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V O L V O

The legacy continues



From the editor's desk

By Abd Al-Rahman Al-Alyan
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Sixty years is a long time for any business, but for the newspaper business, especially in today's climate, it is a lifetime. A remarkable lifetime. When my father, Yousuf Saleh Al-Alyan, started Kuwait Times in 1961, his mission was straightforward: Provide the English-speaking community with a reliable source of news and information about Kuwait.

He also understood that journalism, at its heart, is about bearing witness, and in the 60 years since Kuwait Times published its first issue, we have borne witness to historic developments, extraordinary achievements, and the darkest days. We survived and continue to survive and will bear witness to the brightest future of our beloved Kuwait.

On September 24, 1961, my father set out to record and report Kuwait's daily news, and in doing so, he and the newspaper became an important part of Kuwait's history. Sixty years later, I continue to uphold my father's mission – not only with Kuwait Times, but also with the Kuwait Journalists Association, of which he was a founding member.

Growing up, journalism was an important part of our family life, a great source of insight and information about Kuwait, the Arab region and the wider world, which shaped our daily discussions. I feel lucky and blessed to have grown up in a family for whom news was as important as our daily meals. There has never been a greater need than now for reliable journalism, and Kuwait Times strives to combat misinformation and false facts with its long-established practice of professionalism, dedication and hard work.

Looking back over Kuwait Times' long history, I feel proud to continue my father's legacy, serving Kuwait by chronicling its most important moments and recording its history.

PCR test to cost KD 14, free for students, teachers



A classroom at a public school in Mansouriya is readied for the return of students next month. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

By B Izzak and Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Assistant undersecretary for private medical services at the health ministry Fatima Al-Najjar told local media yesterday that the cost of PCR tests for COVID-19 will be reduced to a maximum of KD 14 per test from Sunday. She also said that the cost of coronavirus antigen tests will be reduced to only KD 3. Meanwhile, the PCR test will be free for all students and teachers at five public health centers, the health ministry announced yesterday.

Member of the consultative committee to contain the coronavirus pandemic Khaled Al-Saeed called for vaccinating children to protect them against the disease. He told local media that many cases have been registered among chil-

dren, including some deaths and admissions to intensive care units. Education Minister Ali Al-Mudhaf yesterday issued a decision calling on private Arabic schools to reopen for students on Oct 3, while foreign schools can reopen from Sept 26. The decision also reinstated the pre-pandemic fees at these schools after they were reduced by 25 percent last year.

The ministry has told unvaccinated teachers and students to bring a negative PCR test result every Sunday in order to be allowed to enter schools. Free PCR testing is available at Hamad Al-Humaidhi and Sheikha Al-Sdairawi centers in the Capital governorate, Zahra center in Hawally governorate, Mutab Obaid Al-Shallahi clinic in Farwaniya governorate, Sabah Al-Ahmad health center and

Qurain health center in Ahmadi governorate and Saad Al-Abdullah health center in Jahra governorate.

The PCR test has been free of charge at all government hospitals, but it is only conducted at the request of doctors when they suspect a patient is infected with the coronavirus. "From the beginning of pandemic, all PCR tests conducted by the ministry of health have been free of charge," Health Ministry Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said.

Kuwait Times visited clinics in Riggae and Farwaniya, but found PCR testing is not available in these clinics. "There is no PCR testing here. We usually direct patients to private clinics or refer them to public hospitals, where the test is free for all," a nurse told Kuwait Times in Riggae.

Local

Work less, achieve more



JUST KIDDIN', SERIOUSLY

By Sahar Moussa

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Karoshi is a Japanese word, which means 'death from overwork'— it was invented in the 1970s to describe deaths caused by work-related stresses and pressures. Many people worldwide are obliged to work long hours and sometimes do two jobs in order to pay their rent and children's school fees and put food on the table; unfortunately, they end up spending too much time in the office away from their loved ones, just to provide for their needs.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a radical transformation in the workplace. Many employees were able to work remotely and working hours were reduced to avoid spreading COVID-19. These options are now becoming part of the mainstream—but not at all workplaces. This new experience has proved and convinced companies and employers that an employee does not have to stay eight hours at the office to be productive. Of course, this does not apply to all types of jobs.

What if you can work for only four hours daily, spend more time with your family, and be more productive and happier, while being paid the same salary? This will be the case of citizens in Qatar after the cabinet there approved a draft decision on the terms and conditions of a part-time system at government agencies, whereby the number of workhours per week are reduced by half. Qatar's aim with this decision is to attain family stability and more productivity in the work field.

In Kuwait, to boost women's productivity, give them greater comfort and ease their great social burden when they go out to work, a proposal was discussed to establish nurseries at government and non-government workplaces for female employees. Article 25 of the labor law stipulates working women must be given two hours daily to breast-feed during work, and the employer should set up nurseries for children under four years of age at workplaces where the number of female workers is more than 50 or the number of workers exceeds 200. Unfortunately, till today this proposal hasn't seen the light of day.

Experts believe that working fewer hours leads to happier, healthier and more engaged workforces. Research shows that people get more done when they work fewer hours, and less done when they work longer hours. I believe that a healthy, friendly and fair environment makes employees love their jobs and be more productive and loyal to the company. It enhances creativity and makes people grow in their careers. Conversely, a toxic environment and long hours of work that are not productive make you depressed, miserable and unwilling to contribute or produce.

A very interesting study done in 2021 that followed Swedish workers showed that reduced working hours reduced stress, exhaustion and negative emotions. Another study in 2017 showed that cutting working hours by 25 percent improved sleep, while research from the 1990s showed that working only six hours a day improved workers' family lives. In some countries, they have adopted the four-day workweek policy, where you reduce your working hours by 20 percent.

Overall, flexible working hours and a relaxed environment at any workplace lead to work-life balance, strengthen family ties, make people happier and fewer sick leaves are taken. In addition, the carbon footprint is reduced, along with the traffic that employees face every morning.

PHOTO OF THE DAY



This picture taken on Sept 21, 2021 shows a view of the waning gibbous moon over Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

A momentous journey



IN MY VIEW

By Abdellatif Sharaa

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Today marks the 60th anniversary of our beloved Kuwait Times. This is the place where I have spent many hours and days; a place that gave me the opportunity to learn how states are run; a place that gave me the opportunity to meet, speak with and pose questions to dignitaries from various parts of the world. Kuwait Times gave me the opportunity to participate in very important events, particularly those that had to do with science and human wellbeing.

Kuwait Times staff - starting from the office employees all the way to the founder Abu Tareq, May Allah bless his soul - were one family. Mind you, we see each other more than our own families, and fortunately, the tradition goes on!

Kuwait Times followed a path that meant truth and accuracy in its reporting; sensitive issues were and are

dealt with accordingly, while maintaining the principle that the public in general and our dear readers in particular must know the truth.

I remember one day when Abu Tareq asked me to come to his office, and told me many things about his journey. One thing remained on my mind very vividly: "Kuwait Times is my dearest daughter, and it must be cared for as such!"

The foundation is solid and the pillars are firm, so regardless of what happens, the paper will remain standing, informing its readers with news and other topics, day in and day out. I trust all those at Kuwait Times today will keep the torch burning and preserve the legacy of its founder, the late Yousuf Saleh Al-Alyan.

Happy anniversary, Kuwait Times! Wishing you all the best, today, tomorrow and every day!

Kuwait Times

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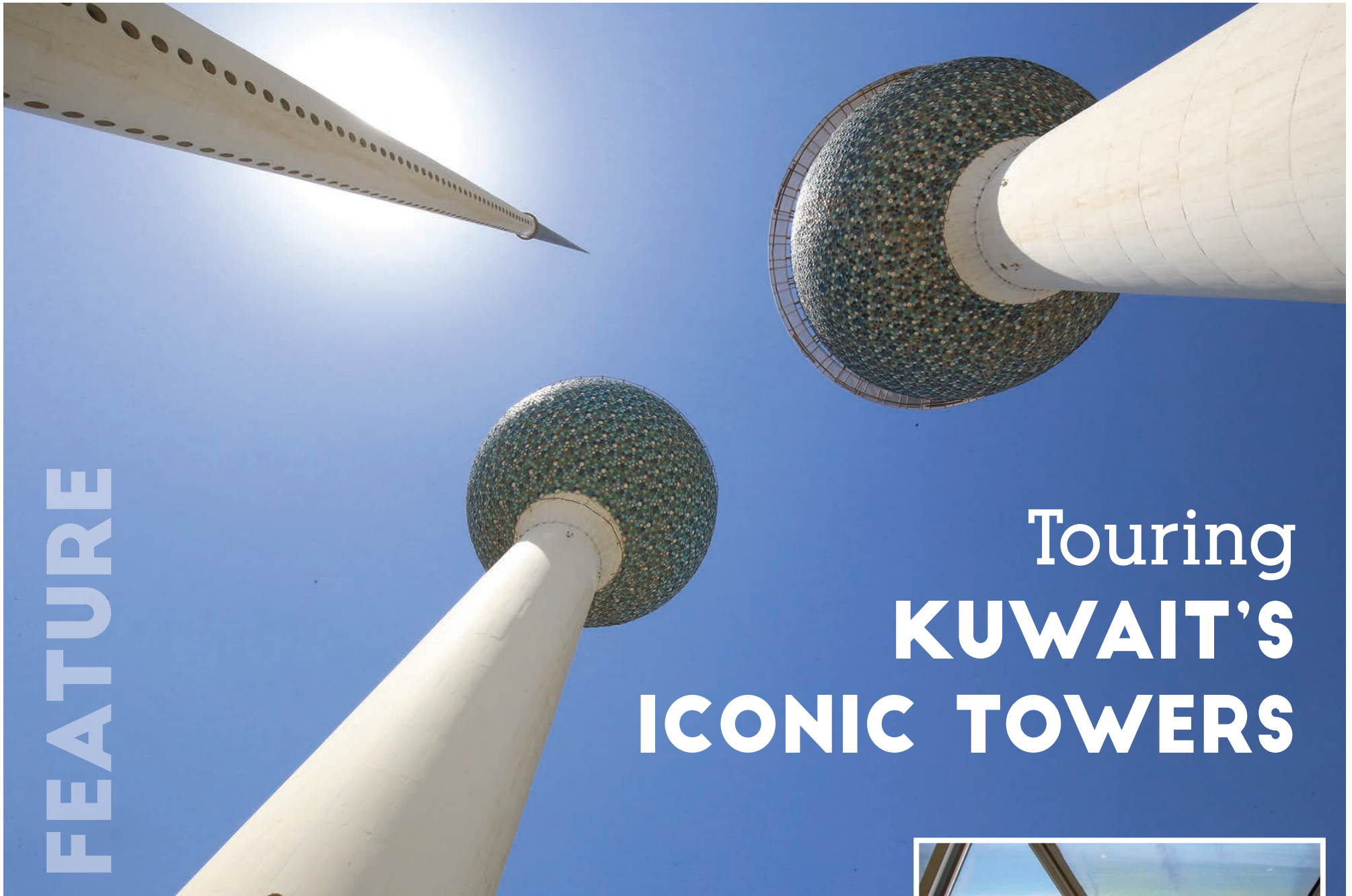
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Local



FEATURE

Touring KUWAIT'S ICONIC TOWERS

PHOTO

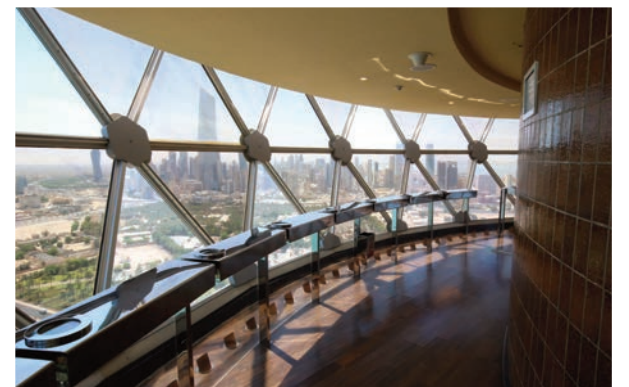
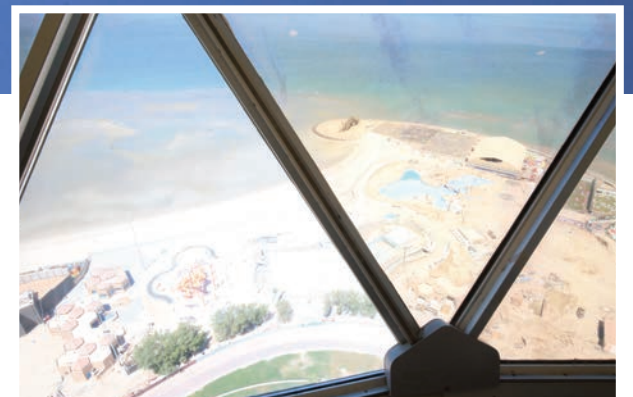
Kuwait Towers stands as the undisputed national symbol and one of the most recognizable landmarks in Kuwait, an embodiment of the nation's dramatic economic and urban development after the discovery of oil. Today, the Towers have become an integral element of the Kuwait City skyline, occupying a focal position on the seafront along Arabian Gulf Road. Known to residents fondly as 'Al Abraj' (simply the Towers), they are a must-visit destination for residents and tourists alike.

The making of an icon

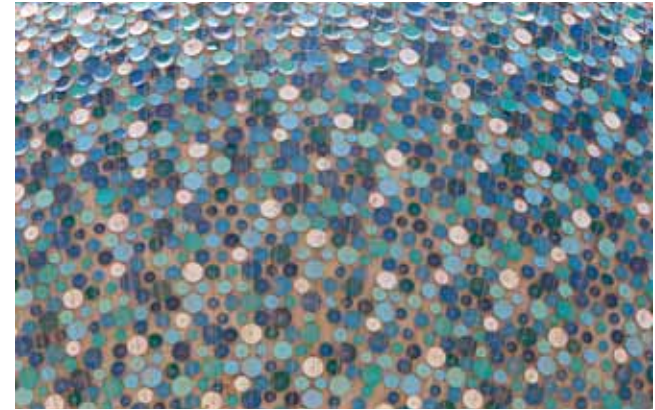
The Kuwait Towers were not originally

intended as a touristic destination. At the beginning, the Towers were simply meant to be the sixth site for the nationwide network of water towers being constructed around Kuwait.

Opened in 1979, the main tower serves as the site's public attraction. The main sphere offers dining, while a viewing sphere gives an incomparable panoramic view of Kuwait City and the Arabian Gulf. The middle tower functions as a water reservoir, holding up to one million gallons of water. Meanwhile, the smallest of the towers - known as the minor tower - illuminates the other two and supplies electricity to them.



Local



The tallest tower's design represents the shape of a censer (incense burner). As for the medium tower, it was designed as a water sprinkler. The smallest tower was designed in the shape of a traditional Arab woman's eyeliner. A staggering 55,000 enameled steel discs were used to cover the three iconic spheres, creating a dazzling pattern of eight bright shades, reflecting the colors of the sky and the sea.

The striking design melded together contemporary architectural concepts, Western technology and traditional Islamic patterns to create this architectural work of art, which now stands as a symbol of Kuwait's cultural heritage and its modern prosperity. Visitors can visit the viewing sphere from 8:00 am to 11:00 pm daily.



Local

Staying under the radar



A plainclothes policeman checks the identification of a resident during a recent raid in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh.

Many illegal residents in Kuwait have mastered the art of hiding from the authorities

By Ben Garcia

For almost two weeks now, security authorities have been cracking down on illegal residents in all governorates of Kuwait, blocking streets and setting up checkpoints to ensure all violators are caught and deported. The crackdowns are the largest police campaigns against illegal residents in Kuwait since authorities announced multiple amnesties during the pandemic, allowing residents without valid visas to either legalize their status or leave the country.

“

I can sense that my time is up, so I am ready

”

But some illegal residents are experts in the art of hiding. Violeta (not her real name), a Filipina who has lived most of her life in Kuwait illegally, said she will stay in Kuwait until state security officers drag her to the airport. “I have been arrested for illegal residency many times, but the police always let me go,” she told Kuwait Times. “I don’t know why, but I suspect it’s because of my old age,” she said.

Violeta, 66, has been an illegal resident since 2002. Violeta came to Kuwait in 1999

and worked as a domestic helper for two years with her employer before running away. “I know I should not have done that. I told them to send me home but they didn’t listen, so I ran away,” she said.

After Violeta absconded from her sponsor’s house, she stayed for a couple of months with a friend before moving to her present accommodation in Maidan Hawally. She then started accepting toddlers of working parents to babysit. “I started caring for children in the area for KD 30, which later rose to KD 70 to KD 80 per child. I stopped babysitting as I got older and could not provide good service. Now I am cooking and delivering Filipino food in the neighborhood,” she said.

In the early years without an iqama, Violeta barely left her room. “I would sometimes go around, but I made sure I was safe from security checks. Most of the time I would go to the old souq by foot and avoid main streets,” she said. Violeta has three grown-up children in the Philippines and hasn’t returned to her family since 1999. “I don’t have a husband anymore. We separated a long time ago and he died five years ago in the care of his new family. That’s why I didn’t bother to go home.”

Nanay Camella, 69, has been without an iqama for the last two months because of her age. “After 30 years in Kuwait, this is my first experience without an iqama,” she said.

“This is because I can no longer renew my visa because of my age. I want to stay in Kuwait to earn money, but I am preparing for the eventuality that I will be caught one day. I am illegal now - that is why I sent home to Mindanao all my belongings and things that I don’t need here. I can sense that my time is up, so I am ready,” she told Kuwait Times.

“In the event that I am apprehended and deported, at least everything is settled. I don’t have any problem with people around me,” she said. “I am afraid of checking and the police, but I am readying myself for anything. I know there will come a time when I have to bid goodbye to the country I love after the Philippines,” she added resignedly. Nanay used to go home to the Philippines often, but during the pandemic she wasn’t able to leave the country. The last time she went home was in 2016.

The crackdowns follow two consecutive amnesties announced in 2020. The first amnesty in April 2020 allowed illegals to leave the country without paying fines and with a free air ticket. Authorities said around 30,000 expats of various nationalities benefited from the amnesty.

The second amnesty for illegal residents - estimated at around 150,000 people - began in Dec 2020 and was later extended for several months. During that period, the interior ministry asked all residents living in the country on temporary visas, which had been automatically extended during the pandemic, to legalize their stay in the country or leave. No official statistics were released about the number of people who availed the amnesty.



