	235	4	22,332,471	-1	-0.42%	8.22%	237	240	21.5	1.12	2.0%	1.13
106	Kuwait International Bank	Banking	225	223	226	223	3	8,144,524	2	-2.00%	-0.89%	222	226	NM	0.98	0.0%	1.01
107	Burgan Bank	Banking	229	232	233	228	5	11,319,474	2	0.87%	8.92%	225	230	18.3	0.94	2.0%	1.05
108	Kuwait Finance House	Banking	821	807	822	801	21	36,036,749	-13	-1.59%	19.20%	801	815	35.2	3.64	1.1%	1.41
109	Boubyan Bank	Banking	767	771	771	760	11	1,686,268	4	0.52%	35.74%	761	773	63.3	4.53	0.0%	1.05
204	National Investments	Financial Services	193	200	202	192	10	10,750,290	9	4.71%	48.15%	195	203	7.2	0.93	5.0%	1.24
205	Kuwait Projects	Financial Services	155	157	159	154	5	4,612,945	1	0.64%	-1.26%	153	159	NM	1.52	3.1%	0.59
252	Al Imtiaz Investment	Financial Services	136	136	139	133	6	26,427,445	0	0.00%	21.43%	132	137	NM	0.83	0.0%	0.99
401	Kuwait Real Estate	Real Estate	157	157	159	154	5	20,257,233	1	0.64%	44.04%	154	159	30.4	1.15	0.0%	0.97
413	Mabaneer	Real Estate	767	759	773	758	15	2,285,406	-8	-1.04%	15.53%	751	761	19.1	1.78	0.7%	1.11
501	National Industries	Financial Services	240	242	243	237	6	18,562,672	2	0.83%	37.50%	239	246	6.2	0.90	0.0%	1.44
505	Gulf Cable	Industrials	857	839	859	829	30	324,988	-14	-1.64%	11.13%	833	846	31.4	0.95	6.0%	0.93
514	Boubyan Petrochemical	Basic Materials	894	965	977	870	107	4,574,787	80	9.04%	50.78%	939	965	27.4	2.27	5.5%	0.72
526	Al Qurain	Basic Materials	377	386	393	368	25	11,613,360	10	2.66%	14.20%	374	392	31.0	1.02	3.9%	0.75
603	Agility	Industrials	979	976	984	962	22	8,130,066	-3	-0.31%	44.38%	966	981	28.4	1.86	0.9%	1.49
605	Zain	Telecommunications	600	599	602	597	5	13,636,147	0	0.00%	-1.16%	597	602	13.8	2.24	5.5%	1.36
623	Human Soft Holding	Industrials	3,286	3,300	3,330	3,275	55	690,519	15	0.46%	-13.14%	3286	3315	6.0	3.80	12.1%	0.49
642	ALAFCO	Industrials	237	230	238	228	10	8,846,199	-6	-2.54%	6.48%	229	237	NM	0.74	0.0%	0.86
818	Ahli United Bank	Banking	283	285	288	281	7	47,710,705	2	0.71%	25.55%	282	287	21.1	2.29	1.3%	1.13
821	Warba Bank	Banking	264	271	272	260	12	15,455,105	8	3.04%	14.83%	262	273	16.1	2.15	0.0%	0.99
823	Mezzan Holding	Consumer Staples	633	644	645	630	15	2,014,723	12	1.90%	5.92%	638	650	20.4	1.84	2.7%	0.44
824	Integrated Holding	Industrials	376	371	379	370	9	8,488,891	-3	-0.80%	1.37%	371	376	NM	1.55	0.0%	0.48
826	Shamal Az-Zour	Utilities	235	234	237	232	5	8,012,242	-1	-0.43%	-15.52%	233	238	20.2	4.90	5.1%	0.67
827	Boursa Kuwait	Financial Services	1,840	1,803	1,840	1,800	40	481,762	-35	-1.90%	63.91%	1798	1840	12.9	6.88	2.2%	0.75

* As of end of week closing

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Business

IMF, G20 fret over supply chain bottlenecks and inflation fears

Georgieva attributes supply chain woes to lag in vaccination rates

WASHINGTON: Global finance officials gathered in Washington on Wednesday were focused on finding a way to alleviate supply chain bottlenecks that are driving prices higher and threatening to derail the economic recovery. As demand has spiked, suppliers have not been able to keep up: Ships are lined up outside American ports waiting to offload goods, US consumer inflation remained elevated in September, global oil prices have jumped over \$80 a barrel, the highest in years, and British families may be forced to do without turkeys for Christmas dinner.

The global supply challenges are a key focus of meetings of the International Monetary Fund, the Group of 20 advanced economies and the smaller gathering of finance ministers from the Group of Seven.

Pandemic restrictions shuttered manufacturing and trade routes while suppliers, who are facing shortages of workers and truck drivers, have not been able to keep up with the sudden surge in demand for goods as economies began to reopen. The disruptions, which some policy-makers fear may be long lasting, have hobbled the recovery momentum, prompting the IMF to cut growth forecasts for major economies like the United States and Germany.

G7 officials agreed to work together to monitor the difficulties. "Supply chain issues are being felt globally-and finance leaders from around the globe must collaborate to address our shared challenges," said UK Chancellor of

the Exchequer Rishi Sunak, who chaired the meeting of the world's richest nations. The World Bank estimates 8.5 percent of global container shipping is stalled in or around ports, twice as much as in January.

Inflation threat

Italy's central bank chief Ignazio Visco agreed with the IMF and others who have said the inflation pressures are mostly due to short-term factors like the surge in demand and the supply issues.

But he acknowledged that "these may take months before fading away." G20 central bankers are studying the issue to see if there are "more structural factors at work" in the bigger-than-expected inflation spike, and "whether there is some component... that could become permanent," Visco told reporters. Central bankers are walking a fine line between supporting the recovery with easy financial conditions while warding off a permanent increase in inflation. The G20 communique said central banks "will act as needed" to address price stability "while looking through inflation pressures where they are transitory." But World Bank President David Malpass warned that some of the price spikes "will not be transitory."

"It will take time and cooperation of policy-makers across the world to sort them out." IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva said the lag in vaccination rates to contain the pandemic in develop-



WASHINGTON: Activists dressed as "debt collectors" hold cutouts of the leaders of Italy, Mario Draghi, United Kingdom, Boris Johnson, United States, Joe Biden, Australia, Scott Morrison and Canada, Justin Trudeau during a demonstration in front of the International Monetary Fund headquarters. —AFP

ing nations is contributing to the supply constraints, and "as long as it widens, this risk of interruptions in global supply chains is going to be higher." In the world's largest economy, US President Joe Biden on Wednesday announced an initiative to ease the backlog by pushing for

24-hour service at ports and suppliers. He won the commitments to work extended hours from the leaders of the giant West Coast port of Los Angeles and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, as well as from companies including Walmart, FedEx and UPS. — AFP

JPMorgan Chase profits jump

NEW YORK: JPMorgan Chase reported higher third-quarter profits Wednesday as the improving economic outlook allowed it to include in earnings \$2.1 billion set aside earlier in the pandemic for potential loan defaults. The big US bank, kicking off the quarterly earnings season for large financial companies, reported profits of \$11.7 billion, up 24 percent from the year-ago period as chief executive Jamie Dimon offered a fairly upbeat outlook.

Revenues rose one percent to \$29.7 billion. Besides the boost from lower reserves for bad loans, JPMorgan's results were lifted by a surge in financial advisory revenues tied to mergers and acquisition and initial public offerings.

Those gains helped offset a modest decline in revenues tied to trading in financial markets. The bank saw a 26 percent jump in debit and credit card volumes. But firm-wide loan growth was anemic, the latest instance of modest lending that has been seen as due to the availability of government support programs during the pandemic.

Chief Executive Jamie Dimon called Tuesday's IMF projection for 5.9 percent growth in 2021 and 4.9 percent growth in 2022 "great numbers," considering the blow from COVID-19. "The most important thing is you get good growth," Dimon said on a conference call with reporters. — AFP

US jobless claims dip below 300,000

ARLINGTON: New applications for US unemployment benefits dipped below 300,000 last week for the first time since COVID-19 sent them skyrocketing into the millions early last year, according to government data released yesterday. There were 293,000 initial claims for unemployment benefit submitted the week ended October 9, the Labor Department said, 36,000 less than the previous week.

That took the total closer to the 256,000 filed in the week of March 14, 2020, just before the pandemic caused mass layoffs. Weekly jobless claims, a closely watched metric of labor market health, remained elevated throughout 2020, but dropped substantially this year as COVID-19 vaccines allowed businesses to reopen. They level has oscillated in recent weeks as the Delta variant injected uncertainty into the labor market, but analysts saw last week's drop as proof of an improving employment situation.

"Initial claims are now within striking distance of their pre-pandemic level, which could be reached later this year as the Delta wave recedes and hiring improves," Daniel Zhao of job search site Glassdoor said on Twitter. Another 21,624 claims, not seasonally adjusted, were filed last week under the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which was created to aid freelance workers not normally eligible for aid but expired weeks ago. All told, more than 3.6 million people were receiving jobless benefits under all programs as of the

week ended September 25, the latest for which data was available. The report showed another record low was seen in insured unemployment, the share of workers actually receiving benefits.

As of October 2, 2,593,000 people were receiving regular benefits, a drop of 134,000 from the prior week and the lowest level since the pandemic began. The insured unemployment rate as of that week was 1.9 percent, slightly lower than the week before, the report said. —AFP



ARLINGTON, US: Women walk past by a "Now Hiring" sign outside a store in Arlington, Virginia. — AFP

Business

China's factory inflation hit 25-year high in September

Figures fan concerns higher prices could filter through supply chains

BEIJING: China's factory inflation hit its highest level in a quarter of a century on surging commodity costs last month, with yesterday's figures fanning concerns that higher prices could filter through supply chains and into the global economy. The reopening from lockdowns around the world has ramped up demand for energy just as stockpiles are low, made worse by China's drive to meet environmental goals by slashing emissions targets.

The producer price index (PPI), which measures the cost of goods at the factory gate, hit 10.7 percent, the National Bureau of Statistics said, marking the biggest jump in its data going back to October 1996. The index had already hit a 13-year high in August, reflecting a surge in commodity prices—and piling pressure on businesses. Many factories have been forced to halt operations because of power outages caused by emissions reduction targets, the surging price of coal and supply shortages. Chinese authorities have since ordered mines to expand production, with energy firms told to ensure there are adequate fuel supplies for winter.

"In September, affected by factors such as rising prices of coal and some energy-intensive industry products, the price increase of industrial products continued to expand," NBS senior statistician Dong Lijuan said in a statement. Dong added that among 40 industrial sectors surveyed, 36 saw price hikes—including coal mining, which had a 74.9 percent rise. For now, there are "few signs" power shortages are feeding into the prices of finished consumer goods, said Sheana Yue, assistant economist at Capital Economics.

The consumer price index (CPI), a key gauge

of retail inflation, hit 0.7 percent in September, slightly down from August. The NBS said pork prices—which fuelled a spike in CPI previously—fell by 46.9 percent on an annual basis.

Stagflation risk

But Zhiwei Zhang, chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management, cautioned that, with prices soaring and economic growth showing signs of slowing, "the risk of stagflation is rising in China as well as the rest of the world". "The ambitious goal of carbon neutrality puts persistent pressure on commodity prices, which will be passed to downstream firms," Zhang added.

Beijing has set a target of reaching peak carbon emissions by 2030, and becoming carbon neutral by 2060. As authorities seek ways to ease the energy crisis, economists warn of the risk of worsening factory inflation.

The country's cabinet, the State Council, said this month that electricity prices would be allowed to rise by up to 20 percent against a benchmark—double the level of the current cap—helping to make it profitable for electricity producers to boost supply. But such a move adds to inflation pressures, leaving authorities with the complicated task of trying to tame prices while also needing to boost the flagging economy. Third-quarter GDP data is due out next week. ANZ Research senior China strategist Zhaopeng Xing said the electricity price cap move was likely to boost headline PPI and warned September's reading will "not be its peak", forecasting higher numbers in October or November.

Yue, however, expected factory-gate inflation would moderate, saying "coal and metal



SHENYANG, China: People buy vegetables at a market in Shenyang in China's northeastern Liaoning province yesterday. — AFP

prices are likely to drop back as property construction slows". Analysts earlier cautioned of a looming hit from the power crunch on other aspects of China's economy such as foreign trade, with supply disruptions possibly filtering down supply chains. That comes as central banks around the world begin to wind back the ultra-loose monetary policies put in place at the start of the pandemic, which were key to

supporting economies but which now are helping fan inflation.

Concerns about China's property sector have also seen the People's Bank of China pump more money into the market in recent weeks. The government has been trying to halt spillover risk from teetering Chinese real estate giant Evergrande, which is bogged down in a \$300 billion debt quagmire. — AFP

Singapore tightens monetary policy as economy recovers

SINGAPORE: Singapore's central bank tightened monetary policy for the first time in three years yesterday, the latest country to act against inflation as coronavirus-hit economies reopen amid continuing supply chain bottlenecks. The world's central bankers are walking a fine line between supporting economic recovery with easy financial conditions while preventing a long-term increase in prices. The move by the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) came as the economy grew 6.5 percent year-on-year in the third quarter, according to preliminary estimates, extending the city-state's recovery from its worst-ever recession last year due to the pandemic.