People arrested during the crackdown are seen.

1st



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Local

MP targets PAM with questions on rules, property ownership

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: MP Saleh Al-Mutairi yesterday targeted the Public Authority of Manpower and its chairman with a series of questions about regulations and properties owned by its senior employees. In his questions addressed to Commerce and Industry Minister Abdullah Al-Salman, who oversees the authority, Mutairi asked if the minister has recommended to the Cabinet to renew the tenure of the authority director for a fresh term, although he has already spent 38 years in a government job.

Mutairi asked if the reported renewal recommendation is in line with existing laws. The lawmaker asked the minister to furnish him with a list of companies, establishments, farms and factories owned by employees and senior officials of the authority and their close relatives. He also asked for a list including the names of companies whose labor recruitment files have been suspended and companies whose suspension had been lifted by orders signed by the director of the authority between 2014 and 2020. MP Mutairi said these questions will explain the problems in the population structure, heavily tilted in favor of expats, and will shed light on the "forces of corruption" blocking the solution to this problem.

On Wednesday, PAM decided to allow the transfer of workers from six sectors - industry, farming, shepherding, fishing, co-ops and free trade zones - to other jobs in the private sector. Aseel



Al-Mazyad, Official Spokesperson and PR and Media Director at PAM, said the authority has made things easier for business owners and employees amid the coronavirus pandemic, especially during the suspension of air travel, as it issued several decisions allowing the transfer of workers from sectors that were previously banned. The ban had been lifted on March 3 to allow local firms to hire labor from inside Kuwait while outside recruitment remains closed. The ban was then reinstated on July 15, before being lifted again on Wednesday.

Kuwaiti army chief, Australian commander discuss military issues

KUWAIT: Chief of the General Staff of the Kuwaiti Armed Forces Lieutenant General Sheikh Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah discussed with the Commander of the Australian Joint Task Force Brigadier General David Paddison important matters and topics of common interest, especially those related to the military. The general staff said in a press statement yesterday that Sheikh Khaled received Paddison along with his accompanying delegation during his official visit to the country.

During the meeting, the important matters and topics of common interest were discussed, where the chief of staff commended the depth of bilateral ties between both sides.

Kuwait, China willing to cement strategic partnership

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Assistant Foreign Minister for Asia Affairs Ambassador Waleed Al-Khubaizi said yesterday Kuwait is eager to bolster bilateral relations with China in all fields. The Kuwaiti official made the remark in a speech he delivered on behalf of Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah during a virtual reception organized by the Chinese Embassy in Kuwait to mark the 72nd anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Khubaizi said Kuwait cherishes its friendship and deep and distinguished relations with China, which have greatly developed in several areas, culminating in a bilateral strategic partnership, especially in energy, trade, investment and mega development projects. He said he looks forward to seeing more joint cooperation with China in order to serve the higher interests of both friendly nations, while commending fruitful cooperation and exchange of information and expertise be-



KUWAIT: Lieutenant General Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah receives Commander of the Australian Joint Task Force Brigadier General David Paddison. — KUNA

The meeting was attended by Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Army Lt Gen Fahad Al-Nasser, Australian Ambassador to Kuwait Jonathan Gilbert and several senior army commanding officers. — KUNA

tween both sides in the fight against the novel coronavirus pandemic. Khubaizi spoke highly of the amazing development and advancement made by China over the last few decades, gaining it an international status as a major influential country.

Chinese Ambassador to Kuwait Li Minggang addressed the reception by regarding the year 2021 as a landmark in the history of Sino-Kuwaiti relations, recalling that bilateral diplomatic ties were forged 50 years ago. He said the relationship between China and Kuwait has ever since stood the test of time, despite international changes and fluctuations. He added that since strategic partnership ties were established between China and Kuwait in 2018, both nations have pushed forward practical cooperation in all fields.

The Chinese ambassador went on to say that both sides have worked together on the basis of team spirit to curb the impact of COVID-19, saying that Chinese companies have actively participated in the execution of over 70 projects in Kuwait. Bilateral trade exchange hit \$9.43 billion in the first half of this year, up 32.4 percent on an annual basis, he said, adding that China imported 14.18 million tons of crude oil from Kuwait, a rise of 5.71 percent, on an annual basis. He concluded by saying that China and Kuwait are willing to maintain close coordination and cooperation, work together to promote regional peace and stability and join international efforts to fight the pandemic. — KUNA

EU adds Kuwait to its safe travel list

BRUSSELS: The European Union (EU) yesterday announced that it had added Kuwait to the list of epidemiologically safe non-EU countries, for which the EU countries should reopen the borders for non-essential travel. The EU Council of Ministers in a press release said following a review under the recommendation on the gradual lifting of the temporary restrictions on non-essential travel into the EU, it updated the list of countries for which travel restrictions should be lifted.

In particular, Chile, Kuwait and Rwanda were added to the list and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moldova were removed, it said. Based on the criteria and conditions set out in the recommendation, as from Sept 23, 2021, member states should gradually lift travel restrictions at the external borders for residents of the following non-EU countries: Australia, Canada, Chile (new), Jordan, Kuwait (new), New Zealand, Qatar, Rwanda (new), Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Ukraine, Uruguay and China, subject to confirmation of reciprocity.

The criteria to determine countries for which the current travel restrictions should be lifted were updated on May 20, 2021. They cover the epidemiological situation and overall response to COVID-19, as well as the reliability of the available information and data sources, it said. The EU Council of Ministers updates the safe travel list based on criteria relating to coronavirus infection levels every two weeks. —KUNA

News in brief

Man shoots himself

KUWAIT: An Indian resident, 31, was rushed to hospital in stable condition after shooting himself with his sponsor's shotgun. The man, who worked as a driver, had an argument with his wife, who is in India. He then took his sponsor's gun and shot himself. Investigations are being conducted.

Near drowning

A 19-month-old toddler was rushed to Farwaniya Hospital in unstable condition after he fell in a bucket of water at his home in Khaitan.

Melee at shisha cafe

A Kuwaiti man ordered shisha at a cafe, but after his order was rejected for unknown reasons, he got angry and destroyed his table. Employees subdued the man and beat him badly, breaking his foot in the process. Police arrested the employees.

Man threatens mom, aunt

A 33-year-old youth confessed to threatening his mother and maternal aunt. The man was ordered detained. A security source said a 63-year-old woman, accompanied by her 59-year-old sister, told police her son threatened to kill them. The man was contacted and asked to come to the police station, but he did not respond. After detectives arrested him, he confessed to the charges, which he said were due to a family dispute.



World powers face 'Afghan dilemma'

Indian man on bail must wash women's clothes for 6 months



DEBARK, Ethiopia: People who fled the war from May Tsemre, Addi Arkay and Zarima gather around in a temporarily built internally displaced people (IDP) camp to receive their first bags of wheat from the World Food Program (WFP) in Debarq.—AFP

'Silent killing': Starvation stalks Tigray

Heavy fighting and massacres claim thousands of lives

ADDIS ABABA: Mothers in Ethiopia's war-scarred Tigray region describe feeding leaves to their children in a desperate bid to keep them alive. As they move from place to place, dodging fighting and searching for aid, they watch for tell-tale signs of malnutrition: sluggishness, rashes, loss of appetite. Those signs are increasingly frequent these days, and in some cases portend the worst possible outcome, according to internal documents and photographs from one aid agency - seen this week by AFP - that detail starvation deaths in two locations, with more suspected elsewhere.

"Before the war, my daughter was in good physical and mental health... now look at her," said the mother of a 20-month-old in the northern city of Adigrat, according to one testimony provided by the agency. "It's been weeks since she lost her appetite. Presently she cannot walk, she lost her smiley face." It has been nearly three months since the UN warned that 400,000 people across Tigray had "crossed the threshold into famine".

The situation has only deteriorated since then, as a de-facto blockade prevents most aid from getting in. Now, after months of heavy fighting and massacres that have claimed thousands of lives, doctors worry Tigray is entering a new phase of fatalities driven by the kind of widespread starvation that turned Ethiopia into a by-word for famine in the 1980s.

"It's a silent killing. People are just dying," said

Dr Hayelom Kebede, research director of Ayder Referral Hospital in Tigray's capital Mekele, the region's biggest. "With starvation, the bad thing is you will see people in the throes of death, but they will not die immediately," he told AFP. "It takes time, after their body is weakened and weakened and weakened. It's more horrific than bullet deaths."

'Indications of a siege'

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, a Nobel peace laureate, sent troops into Tigray in November to topple the regional ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a move he said came in response to TPLF attacks on army camps. The fighting disrupted the harvest in a region that was already struggling to supply enough food, and some combatants made things worse by blocking and looting food aid. In a stunning about-turn in late June, the TPLF recaptured most of Tigray, including Mekele, and government forces largely withdrew. Abiy's office announced a humanitarian ceasefire, yet very little aid has gone in - less than 10 percent of needed supplies over the past month, according to the US.

Federal officials blame the TPLF for obstructing deliveries, citing recent offensives in neighboring Afar and Amhara regions. Last week, the UN sounded the alarm over hundreds of aid trucks it said had "not returned" from Tigray, though the TPLF said this was due to obstructions

drivers faced while entering from Afar, currently home to the only viable road route into Tigray. With fighting in Afar reportedly over, at least for now, pressure is mounting on the government to address the aid shortages.

"The United States is appalled by reports of starvation deaths in Ethiopia," a State Department spokesperson told AFP this week. "Access by road and by air, which along with electricity, telecoms, banking activity and fuel supplies are essential to enable aid delivery, are being denied by the Ethiopian government—indications of a siege." US President Joe Biden last week signed an executive order allowing for sanctions against the warring parties if they fail to commit to a negotiated settlement.

No food, no medicine

At Ayder hospital, evidence of shortages is everywhere. At least 50 children are receiving intensive care treatment for malnutrition, said Hayelom, but there is little medics can do for them. "We used to supply nutrients for these children, but now we have run out of medicine and we have run out of any food stock, so we couldn't support them," he said. The EU's first humanitarian "air bridge" flight reached Mekele on September 11 with therapeutic food for severely malnourished children, but officials removed medicines before the flight could take off from Addis Ababa, according to a report by the UN humanitarian agency.

Even some doctors and nurses, unable to access their salaries with banking suspended, are getting by on a snack of roasted barley known as kolo, Hayelom said. He has tried to alert the health ministry but the response has been muted. "They said, 'yeah, we're also concerned' but they have no capacity" other than to raise it with Abiy's office and government ministers, he said. It is unclear how long children at the hospital will be able to hold on, he said.

'Catastrophic' scenario

Outside Mekele, pockets of starvation deaths have already emerged. The interim administration set up by Abiy reported in April roughly eight such cases in the town of Ofra. More recently three starvation deaths have been confirmed in Mehoni south of Mekele and two in Adwa to the northwest, according to the aid agency documents reviewed by AFP, which reflect only limited assessments.

The agency provided the materials on condition of anonymity for fear of sanctions from the Ethiopian government, which has suspended the work of several NGOs. Though fighting in the region has largely died down in recent months, parts of Tigray remain inaccessible, making a comprehensive picture unattainable. Tigrayan leaders reported that 150 people died of starvation in August and that one million were "at risk of fatal famine", but those figures could not be independently verified.—AFP

International

People have lost hope: Lebanon's only suicide hotline inundated

Desperation, financial downturn spur mental health crisis

BEIRUT: The phones at Lebanon's only suicide hotline hardly ever stop ringing as people grow more and more desperate in the face of a financial downturn that has spurred a mental health crisis. In one call, a father says he is thinking of taking his own life because he is unable to feed his children, and in another, a man recently made homeless says he has lost all hope. There are dozens of such calls every day, and around 1,100 a month, in a nation that has seen an exodus of healthcare specialists and shortages of drugs to treat anxiety, depression and psychosis.

The number of people phoning in has more than doubled since last year, and is expected to continue to grow in the coming months as hopes dim for a battered population pushed to the brink by a seemingly endless succession of woes. One morning this month, "we woke up at 5:30 am to a call from a 31-year-old who is homeless" and feeling suicidal on Beirut's east-west flyover, said Mia Atoui, the co-founder and vice president of Embrace, the NGO that runs the hotline.

Before that, the organisation got a call from a dad living in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley who was feeling suicidal because he had four kids he could no longer afford to feed, she added. "We are receiving similar calls every day... the crisis has worsened enormously," Atoui said higher demand had prompted the organization to extend hotline operations to 21 hours a day, up from 17, with the aim of reaching 24 hours in the coming months.

A free therapy clinic run by the organization is fully booked

until October, with more than 100 people on the waiting list. The number of children phoning in has also risen, with people under the age of 18 accounting for 15 percent of callers in July, up from less than 10 percent in previous months. "A lot of people have lost hope," Atoui said.

Epidemic of loneliness

Since the start of the country's financial crisis in 2019, the triggers for emotional distress have kept piling up, with the coronavirus pandemic and a monster blast at the Beirut port last year stretching a nation's psyche to its limit. The past four months have seen Lebanon land on even tougher times, with dwindling foreign currency reserves sparking shortages of key imports including fuel, medicine and bread amid around-the-clock power cuts.

With hospitals going out of service and schools at risk of closing down, Lebanese have fled the country en masse, leading to an epidemic of loneliness on top of the misery that now plagues daily life. Fadi Maalouf, the head of the psychiatry department at the prestigious American University of Beirut Medical Centre, said he has seen an upsurge in the load of patients coming in for treatment. "We are definitely seeing more anxiety and depression, but also more advanced conditions," he said. The situation, Maalouf said, had been worsened by a dual dilemma.

The bulk of mental health specialists have left, leaving patients struggling to find expert help, while shortages of antidepressants,



BEIRUT: Magalie Eid, a volunteer operator, answers calls at Embrace, an NGO which runs a suicide-prevention hotline, in Lebanon's capital Beirut. —AFP

mood stabilizers, and anti-anxiety medication have interrupted treatment for many. "We saw patients who cut down on their treatment so that the supply they have would last longer, and they came to us in our outpatient clinic with a worsening of their condition," Maalouf said. "We even saw patients who decided to stop their treatment and they become more severely depressed, even suicidal, and they ended up in our emergency room," he added. "These are all patients who were previously stable." —AFP

Timeline: Tunisia's authoritarian slide

TUNIS: In the decade since Tunisia's toppling of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali sparked the Arab Spring, the North African country has had almost as many governments. But fears of a regression to authoritarian rule are growing with President Kais Saied taking powers that will allow him to rule by decree. Here is a timeline:

2019: Saied elected

Saied, a retired law professor and political outsider, is elected president on September 15, 2019 after his elderly predecessor dies in office. The populist conservative is swept to power on a wave of public outrage against political parties seen as corrupt and self-serving, taking nearly 73 percent of the vote. The populist conservative also has support from across the spectrum including the then ruling Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party.

2021: July 25 protests

Thousands of Tunisians join protest marches against the government led by parliament's largest faction, the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party, as COVID deaths surge to one of the highest per capita rates in the world.

Parliament suspended, PM ousted

That night Saied suspends parliament for 30 days and dismisses Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi. Saied, who officially heads the army, says he will pick a new prime minister and lift parliamentary immunity, and warns armed opposition will be met with a "rain of bullets". Saied's supporters flood the streets

of the capital Tunis and sound car horns while fireworks light up the sky. The move comes after a prolonged deadlock between Saied, the prime minister and Ennahdha leader Rached Ghannouchi, which crippled management of the pandemic.

'Coup'

Ennahdha slams Saied's actions as a "coup d'etat against the revolution and the constitution." The following day Ghannouchi leads a sit-in after the army blocks him from entering parliament. Later his and Saied's supporters clash outside the building. Police close the Tunis office of Qatari news channel Al Jazeera. The Gulf state is close to Ennahdha.

'Danger to the state'

With Washington and Paris calling for a swift return to parliamentary democracy, Saied announces an anti-corruption drive on July 28, targeting 460 businessmen he accuses of graft during Ben Ali's rule. On August 24, President Saied extends his suspension of parliament saying it and "the other political institutions are a danger to the state as they are." His opponents warn he is establishing an "autocratic regime". Human rights groups warn of restrictions on freedoms and the European Union's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell says he had made his concerns known to the Tunisian president.

Rule by decree

On Wednesday, Saied took exceptional powers that will effectively allow him to rule by decree, concentrating authority in the hands of the presidency at the expense of parliament and the prime minister's office. Ennahdha says Saied's power grab risks "dismantling the state". Meanwhile, police arrest lawmaker Seifeddine Makhoulouf, a critic of Saied who heads an ultraconservative Islamist party, for the second time in barely a week, for "undermining the dignity of the army". —AFP

Tunisia's Saied issues decree strengthening presidential powers

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied took exceptional measures on Wednesday that strengthen the powers of his office at the expense of the government and parliament, which he will effectively replace with rule by decree. The provisions, laid out in a series of articles published in the official gazette, come almost two months after his initial power grab.

Under the current system most of the executive power was in the hands of the government, and the measures announced by Saied clearly tip the balance in favor of the presidency. "Legislative texts will be promulgated in the form of decrees signed by the President of the Republic," one of the articles stipulates. A second article says that "the President shall exercise executive power with the help of a Council of Ministers chaired by a Head of Government". "The President of the Republic presides over the Council of Ministers and may mandate the Head of Government to replace him/her," says another.

Saied, a political outsider, came to power in 2019 on a wave of public outrage against political parties widely seen as corrupt and self-serving. An austere legal academic, the 63-year-old president has shown little inclination to negotiation or compromise, even in the midst of the country's social and health crises. —AFP

International

Recognize the Taliban? World powers face Afghan dilemma

World powers open up channels of communication

PARIS: The international community faces a growing dilemma over whether to recognize the Taliban as the rulers of Afghanistan, weighing distaste on the vision of the Islamist group with the need for stability. Since the August 15 takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, which dislodged the pro-Western government, world powers have opened up channels of communication with the group but made clear this does not mean recognition.

The Taliban themselves have begun to indicate impatience on the issue of recognition, which would allow its officials to represent the country in international organizations, funds to be unblocked for the cash-starved economy. The debate burst into the open at the UN General Assembly where the Taliban have asked to speak on behalf of Afghanistan, but the ambassador of the former ousted government claims to represent his country. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas rejected the demand of Afghanistan's new rulers, saying a Taliban "show" would serve no purpose and "concrete deeds" were needed.