Singapore has taken a strategy of living with the virus by ramping up its vaccination rate—currently at around 85 percent—as it opens up the economy and eases travel for those who have been vaccinated. Inflation has been rising across the world as supply chains

struggle to meet surging demand, prompting central banks such as those in New Zealand and South Korea to tighten monetary policy.

"MAS' move is in response to concerns that inflation globally may stay elevated for longer than what may be currently perceived," said Song Seng Wun, a regional economist with CIMB Private Banking.

"For Singapore, which imports everything from food on the table to shoes, it is inevitable that a stronger exchange rate is needed to contain inflation as much as possible," he told AFP. This is all the more crucial as the economy is expected to continue growing into next year with further opening-up and as travel gains pace, he added. Singapore's conducts monetary policy through the exchange rate in which the local dollar is managed against a basket of the currencies of its major trading partners.

MAS said yesterday said it will "raise slightly" the slope of the Singapore dollar's exchange policy band from zero percent, which would allow for a modest appreciation of the unit.

This "will ensure price stability over the medium term while recognizing the risks to the economic recovery", it said. Singapore has registered more than 135,000 virus cases but a very low level of fatalities compared with other countries, reporting just 192 deaths. — AFP

Chile's central bank flags biggest rate hike in 20 years

SANTIAGO: The Central Bank of Chile on Wednesday announced a hike in its benchmark rate from 1.50 percent to 2.75 percent, the biggest hike in 20 years as the country grapples with inflationary pressures. The bank raised the interest rate by 125 basis points in the face of a "macroeconomic scenario which increased the risks concerning the (official) objective of inflation at three percent," the bank said in a statement. The move came after the consumer price index (CPI) rose 1.2 percent in September, the highest monthly spike in 13 years, representing a rise of 4.4 percent since early 2021 and of 5.3 percent over the previous twelve months.

Inflation has been spurred by greater liquidity in the country after votes in Congress that allowed Chileans to withdraw funds on three occasions from their private retirement savings in order to weather the economic and social consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. The Central Bank indicated further rate hikes could follow, and the economy's trajectory will be assessed in the next monetary policy report, "bearing in mind the need to avoid a more persistent rise in inflation," the bank said. Chile ended 2020 with three percent inflation, but several experts warned of an "overheating economy" and inflationary risks if a fourth withdrawal of funds from private retirement savings, currently being debated in Congress, is approved. — AFP

Business

Turkish lira hits record low as Erdogan sacks central bankers

Embattled Turkish currency has lost nearly a fifth of its value so far this year

ISTANBUL: The Turkish lira sank to a record low against the US dollar yesterday after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan fired three central bank members in an overnight decree. The embattled Turkish currency has lost nearly a fifth of its value so far this year as market concerns over the policy-setting bank's independence hit fever pitch.

Erdogan removed two deputy governors and a member of the monetary policy committee, according to a decision published in the official gazette. One of the dismissed bankers was reportedly the only one to vote against a surprise interest rate cut that sent the lira on a new downward spiral last month.

"The direction of travel is worrying and there can't be many (if any) investors left that believe the central bank of Turkey is still taking the fight against inflation seriously," analyst Jason Tuvey of Capital Economics told AFP. The Turkish lira fell overnight by around one percent to 9.19 to the dollar, a record low, before rallying to 9.13 in the afternoon. Emerging market currencies are weakening across the world on expectations that the US Federal Reserve and European Central Bank

will soon start raising interest rates, making their assets more attractive. But Turkey's currency is falling faster than most others because of political concerns about Erdogan. The lira moved past the nine to the dollar mark for the first time on Monday, when Erdogan suggested that Turkey might conduct a new military operation in Syria.

A dollar was worth 3.75 lira at the start of 2018. Erdogan has fired three central bank governors since 2019, undermining investor confidence and leading to losses in the value of the lira that make life more difficult for ordinary Turks. The powerful Turkish leader has called high interest rates "the mother and father of all evil", demanding cheap money policies that stimulate lending, investment and economic growth. But this push for economic expansion at all costs has seen the annual inflation rate soar to nearly 20 percent—four times higher than the government's official target. Current central bank governor Sahap Kavcioglu had resisted lowering interest rates during his first five months in the job, leading to speculation that he was about to be dismissed. But the bank lowered the one-week repo rate to 18 percent from 19 percent on September 23. —AFP



ISTANBUL: A currency exchange official counts Turkish Lira banknotes in front of the electronic panel displaying currency exchange rates at an exchange office in Istanbul. —AFP

US Trade Rep signals shift towards WTO disputes

GENEVA: US Trade Representative Katherine Tai yesterday signaled a shift in Washington's stance on the World Trade Organization's dispute resolution process. "We all recognize the importance of the WTO, and we all want it to succeed," Tai said in a speech to be delivered at The Geneva Institute's Geneva Trade Platform.

But she said the WTO must be "flexible." Under the administration of former president Donald Trump, the United States brought the WTO's dispute settlement system to a grinding halt in December 2019 by blocking the appointment of new judges to the key Appellate Body.

Tai, who was appointed by Trump's successor Joe Biden, indicated Washington is looking to thaw relations with the global trade body and improve how trade conflicts are settled. "We believe we may succeed in reforming the negotiating pillar if we create a more flexible WTO, change the way we approach problems collectively, improve transparency and inclusiveness and restore the deliberative function of the organization," she said, according to excerpts of her speech.

The organization's seven-member Appellate Body can uphold, modify or reverse a dispute panel's initial findings. US criticism of the process predates Trump, although he cranked up hostilities to new levels. While Washington has won most of the cases litigated by the WTO, Trump's administration accused the body of exceeding its powers with judgments viewed as violating of national sovereignty.

Even Tai noted that the dispute settlement proves "has become synonymous with litigation-litigation that is prolonged, expensive, and contentious." WTO chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala hopes to get the problem resolved before the next trade ministerial conference later this year. —AFP

Fed officials lean towards cutting back on stimulus

WASHINGTON: Unless the US economic situation changes dramatically, Federal Reserve officials are leaning towards cutting back on monetary stimulus as soon as November, according to a central bank document released Wednesday. The date when the Fed will pull back on its monthly bond purchases has been a closely watched topic for months, and the policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) last month indicated the time could come "soon."

The minutes of the FOMC meeting released Wednesday showed officials speaking positively of plans to begin cutting back on the bond purchases as soon as after their next meeting scheduled for November and end it by mid-2022. Officials indicated that "provided that the economic recovery remained broadly on track, a gradual tapering process that concluded around the middle of next year would likely be appropriate," according to the minutes.

If the FOMC makes the decision at the next meeting then "the process of tapering could commence with the monthly purchase calendars beginning in either mid-November or mid-December." The central bank currently buys \$80 billion in Treasury bonds and \$40 billion in mortgage-backed securities each month, a policy implemented early last year as the COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented downturn.

But the policy has increasingly been questioned in recent months amid rising inflation. The minutes showed participants favored a plan to cut purchases of Treasury bonds by \$10 billion a month, and reduce mortgage-backed securities by \$5 billion a month. With inflation spiking through much of this year, central bankers' forecasts released at last month's meeting showed interest rates could be hiked off zero as soon as next year.



KARACHI: A stockbroker watches an index board showing the latest share prices during a trading session at the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) in Karachi yesterday. —AFP

According to the minutes Fed officials acknowledged inflation could worsen. "Most participants saw inflation risks as weighted to the upside because of concerns that supply disruptions and labor shortages might last longer and might have larger or more persistent effects on prices and wages than they currently assumed," the minutes said. Fed officials also discussed the ongoing impact of COVID-19, noting that the increase in labor force participation expected once vaccines were rolled out "had not yet materialized." Employers nationwide have struggled to fill open positions, even though the economy remains about five million jobs short of its pre-pandemic total.

"Various participants suggested that a complete return to pre-pandemic conditions was unlikely" since many people had decided to leave the workforce through retirement and other means, the minutes said. But some Fed officials predicted the labor force would snap back to where it was in February 2020, once the virus receded. —AFP

Business

Global shortages crimp growth in economic powerhouse Germany

Research groups revise down growth estimate for 2021 to 2.4%

FRANKFURT: Global shortages in industrial components and raw materials have cramped Germany's export driven economy, prompting the country's leading economic institutes to slash their forecast for growth this year yesterday. In their biannual forecast, the research groups revised down the estimate for 2021 to 2.4 percent, from their earlier prediction of 3.7 percent made in April. "The corona(virus) pandemic still shapes the economic situation in Germany," the institutes (DIW, Ifo, IWH and RWI) said in a joint statement, preventing a return to normal economic activity.

After rapid growth in spring, the German economy had been held back by supply bottlenecks "hampering manufacturing" and meant that "only the consumer-related service industries are growing", the institutes said. Together the institutes expect pandemic effects and shortages to be "gradually overcome" in 2022, raising their forecast for growth in the year to 4.8 percent from 3.9 percent. Earlier this week, the International Monetary Fund downgraded its own global economic forecasts, including Germany's outlook, pointing the finger at supply chain disruptions.

'Difficult autumn'

Businesses have to prepare for a "difficult autumn", Joachim Lang, the head of Germany's influential industrial lobby, the BDI, said last week in response to sinking export figures. Ralph Wiechers, chief economist at the mechanical engineering industry group VDMA, told AFP that businesses were being confronted with shortages across the board, "whether it's wood for pallets, packing materials, steel—an important input for our industry—or computer chips, semiconductors".

Orders from customers have also begun to drop among the companies Wiechers represents due to an inability to lay their hands on materials. "They are not getting the plastic supplies, so why should they buy a plastic processing machine?" he said. The deterioration of the economic situation has seen a series of Germany's closely watched indicators turn red. Last week, the federal statistics agency Destatis reported that industrial production went into reverse in August, falling by four percent month-on-month, while incoming orders slumped 7.7 percent after a record July.



DORTMUND, Germany: An aerial view of containers at the inland port in Dortmund, western Germany. —AFP

Shortages were having knock-on effects on companies' production and revenues, Wiechers said, with mechanical engineering among the sectors most heavily affected. Only Germany's key automotive sector was suffering more acutely from scarcity—a situation driven largely by the short supply of semiconductors, a component in

both conventional and electric vehicles.

Production lines in Germany at Volkswagen, Opel and Ford have been at a standstill as bottlenecks tighten, while BMW and Mercedes-Benz have been delivering vehicles with missing components, according to the German weekly WirtschaftsWoche. —AFP

Food and rent prices drive US inflation spike in September

WASHINGTON: The US inflation spike is not over, according to government data released Wednesday that showed prices for food and rents increasing in the world's largest economy last month, underscoring the complications Washington policymakers face as they guide the country's bounceback from the pandemic. The Labor Department's consumer price index (CPI) rose 5.4 percent, seasonally adjusted, in September compared to the same month a year ago. From August, it rose just above analysts' forecasts to 0.4 percent.

Food and housing prices accounted for more than half of the overall gain, the Labor Department said, while the impact of rising global energy prices was also apparent in the data that some economists warned could indicate inflation is on track to overstay its welcome. "The pickup in shelter costs is something to watch as it could offset some of the slowdown in inflation that occurs as current supply chain disruptions are resolved," Diane Swonk of Grant Thornton said on Twitter. The United States has dealt with price increases throughout this year as businesses reopen from COVID-19 shutdowns in 2020 and supply chains deal with shortages and delays.

The inflation presents a challenge to President Joe Biden, whose opponents have also used it to argue his spending plans are excessive. It has also vexed the Federal Reserve, which has indicated it may begin pulling back on monetary stimulus by the end of the year but wait longer to raise its borrowing rate despite concerns the central bank's easy money policies are allowing prices to climb.

Shelter climbs

Minutes from the Fed's September policy setting meeting released on Wednesday said "most participants saw inflation risks



SANTA MONICA, US: In this file photo, a woman sells bread at the West LA Farmer's Market in Santa Monica, California. — AFP

as weighted to the upside because of concerns that supply disruptions and labor shortages might last longer" and be more impactful than forecast. While the central bank prefers to get its inflation numbers from the Commerce Department, the CPI data contain dynamics undoubtedly on Fed leaders' minds.

Excluding volatile food and energy prices, inflation rose four percent last month compared to the same month in 2020, according to the report. Compared to last August, it was up 0.2 percent.

Among the categories that drove the overall inflation gains, food rose 0.9 percent and the food at home category, which includes groceries, climbed 1.2 percent. Shelter gained 0.4 percent, which Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics said was its biggest monthly increase since June 2006.

"This might just be an overshoot after a couple of relatively modest increases, but we can't rule out the idea that the fundamentals—rapid house price gains, more aggressive landlord pricing, low inventory and faster wage growth—are pushing up the trend," he said. The impact of rising global oil prices were seen in the data, with the gasoline index climbing 1.2 percent compared to August and energy overall rising 1.3 percent. —AFP

US Treasury to study climate change's impact on communities

WASHINGTON: The US Treasury announced Wednesday it will study how climate change is affecting communities and households in the United States.