"At some point, the Taliban will have to make a choice between money and normalization, or absolute isolation," added a European diplomat, who asked not to be named. "We will see if it works. As of now, it is not working." Even countries far less troubled than the West by the ousting of the former government, or even supportive of the Taliban, have been in no rush to recognize Kabul's new rulers. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said the

Taliban needed to be more sensitive and take account of international opinion, an attitude shared by Qatar, which has long served as a mediator.

Even China, which has expressed a willingness to work with the Taliban and could scent an advantage by being among the first to recognize them, has yet to do so. Western countries are alarmed that the first weeks of Taliban rule have not augured well for life under a group notorious for its brutal, oppressive rule from 1996 to 2001. There is particular concern for the rights of women and girls who have not yet been allowed back to school although the Taliban have vowed this will be "as soon as possible".

'Camouflage powerlessness'

But after its "painful defeat" in Afghanistan, the West is in no position to dictate conditions, said Markus Kaim, Senior fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. "Western statements about how many levers they have on the Taliban and how effective they are only camouflage their own powerlessness and perpetuate the imperial hubris that has been part of the problem in Afghanistan," he said.

The West, however, is not without tools to put pressure on Kabul. Many Afghan bank accounts held abroad have been frozen. And from August 18, the International Monetary Fund suspended disbursements to Afghanistan due to the "lack of clarity within the international community regarding recognition of a government".

The issue is all the more acute as the country



KABUL: A Taliban fighter stands guard along a street near the Zanaq Square in Kabul yesterday. —AFP

risks humanitarian disaster this winter - the Taliban themselves were surprised at their swift victory and key central functions of the Afghan state have still not been restored. Amina Khan, director for the centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, told AFP that the immediate priority for the Taliban was recognition by powers in its part of the world. "The Taliban are putting their bets more on regional countries, for development, aid and political recognition. They want to work with China,

Russia, Iran," she said.

She added that in contrast to the Taliban's previous spell in charge in the 1990s, there was now more strategic convergence among neighbors and nearby countries on the issue of recognition. "The region has an appetite to play a larger role in Afghanistan and engage with the Taliban," she said. But she added that the group will have to "deliver on their promises", notably pledges that Afghanistan will not become a base for forces hostile to neighboring countries. —AFP

Facebook ordered to release anti-Rohingya content

WASHINGTON: A US judge has ordered Facebook to release records of accounts linked to government-backed violence against the Rohingya in Myanmar that it had shut down, the Wall Street Journal reported. In his ruling on Wednesday, Washington DC district court Magistrate Judge Zia Faruqi criticized the social media giant for refusing to provide the records to countries pursuing a case against Myanmar in the International Court of Justice, the Journal said. Facebook had resisted releasing the information on the grounds of US privacy law. But the judge ruled that the deleted posts would not be covered under the protections for users' personal communications.

"Locking away the requested content would be throwing away the opportunity to understand how disinformation begat genocide," Faruqi wrote in his ruling, as quoted by the Journal, saying Facebook "taking up the mantle of privacy rights is rich with irony." Facebook has been accused of being slow to respond to abusive posts portraying Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims in sub-human terms, helping to drum up support for a military crackdown that forced more than 740,000 of the stateless minority to flee the country in 2017. —AFP

US special envoy to Haiti resigns, slams migrant deportations

PORT-AU-PRINCE: The US special envoy to Haiti resigned yesterday two months after his appointment, denouncing the Biden administration's deportation of Haitian migrants from the US-Mexico border back to their poverty-stricken homeland. "I will not be associated with the United States inhumane, counterproductive decision to deport thousands of Haitian refugees and illegal immigrants to Haiti," State Department envoy Daniel Foote said in a scathing letter of resignation. In the letter to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Foote described Haiti as a place where US diplomats "are confined to secure compounds because of the danger posed by armed gangs in control of daily life."

"Mired in poverty, hostage to the terror," Foote wrote, the Haitian population "simply cannot support the forced infusion of thousands of returned migrants lacking food, shelter, and money without additional, avoidable human tragedy." "More refugees will fuel further desperation and crime," he wrote. The resignation came after the administration of President Joe Biden began last weekend loading Haitian migrants who crossed into the country from Mexico onto aircraft and flying them back to Haiti. Many of

the thousands who crossed the border actually travelled from South America, where some said they fled to years ago from the grinding poverty and violence of Haiti.

Thousands at the US border

Well over 10,000 migrants, the largest part of them Haitian, flowed into the Texas border city of Del Rio in recent weeks seeking to remain in the United States. Footage of the migrants, many of them families, massing under a highway bridge and moving back and forth to Mexico for food, have stunned America and sparked a fresh crisis over migrant policy.

Biden came under strong criticism after photographs and videos showed mounted Border Patrol officers using their horses to try and control the migrants, with some appearing to threaten migrants with their horses' long reins. That has led to calls from Biden's own Democratic party to give the Haitians asylum rather than fly them back to Haiti. On Wednesday Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said he was in talks with Brazil, Chile and other South American countries to send the migrants back to them. Tens of thousands of Haitians fled to South America after the massive 2010 earthquake wreaked heavy damage across the Caribbean nation. Foote said in his letter that Haiti needs more assistance and a democratically chosen government, after the July assassination of president Jovenel Moise. "What our Haitian friends really want, and need, is the opportunity to chart their own course, without international puppeteering and favored candidates but with genuine support for that course," he said. —AFP

International

US and France leaders try to defuse submarine row

Biden, Macron have a 'friendly' phone call

PARIS: US President Joe Biden and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron had a "friendly" phone call Wednesday to defuse a deep row over submarine sales to Australia, promising to meet in person to repair the transatlantic relationship. The call, which the White House said lasted about 30 minutes, was the first between Biden and Macron since France recalled its ambassador over the surprise US announcement of a deal to build nuclear submarines for Australia - scuppering a previous French deal to sell conventional submarines.

Paris called the US-Australian plan, which was launched as part of a new Indo-Pacific security group along with Britain, a stab in the back and also pulled its ambassador from Australia. In a joint statement after the call, the two leaders vowed to launch "in-depth consultations... for ensuring confidence" and to meet in Europe at the end of October. The statement also said Macron would order France's ambassador back to Washington next week.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters the talk "was friendly" and Biden was "hopeful this was a step in returning to normal." The statement said the US recognized the need for stronger European defense to complement the NATO military alliance, a key idea repeatedly floated by the French leader. In what amounted to an acknowledgement of French anger, the English-language version of the statement issued by the White House said that the management of the dueling submarine deals "would have benefited from open consultations among allies."

The French-language version issued by the Elysee Palace was even more explicit, saying consultations "would have avoided this situation." There was no word about where the October meeting

will be but Biden will already be in Rome and Glasgow at that time for the G20 and COP26 climate summits. At the annual United Nations summit, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, after giving the cold shoulder for days, spoke with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the sidelines of a meeting and the two expected to meet again Thursday, a US official said.

'Good messages'

France's Naval Group said it will send a detailed invoice in the coming weeks to Australia for cancelling the contract originally worth Aus\$50 billion (\$36.5 billion, 31 billion euros). As well as a huge commercial setback, the loss of the deal was also a blow to France's security strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, where it has a presence through overseas territories.

The submarine row plunged Franco-US ties into what some analysts viewed as the most acute crisis since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which Paris opposed. After four years of tumultuous relations with ex-president Donald Trump, the spat also dashed hopes of a complete reset under Biden, who took office in January aiming to rebuild frazzled ties with Europe.

Wednesday's call sought at least to settle the mood, with the White House soon after releasing a photo of Biden smiling while speaking to Macron. "The messages from the call are good. It was recognized that communication should have been better," said Benjamin Haddad, director of the Europe Center at the Atlantic Council, a think tank. "The US understood that the main shock in Paris did not come so much from the commercial aspect as from the breakdown in confidence," he said. In another welcome step

since. "Algerians travelling to Morocco transfer via Tunis," the source said on condition of anonymity. The decision will more immediately effect Moroccan flights that have routes over Algerian territory. Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra told CNN International on Tuesday that cutting diplomatic ties was "sending the right message" to Morocco. "This is a civilized way of putting an end to a situation that could not last anymore without running the risk of costing more casualties and taking the two countries into a path that would not be desirable".

'Make wisdom prevail'

In July, Morocco's King Mohammed VI deplored the tensions and invited Algeria's President Abdelmadjid Tebboune "to make wisdom prevail" and "work in unison for the development of relations" between the neighboring countries. Earlier this month, more than 200 Moroccan and Algerian civil society figures appealed for a "return to reason" after Algiers' decision to cut diplomatic ties. Intellectuals, academics and other civil society actors, most of them Moroccan, signed a petition rejecting the "current situation which could lead to an unnatural confrontation... contrary to the interests of the two peoples and the region". Algeria is the key foreign backer of the Polisario Front, which has for decades fought Morocco for the independence of Western Sahara. Morocco sees the former Spanish colony as an integral part of its territory. The sparsely-populated desert territory boasts significant phosphate resources and a long Atlantic coastline with access to rich fishing waters. Algiers was also angered by Morocco's normalization of ties with Israel last year as a quid pro quo for US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Rabat had severed diplomatic relations with Algeria in 1976 for several years after Algiers recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), proclaimed by the Polisario. —AFP



CARBIS BAY: In this file photo US President Joe Biden (left) and France's President Emmanuel Macron speak after the family photo at the start of the G7 summit in Carbis Bay, Cornwall. —AFP

for Paris, the joint statement added that the US committed "to reinforcing its support to counter-terrorism operations" in the Sahel region of Africa, where French forces are deployed to fight jihadists.

Observers and some of France's European partners had begun wondering how and when Macron would call an end to the face-off, which is playing out just seven months ahead of French presidential elections. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson showed he was out of patience, using a French-English mix to say it was "time for some of our dearest friends around the world to 'prenez un grip' (get a grip)." —AFP

Algeria closes airspace to all Moroccan planes

ALGIERS: Algeria said Wednesday it has closed its airspace to all Moroccan planes due to "provocations and hostile practices" by its neighbor, in the latest dispute between the countries at odds mainly over Western Sahara. The move comes after Algeria broke off diplomatic ties with Morocco on August 24, accusing it of "hostile actions" following months of heightened tensions between the two North African countries. Morocco called the severing of ties "completely unjustified" and said the decision was based on "false, even absurd pretexts".

Relations between the neighbors have been tense for decades due to Algeria's support for the Polisario Front, which demands a self-determination referendum in Western Sahara, while Morocco, which controls around 80 percent of the desert territory, has offered only autonomy. The Algerian presidency said in a statement on Wednesday the decision had been made "to shut its airspace immediately to all civilian and military aircraft as well as to those registered in Morocco." The decision was announced after a meeting of the High Security Council chaired by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune. The presidency said the meeting examined the situation on Algeria's border with Morocco and took into account "the continuation of provocations and hostile practices by Morocco", without providing details. The decision will not have a major immediate effect because Algeria closed off air links in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reopening to seven countries in June - of which Morocco was not one. A source close to the state-owned carrier Air Algérie said no direct commercial flights between Algeria and Morocco had flown

US authorizes Pfizer COVID booster for the elderly and high-risk

WASHINGTON: The United States on Wednesday authorized the use of boosters of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine for people aged over 65, as well as adults at high risk of severe disease and those in high-exposure jobs. The announcement means a significant part of the population - amounting to tens of millions of Americans - are now eligible for a third shot six months after their second. "Today's action demonstrates that science and the currently available data continue to guide the FDA's decision-making for COVID-19 vaccines during this pandemic," said Janet Woodcock, acting head of the Food and Drug Administration, in a statement.

The decision was expected and came after an independent expert panel convened by the regulatory agency last week voted in favor of recommending the move. The panel, however, rejected an initial plan by the White House to fully approve Pfizer boosters to everyone aged 16 and over, in what amounted to a rare rebuke of President Joe Biden's administration. The group of vaccinologists, infectious disease specialists and epidemiologists concluded that the benefit-risk balance differed for younger people, especially young males who are more susceptible to myocarditis. —AFP

International

Mexico's 'love-hate' relationship with former colonial ruler Spain

Mexico to celebrate 200 years of independence

MEXICO CITY: Mexico this month celebrates 200 years of independence from Spain, the former colonial ruler with which it has a "love-hate" relationship today. Most Mexicans have a mixed European and indigenous ancestry and have contrasting feelings about the violence of the conquest, which imposed culture, language and religion on the country. Spain is thus seen as both the motherland and the enemy.

"There is this love-hate, but it depends on the social scale. Among the middle and upper classes we see this ambivalence, but in the lower classes the hatred is deeper," historian Lorenzo Meyer told AFP. The relationship between the two countries' governments has also seen ups and downs, he said. The Spanish benefited from good relations during Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz's 1884-1911 rule, but distanced themselves from the upheaval of the 1910-1920 Mexican revolution. Ties improved again during the Second Spanish Republic from 1931-1939, before dictator Francisco Franco took power.

Aside from politics, Spain has given Mexico "cultural salvation" from American influence, Meyer said. There is a passion in Mexico for bullfighting and music, with popular songs like "Madrid" and "Granada" penned in the 1930s by Mexican composer Agustin Lara. The affection is mutual, said Mikel Alonso, a chef of Basque origin who has Mexican nationality. "In my hometown when people sing there are only two types of songs - the deep and nostalgic Basque and the happy ranchera," he said.

'Open arms'

Mexico provided refuge to Spanish anti-Franco Republicans, who even established a government in exile in the Mexican capital between 1939 and 1946, and had diplomatic representation until the 1980s. "Franco was never recognized. The Republican embassy here was the one that endured the most in the world," Meyer said. "They lived with the fiction that there was a Republican ambassador but there was a representative of Franco (in the Portuguese embassy) who was really the one who ran the daily business," he added.

Mexico hosted around 20,000 Republicans, including intellectuals who propped up educational institutions. "The welcome given to the Spanish Republican exiles will never be forgotten," said Carlos Martinez Shaw, of the Royal Academy of History in Madrid. "They were received with open arms in Mexico," he added. At the beginning there was reluctance from the Republicans and even a demand that their children have Spanish teachers, Meyer said. "They came not out of love, but out of force. Mexico offered them asylum and gave them facilities. They had nowhere to go," he said.

Mutual ambivalence

One exile was Angel Sarmiento Gonzalez, a Republican deputy who promoted agrarian reform. Pursued by Franco, he came to Mexico in the 1940s with a wife and five children. His grand-

daughter, Veneranda Merino Sarmiento, remembers the gratitude towards Mexico, but also some resentment at times. "There was always someone calling us gachupinas," a disparaging Mexican name for Spaniards, she said.

The Spanish arrived poor and became rich, causing both offense and envy, Meyer said. "But they also despised Mexicans, calling them 'Indians,'" he added. The resentment resurfaced after Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in 2019 demanded that Spain apologize for the events of the conquest. Madrid flatly rejected Lopez Obrador's request, saying the conquest "cannot be judged in the light of contemporary considerations." Mexican constitutional lawyer Francisco Burgoa sees the demand as at odds with the 1836 Calavatra treaty, the definitive recognition of Mexican independence.

The agreement "puts an end to any dispute or claim between the two countries," he said. Jesus Bustamante, a historian with Spain's Higher Council for Scientific Research, sees the request as part of "nationalist rhetoric" at a time when Mexico faces myriad domestic challenges such as criminal violence. "Perhaps what is happening is that addressing these rhetorical and identity issues and calling Spain to account is a kind of distraction," he said. But there are also still "open wounds," Meyer argued. In Lopez Obrador's logic, "representing the grievances of the popular classes is not harmful, on the contrary," he said. — AFP

Ukraine adopts law limiting oligarchs after gun attack

KIEV: Ukraine's parliament yesterday passed a law meant to reduce the influence of oligarchs in the country a day after an attack on a top presidential aide that officials said could have been a retaliation to the legislation. Gunmen opened fire on a car carrying President Volodymyr Zelensky's senior aide, Sergiy Shefir, on Wednesday.

The new law aims to "prevent risks to national security linked to the excessive influence" of oligarchs, according to the parliament's website. Zelensky put forward the legislation earlier this year when he announced a new campaign to limit the authority of the country's oligarchs, accusing them of exerting too much control over the economy.

Under the law, individuals recognized as "oligarchs" will be prohibited from financing political parties and participating in the privatization of large companies. An individual may be classified as an oligarch if three out of four criteria outlined by the law are met. These are beneficial ownership of a monopoly company, significant influence over the media, participation in political activities, and a fortune of over 2.4 billion hryvnias (about \$87 million).

Ukraine's richest man Rinat Akhmetov, powerful tycoon Igor Kolomoisky and former president Petro Poroshenko—an outspoken critic of Zelensky—are among those who could be targeted by the law. The legislation was passed in a second and final reading by 279 lawmakers out of a required minimum of 226. The vote came after what officials described as an assassination attempt on presidential aide Shefir. More than 10 bullets hit Shefir's car during the attack near the village of Lisnyky, south of the capital Kiev. He escaped unharmed but his driver was "seriously injured."



KIEV: In this file photo, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky (center) and his wife Olena together with members of his crew react at The Olympic Stadium in Kiev, with the chief aide to Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky. — AFP

Shefir is a 57-year-old former script writer and longtime associate of comedian-turned-politician Zelensky, who was on a visit in the United States, promised a "strong response". "That is the price of changes in the state, that is the price of reforms," he said in his speech to the UN General Assembly. Police said they did not rule out that the attack was politically motivated. National police chief Igor Klymenko said Wednesday that Shefir may have been targeted as part of a bid to pressure Ukraine's top leadership or destabilize "the political situation in our country." — AFP

6 die in plane crash in Russia's Far East

MOSCOW: All six crew members on board a Russian transport plane died when it crashed earlier outside the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk, local officials said yesterday. The wreckage was discovered by a search team after it disappeared from radars on Wednesday evening. Photos from the scene showed debris from the Antonov An-26 transport aircraft scattered across broken tree branches. "All members of the crew died. We extend our condolences to the families," the Khabarovsk branch of the health ministry said in a statement.

Antonov planes were manufactured during the Soviet era and are still used throughout the former Soviet Union for civilian and military transport. They have been involved in a number of accidents in recent years. Investigators said remnants of the plane were discovered on a ridge in the Bolshekhekhtsirsky Nature Reserve, some 20 kilometers south of Khabarovsk. They said they were now looking into the cause of the crash.