The department's Financial Literacy and Education Commission will look into "how households, communities, and the smallest businesses experience financial resilience in the face of climate change and climate transition," Treasury said in a statement. It will also focus on "how to map climate-related financial risks, and identify which groups and regions will be most impacted," and also study the best ways to deal with the threats, with an emphasis "on historically disadvantaged people and regions."

"Beyond events like storms and wildfires, we expect climate change to impact insurance, credit and household savings," Treasury Under Secretary for Domestic Finance Nellie Liang said in a statement.

"It's vital that Treasury undertake this work, in collaboration with other experts in and outside of government, in order to help families prepare for climate-related financial risk," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen had on Tuesday encouraged leaders of several multilateral development banks to dedicate more capital towards projects intended to mitigate climate change. Yellen urged officials from the World Bank, African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and Inter-American Development Bank Group to "increase their focus on climate adaptation... and to support developing countries in implementing ambitious emissions reduction measures and protecting critical ecosystems." —AFP

Sports

Kohli gets a last shot at World Cup glory as India captain

DUBAI: Virat Kohli will be looking for a fairy-tale ending to his leadership of India's Twenty20 team as he chases an elusive first major title at the World Cup. The 32-year-old Kohli will step down as T20 skipper after the 16-nation tournament in the United Arab Emirates and Oman that starts on Sunday.

The prolific run-scorer has also quit as captain of Indian Premier League side Royal Challengers Bangalore and many have welcomed his decision to concentrate more on his batting. Kohli had been at the center of growing speculation in recent months as the wait for success grew.

Former India all-rounder Irfan Pathan said Kohli can go into the World Cup, that will start for them against Pakistan on October 24, with no pressure and that will be good for the team. "I think he will enjoy his cricket more now after taking this decision," Pathan, who played a key role in India's inaugural T20 World Cup triumph in 2007, told AFP. "India will do well with the side, the confidence and the experience they have."

Kohli became captain across all formats after M.S. Dhoni relinquished his limited-overs leadership in 2017. But India have not won a World Cup or Champions Trophy since. Kohli will still have Dhoni by his side as the former captain, who led India to the T20 title in 2007 and the 50-over crown in 2011, is the team mentor for the tournament. Kohli was closing in on his India debut when Dhoni's team created history by winning the first world T20 title in Johannesburg.

Competitive World Cup

The triumph triggered a T20 boom across

South Asia and led to the birth of the IPL in 2008. After making his ODI debut in 2008, Kohli soon created his own brand of cricket but has faced pressure over his failure to win a global title. India, the hosts and led by Dhoni, lost in the semi-finals to eventual winners West Indies despite an unbeaten 89 by Kohli in 2016. India also bowed out in the final four three years later, under Kohli, in the ODI World Cup.

India remain one of the favorites to lift the T20 trophy in Dubai on November 14 alongside holders West Indies and Eoin Morgan's England. Pitched against old rivals Pakistan, New Zealand, Afghanistan and two other qualifying teams in



India a favorite to lift T20 trophy

Group B, India are hoping for a smooth path to the semi-finals.

"I will always want India to win, but West Indies will be one of the favorites," added Pathan. "England and Australia all have good attacks and you can never count out Pakistan. It will be a very, very competitive World Cup."

All 15 Indian squad members, and three standby players, have been in the UAE for over a month with their IPL teams getting used to the pitches in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. Swash-buckling opener Rohit Sharma is widely tipped



MUMBAI: In this file photo taken on March 31, 2016 India's Virat Kohli plays a shot during the World T20 cricket tournament semi-final match between India and West Indies at The Wankhede Cricket Stadium in Mumbai. —AFP

to be Kohli's successor as T20 captain and will also be key to the team's chances. The in-form K.L. Rahul and wicketkeeper-batsman Rishabh

Pant complete the top order batting spearhead while Mohammed Shami and Jasprit Bumrah will lead the pace attack. — AFP

IPL final turns into Dhoni vs Morgan tactical showdown

DUBAI: The Indian Premier League final today will be a clash between two of cricket's finest tacticians when M.S. Dhoni's Chennai Super Kings take on Eoin Morgan's Kolkata Knight Riders. Between them they have won every major title on offer.

Morgan led England to victory in the 2019 50-over World Cup. Dhoni masterminded India's wins. He was India's captain when they won the Twenty20 World Cup in 2007 and the 2011 50-over title. Neither has been a big run scorer in this year's pandemic-hit tournament, which forced it to be moved to the United Arab Emirates.

But Dhoni's Chennai, three-time champions, have been the team to beat this year, the first to make the playoffs. The 40-year-old, who will be a mentor for India at the T20 World Cup starting Sunday, has been his usual unflappable self as the tension mounts.

"Purely from the captaincy point of view who can handle the pressure best, probably has to be Dhoni," admitted Gautam Gambhir, the former India batsman who led Kolkata to their two previous IPL triumphs. Morgan's Kolkata resumed the tournament seventh out of the eight teams, but went on to win five out of seven games to reach the playoffs.



Eoin Morgan

'Very clever' Morgan

They knocked out Virat Kohli's Royal Challengers Bangalore in the eliminator and then Delhi Capitals in the second qualifier on Wednesday to reach the final. Kolkata advisor David Hussey, the former Australian international, said Morgan has made a huge impact on the team's results, aided by the break during the IPL's suspension when a coronavirus surge hit India in April.

"I truly believe that Morgan is captaining really well, he's mar-

shalling the troops, he's tactically very clever. The bowling changes have been spot on. I think that's contributed to our success this time around," Hussey said after the win over Delhi.

Morgan made smart bowling choices on the slow UAE pitches with West Indies mystery spinner Sunil Narine as the attack kingpin. Opener Venkatesh Iyer has emerged as an unlikely batting hero, while Morgan has scored just 129 runs in 16 games.

The left-handed Iyer, who made his debut for Kolkata in the UAE leg, smashed 55 in Wednesday's game in a big partnership with fellow opener Shubman Gill. Hussey hailed Iyer as "a class player". "He is tall, a Stephen Fleming clone I believe. He has got a big future in the game."

Kolkata may be forced to leave Shakib Al Hasan out of the team and bring back Andre Russell, who is recovering from a hamstring injury. Bangladesh want to keep Shakib fresh for the T20 World Cup that starts in the UAE after the IPL.

Ruturaj Gaikwad and South African veteran Faf du Plessis have led Chennai's batting while Dhoni showed just a flash of his past brilliance when he made 18 off six balls, including three fours, as Chennai beat Delhi to reach the final for the ninth time.

Chennai are still smarting from their failure to reach the playoffs last season. But Dhoni says key players made use of their time to improve their performances. "That is the reason why we have come back strongly this season," said the legendary Indian.