The emergencies ministry said it had taken more than five hours to reach the remote crash site. Once notorious for plane accidents, Russia's major airlines have shifted from ageing Soviet aircraft to more modern planes. But poor aircraft maintenance and lax safety standards persist, and the country has recently seen several deadly air accidents. In July, an An-26 flying over the Far Eastern Kamchatka peninsula crashed, killing all 28 people on board. A month later, a Mi-8 helicopter carrying 16 tourists and crew on a sightseeing trip in Kamchatka crashed into a lake, killing eight people. — AFP

South Africa seethes at UK's Beta bogeyman 'discrimination'

South Africa on red list of high-risk countries

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa is seething over Britain's decision to keep the country on its coronavirus "red list," a move that means travelers must pay for pricey hotel quarantine on their return to the UK. Renowned for its wildlife and breathtaking scenery, South Africa is struggling to recover from the crippling blow coronavirus dealt to a tourism industry that directly accounts for three percent of the nation's economy and - prior to the pandemic - was one of the few employment bright spots, providing more than 700,000 jobs.

Shut off from the rest of the world for most of 2020 and then blacklisted by several governments over the discovery of the Beta variant in December, South Africa is slowly starting to see a trickle of high-paying foreign visitors as infection rates fall. Travelers coming from Europe and the US, South Africa's biggest tourism markets along with the UK, can currently holiday and then self-isolate at home upon return - a hassle that some are prepared to take.

But the UK has kept South Africa on its red list of high-risk countries, meaning anyone arriving from South Africa is forced to quarantine in a hotel for 10 days, costing more than \$2,400 (2,000 euros) per person. The stratospheric cost rules the country out for most British tourists. With more than 400,000 visitors a year in pre-pandemic times, the UK was South Africa's biggest source of long-haul travelers, especially during the northern hemisphere winter.

Some British nationals such as Claire Alexander have been stuck in South Africa for over a year because of the costly re-

strictions. "I've just spoken to my 91-year papa in Stirling and it's pretty sore knowing I can't get home," said the mother of two, whose youngest child has yet to meet "his Scottish clan". Marc Mendelson, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Cape Town, is a Briton who earned his PhD at Cambridge's prestigious Addenbrooks Hospital. He said he was "embarrassed" by his home country's government. "Misinformation, misrepresentation, outdated & inaccurate science," he tweeted this week.

Beta blocker

The British embassy in Pretoria acknowledged "positive developments" in South Africa. It noted "cases going down, data on variants of concern improving and vaccinations rising." But it said concerns remained "about the continued presence of Beta given its potential ability to circumvent vaccines". Nonsense, South Africa's leading genomics expert Tulio de Oliveira said, tweeting on Monday that his research showed the Delta variant had now completely replaced Beta in South Africa.

That was confirmed by Adrian Puren of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, who told AFP that the Beta variant was "undetectable" in cases sequenced in September, and that concerns over its vaccine resistance were "moot". "Really unscientific decision," de Oliveira said, adding that South Africa has a higher vaccination rate than some non-red listed countries - including India, where the Delta variant first appeared. "We have a smaller number of infections than the UK... So why this

discrimination?" de Oliveira said, adding that: "We look forward to engaging the UK scientists and for constructive discussion with (the) UK."

Jabs pickup

Daily new cases in South Africa peaked at the end of June at just over 26,000, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Britain continues to see more than 30,000 new cases a day. Vaccinations, meanwhile, are picking up after a slow start, with around 20 percent of South African adults now fully jabbed.

To date the country has recorded more than 2.8 million cases, the highest in Africa, of which at least 86,376 have been fatal. Britain has recorded 7.5 million cases and at least 135,455 deaths. South Africa's main inbound tourism association has also been lobbying London to remove the red tag. Director of luxury holiday booker Discover Africa Group, Andre Van Kets, argued the measures no longer made sense given infection and vaccination rates were "moving in the right direction".

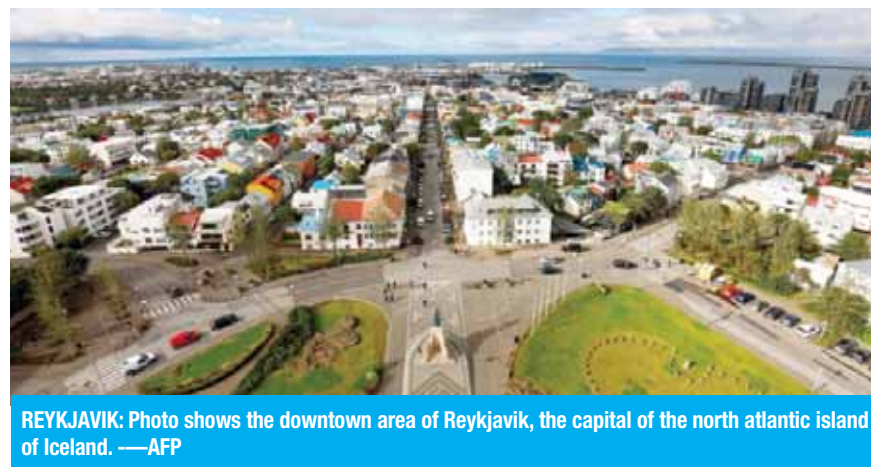
British tourists are still enquiring and making plans for 2022 and 2023, he said, but often pull out when asked to pay a deposit. "There is no reasonable basis for keeping South Africa on the red list," Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor said this week in a statement touting the country's "robust vaccination program and excellent science". "It's ridiculous," said Andre Retief of tour operator Safari With Us, which has relied on the UK for 20 to 30 percent of its bookings. "COVID is all over the world now and coming on safari is actually quite safe." —AFP

Icelanders go to polls fearing big 'unstable' coalition

REYKJAVIK: Iceland holds legislative elections tomorrow after four years of an unprecedented left-right coalition that has managed to put a lid on a volatile decade of crises and scandals. But with so many political parties vying for power and no one clear coalition option emerging, analysts say it is hard to predict the shape of the next government. Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir, whose Left-Green Movement had never before been in government, is seeking a second mandate in a political landscape more splintered than ever.

Opinion polls point to a record nine parties expected to win seats in the Althing, Iceland's almost 1,100-year-old parliament. That makes it particularly difficult to predict which parties could end up forming a coalition together after the vote. With 33 of 63 seats, the outgoing coalition is an unholy mix of the conservative Independence Party, the centre-right Progressive Party and the Left-Green Movement. This is only the second time since 2008 that a government has made it to the end of its four-year mandate on the sprawling island of 370,000 people.

Deep public distrust of politicians amid repeated scandals sent Icelanders to the



REYKJAVIK: Photo shows the downtown area of Reykjavik, the capital of the north Atlantic island of Iceland. —AFP

polls five times from 2007 to 2017. "This government was not founded on the premise of undertaking societal changes, but much rather for the purpose of co-habitation politics in a country that had been in upheaval for a long time," noted Eirikur Bergmann, a political science professor at Bifrost University.

'No clear alternative'

Opinion polls suggest the current coalition will likely fail to win re-election. Jakobsdottir, 45, is however broadly popular, having won over Icelanders with her integrity, sincerity and consensual management style. She has also been praised for her handling of the COVID-19 crisis, with Iceland recording only 33 deaths. "I

think this government has done a good job, and I think it has really shown what is possible in politics," she told AFP in an interview this week.

But her coalition has at times struggled with internal divisions and the head of the Independence Party, Bjarni Benediktsson, has his eyes on the post of prime minister. The Independence Party is credited with between 20 and 24 percent of votes in surveys, and is expected to remain the largest party. A former prime minister, he comes from a family that has long held power on the right and is the current finance minister. "I'm optimistic, I feel supported," he told a campaign rally this week, insisting his party would continue to be "the backbone of the next government". —AFP

Burundi accuses opposition leader of 'terrorist acts'

NAIROBI: Burundi has issued an international arrest warrant against exiled opposition politician Alexis Sinduhije, accusing him of leading a group responsible for multiple "terrorist acts", the country's attorney general said. The announcement by Sylvestre Nyandwi late Wednesday followed a string of attacks in the troubled East African nation in recent days that have left at least six dead and more than a hundred wounded. But the warrant relates to earlier attacks, including grenade explosions and ambushes that have killed dozens and injured several since the beginning of 2020, the attorney general said.

"The investigations already carried out have revealed that these acts are committed by a band of terrorists led by (...) Alexis Sinduhije", he alleged. "Under national and international law, these acts constitute acts of terrorism, as well as crimes against humanity." The president of the opposition Movement for Solidarity and Development (MSD), Sinduhije lives in exile in Belgium. He has long been suspected by the Burundian government of being at the helm of RED-Tabara, the most active rebel group in the country — a claim he has always denied.

RED-Tabara has a rear base in South Kivu in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo and is estimated to number between 500 and 800 men. The group emerged 10 years ago and is accused of being behind many deadly attacks or ambushes in Burundi since 2015. In 2020, the group said it was behind a series of attacks that killed more than 40 people from the security forces and the youth league of the ruling CNDD-FDD party. —AFP

International

Fears of hole in EU heart as 'Queen of Europe' departs

Merkel praised steer Europe through years of turbulence

BRUSSELS: Angela Merkel's exit from the stage is sparking fears of a hole at the heart of the European Union during challenging times - but there are also hopes for a wind of change. Tributes have been growing for the German leader - dubbed "Queen of Europe" by some observers after 16 years as chancellor - ahead of elections this weekend to choose a successor. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte praised Merkel's "enormous authority" after helping steer Europe through years of turbulence that included the financial crisis, migrant crisis, Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, who served under Merkel as German defense minister, underscored how important the former physicist's analytical skills had been for unlocking intractable EU negotiations. "She can always put things in the context of the many years in Europe she helped to shape," von der Leyen said. "And often, when we've hit an impasse, she'll throw out an idea and then we're moving again. We'll miss that."

Pragmatic manager

"Of course, her departure leaves a void," Janis Emmanouilidis of the European Policy Center told AFP. He called the departure of the EU's longest-serving current leader "the end of an era" for the 27-nation bloc. Few will remember Merkel for any visionary speeches on Europe's future. But it has been her much-touted image as a pragmatic manager that has seen her help to maintain unity inside the EU during a period Emmanouilidis dubbed one of

"permanent crisis". He said she had shown "continuity and firmness", qualities that have made her the pre-eminent leader in Europe. "The next chancellor will first have to gain stature before being able to look to replace her in this role." Merkel's steady hand has seen her carve out a positive reputation across much of the continent. In a survey carried out in 12 EU countries by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 41 percent of respondents said they would back Merkel if in a vote for the fictitious role of EU "president".

"Merkel's approach of searching for compromises between competing interests is a major source of Berlin's positive image," the think-tank said. But she has also attracted criticism for her handling of some key challenges. During the eurozone debt crisis of the early 2010s, Merkel was lambasted for the delay in coming to the aid of indebted countries, such as Greece, spurring fears of a collapse of the single currency. She then drew widespread popular ire in Greece for the swingeing conditions imposed on Athens under a bailout.

Hesitancy

Former European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker hailed Merkel for opening Germany's borders during the 2015 migrant crisis and helping craft a 750 billion-euro rescue plan from the pandemic. But he pushed back at those portraying her as the savior of Europe. "It is the German narrative that would like to present it as if she had been at the origin of all the solutions to these serious crises," Juncker said. "I do not underestimate the role she played,



BERLIN: German Chancellor Angela Merkel plays with a handball given to her by the German Handball Federation's president (not in picture) as she received the German national handball team at the Chancellery in Berlin. —AFP

but I am far from overestimating it after having experienced her hesitancy." —AFP

Germany youths yearn for change

BERLIN: For millions of young Germans, Chancellor Angela Merkel is the only leader they have known, a beacon of stability in a world plagued by uncertainties. But as her 16-year tenure comes to end, some say her slowly-slowly approach stymied progress on burning issues such as climate protection and the digital race. Voters under the age of 30 make up 14 percent of the electorate in Germany, which goes to the polls on Sunday. Eager to see change on climate issues, many are shunning her Christian Democrats (CDU) party in favor of the Greens.

Some accuse the old-guard parties - like the CDU or the centre-left Social Democrats - of failing to bring about meaningful change. "She has completely failed on digitalization, the climate crisis has worsened, the gap between rich and poor has widened and she has done nothing about inequality of opportunity in schools," said Christophe Dierckx, a 27-year-old entrepreneur from Frankfurt. He added that Merkel has largely ignored his generation and their future, practicing conservative politics "at its worst".

He's not the only young person to feel sidelined. Merkel's CDU policies are "mostly aimed at older people", Kaan Ogurlu, a 19-year-old Berlin law student, said. A youth-led movement has in recent years made a vocal push for Merkel's government to step up climate protection, protesting on Fridays in school strikes inspired by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. Young activists have also taken the government to court to force it to improve environmental targets. After a TV debate between the three main candidates to replace Merkel last weekend, just 11 percent of voters aged 18 to 34 picked the CDU's Armin Laschet as the winner, with 52 percent opting for the Greens' Annalena Baerbock. —AFP

Austerity, far-right, Uyghurs: Merkel's ambivalent legacy

BERLIN: Crises have a knack for felling leaders. Not Chancellor Angela Merkel. During 16 years in power, the veteran navigated Germany through the 2008 financial turmoil and ensuing eurozone debt crisis, the 2015 refugee influx and now the coronavirus pandemic. "Merkel has experienced more global crises than Macron, Johnson and Trump added together," noted Zeit weekly, referring to contemporaries in France, Britain and the United States. While largely admired at home and abroad even in the final weeks of her reign, the legacy she leaves behind is marked both by light and shadows.

Party in crisis

Merkel scraped to a narrow win in 2005 against then-incumbent chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of the Social Democrats, putting her conservative CDU-CSU alliance on the path of power for over a decade. At the zenith of her popularity, Merkel led the conservatives to a thumping win with 41.5 percent of votes in 2013. With her track record, she was able to end a crucial TV election debate that year with the simple closing words "you know me".

But her exit from politics has been marred by a succession crisis in her party. Merkel's initial choices to take over from her, first Ursula von der Leyen and later Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, had to bury their ambitions over various missteps well before the election year began. Her party's current chancellor candidate, Armin Laschet, is lagging behind his Social Democrat rival Olaf Scholz, with the conservative CDU-CSU on course to come in below its worst-ever score of well under 30 percent in Sunday's election.

Budget dogma

Once dismissed as the sick man of Europe, Germany has cemented its reputation as the bloc's economic engine on Merkel's watch. Unemployment is at record lows - 5.7 percent in July even as the economy rebounds from

the impact of the pandemic. Budget surpluses chalked up from 2012 also allowed the ageing nation to pay down a huge debt mountain, giving it a buffer against the impact of the health emergency. But Germany's fixation with balanced budgets has left a sour taste, particularly among southern Europeans battered by the financial and eurozone debt crises. Merkel appeared to ignore pleas for debt relief when Greece was on the brink of economic collapse, triggering huge demonstrations in the country. While credited with securing huge European bailouts that saved Greece from crashing out of the euro, it was achieved at a heavy social cost including massive job losses. But it was COVID-19 that forced her to make a drastic U-turn on her resistance to mutualising European debt. Instead, Merkel spearheaded the 800-billion-euro (\$950-billion) EU recovery fund, which sees the European Commission raising money by issuing bonds on behalf of all 27 members.

Climate chancellor?

Merkel made the startling decision to shut Germany's nuclear power plants in the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima disaster, triggering the 'Energiewende' - the shift to sustainable energy. But the sudden policy shift forced greater reliance on coal energy in the transition period as the country battles to ramp up wind or biomass energy output. Merkel's government has been accused of protecting Germany's vital automobile industry by watering down emissions regulation reforms, and its refusal to advance a 2038 deadline to quit coal energy has also irked green activists. In a humiliating ruling against the government's flagship environmental protection plan, Germany's highest court in April ordered Merkel's coalition to draw up an improved plan. The government subsequently pulled forward targets to slash CO2 emissions by 65 percent by 2030 compared to 1990 levels, from an earlier goal of 55 percent. "When I look at the situation, no one can say that we have done enough" for the environment, admitted Merkel in June.

"Time is pressing. I can understand the impatience of young people." She was lauded by human rights activists in 2015 for keeping Germany's borders open to hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing war in Syria and Iraq. But on China's mass incarceration of Uyghurs in the far western province of Xinjiang, Merkel has been accused of lacking bite. Critics say she is hamstrung by huge economic interests in China. —AFP

International

Armin Laschet: Comeback king after Merkel's crown

Merkel to bow out of politics after Sunday's election

BERLIN: Armin Laschet, the candidate from Angela Merkel's party to succeed her as chancellor, may have had a dismal election campaign marred by gaffes, but he also has a knack for snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, which could still see him triumph in Sunday's polls. The affable 60-year-old has a reputation for endurance and what *Der Spiegel* magazine has described as an ability to "sit out" his opponents, even when the chips are down. Elected as head of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in January, Laschet was for some time the clear favourite to become Germany's next chancellor when Merkel bows out of politics after Sunday's election.

But recent polls have shown the conservative alliance of the CDU and the Christian Social Union (CSU), its Bavarian sister party, trailing behind the Social Democrats (SPD) and on course for their worst election result since World War II. A particular low point for Laschet came in July, when he was caught on camera laughing during a tribute to the victims of deadly floods in North Rhine-Westphalia, where he is the regional leader. He has also been widely criticized over his dithering response to the COVID-19 pandemic in that region, with the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper describing him as "indecisive, sometimes acting impulsively".

Miscalculated?

If Laschet does manage to bring his party home as the winner on Sunday, it would not be the first time he has defied expectations. Laschet won the vote to become CDU leader against the odds, and went on to secure the conservatives' nomination to be chancellor candidate after a drawn-out battle with the more popular Markus Soeder of the CSU.

How Germany's complex electoral system works

BERLIN: In many countries, a strong lead in the polls often results in a landslide—but things are not so simple under Germany's complex election system. In the end, frontrunner Olaf Scholz, the current vice-chancellor and finance minister, may be forced into torturous coalition haggling with any number of potential partners to succeed Angela Merkel at the chancellery. The reason is post-war Germany's election system, which mixes the "winner-takes-all" approach of Britain and the United States with the proportional representation system that allows for more small parties.

Most women, most parties

A total of 60.4 million people over the age of 18 are eligible to vote for the next government of the European Union's most populous nation and its biggest economy. Women voters outnumber men at 31.2 million and 29.2 million, respectively. About 2.8 million will be first-time voters on election day, September 26. Voter participation four years ago stood at 76.2 percent, up nearly five points from 2013 and higher than in many other Western democracies. This year, 33 percent of the candidates for the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament, which ultimately elects the chancellor, are female—a post-war record. A whopping 47 parties are fielding candidates—another first.

He also outperformed the polls to secure his impressive 2017 election win in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous state. Asked in a recent TV interview whether he thought he was often underestimated, Laschet replied that "many have certainly miscalculated". A devout Catholic, Laschet was born in Aachen, a spa city in western Germany near the border with Belgium and the Netherlands, where his father fed the family digging for coal. "When you're down in the mine, it doesn't matter where your colleague comes from, what his religion is or what he looks like. What is important is, can you rely on him," he told party colleagues in January. Laschet initially studied law in Munich before working as a journalist, including for several years as the editor of a Catholic newspaper. After first joining the CDU as a teenager, he was elected to the Bundestag German parliament in 1994 and to the European Parliament in 1999. He became head of the CDU in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2012 and has been state premier there since 2017.

'Passionate European'

A defender of multiculturalism, Laschet has a reputation for being even more pro-migration than Merkel and famously backed the chancellor during the fallout from Germany's 2015 refugee influx. A self-described "passionate European", he is a fluent French speaker and met his wife and the mother of his three children, who is of French-speaking Wallonian origin, singing in a church choir.

In his office in Duesseldorf, Laschet keeps a golden bust of his hero and alleged distant relative Charlemagne, the king of the Franks credited with uniting Europe - a fitting role model for a man often praised for his ability to unify. "Polarizing is easy - anyone can do it," he told a party conference earlier this year. "We

Five-percent hurdle

When German voters enter the polling booth, they make two crosses on the ballot paper—one for a direct representative in their local district, the other for their preferred political party. The first vote is meant to ensure that each of Germany's 299 districts is represented in the Bundestag. In the second—and in many ways decisive—vote, citizens choose a party. Ahead of election day, the parties write up their "candidate lists" in each of the 16 states. The names at the top have the biggest chance of getting a seat. The party with the most votes then gets to send the most lawmakers to the lower house.

For example, if a party scores three direct seats through the first vote but is eligible for 10 seats overall through the second vote, seven more names on the party's state are also given seats. A complication arises when the direct and party votes are out of balance because voters "split" their ballot. When a party earns more direct seats than it is entitled to through its share of the party vote, it is granted the extra seats anyway. These are called "overhang" seats.

As a result, the size of the Bundestag can expand far beyond its minimum size of 598 seats. After the 2017 election, the chamber had 709 lawmakers—a figure which could even grow larger. Parties which score below five percent of the second vote stay out of parliament altogether. This is meant to prevent excessive political fragmentation and stop potentially extremist parties. The far-left *Die Linke* party is flirting with the five-percent bar in the polls and its success or failure could be a key factor in post-election coalition arithmetic. Once polling booths close at 1600 GMT, the question will be whether any alliance of parties has an absolute majority to elect a chancellor—half of all the lower house seats plus one. —AFP



BERLIN: A defaced election campaign poster featuring Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party leader and candidate for Chancellor Armin Laschet reads: 'Shot dead for Germany' instead of 'Determined for Germany' in Berlin ahead of parliamentary elections on September 26. —AFP

have to speak plainly, but not polarise. We have to be able to integrate. Keeping a society together and bringing it together, that is hard work."

Known for his jolly persona, Laschet is a regular at the famous carnival celebrations in North Rhine-Westphalia and was even awarded a "prize against deadly seriousness" by the Aachen carnival club last year. But he also showed his serious side when responding to the crisis in Afghanistan, accusing NATO of the "biggest debacle" in its history. Afghanistan gave Laschet "the first opportunity to present himself as a statesman in the making", *Die Welt* daily said. "This was no longer the friendly Rhinelander." —AFP

Germany's climate militants fight for parliamentary seats

MONCHENGLADBACH: Dressed in a rainbow-colored unicorn costume, Kathrin Henneberger once camped on a beech tree, trying to save a forest from destruction. Come Monday, she hopes to be one of Germany's newly elected MPs. The 34-year-old counts among one of Germany's most prominent climate militants standing in Sunday's general elections for a seat in parliament. After years of occupying coal mines or blocking power stations, Henneberger and other activists now want a direct say in the halls of power.

Like Henneberger, Jakob Blasel, who co-founded the German chapter of Fridays for Future school strikes, is running on the Greens' ticket. "The places where decisions are made are decisive for our demands," Blasel, 20, told AFP. Blasel pointed to recurring droughts in 2018-2019 and July's deadly flooding as evidence that the impact of climate change has already reached the doorstep of every German. The floods that struck western Germany over the summer claimed 181 lives and destroyed homes, schools and other critical infrastructure. In the south of Germany, scientists in the Bavarian Alps this year issued another alarming warning of irreversible damage wrought on nature. —AFP

International

Shaman dies of COVID after touting 'blessed' water cure

White claimed he could end the pandemic in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO: A high-profile shaman who tried to end Sri Lanka's COVID-19 outbreak with "blessed" water has died of the virus, his family said yesterday. Eliyantha White, 48, who treated sports stars and top politicians including the country's prime minister, claimed in November he could end the pandemic in Sri Lanka and neighboring India by pouring pots of his "blessed" water into rivers. Health Minister Pavithra Waniarachchi endorsed the water treatment, but was infected two months later and ended up in a hospital intensive care unit. She was later demoted, and lost her portfolio, but remains in the cabinet.

White attracted international attention in 2010 when legendary Indian cricketer Sachin Tendulkar publicly thanked him for treating a knee injury, saying it helped him hit the first-ever one-day international double century against South Africa. In a 2010 interview with AFP, White claimed he had "special powers"

since the age of 12. He has since treated other Indian cricket stars, including Gautam Gambhir and Ashish Nehra. White's family said he had refused the COVID-19 vaccine. His body was cremated at Colombo's main cemetery yesterday in line with quarantine regulations.

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was among politicians to have consulted White, said on Twitter: "His legacy will continue to live through all the lives, he touched and healed of various ailments." But mainstream doctors described White as a fraud and Ayurveda physicians rejected his claims - even though the shaman said he used methods from the 3,000-year-old Indian medical tradition. Sri Lanka's total coronavirus deaths exceeded 12,000 with more than half a million people infected so far. Doctors say the real toll is at least twice as high and authorities have resorted to mass cremations to clear bodies piling up at hospitals and morgues. — AFP



COLOMBO: A cemetery worker wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) prepares to place the coffin of Eliyantha White, a local shaman who claimed he had super natural powers to end the pandemic and died of the COVID-19 coronavirus, inside the furnace at the crematorium of the Colombo General Cemetery yesterday. — AFP

Myanmar faces 'alarming' risk of escalating civil war

GENEVA: Myanmar is facing the alarming prospect of an escalating civil war as an uprising against the military junta widens, the UN's human rights chief warned yesterday. Michelle Bachelet told the United Nations Human Rights Council that time was running out for other countries to step up efforts to restore democracy and prevent a broader conflict. Myanmar has been in turmoil since Aung San Suu Kyi's government was ousted by the military in February, sparking a nationwide uprising that the junta has tried to crush. Attacks on troops have increased since lawmakers ousted by the generals called for a "people's defensive war" earlier this month.

Bachelet said the human rights situation had deteriorated significantly as the effects of the coup "devastate lives and hopes across the country". "Conflict, poverty and the effects of the pandemic are sharply increasing, and the country faces a vortex of repression, vi-

olence and economic collapse," she said. Faced with the "overwhelming repression of fundamental rights", the armed resistance movement was growing. "These disturbing trends suggest the alarming possibility of an escalating civil war," she said.

Bachelet urged countries to support a political process that would engage all parties, saying the ASEAN regional bloc and influential powers should use incentives and disincentives "to reverse the military coup and desperate spiral of violence". "Myanmar's stability and path to democracy and prosperity have been sacrificed over these last months to advance the ambitions of a privileged and entrenched military elite," she said. "The national consequences are terrible and tragic — the regional consequences could also be profound. The international community must redouble its efforts to restore democracy and prevent wider conflict before it is too late."

Bachelet said more than 1,100 people had now reportedly died at the hands of the security forces since the coup, while over 8,000 others, including children, had been arrested and more than 4,700 still in detention. The former Chilean president urged all parties - but especially the military - to allow unrestricted access to humanitarian aid, and called for the immediate release of all political prisoners. She called for all armed forces to protect civilians and said the use of air strikes and artillery in residential areas must cease immediately. — AFP

Nigeria gunmen kill 2 policemen

ENUGU: Gunmen have killed two policemen in southeast Nigeria, police said yesterday, in the latest violence targeting security personnel and government facilities in the restive region. In the incident on Tuesday, gunmen attacked a police checkpoint at Nachi in Enugu state and shot dead two officers, state police spokesman Daniel Ndukwe told AFP. "I can confirm that we lost two personnel to an attack by yet unidentified gunmen," he said. "Full-scale investigation that will lead to fishing out the assailants has commenced," he added. Residents of Nachi community confirmed the attack and death toll.

No group has claimed responsibility for the assault, but police

often blame the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a banned separatist group demanding an independent state for the ethnic Igbo people. IPOB denies any involvement of its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network. Dozens of police officers and other security personnel have been killed since January in targeted attacks in the southeast. Raids on prisons have seen scores of inmates freed and weapons carted away. On Sunday, gunmen ambushed a police patrol in the commercial town of Onitsha in Anambra state and killed an inspector.

Also Sunday, an area office of the electoral agency INEC was set ablaze in Enugu state, but vital election materials and equipment were not affected. IPOB's leader Nnamdi Kanu has been in custody since he was arrested abroad in June and brought back to Nigeria to face treason charges. Calls for a separate state of Biafra are a sensitive subject in Nigeria, after a unilateral declaration of independence in 1967 sparked a brutal 30-month civil war. More than one million people died, most of them Igbos, from the impact of conflict, hunger and disease. — AFP

Indian man on bail must wash women's clothes for six months

PATNA: An Indian man accused of attempted rape has been given bail on condition that he wash and iron the clothes of all women in his village for six months. Lalan Kumar, 20, will have to buy detergent and other items needed to provide six months of free laundry services to about 2,000 women in the village of Majhor in Bihar state, under the ruling made Wednesday.

Kumar, who washes clothes for a living, was arrested in April on charges including attempted rape, Santosh Kumar Singh, a police officer in Bihar's Madhubani district, told AFP. No date has been set for his trial. "All the women in the village are happy with the court decision," Nasima Khatoon, the head of the village council, told AFP. "It is historic. It will boost respect for women and help to protect dignity," added Khatoon, one of the village dignitaries who will monitor Kumar.

Women in the village said the order had made a positive impact by making crime against women a subject of discussion in their community. "This is a remarkable step and a different kind of punishment that sends a message to society," said Anjum Perween. India's rape laws were overhauled after a 2012 gang rape in New Delhi but the number of offences remains high, with more than 28,000 rapes reported in 2020. Police have long been accused of not doing enough to prevent violent crime and failing to bring sexual assault cases to court. — AFP

LIFESTYLE

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2021

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**Disco and live audiences
in Milan as Italy
fashion seeks 'rebirth'**

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A model wears a creation by Fendi as part of the Women's Spring-Summer 2022 collection presented during the Fashion Week in Milan yesterday. — AFP

At the 'Human Library', everyone is an open book

At the "Human Library", you can "loan" a person to tell you their life story, an original concept born in Denmark that is designed to challenge prejudice and which has spread around the world. Iben - a quiet 46-year-old sexual abuse victim with mental health issues who doesn't give out her last name - is one of eight "books" curious people can loan on this autumn day in Copenhagen. For 30 minutes, you can ask anything you want, either one-on-one or in a small group. "The Human Library is a safe space where we can explore diversity, learn about ways in which we're different from each other, and engage with people we normally would never meet... and challenge your unconscious bias," explains Ronni Abergel, the project's garrulous initiator.

He created the living library in 2000 during the Roskilde music festival and went on to build a non-profit organization. The concept has since found its way into more than 70 countries. "A reading truly is a conversation," says Abergel. "I'm going to take a few minutes to explain my topic, my background, and to make sure that you can ask me anything about being HIV (positive) or disabled, or transgender, or a refugee or Jewish or Muslim, or whatever my topic may be."

Blank pages

In most cases the conversations flow freely, typically held in a calm environment like a city library, a meeting room, or as today,

in the garden of the Human Library's premises. "Sometimes people ask a lot and the conversation flows. But sometimes I maybe need to tell them a little bit more, ask my readers questions in order for them to reflect or ask new questions," says Anders Fransen, a 36-year-old blind and hearing impaired "book". People are encouraged "to ask really difficult questions", Abergel says, stressing that nothing is off limits, no matter how sensitive the subject may be.

People who loan Iben can choose between three of her oral books: sexual abuse victim, living with borderline personality disorder, or severe post-traumatic stress disorder. She has on occasion refused to answer questions. "I have said that that page wasn't written yet. So they just smiled and said okay," she recalls. But she's never had a bad experience in her four years. "All my readings are different," and they've evolved over the years, she says.

"When I started, I was in a totally different place... I've been working on myself for years." "It's such a gift (being) a book, you can self-reflect." Fransen says he's proud to have helped people develop how they think about handicaps. After a recent 'reading' with some eighth graders, he overheard them talking to their friends. "They were saying 'hey, this guy is a cool guy, he has a cool story to tell.' So I made an impression on them," he smiles.

'Neutral learning space'

'Loanees' come away with powerful experiences too. "All the responses we're getting indicate that it's a high impact experience," Abergel says. He was recently contacted by a reader who borrowed a human book in 2004. "She was telling us about the impact (the book had) on her view on Muslims... And she had used that information in the 17 years that have passed. So that has been to the benefit of the community, her and other people of Muslim background." In an increasingly polarized world, Abergel wants his initiative to help people become "less apprehensive, more open, more understanding and accepting of your right to be different."

But, he insists, the organization is not about promoting diversity or combating prejudice. "We run a neutral learning space where there is an opportunity for you to engage, learn about yourself and other groups," he says. "What you learn and what you do with your learning is entirely in your hands." One of those loaning a book is 41-year-old Karem. "To see the person and listen to him or her and see the perspective, the whole story that is almost unfolding in front of you" is "very touching", he says. "It lets people see that at the end of the day we are a lot of titles, but the same flesh and blood and bones." — AFP



In this file photo US director Melvin Van Peebles poses during a photocall at the 38th US Film Festival, in the French northwestern sea resort of Deauville. — AFP

'Godfather of modern Black cinema' Melvin Van Peebles dies at 89

Pioneering African-American writer and director Melvin Van Peebles, whose groundbreaking 1971 film "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" inspired a younger generation of Black filmmakers, has died at the age of 89. Van Peebles, often called the "godfather of modern Black cinema," died Tuesday night at home with his family, his actor son Mario Van Peebles and The Criterion Collection said in a statement. "We are saddened to announce the passing of a giant of American cinema, Melvin Van Peebles, who died last night, at home with family.

"In an unparalleled career, Van Peebles made an indelible mark on the international cultural landscape. He will be deeply missed." With "Sweet Sweetback," a low-budget film about a sex show performer who ends up killing two racist cops who were beating a Black Panther activist, Van Peebles ushered in an era of "Blaxploitation" films and was an inspiration to a new generation of filmmakers such as Spike Lee and Barry Jenkins. "I didn't even know I had a legacy," Van Peebles told the New York Times in a 2010 interview. "I do what I want to do."

"Sweet Sweetback," which Van Peebles wrote, directed, financed and starred in, opened in just two venues but thanks to strong word-of-mouth among Black audiences went on to take \$10 million, making it the highest-grossing independent film in history at the time, according to The Hollywood Reporter. The Criterion Collection, which is releasing a collection of his films, called it "a landmark of Black and American independent cinema that would send shock waves through the culture." — AFP



The depot of the Human Library on Noerre Alle street in Copenhagen. — AFP photos



A list of titles of 'human books' is seen on a chalkboard at the Human Library in Copenhagen.



Brazilian skateboarder Dora Varella rides at a skate park in Sao Paulo, Brazil. — AFP photos



Skateboarder Marcela Rosa, 7, rides on an improvised track inside a sports court in the city of Poa.

Women's skateboarding soars in Brazil after Tokyo Olympics

When she saw 13-year-old Brazilian Rayssa Leal win silver in the first-ever street skateboarding competition at the Summer Olympics in Tokyo, Giovanna Alves Farias only had one wish: To start flying around a skate park herself. "I nearly cried. Seeing a 13-year-old girl like me win a medal was so unexpected!" Giovanna told AFP. "Before the Games, I was already interested in skateboarding, but after seeing that, I told my dad: 'Let's go!'" Leal's success is fueling a boom in skateboarding-long a sport dominated by men-among women and girls in Brazil, who see themselves soaring to new heights, maybe even at the Olympics.

Right after the Olympics ended in Tokyo, the teen started to test out her abilities at a park in Sao Bernardo do Campo, near the mega-city of Sao Paulo. Ana Clara Agostini, who is only 12, had already been working on her skateboarding tricks for some time, but the frenzy around Leal-known as the "Little Fairy"-kickstarted her desire to put her skills to the test in competition. "I am thinking about what it would be like to take part in the Olympics, and I am training," she said. Clad in her helmet and wrist guards, Ana Clara admits she is also looking for the adrenaline rush that hurling herself off obstacles in the park gives her. "I love the feeling of going fast and going higher and higher, so I get more confident and try some new tricks," she says.

'Mission accomplished'

Leal first jumped to viral fame at the age of seven, thanks to a video of her doing skateboarding tricks dressed as Tinker Bell from the Peter Pan's children stories. Julia de Souza Lima Martins, who is eight, wants to follow in her footsteps. "My aunt recorded the

Olympics, I watched the competition and I'm trying to imitate the tricks," Julia says at the Sao Bernardo do Campo park with a smile. Her helmet is bubble gum pink. For 20-year-old Dora Varella, another member of Brazil's Olympic skateboarding team in Tokyo, seeing more and more young girls take up the sport has been one of the greatest rewards. "When

boarding, everyone shares the same passion. Whether you are five or 40, man or woman, we're all treated equally," she says.

'Do something good with my life'

But male chauvinism was certainly alive and well in skateboarding in the past, according to 46-year-old Renata Paschini. "When I

In 2009, she created the Association for Women Skateboarders, which organized competitions for women and girls and made sure the Sao Bernardo do Campo skate park had hours reserved for women. The sport also became an outlet for at-risk youth, such as those served by the non-governmental organization Social Skate, created in 2012 in



Skateboarder Keila Emilyn, 13, rides on an improvised track inside a sports court in the city of Poa.