Morgan knows he faces a classic battle in Dubai but knows the IPL can throw up surprises. "We would like to keep going, playing against CSK, one of the best franchises in IPL history. Anything can happen," said the England leader. — AFP

Sports

Friday, October 15, 2021

Pakistan to summon spirit of 2009 for T20 title, says Afridi

KARACHI: Shahid Afridi, the box office trail-blazer of Pakistan white ball cricket, believes his “unpredictable” nation can summon the spirit of 2009 and win a second T20 World Cup. Afridi was man of the match in a nail-biting seven-run semi-final win over South Africa in the tournament 12 years ago where he made 51. He then starred again in the eight-wicket rout of Sri Lanka in the final at Lord’s where he smashed an undefeated 54.

Rawalpindi.

Three days later, England also withdrew its men’s and women’s teams from visiting Pakistan. “This is Pakistan cricket for you, never ever a dull day,” added Afridi ruefully. “Pakistan can surprise any team in the world. Rule them out at your peril.” In his 22-year international career, Afridi was at the heart of Pakistan’s “topsy-turvy” ride in limited overs cricket.

Heartbreak and drama

Afridi anchored Pakistan’s run to the final in the inaugural Twenty20 World Cup in South Africa in 2007, taking 12 wickets which earned him the player of the tournament award. Pakistan, however, lost twice against arch-rivals India — including the final. “Pakistan gave the best entertainment in the first T20 World Cup,” insists Afridi. “We lost to India in the group match after a bowl-out, which was something very new for us.”

Pakistan then lost the final with Misbah-ul-Haq falling to an injudicious shot off the third ball of the final over, with just six needed for a win. “Misbah brought Pakistan into the game but then we lost by the barest of margins,” said Afridi.

Under Afridi, defending champions Pakistan then lost in the semi-final of the 2010 edition in the Caribbean when Michael Hussey clobbered 39 runs in the last two overs to give Australia an unlikely win.

“T20 suits our character,” added Afridi. “We have the talent, approach and aggression required for this rapid format. It is a format which is loved throughout Pakistan. We won against every team and then every team adopted that style. Bowling is now full of variety and new batting techniques have developed.”

Afridi insists Pakistan can once again spring a few surprises in the UAE. “The current Pakistan team is very talented although they lack experienced players. But, as we all know, never underestimate a Pakistan team!” — AFP

“Never underestimate a Pakistan team!”

Pakistan’s victory came just three months after the terror attack on the Sri Lanka team in Lahore, an incident which sparked a shutdown of international cricket in the country. “We had that issue of the Sri Lanka attacks on our minds,” Afridi told AFP. “The whole nation was disappointed and frustrated so that win was very much needed. The win gave the whole nation happiness and some unforgettable moments.”

Afridi famously stormed onto the scene in 1996 when he broke the record for the fastest century in ODI cricket, reaching his hundred from 37 balls. It was a record which stood until 2014. Afridi, who played 99 T20 Internationals for Pakistan, thinks recent setbacks can again inspire Babar Azam’s team in the 2021 T20 showpiece.

A month before the mega-event, head coach Misbah-ul-Haq and bowling coach Waqar Younis resigned, apparently believing new board chairman Ramiz Raja would sack them anyway. Then New Zealand abandoned their tour of the country just minutes before the first ODI in



BIRMINGHAM: This file photo taken on July 13, 2021 shows England’s Ben Stokes reacting after being bowled out during the third one day international (ODI) cricket match between England and Pakistan at Edgbaston cricket ground in Birmingham. — AFP

England eye World Cup glory without talisman Stokes

LONDON: Eoin Morgan’s England will become double world champions if they win the T20 World Cup — but they will have to do it without talisman Ben Stokes. The all-rounder played a pivotal role in England’s first 50-over World Cup triumph in 2019, scoring an unbeaten 84 and then hitting vital runs in the Super Over in the final against New Zealand.

He cemented his place in England folklore the following month when he almost single-handedly beat Australia by smashing an unbeaten 135 at Headingley in the third Ashes Test. But the 30-year-old has not pulled on an England shirt since July, taking time out of the game to focus on his mental health and a troublesome finger injury.

It means he will miss out on his chance for redemption in the United Arab Emirates and Oman. The Durham player had a point to prove after he was humiliated by Carlos Brathwaite in the 2016 final — the West Indian smashed four consecutive sixes off his bowling to clinch the title.

England will also be without another 2019 World Cup hero in Jofra Archer after the fast bowler underwent surgery for an elbow injury earlier this year. But Morgan’s side remain one of the tournament favorites as they seek their first T20 world title since 2010 and aim to become the first team to hold both limited-overs trophies at the same time.

England firepower

England are top of the Twenty20 rankings and boast a number of global white-ball stars including captain Morgan, Jos Buttler, Jason Roy and Dawid Malan, who is the number one batsman in T20 cricket. Liam Livingstone adds a certain X-factor to England’s fearsome batting line-up, boasting a strike rate in T20 internationals of 167 runs per 100 balls.

The 28-year-old all-rounder dazzled for Birmingham Phoenix in the Hundred this year and smashed England’s fastest-ever international century — a 42-ball blitz against Pakistan — in a T20 match in July. Multi-format all-rounder Chris Woakes is in the squad, having made his return to T20 international cricket earlier this year after a gap of more than five years. And left-arm seamer Tymal Mills is back in the England fold for the first time in almost five years after impressing in the Hundred, helping to offset the loss of Archer. Buttler admits that the absence of Stokes and Archer is a big drawback but believes England have the firepower to compete.

“We will focus a lot on ourselves, playing to the best of our ability and if we do that I think we’ll go a long way,” he said. “To become double world champions would be a huge achievement and it won’t be easy, I think we all understand that.” Buttler says some of the new players will be valuable additions to the England squad. “Liam had a fantastic summer,” said the wicketkeeper-batsman. “The century against Pakistan and the Hundred — he was the poster boy of that — so he will go into the tournament full of confidence. We have a number of match-winners and Liam is another one of those. I enjoyed watching the Hundred and it was great to see Tymal operating.” — AFP



MOHALI: This file photo taken on March 24, 2016 Pakistan’s captain Shahid Afridi batting during a training session at the Punjab Cricket Stadium Association Stadium in Mohali, ahead of their World T20 Cricket tournament match against Australia. — AFP

Sports

Friday, October 15, 2021

Medvedev stunned by Dimitrov at Indian Wells

INDIAN WELLS: Reigning US Open champion Daniil Medvedev joined the growing list of top-seed casualties at the ATP/WTB Indian Wells on Wednesday, losing in the fourth round to world No. 28 Grigor Dimitrov 4-6, 6-4, 6-3.