Skateboarder Marcela Rosa, 7, rides on an improvised track.

we came back from Japan, I saw there was a real bump in interest in skateboarding, and I said to myself: 'Mission accomplished!'"

"There are more and more skateboarding classes for small kids and I see there are often more girls than boys. That's what is really awesome about the Olympics," added Varella, who is a professional. When Varella started skateboarding 10 years ago, she was one of the only girls out on the ramp, but she says she never worried about it. "In skate-

boarding, everyone shares the same passion. Whether you are five or 40, man or woman, we're all treated equally," she says. "I come from a very traditional family and I ran the risk of dishonoring them if they found out I was skateboarding. I had to hide my board in a backpack instead of carrying it under my arm," Paschini said.

Poa, a poor suburb of Sao Paulo. The group gives free skateboarding lessons to nearly 150 youths, 44 of them girls like 13-year-old Keila Emilyn Amaro da Silva. "I'm devoting myself to training so I can go to the Olympics and do something good with my life," she says. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



US actor Johnny Depp receives the Donostia Award for his career, in the 69th San Sebastian Film Festival in the northern Spanish Basque city of San Sebastian. — AFP

Johnny Depp says 'no one is safe' from cancel culture

Nobody is safe from the "instant rush to judgement" handed out by today's cancel culture, Hollywood star Johnny Depp said Wednesday at a Spanish film festival where he was accepting a lifetime achievement award. Depp, who last year lost a libel case against a British newspaper that labelled him a "wife-beater", was responding to questions from journalists at the San Sebastian film festival in northern Spain. In what appeared to be a reference to the #MeToo movement that has targeted the sexual harassment and assault of women by powerful men, he suggested that things had got out of hand.

"The various movements that came out, I'm sure with the best of intentions-however it's so far out of hand now that I can promise you that no one is safe," he said. He also lashed out at "this cancel culture or this instant rush to judgment based on essentially what amounts to polluted air that's exhaled." The three-time Oscar nominee sued the publisher of The Sun, a British tabloid, over claims he was violent to his ex-wife Amber Heard during their volatile two-year marriage. But the lurid details of his private life that emerged during the 16-day libel trial-and the fact that he eventually lost the case-damaged his reputation.

In the aftermath of the trial, Depp said he was asked to step down from his role in the "Fantastic Beasts" film franchise based on the book by Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling. Women's rights groups and some women in the film industry have criticized the festival's decision to hand Depp its Donostia award, which it gave out "in recognition of his career". Depp, who continues to deny he was violent towards Heard, told journalists: "No one safe, but I believe that if you are armed with the truth then that's what you need." The 58-year-old was critical too, of the current state of mainstream American cinema. "How much more condescension as an audience do we need? 'I've said this for a long time, Hollywood has grotesquely underestimated the audiences.'" —AFP

Billie Eilish, BTS, Elton John in concert for climate action, vaccines

Some of the biggest names in pop, from Billie Eilish to BTS and Elton John, will lend their star power to Global Citizen Live tomorrow for a round-the-world event to raise awareness on climate change, vaccine equality and famine. Concerts staged in New York, Paris, Lagos, Rio, Sydney, Mumbai and more will be broadcast globally for the event, scheduled to coincide with the UN General Assembly this week. The star-studded line-up will also push for action at the G20 next month and COP26 climate meeting in November.

Eilish and Coldplay will headline in New York's Central Park, joined by Jennifer Lopez, Camila Cabello, Shawn Mendes and Burna Boy, among others. Ed Sheeran will perform in Paris alongside Elton John, with Doja Cat, Black Eyed Peas and Stormzy supporting. And then there will be Femi Kuti in Nigeria, Alok in Rio, and Duran Duran and Kylie Minogue in London. "Across six continents, artists will help rally citizens in demanding that governments, major corporations and philanthropists work together to defend the planet and defeat poverty," NGO Global Citizen said in a statement.

It said it was focusing "on the most urgent, interrelated threats hitting those in poverty the hardest-climate change, vaccine equity, and famine". A slew of other artists-including Metallica and The Weeknd-are also involved, either through live or filmed performances. Global Citizen said it wants one billion trees planted, one billion vaccines delivered to the poorest countries and meals for 41 million people on the brink of famine. The organization has been behind other high-profile charity events, including "Vax Live: The Concert To Reunite The World" earlier this year in Los Angeles. —AFP

That brought together musicians, actors,



Billie Eilish performs onstage during the 2021 iHeartRadio Music Festival at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, Nevada. — AFP



Britney Spears and Sam Asghari

Britney Spears asks to end father's guardianship in order to marry

Britney Spears has asked a judge to end her father's guardianship at a hearing next week so that she can get married with a prenuptial agreement, a petition filed by her lawyer said Wednesday. The US pop singer, who has described the controversial 13-year arrangement that gives Jamie Spears control of her affairs as "abuse," recently announced her engagement to boyfriend Sam Asghari. Jamie Spears filed a petition last month for Britney's conservatorship to be ended, saying he acknowledges the singer now "believes that she can handle her own life."

According to the filing Wednesday, Britney is "in the process of engaging a family law attorney to craft a prenuptial agreement," which would require the approval of any conservator still in place. "Given that Ms Spears's relationship with that Conservator (her father) is broken, Mr Spears's continued involvement would impede the ability to negotiate and consummate a contract that all can agree is in Ms Spears's best interests," it states. The petition

calls on the Los Angeles court judge to "suspend Mr Spears" at the next hearing, set for September 29. It proposes a short-term, temporary guardian who can take over from her father and potentially approve a prenuptial agreement before the entire conservatorship structure can be ended later this year.

Spears and Asghari met in 2016 when they co-starred in a music video for her single "Slumber Party." Spears, 39, has two children with former husband rapper Kevin Federline, and had a brief Las Vegas marriage to childhood friend Jason Alexander that was annulled after just 55 hours. The star rocketed to fame in her teens with hits like "...Baby One More Time," but suffered a highly public 2007 breakdown, attacking a paparazzo's car at a gas station. That led to her being placed under the court-ordered conservatorship largely governed by her father. —AFP

'Historic night' as Somalia screens first film in 30 years

Somalia hosted its first screening of a movie in three decades under heavy security on Wednesday, as the conflict-ravaged country hopes for a cultural renewal. Built by Chinese engineers as a gift from Mao Zedong in 1967, the National Theatre of Somalia has a history that reflects the tumultuous journey of the Horn of Africa nation. It has been targeted by suicide bombers and used as a base by warlords. And it has never screened a Somali film. Until now. "This is going to be a historic night for the Somali people, it shows how hopes have been revived... after so many years of challenges," theatre director Abdikadir Abdi Yusuf said before the screening.

"It's a platform that provides an opportunity to... Somali songwriters, storytellers, movie

directors and actors to present their talent openly." The evening's program was two short films by Somali director Ibrahim CM-"Hoos" and "Date from Hell"-with tickets sold for \$10 (8.50 euros) each, expensive for many. According to sources contacted by AFP, the evening passed off without any security incidents. Although Mogadishu was home to many cinema halls during its cultural heyday, with the national theatre also hosting live concerts and plays, the seaside capital fell silent after civil war erupted in 1991.

Warlords used the theatre as a military base and the building fell into disrepair. It reopened in 2012, but was blown up by Al-Shabaab jihadists two weeks later. The Al-Qaeda linked Islamist group launches regular attacks in Mogadishu and considers entertainment evil. After a painstaking restoration, the authorities announced plans to hold the theatre's first screening this week. For many Somalis, it was a trip down memory lane and a reminder of happier times. "I used to watch concerts, dramas, pop shows, folk dances and movies in the national theatre during the good old days," said Osman Yusuf Osman, a self-confessed film buff. —AFP

US filmmaker Gus Van Sant sets Andy Warhol's early life to music

US filmmaker, writer, painter, photographer and musician, Gus Van Sant, is now turning his hand to theatre with a new musical in Lisbon about the early career of Pop Art creator, Andy Warhol. Van Sant—best-known for films such as “My Own Private Idaho” and “Good Will Hunting”—said he had long wanted to make a film about Warhol, and even wrote a screenplay with US actor River Phoenix, who died at 23 in 1993, set for the lead role. Now, in his first-ever work for the stage, the 69-year-old laureate of Canne’s Palme d’Or has written the musical “Andy”, which is being premiered on Thursday in the Portuguese capital as part of the Biennial of Contemporary Arts where Van Sant is one of this year’s artists in residence.

“I was trying to put together the greatest hits of Andy’s life to explain his rise into the art world in the 60s,” the filmmaker said. With dialogue and songs penned by Van Sant himself, the musical—which is being staged in English in Lisbon’s prestigious Teatro Nacional D. Maria II, ahead of a European tour that takes it to cities such as Rome, Amsterdam, Paris and Athens—is a collection of anecdotes about Warhol’s encounters with leading figures of American culture, like writer Truman Capote, art critic Clement Greenberg and actor Edie Sedgwick. The picture that emerges of the artist is one of “a very strange character that is not really related to the Andy Warhol that maybe we know. He’s sort of a stand-in for Andy,” Van Sant said. Among Van Sant’s films

are biopics about iconic figures such as Nirvana singer Kurt Cobain in “Last Days” and gay rights campaigner Harvey Milk in “Milk”.

“Very few people knew who Andy Warhol really was,” said Portuguese actor Diogo Fernandes, who plays the artist in the production. “I think he was someone who was shy, fascinated by American culture and who wanted to be a star, but never imagined what impact he would have,” Fernandes told AFP. For Van Sant’s collaborator on the project, John Romao, Warhol was “someone half-hidden in the shadows, shy, but very forceful at the same time thanks to his ability to turn his ideas into reality. This made him both fascinating and frightening to those around him.” Born in Pittsburgh in 1928, Warhol began his career as a commercial illustrator.

But he soon became a leading exponent of the Pop Art movement and worked in a wide range of different media, such as painting, photography and film. His studio in New York, The Factory, was a meeting place for intellectuals, drag queens, playwrights, Hollywood celebrities and wealthy patrons. Best-known for his silkscreen paintings of “Campbell’s Soup Cans”, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and Mao Zedong, he also managed and produced the experimental rock band, The Velvet Underground, and founded Interview magazine. He died in New York at the age of 58 in 1987. — AFP

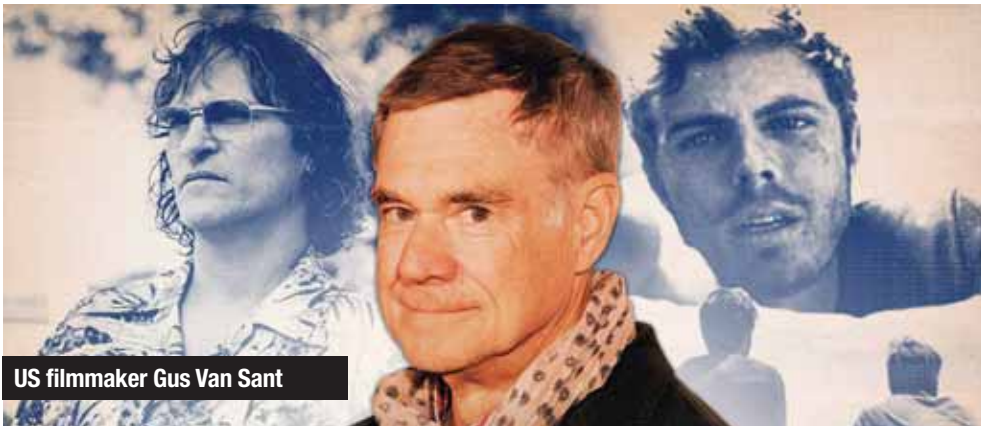


An undated photo courtesy of Sotheby's New York shows a Frida Kahlo self-portrait entitled 'Diego y yo'. — AFP

Frida Kahlo self-portrait set to smash records at auction

A Frida Kahlo self-portrait featuring her husband Diego Rivera is tipped to sell for more than \$30 million at auction in New York, Sotheby’s said Wednesday. “Diego y yo” (Diego and I), painted in 1949, “is poised to shatter” Kahlo’s current auction record of \$8 million set in 2016, the auction house said in a statement. The artwork, which will be the star lot of Sotheby’s big November sale, is also expected to smash the record for a painting by a Latin American artist. “Los Rivaless,” a 1932 work by Rivera, with whom Kahlo had a passionate and tumultuous love affair, is currently the most valuable—Christie’s sold it for \$9.8 million in May 2018.

“Diego y yo” is emblematic of Kahlo’s self-portraits, known for their intense and enigmatic gaze that made the Mexican painter, a feminist icon, famous around the world. In the painting, Rivera’s face appears on Frida’s forehead, above her distinctive eyebrows and dark eyes from which a few teardrops fall. The depiction of Rivera, who at the time was close to Mexican actress Maria Felix, as a third eye symbolizes the extent to which he tormented her thoughts, art experts say. Kahlo and Rivera married each other twice. She died aged just 47 in 1954. “Diego y yo” last sold at Sotheby’s for \$1.4 million in 1990. — AFP



US filmmaker Gus Van Sant

Tony Soprano returns in prequel film 'The Many Saints of Newark'

Fourteen years after the last episode of the cult television series “The Sopranos,” a film retracing the early years of future mob boss Tony Soprano premiered Wednesday in New York. Series creator David Chase, co-writer of the prequel “The Many Saints of Newark,” introduced the cast at the historic Beacon Theatre, which was transformed back into a giant cinema for the occasion. The applause redoubled for Michael Gandolfini, who stepped into the shoes of his late father to play the younger version of Tony Soprano, a role for which James Gandolfini won three Emmys with his portrayal of the violent head of a mafia clan who was also a troubled family man.

Broadcast between 1999 and 2007 on the US cable network HBO, “The Sopranos” marked the beginning of a golden age for television series with its dark humor and complex characters and made a star of James Gandolfini, who died in 2013 at the age of 51. “We miss your father!” shouted one member of the audience. In the film, 22-year-old Michael Gandolfini plays a teenage Tony Soprano in 1960s New Jersey. “I didn’t know if Michael really wanted to (do it), like whether it would be too much,” director Alan Taylor told AFP on the sidelines of the screening as part of the Tribeca film festival.

“He lost his father and to do this is very emotionally hard. Once he agreed to do it, and he showed he could with an audition, I just, I never doubted,” Taylor said. “The only thing I

had to sometimes do was pull him back from being his dad, too much. He’s not this guy yet (in the movie). He’s still the younger, a softer version of his character,” added Taylor, who directed several episodes of the original series, which ran for six seasons and won 21 Emmys and five Golden Globes. While the film traces the youthful years of Tony, a gifted teen but lacking a moral compass, caught between an absent father and an overly severe mother, the film centers on a character he venerates, Dickie Moltisanti, played by Alessandro Nivola.

The story also explores the tensions between the Italian-American and African-American communities in then-New Jersey, as well as the Newark riots of 1967 and police violence. But “The Many Saints of Newark” also includes multiple references to the series to satisfy fans. “I’ve seen the show maybe six or seven times ... (and) this definitely lived up to the hype,” Robert Quinn, 23, said after the screening. “I grew up in North Jersey. You definitely hear some people who talk like that.” The film is released this week in Britain and will be broadcast in the United States simultaneously in theaters and on HBO Max from October 1. — AFP



Tony Soprano

Lifestyle | Fashion



Disco and live audiences in Milan as Italy fashion seeks 'rebirth'



There was disco fever on the Milan catwalks Wednesday as Fendi kicked off the first fashion week for almost 18 months with predominantly live audiences. Coronavirus restrictions meant a reduced guest list, but photographers still gathered outside to get a glimpse of stars including Vogue legend Anna Wintour and influencer Chiara Ferragni. "It is difficult not to get

excited," said Fendi chief Serge Brunschwig. "It's the first time in 18 months that we have the public back, with the feeling of something like a return to normal." Fendi is not alone—from Prada to Versace, Dolce & Gabbana, Missoni, Ferragamo and Etro, almost all the big fashion houses have opted for in-person shows for the spring/summer 2022 women's collections in Milan.

Out of 65 catwalk shows over the next five days, 43 will have a physical audience, as will 77 out of the 98 presentations—and many of the parties are back. COVID-19 still made its presence felt. Guests have to show proof of vaccination or a negative test, and wear masks.



Lifestyle | Fashion

**Disco vibe**

But at Fendi, the atmosphere was pure 1970s disco, with a soundtrack of Diana Ross and Chic and looks and attitudes reminiscent of Grace Jones and Jerry Hall. There were immaculate white silhouettes, including wide trouser suits, on which designs by renowned fashion illustrator Antonio Lopez gradually encroached on the collection. Artistic director Kim Jones was inspired by a hand-drawn Fendi logo by Lopez that he found in the archives. "Lopez was a friend of Karl Lagerfeld and has always been someone who inspired me," Jones said in the show notes.

"He was avant-garde, inclusive, admired by everyone, from Andy Warhol to Steven Meisel and David Hockney. I wanted to introduce him to a new generation." Lopez' brushstrokes appeared on kaftans, silk blouses and bags, while figurative designs with the faces of women became coloured motifs on leather or lace.



Models wear creations by Fendi as part of the Women's Spring-Summer 2022 collection presented during the Fashion Week in Milan. — AFP photos

Lifestyle | Fashion



'Moment of rebirth'

Elsewhere in Milan, Roberto Cavalli is back, under new artistic director Fausto Puglisi, while MM6 Maison Margiela and Luisa Spagnoli have shows for the first time. Gucci is not on the catwalk schedule in Milan but will unveil a new project entitled The Vault, while Giorgio Armani celebrates 40 years of his Emporio line with a retrospective exhibition. Italy was the first European country to face a wave of coronavirus cases in February 2020, sparking a nationwide lockdown that

plunged the eurozone's third largest economy into recession. But a successful vaccination campaign has brought hopes of a return to some kind of normality-and economic growth. Carlo Ferro, president of the Italian Trade Agency, said the resumption of physical events in Milan "shows the courage of the organizers, the tenacity of the companies and the support of Italian industry".

The numbers on the Italian fashion industry-including the textile, clothing, leather, shoe and leather goods sec-

tors-are encouraging. Turnover in the first quarter of 2021 was up 24 percent compared to the same period in 2020. That is still 15 percent lower than before the pandemic, but industry players are hoping a sharp increase in orders will make up some of the difference by year end. The collections this week "mark a moment of rebirth", said Carlo Capasa chairman of Italy's national fashion chamber, the CNMI. — AFP



Lifestyle | Fashion



Models wear creations for Roberto Cavalli's Women's Spring-Summer 2022 collection presented during the Fashion Week in Milan.-

Kids Page

Word Search

WORD SEARCH

...LITTLE MAN...

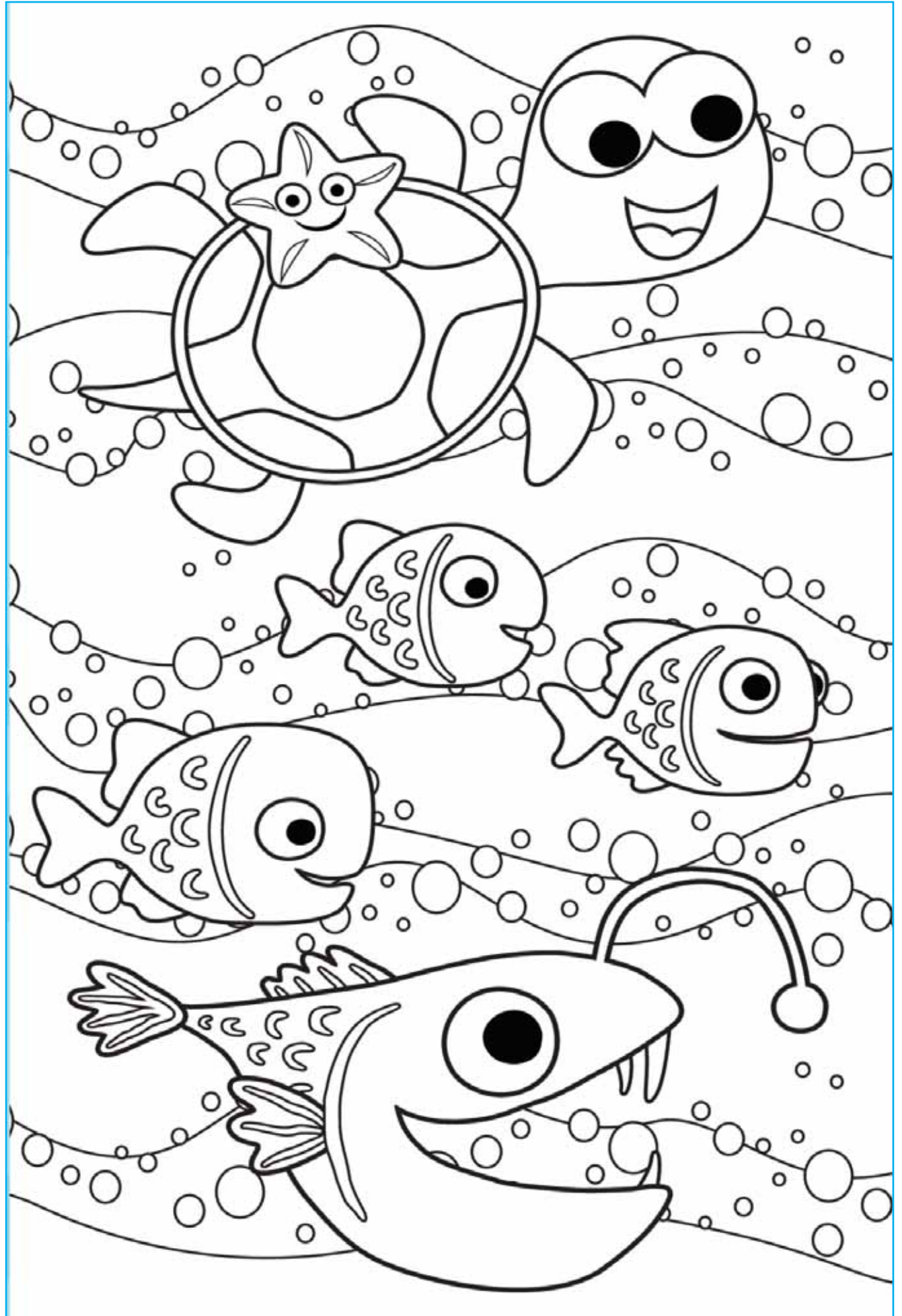
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Baby Crib Joy Mom Rattle
 Bib Cute Little Mustache Soft
 Blanket Dad man Newborn Strollers
 Bottle Diapers Love Pacifier Toddler
 Boy Giggle Milk Powder Toys Wipes

Kids Mazes

love you

Color It



Find the objects

Find 10 hidden objects in the pictures



Word Scramble

Fall Word Scramble

Unscramble the words and write the letters in the boxes. Use the letters in the shaded boxes to form a new word that answers the riddle.

ULQIT

LAVEES

BEEESTRMP

SVRTAEH

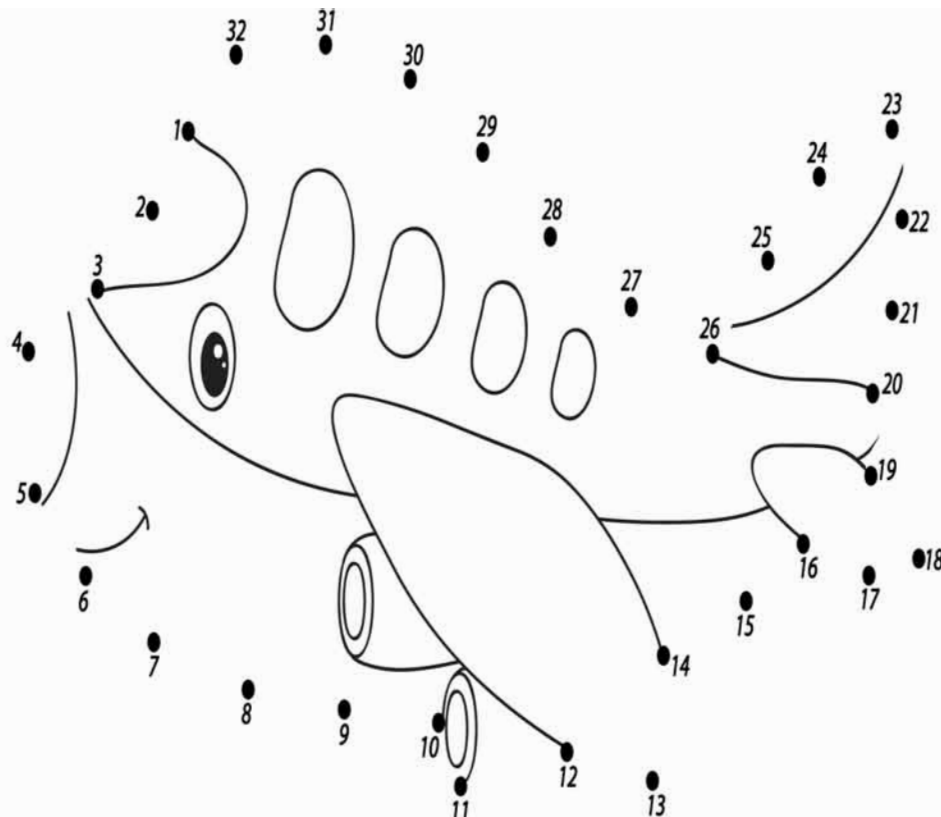
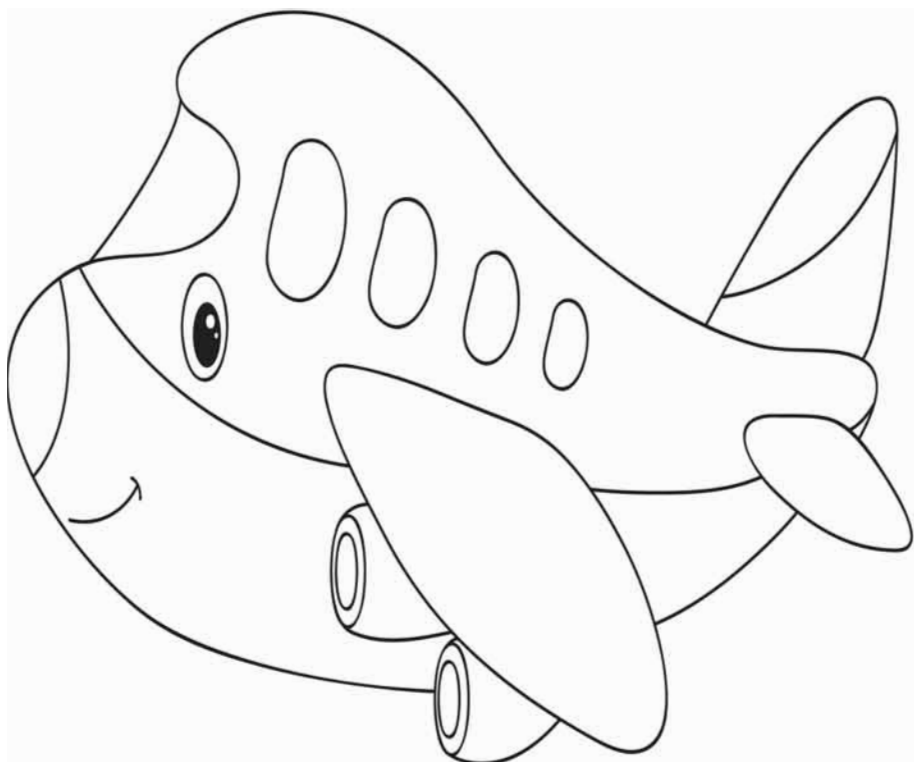
TECTHUNS

AUMUTN

ATOLFLOB

Q. What do you get when you drop a pumpkin?

Join the dots



Business

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2021

33 Embattled South African Airways resumes flights**33** Asian markets rally on easing Evergrande fears**34** Lonely toil of 'last shale miner' in South Belgium

MILTON KEYNES: A pedestrian walks her dog next to a line of parked autonomous robots called Starship before delivering groceries from a nearby Co-op supermarket in Milton Keynes, England. - AFP

Army of shopping delivery robots

Delivery robots take the strain out of shopping in UK town

MILTON KEYNES: It's famous for its roundabouts and statues of concrete cows. But the English town of Milton Keynes now has another claim to fame - a trundling army of shopping delivery robots. The six-wheeled automated vehicles, launched three years ago, barely get a second glance as they ply the residential streets, some 80 kilometers north of London.

Numbers have grown to 200 in Milton Keynes and nearby Northampton, which introduced the service in 2020, with plans for as many as 500 to be in action in five more places across the country. According to the robots' operators, the squat white machines came into their own when Britain locked down last year as coronavirus hit the country. "Everyone was so in need of contactless delivery during the pandemic," Andrew Curtis, head of UK operations at Starship Technologies said. The US company, which has quadrupled its deliveries in the UK, now makes 1,000 deliveries a day.

"Demand hasn't dropped off," Curtis said, adding that as stay-at-home restrictions were lifted, users became more willing to try the technology. The company has signed a new agreement with longstanding partner the Co-op Group's chain of supermarkets, to provide 300 new robots by the end of the year and triple deliveries. In front of one of the retailer's shops in Milton Keynes, which was the first to use the delivery machines in 2018, a dozen robots are ready and waiting. With their antenna topped with an orange flag to aid visibility, they look almost like a queue of empty bumper cars.

Starship troopers

An employee emerges from the shop and places the newest order inside one of the robots - a small bag containing raspberries, yoghurt and a bouquet of flowers. With its lid locked, the droid immediately dashes out onto the pavement. It turns and moves

forward to cross the road before stopping, reversing suddenly to let a car pass. Fitted with cameras, sensors and a loud alarm if needed, the robots - first created in 2014 by the two founders of Skype - are 99 percent autonomous. But if they become stuck, an operator can take control.

Once launched, the robot navigates the maze of footpaths that wind between Milton Keynes' red brick houses. When the way is clear, it can reach speeds of up to six kilometers per hour - a little more than a reasonable walking pace. Deliveries reach customers in less than an hour. The Co-op said the use of the robots is environmentally friendly as well as convenient, with 70 percent of Starship's customers going without a trip in the car to a store or receiving a delivery from a fuel-powered vehicle.

Under the delivery system, the robots remain the property of Starship and orders are placed via an application they developed. The company manages

1,000 robots, mainly in Britain and the United States but also in Estonia, Germany and Denmark. The tech firm is not alone in the delivery robot race. In the United States, for example, where it operates mainly on university campuses, it is jockeying for position with start-ups and logistics giants such as Amazon and FedEx.

A 'godsend'

As their numbers grow, the wheeled delivery drones have drawn criticism from unions, who fear they will take jobs from people. The debate has made its way into US town halls, which are tasked with deciding limits on delivery journeys and rules around sharing the pavement. "Fortunately, we've not had any accidents so far," Curtis said, adding that in the UK Starship has obtained permission from local authorities for each of its operating locations. —AFP

PREMIER MARKET WEEKLY TECHNICAL BULLETIN

WEEK ENDED ON 23 SEPTEMBER 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	960	960	965	953	12	14,977,569	22	0.00%	14.29%	940	965	23.3	2.07	2.0%	1.27
102	Gulf Bank	Banking	237	236	238	233	5	47,139,001	-1	-0.42%	7.76%	232	237	21.4	1.12	2.0%	1.13
106	Kuwait International Bank	Banking	223	224	226	222	4	31,277,701	2	0.90%	7.69%	224	230	NM	0.98	0.0%	1.01
107	Burgan Bank	Banking	231	226	231	225	6	19,666,937	-3	-1.31%	6.10%	225	233	17.8	0.92	2.1%	1.05
108	Kuwait Finance House	Banking	829	825	831	821	10	21,204,177	-5	-0.60%	21.86%	820	830	36.0	3.72	1.1%	1.41
109	Boubyan Bank	Banking	774	771	778	766	12	2,032,361	-10	-1.28%	35.74%	761	773	63.3	4.53	0.0%	1.05
204	National Investments	Financial Services	195	195	197	192	5	6,332,733	0	0.00%	44.44%	195	201	7.0	0.90	5.1%	1.24
205	Kuwait Projects	Financial Services	156	157	158	155	3	4,143,411	3	1.95%	-1.26%	153	159	NM	1.52	3.1%	0.59
252	Al Imtiaz Investment	Financial Services	132	133	133	127	6	27,694,969	0	0.00%	18.75%	128	133	NM	0.81	0.0%	0.99
401	Kuwait Real Estate	Real Estate	145	146	149	144	5	61,680,029	0	0.00%	33.94%	145	148	28.3	1.07	0.0%	0.97
413	Mabaneer	Real Estate	790	781	810	776	34	1,832,619	-18	-2.25%	18.87%	772	785	19.7	1.83	0.7%	1.11
501	National Industries	Financial Services	237	245	247	237	10	72,485,983	8	3.38%	39.20%	239	246	6.3	0.91	0.0%	1.44
505	Gulf Cable	Industrials	818	808	825	808	17	761,629	-7	-0.86%	7.02%	806	820	30.3	0.91	6.2%	0.93
514	Boubyan Petrochemical	Basic Materials	864	874	876	860	16	934,822	10	1.16%	36.56%	860	877	24.8	2.05	6.1%	0.72
526	Al Qurain	Basic Materials	379	380	383	375	8	1,648,233	1	0.26%	12.43%	374	382	30.5	1.00	4.0%	0.75
603	Agility	Industrials	991	989	993	985	8	8,644,438	0	0.00%	46.30%	981	991	28.8	1.88	0.9%	1.49
605	Zain	Telecommunications	601	602	605	598	7	8,753,815	1	0.17%	-0.66%	597	602	13.9	2.25	5.5%	1.36
623	Human Soft Holding	Industrials	3,350	3,330	3,380	3,323	57	626,318	0	0.00%	-12.35%	3315	3350	6.1	3.84	12.0%	0.49
642	ALAFCO	Industrials	233	227	233	225	8	7,984,463	-6	-2.58%	5.09%	224	229	NM	0.73	0.0%	0.86
818	Ahli United Bank	Banking	275	287	287	275	12	75,190,478	11	3.99%	26.43%	277	293	21.3	2.30	1.3%	1.13
821	Warba Bank	Banking	260	261	264	259	5	7,302,353	2	0.77%	10.59%	257	262	15.5	2.07	0.0%	0.99
823	Mezzan Holding	Consumer Staples	611	629	638	610	28	16,690,915	13	2.11%	3.45%	618	638	19.9	1.80	2.8%	0.44
824	Integrated Holding	Industrials	381	374	381	372	9	3,749,469	-7	-1.84%	2.19%	371	376	NM	1.56	0.0%	0.48
826	Shamal Az-Zour	Utilities	237	237	238	231	7	7,512,982	1	0.42%	-14.44%	233	238	20.5	4.96	5.1%	0.67
827	Boursa Kuwait	Financial Services	1,868	1,802	1,872	1,795	77	1,109,156	-66	-3.53%	63.82%	1798	1840	12.9	6.88	2.2%	0.76

* As of end of week closing

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al-safat-investment-company

Business

Bank of England holds its stimulus, record-low rate

UK annual inflation would top 4%, BoE warns

LONDON: The Bank of England yesterday maintained its stimulus amount and record-low interest rate, even as it warned that UK annual inflation would top four percent this year. The BoE's nine-strong monetary policy committee (MPC) voted unanimously to hold its key borrowing cost at 0.1 percent, a statement said.

Policymakers voted 7-2 in favor of keeping its so-called quantitative easing stimulus at almost £900 billion (\$1.2 trillion, 1.0 trillion euros). The decision comes as global central banks grapple with when to withdraw ultra-loose monetary policy and massive stimulus as COVID-blighted economies start to recover. Yesterday's news came one day after the Federal Reserve said it would soon begin tapering its own emergency aid.

"Two (MPC) members preferred to stop the current asset purchase program as soon as practical after this meeting rather than continuing it until around the end of the year, as currently planned," the BoE said. "Continuing with asset purchases when CPI inflation was above 3.0 percent and the output gap was closed might cause medium-term inflation expectations to drift up further." Central banks have embarked on huge purchases of commercial bonds, resulting in massive cash amounts swirling around the world economy.

Some analysts argue that this fuels inflation, which is on the rise in any case after the pandemic caused supply shortages. The BoE also warned yesterday that annual inflation was now expected to breach 4.0 percent - more than double its target

level - in the fourth quarter as a result of high energy and goods prices. The annual inflation rate had already spiked in August to a near-decade high of 3.2 percent after the COVID-hit economy reopened.