Medvedev, who won his first Grand Slam title last month at Flushing Meadows, had not lost a set heading into the fourth round but dropped eight straight games, and had his serve broken six times against Dimitrov, en route to a stunning early exit for the top seed.



Hubert Hurkacz advances after beating Karatsev

"I don't remember myself losing three service games, even four service games ever on hard courts," Medvedev said. "That shows how slow this court is and the conditions, more like clay, which I don't like. To lose four times the serve is just unacceptable. That's why I lost the (second) set."

World No 2 Medvedev did not take a break after his emotional US Open victory and said his busy schedule may have finally caught up with him. "I did feel exhausted in this tournament. Now I can say it. I couldn't say it before my matches. There are a few physical things that have come up," said Medvedev, who is hoping to eventually overtake world No 1 Novak Djokovic.

Medvedev won the first set, was up 4-1 in the second and appeared to be cruising to another easy victory when the wheels came off: his unforced errors mounted and service game fell flat. Medvedev had no answers for the way Dimitrov was playing and predicted the Bulgarian would likely go on to capture the title.

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"If he plays like this, like the way he played me from 4-1, then he is going to win the tournament," Medvedev said. "He played the second half of the match better than anyone did against me at the US Open. It is not like I gave him the match."

The match turned in the sixth game of the second set as Dimitrov broke Medvedev's serve for

the second time in the set to cut the Russian's lead to 4-2. Dimitrov held serve in the next game and then broke Medvedev's serve twice more to take the set and lay the foundation for a dominating performance in the third. The Bulgarian closed out the match on the first match point, when Medvedev blasted a forehand long.

"Been watching quite a bit of his matches," Dimitrov said of Medvedev. "I really wanted to play this match to be completely honest. What he has been able to accomplish this past year and a half is pretty amazing. I think it really pushes me also to do better." Dimitrov will face Polish eighth seed Hubert Hurkacz, who rolled over Russian

Medvedev, who has won 50 matches in 2021, described this as a minor setback because this event is not a Grand Slam. "I don't see this as the end of the world. I don't think this would happen in a Grand Slam," he said. This is the second time Dimitrov has beaten Medvedev in five career meetings. The last time was a three-set win in their first encounter in 2017 in London.

In other men's fourth-round matches on Wednesday, second seed Stefanos Tsitsipas defeated Australian Alex De Minaur 6-7 (3/7), 7-6 (7/3), 6-2 and third-seeded Alexander Zverev of Germany overpowered France's Gael Monfils 6-1, 6-3 in just 61 minutes.



INDIAN WELLS: Grigor Dimitrov of Bulgaria reacts for a forehand return to Daniil Medvedev of Russia in their Round of 16 match at the Indian Wells tennis tournament on Wednesday in Indian Wells, California. — AFP

Aslan Karatsev 6-1, 6-3 on Wednesday in the quarter-finals.

Minor setback

The 25-year-old Medvedev beat Djokovic in the US Open final last month to prevent the Serbian star from becoming the first man since the legendary Rod Laver in the 1960s to win all four Grand Slams in the same year. On Wednesday, Medvedev made six double faults in the two hour, 15 minute match in the main stadium.

In the women's draw, two-time winner Victoria Azarenka punched her ticket to the semi-finals with a straight-sets win — 6-4, 6-2 — over Jessica Pegula. Azarenka, who is the only player left in the women's and men's fields to have won in Indian Wells, captured the title in 2012 and 2016.

The 32-year-old from Belarus needed 94 minutes to end the run of American Pegula and reach the final four of this event for the fourth time in her career. "I really played well in the crucial moments," Azarenka said.—AFP

Pedri's new deal to include €1bn release clause

MADRID: Barcelona midfielder Pedri has agreed a contract extension until 2026, with the deal including a one-billion-euro (\$1.16 billion) release clause, the club announced on Thursday. "FC Barcelona and the player, Pedro Gonzalez 'Pedri',

have agreed a contract extension until 30 June 2026. The release clause is set at 1 billion euros," the club said in a statement.

Barca added the 18-year-old's signing ceremony will happen on Friday. The deal comes as a huge boost to Barcelona, whose enormous debts have prompted the departures of high-profile players like Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and Antoine Griezmann.

Pedri has emerged in recent months as one of the world's most exciting young talents. He joined Barca from Las Palmas in 2020 and was an immediate success, going on to play 53 games under



CHARLOTTE: In this file photo taken on December 27, 2020 Kyrie Irving of the Brooklyn Nets runs the court during the fourth quarter of their game against the Charlotte Hornets at Spectrum Center in Charlotte, North Carolina. — AFP

Irving 'doing what's best for me' in declining vaccine

NEW YORK: Brooklyn Nets star Kyrie Irving says he's "doing what's best for me" in declining a COVID-19 vaccine, a move that will see him sidelined from NBA play. Irving addressed the issue on Instagram Live on Wednesday, confirming that he hoped to be back on the floor with teammates eventually.

But he said he would not bow to pressure to be vaccinated, while insisting he was neither anti- nor pro-vaccines. "Do what's best for you, but I am not an advocate for either side," Irving said. "I am doing what's best for me. I know the consequences here, and if it means that I'm judged and demonized for that, that's just what it is, that's the role I play."

He added: "No, I'm not retiring, and no, I'm not going and leaving this game like this. There's still so much more work to do." Because of the pandemic, New York City implemented rules that do not allow unvaccinated athletes to take part in practices and games at public arenas — including the Nets' Barclays Center home and Madison Square Garden, home of the rival Knicks.

It had previously appeared that Irving could train with the team at their private practice facility and be available for road games, but the Nets said Tuesday that he would not play or practice with the team "until he is eligible to be a full participant."

"Kyrie has made a personal choice, and we respect his individual right to choose," Nets executive Sean Marks said. On Wednesday, Irving said his ultimate decision on getting a vaccine would have nothing to do with the Nets — nor with a New York mandate. "Once again, I'm going to repeat this," he said. "This is not about the Nets, this is not about the organization, it's not about the NBA, it's not politics. It's not any one thing. It's just about the freedom of what I want to do." — AFP

Ronald Koeman in his first season.

Pedri scored against Real Betis to become the fourth youngest Barcelona goalscorer in La Liga, behind Ansu Fati, Bojan Krkic and Messi. He was also pivotal in Spain reaching the semi-finals at Euro 2020 and then the team winning a silver medal at the Olympic Games in Tokyo. In the statement, the club described it as "a tough year, with many miles on the clock, but one full of reward". Pedri is among a group of youngsters hoping to lead a new era for Barcelona, which also includes the likes of Fati, Gavi, Sergino Dest, Eric Garcia, Ronald Araujo and Nico Gonzalez. — AFP



Pedri

Sports

Weah, Dest revive US World Cup hopes, Mexico stay top

LOS ANGELES: Timothy Weah set up the winner as the United States came from behind to defeat Costa Rica 2-1 and reignite their 2022 World Cup qualifying campaign on Wednesday. Weah, who plays for French champions Lille, was drafted into the US starting line-up shortly before kick-off after DC United's Chris Arriola suffered an injury in the warm-up.

The 21-year-old son of Liberian football icon George Weah was instrumental in the winning US goal, picking up a pass from Barcelona wingback Sergino Dest and rifling a shot towards Costa Rica goalkeeper Leonel Moreira's near-post.

Weah's effort cannoned off the woodwork and ricocheted off Moreira and into the net for an own goal on 66 minutes. It completed a well-earned comeback for US coach Gregg Berhalter's young side, who recovered after falling behind inside the first minute from Keysher Fuller before Dest's 25th-minute equalizer.

The win in Columbus, Ohio, gave the United States 11 points from six matches, three behind Mexico after El Tri's 2-0 victory over El Salvador in San Salvador. "The team dug in and stuck together and I was really happy with the performance after conceding the first-minute goal," US captain Tyler Adams said.

The United States had suffered an upset 1-0 away defeat to Panama on Sunday, when Berhalter was criticized for making seven

changes from the team that beat Jamaica last week. Against Costa Rica on Wednesday, Berhalter returned to the nucleus of the team that had brushed aside Jamaica, making 10 changes, and his team looked a more threatening and dynamic unit as a result.

The line-up was also the youngest ever US team to start a World Cup qualifying match, with an average age of 22 years and 229 days.



**US with
11 points from
6 matches**

But the Americans were given a fright early on when a swift counter-attack by Costa Rica saw Ronald Matarrita beat Dest down the left flank before crossing to the far post for Fuller to volley home from inside the area.

The setback galvanized the United States, however, and they dominated possession for long periods before drawing level midway through the half. Weah broke down the left and played a deep cross that found Yunus Musah on

counter but I'm happy. We haven't conceded a goal, we have six points, it's another step towards qualifying." Chelsea dominated the ball in the early stages but it was the home side who had the first real chances of the game, both of which came after pouncing on sloppy passes in midfield.

Chelsea held at bay

Adrien Rabiot was barracked by the home crowd in the 16th minute when after sprinting away on a break with almost the entire Chelsea team still upfield, he elected to play a pass to Federico Bernardeschi which was completely mishit and rolled to Edouard Mendy. Four minutes later it was Chiesa's turn to show the Blues a clean pair of heels after pinching the ball, only for his low shot from a tight angle to drift just wide.

Juve's gameplan of sitting in and stopping Chelsea from getting a passing rhythm going worked but they initially lacked a focal point and too often let off the hook a Chelsea team missing the dynamism of N'Golo Kante and Mason Mount. However they got the goal they deserved immediately after the break through Chiesa, who has had an uncertain start to the season but confidently met Bernardeschi's through ball to lash home the opener at the near post. — AFP

Chelsea responded by again pressing Juve back into their box but again struggled to break through the hosts' well-drilled backline. It was Juve who were wondering how Bernardeschi didn't double their lead in the 64th minute when he tripped over his own feet with the goal at his mercy. And they were breathing a big sigh of relief with six minutes left when after a prolonged spell of Chelsea dominance Romelu Lukaku thumped wide after being nicely set up by Mateo Kovacic. — AFP



SAN SALVADOR: Mexico's Hector Moreno (center) celebrates with his teammates after scoring against El Salvador during their Qatar 2020 FIFA World Cup Concacaf qualifier football match at Cuscatlan Stadium, in San Salvador, on Wednesday. — AFP

the opposite flank.

The Valencia midfielder laid off to Dest, who cut in and rifled a left-footed shot into the top corner past Costa Rica keeper Keylor Navas. The United States will try to build on the victory when they host Mexico on November 12.

Mexico maintained their lead in the eight-

nation final qualifying group with a victory over El Salvador in a bruising encounter that saw both teams reduced to 10 men in the second half. Mexico center back Hector Moreno headed in a corner kick in the 30th minute. Raul Jimenez sealed the win with a penalty in second-half stoppage time. — AFP

Chiesa strikes to give Juve huge win over holders Chelsea

TURIN: Federico Chiesa proved to be a big game player once again with the only goal in Juventus' 1-0 Champions League win over holders Chelsea which could kick-start their faltering season. Sat 10th in Serie A after a succession of unconvincing performances domestically, Juve top Group H with a perfect six points thanks to a superbly taken winner 10 seconds after half-time from Chiesa, one of Italy's stars at Euro 2020.

Massimiliano Allegri's side took down the European champions, despite missing starting forwards Paulo Dybala and Alvaro Morata, with a disciplined performance that sucked the life out of the Blues and restricted them to very little in front of goal. "We showed the Juventus spirit tonight, and that's what the coach asks of us," Chiesa, who has been criticized by Allegri this season, told Amazon.

"There has never been any problem between me and the coach, I do what he asks of me. When Juve start off poorly there is always a lot of unnecessary noise: we all want to take the club back to the top." Juve are three points clear of both Chelsea and Zenit, who they play in Saint Petersburg in three weeks. "The players put in a great performance against the European champions. We were solid defensively and conceded very few chances. (Wojciech) Szczesny barely had a save to make," said Allegri to Amazon.

"We also missed some really good chances on the

Zain main sponsor of Kuwait's biggest Street Football League

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced its main sponsorship of Street Football League (SFL), the country's biggest street football competition. SFL aims at creating a community for street football enthusiasts and encouraging them to showcase their skills and talents within a professional setting.

Zain's support to this unique competition comes as part of its strategy that closely focuses on supporting and developing the local sports and youth scenes. The company puts the support of Kuwaiti sports at the forefront of its priorities, especially when it comes to shouldering similar programs that target enthusiasts and non-pro players, encouraging them to enjoy the sport they love within an organized and pro setting. Street Football League aims at creating a community for street footballers, encouraging talents to showcase their skills, and contributing to elevating Kuwait's football scene. SFL also aims at supplying talents to professional clubs, offering a pro setting for enthusiast and street footballers, as well as spreading values through awareness campaigns.

SFL's season includes four competitions: First Division, Second Division, League Cup, and Super Cup. Each season features over 80 teams, of which 40 are divided between the first and second divisions. The Super Cup features an encounter between the First Division champions and the Cup champions. Games are held weekly within a professional setting supervised by volunteers. Zain strongly believes in the important role played by the private sector in developing the youth and sports sectors in Kuwait. The company makes this concept a reality by sponsoring and supporting various major sporting events in Kuwait, as well as sponsoring and encouraging many Kuwaiti athletes who represent Kuwait in local, regional, and international arenas.



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