"Against a backdrop of robust goods demand and continuing supply constraints, global inflationary pressures had remained strong and there were some signs that cost pressures might prove more persistent," read minutes from the gathering. "Oil prices had remained elevated and global shipping costs had continued to rise. Wholesale gas prices had risen substantially across Europe." The bank warned also that "considerable uncertainties remain" over the economic outlook, including from the end next week of the state's furlough jobs support scheme.—AFP

EU to impose universal charger; blow to Apple

BRUSSELS: The European Union yesterday said it will impose a universal charger for smartphones, setting up a clash with Apple and its widely used iPhone connector cable. The European Commission believes a standard cable for all devices will cut back on electronic waste, but Apple says a one-size fits all charger will stop innovation and create more pollution. The EU is a massive market of 450 million people, and the imposition of the USB-C as a cable standard could have a decisive effect on the global smartphone market. "European consumers have been frustrated long enough about incompatible chargers piling up in their drawers," said EU executive vice president Margrethe Vestager in a statement. "We gave industry plenty of time to come up with their own solutions, now time is ripe for legislative action for a common charger," she said. Consumers currently have to decide between three main chargers to power their phones: Lightning ones for Apple handsets, micro-USB ones widely used on most other mobile phones, and USB-C ones that are increasingly being used. That range is greatly simplified from 2009, when dozens of different types of chargers were bundled with mobile phones, creating piles of electronic garbage when users changed brands.

'Inconvenient' and wasteful

The EU said the current situation remained "inconvenient" and that European consumers spent approximately 2.4 billion euros (\$2.8 billion) annually on standalone chargers that do not come with their electronic devices. Apple, which already uses USB-C connectors on some of its iPads and laptop computers, insists legislation to force a universal charger for all mobiles in the European Union is unwarranted. "We remain concerned that strict regulation mandating just one type of connector stifles innovation rather than encouraging it, which in turn will harm consumers in Europe and around the world," Apple said. The European Commission had long defended a voluntary agreement it made with the device industry that was set in place in 2009 and saw a big reduction in cables, but Apple refused to abide by it. In the commission's proposal, which could yet be considerably changed before ratification, smartphone makers will be given a 24-month transition period, giving "ample time" for companies to fall in line, the commission said. Apple said that it believed the two year transition period would be a major worry for the industry as it could prevent the sale of existing equipment.—AFP

European Union tackles 'critical' energy crisis

BRUSSELS: The European Commission said it is poised to validate "short-term temporary measures" to tackle the effects of a global energy crisis - while keeping an eye on long-term climate goals. The European energy commissioner, Kadri Simson, made the comment after a meeting in Slovenia of EU energy ministers dominated by the issue, which several of them said had grown "critical".

Europe is facing soaring power prices as its economy recovers from the COVID pandemic, and as winter approaches while natural gas reserves are at a worrying low level. A profound EU transformation towards a low-carbon future, phasing out fossil fuels, is adding to the pressure on the bloc's market and on households. A key reason for the high prices is the spot market for natural gas, something European lawmakers accuse Russia of manipulating in an effort to get Germany to activate a new pipeline across the Baltic Sea that bypasses a transit route through Ukraine. The United States long opposed that Nord Stream 2 pipeline, but finally relented under German insistence. US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm on Wednesday warned against "manipulation" of gas prices in Europe. "The US has been clear that we and our partners have to be prepared to continue to stand up when there are players who may be manipulating supply in order to benefit themselves," Granholm told an online briefing to journalists during a visit to Poland.

Russia's gas giant Gazprom has reduced its flow of gas through Ukraine, leaving its European storage tanks nearly empty. But the company denies it is holding supplies to ransom to bring Nord Stream 2 online. While Austrian Energy Minister Leonore Gewessler pointed to the "high dependency on Russian gas" as an



NEURATH: Trucks drive near the coal-fired power station Neurath of German energy giant RWE at the open-cast mine of Garzweiler, western Germany.—AFP

underlying problem for supplies as she went into the meeting, others were more circumspect. Simson said the reasons for the steep rise in energy wholesale prices were "mainly global" and consumers in all EU countries were therefore feeling the impact.

EU 'toolbox'

While she said the EU was still striving towards goals for a low-carbon future by transforming its energy, transport and industry sectors - and by reducing reliance on natural gas and other fossil fuels - Brussels recognized immediate remedies were needed. "In the short run, there are several member states who are ready to introduce short-term temporary measures to protect their vulnerable consumers," she said.

Cutting value-added tax and excises on energy would be "in accordance with EU regulations," she said. But she explained that she had also asked the EU energy ministers to draw up, within weeks, "a more structured toolbox" of measures that could include grouped purchase

agreements and increased emphasis on more-affordable renewable energy.

Yesterday, Simson traveled to Poland to join Granholm for an EU-US ministerial-level meeting on energy and climate cooperation. The two were also to set out preparations for the EU-US Energy Council, a high-level body guiding coordination on shared strategic energy issues across the Atlantic. The EU is not the only region struggling with a surge in energy prices. Asia, too, is seeing increases and is taking in more natural gas to feed expanding economies.

The United States, too, has seen prices rise but not nearly as much, being largely shielded because of gas production from its shale fields. In former EU member Britain, wholesale energy prices are outstripping even those in Europe. At least four British consumer energy suppliers have gone bust and others are teetering, unable to raise bills to households because of a mandated price cap. Poor energy production from wind sources and a fire that has knocked out a UK converter station bringing energy from France have compounded the problem.—AFP

Business

Asian markets rally on easing Evergrande fears, comments

Investors cheered by US Federal Reserve plan

HONG KONG: Asian markets rose yesterday as concerns about a collapse of troubled property giant Evergrande receded for now, while investors were also cheered by a Federal Reserve plan to begin scaling back its ultra-loose monetary policy soon. Hong Kong was among the lead advancers as it reopened after a mid-week break to catch up with news that Evergrande had agreed a plan to repay interest to its domestic bondholders, soothing worries of a default that have raised talk of a hammer blow to the Chinese economy.

And while Wednesday's statement was vaguely worded - not detailing how much and when it would pay - it was grasped as a much-needed positive sign. Attention is now on what it plans to do about repayments to offshore bondholders. Observers pointed out that even if it fails to meet its obligations, the firm still has 30 days to come up with the cash. However, they will be keeping an eye on how it deals with those dollar-denominated notes.

"International investors will watch closely for new developments and for any state reaction, and assess how contagious it can be for the rest of the economy," Bernard Shaw, an Asia bond syndicate banker at Daiwa Capital Markets Singapore, said. Hong Kong rose more than one percent, with Evergrande surging about 30 percent briefly before easing back slightly - though its shares are still down more than 80 percent

this year. There were also gains for other property developers as well as banks that have exposure to the firm. Shanghai was also in positive territory, helped by an infusion of \$17 billion into financial markets by the People's Bank of China.

Justin Tang, of United First Partners, said the Wednesday announcement "displayed that maintaining bond solvency was still on the agenda for Evergrande and also raised hopes for investors that creditors are to an extent open to resolution". "The read-through is that an orderly restructuring/negotiation is still on the cards for other onshore and offshore creditors and could buy the time Evergrande so desperately needs." Sydney also added one percent, while Mumbai and Singapore were up even more. Wellington, Taipei, Manila, Bangkok and Jakarta were also higher. Tokyo was closed for a holiday.

In Europe, London, Paris and Frankfurt all rose at the open. The positive start to the day followed a rally of around one percent for all three main Wall Street indexes, where investors also welcomed a Fed statement on tapering its vast bond-buying program. The central bank said it expects to "soon" be ready to start the wind-down of stimulus put in place at the start of the pandemic that has been a key driver of the global economic and equity rebound.

Debt ceiling warning

The world's biggest economy was now strong



TOKYO: A woman looks out from an observatory deck in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

enough for the bond-buying program to be slowed, "if progress continues broadly as expected", it said in a statement after its policy meeting. "The Fed has officially given notice that if the recovery continues as planned, a moderation in the pace of asset purchases can happen soon," said OANDA's Edward Moya, adding that investors "can now completely price in a formal November taper announcement with a Decem-

ber start date".

He said traders were cheered as "the Fed has well telegraphed that they were nearing a taper announcement and continue to show they are in no rush to deliver interest rate hikes". "The biggest risk to the stock market is an accelerated pace of tightening and the Fed is showing that is something they will avoid unless they were dead wrong about inflation." — AFP

Nigeria aims to boost oil output

ABUJA: Nigeria said it aims to produce 1.88 million barrels per day of crude oil next year and the budget will be based on the benchmark price of \$57 per barrel, calling it a "very conservative" output goal as the country's economy struggles. Africa's most populous country has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, insecurity and a slump in global oil prices vital to its petroleum-reliant economy.

The government said Wednesday that a Senate committee had approved spending plans for the next three years, called the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), which forecasted gross domestic product growth of 4.2 percent and inflation of 13 percent for 2022. The upper house also gave its nod for daily crude oil production of 1.88 million barrels per day (mbpd) for next year, 2.23 mbpd for 2023, and 2.22 mbpd for 2024 "in view of an average 1.93 mbpd over the last the years". Those figures are an increase from 1.47 mbpd oil production this year, when the budget was based on \$40 per barrel.

The upper house said that "a very conservative oil output benchmark has been adopted for the medium term in order to ensure greater budget realism". The Senate committee recommended the MTEF, saying it was "designed deliberately to minimize the adverse socio-economic consequences of the unabating COVID-19 pandemic and other crises peculiar to our country". The estimates were considered by the Senate ahead of the 2021 appropriation bill being presented by President Muhammadu Buhari later in the year. While economic growth has bounced back after being hit by the pandemic, insecurity, kidnapping and criminal attacks have surged this year in northwest and central states and food inflation remains stubbornly high. — AFP

South African Airways resumes flights after bankruptcy

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa's embattled national airline yesterday flew its first plane since March 2020 after emerging from bankruptcy proceedings. Passengers on the South African Airways (SAA) flight from Johannesburg to Cape Town were greeted on their departure by singing and dancing airline staff. Once Africa's second-largest airline after Ethiopian Airlines, SAA had survived for decades on government bailouts and was shedding routes even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The government agreed in June to sell a 51-percent stake to a group of investors called the Takatso Consortium, opening the way to a potential injection of \$200 million (171 million euros).

Even after a state bailout of more than \$500 million (426 million euros) and a restructuring of its debt, the airline only emerged from bankruptcy after slashing hundreds of jobs. In addition to the domestic route that resumed yesterday, SAA plans to begin regional services next week to Accra, Kinshasa, Lusaka, Harare and Maputo. Chief finance officer Fikile Mhlonto said this week that the airline's fleet is down to six planes, from a previous 46. SAA low-cost subsidiary Mango remains grounded and in bankruptcy proceedings. — AFP

Indonesia approves giant solar project

JAKARTA: Indonesia approved a giant solar power link between Australia and Singapore after a \$2.5 billion investment promise, authorities said yesterday. Southeast Asia's largest economy has agreed to allow Sun Cable's Australia-Asia PowerLink or AAPowerLink route through Indonesian waters and approved the undersea survey permit. "We expect this project will have a sustainable impact for our economy through various procurement programs that will benefit the industry and the government's revenue," coordinating minister of maritime and investment Luhut Binsar Panjaitan told a virtual press conference in Jakarta.

AAPowerlink will generate solar electricity from one of the world's biggest solar farm projects and transmit it from Darwin to Singapore starting in 2028. The project is expected to supply up to 15 percent of Singapore's electricity needs and reduce the country's emissions by around six million tons annually. The company will not be supplying renewable energy directly to Indonesia but promised around \$1 billion in direct investments on procurement of equipment and services and an additional \$1.5 in operational spending over the life of the project.

"We're really excited to announce that this project will invest \$2.58 billion into Indonesia," Sun Cable CEO David Griffin said. "We want this world-leading project to create a step-change in the Indo-Pacific's capability to achieve net-zero ambitions and economic growth sustained by renewable energy." The over 30-billion Australian dollar project includes the construction of the enormous solar farm in Australia's Northern Territory, the world's largest battery, and an approximately 4,200-kilometre undersea high-voltage cable system from Darwin to Singapore. — AFP

Business

China opposes Taiwan 'joining trans-Pacific trade agreement'

CPTPP - the region's biggest free-trade pact

TAIPEI: China yesterday said it opposed Taiwan joining a major trans-Pacific trade deal just days after Beijing said it wanted to become a member of the same agreement. Signed by 11 Asia-Pacific countries in 2018, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) is the region's biggest free-trade pact and accounts for around 13.5 percent of the global economy. Taiwan has lobbied for years to join and announced yesterday it had officially applied. "Taiwan can't be left out in the world and has to integrate into the regional economy," cabinet spokesman Lo Ping-cheng told reporters.

But China, which claims self-ruled, democratic Taiwan as its own territory, said Taipei should not be allowed to join. "We firmly oppose any country having official exchanges with Tai-

wan and firmly oppose the Taiwan region's accession to any official treaties or organizations," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters. Last week China submitted its own application to join the CPTPP. Negotiations for the sweeping trade deal were initially led by the United States as a way to increase its influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

It was originally designed to keep China, which has its own regional trade deal, locked out. But former US president Donald Trump, who disdained multilateral agreements, pulled out of the deal in 2017. The CPTPP is the successor to those negotiations and currently includes Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, New Zealand, Singapore and Vietnam. Those hoping to join must have the unanimous support of all the pact's

member countries, something both China and Taiwan may struggle to obtain.

China's application comes at a time when Beijing is feuding with a host of Western nations, especially Australia, which it has placed trade restrictions on. Australia this week said China must end a freeze on contact with senior Australian politicians if it hopes to sign up. Meanwhile smaller countries within the CPTPP are unlikely to want to risk incurring Beijing's wrath by agreeing to let Taiwan join.

China's authoritarian leaders have vowed to one day seize Taiwan, by force if necessary. They have ramped up economic, military and diplomatic pressure on the island since the 2016 election of President Tsai Ing-wen who views Taiwan as a sovereign nation. China often sends military aircraft into Taiwan's air defense zone

to display displeasure. Yesterday, Taiwanese officials said 19 Chinese planes - including 14 fighter jets and two nuclear-capable bombers - crossed into the zone, one of the biggest incursions in months.

But China's growing threats towards Taiwan have generated international sympathy for the island among Western powers. Tokyo responded favorably to Taiwan's application. "Japan welcomes Taiwan's application to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership," Japanese foreign minister Toshimitsu Motegi told reporters in New York. John Deng, Taipei's lead trade negotiator, said he expected Chinese opposition but portrayed Taiwan as a more reliable free-trade partner. "We have the foundation of democracy and the rule of law so all our regulations are transparent and we respect private properties," he said.— AFP

Evergrande's founder calls for construction, sales to resume

BEIJING: The head of teetering Chinese developer Evergrande has urged staff to resume construction and sales to deliver properties, state media reported yesterday, as the firm battles to avoid a collapse that could send shockwaves through the world's number two economy. Furious homebuyers and investors around the country have gathered to demand repayment as the developer drowns in a sea of debt worth more than \$300 billion, and struggles to meet its obligations.

The comments came as the company was due to pay interest to foreign bondholders yesterday, with expectations it will miss the deadline, starting the clock on a countdown to what could be a default in 30 days. Evergrande had not issued any statements on the bond deadline as of yesterday evening. Financial regulators recently urged Evergrande representatives to avoid a near-term default on dollar bonds and focus on repaying individual investors - but without offering financial support. Bloomberg reported yesterday. Analysts Capital Economics estimate Evergrande has committed to complete some 1.4 million properties - around 1.3 trillion yuan (\$200 billion) in pre-sale liabilities, as of the end of June.

Xu Jiayin, the billionaire who founded the company in 1996, called more than 4,000 Evergrande managers to a meeting shortly before midnight on Wednesday, asking them to "devote all their energy to resuming work and production and ensuring that properties are delivered", the state-owned China Securities Journal reported. He also said the group must "make every effort to fulfill" payment plans the company had previously announced, the Journal reported.



SHANGHAI: A general view shows the Evergrande Center building in Shanghai. —AFP

The privately-owned conglomerate had previously offered to repay some debts in kind, promising creditors including suppliers, contractors and investors parking spaces and commercial units instead of cash. Xu on Wednesday night promised to maintain a "highly responsible attitude toward investors". The crisis sent shivers through world markets on Monday as traders feared a collapse at one of China's biggest property firms would spill over into the economy and have painful knock-on effects globally, just as countries battle to overcome the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

However, those concerns were eased slightly Wednesday when Evergrande said it had reached a deal with domestic bondholders to repay interest on their notes yesterday. Beijing authorities recently asked local governments to prepare for Evergrande's potential collapse, the Wall Street Journal reported yesterday, suggesting a major state bailout is unlikely. Evergrande's liquidity crunch has triggered public anger and rare protests outside its offices in China as investors and suppliers demand their money back.— AFP

Lonely toil of Belgium's 'last shale miner'

VRESSE-SUR-SEMOIS: For the past decade, Vincent Theret has worked alone in a deep hole under the wooded Ardennes hills of southern Belgium. Boasting of being the last of his kind, he harvests slabs of blue-tinged shale, left behind as waste in what was once a thriving slate mine that closed in 1948. The shale was too hard to be worked as slate, but in the hands of the 61-year-old craftsman it is now used in decorative masonry and paving, tiles and sinks, for householders who prize its hard-wearing elegance.

But as a source of architectural flair, rather than of a mass-market roofing material, the drift mine in Alle-sur-Semois no longer supports a large mining community ... just Theret, who rents access to the cavernous pit from the local council and ventures in alone. It's dark, damp and po-

tentially dangerous but, Theret told AFP, "the day I'm afraid to go into the mine, I'll stop."

Inside the gallery, lit by spotlights, he manoeuvres an excavator to load tons of stone. "You have to be careful, you don't go in there like you're going to the fair," he says, recounting that one day when he arrived on the spot he found a 500-tonne block that had broken from the wall. "I listen to the mine, to the drops of water falling from the vault, to the cracks. You have to listen, you have to observe", explains the man who was first a bricklayer, then worked in an open-cast quarry before bringing this former slate mine back to life in 2012. At the Vresse-sur-Semois site, another old gallery has been fitted out for tourist visits, to tell the story of the daily life of the former miners, driven out of business by competition from foreign slate exporters. Theret says that he thinks about these miners every day as he recovers their shale waste. "What they are giving me here is great... The good stone, we go and get it from the bottom, that's why the miners went down so deep. The further down you go, the more moisture the stone has and the more beautiful it is, better quality." — AFP



ALLE, Belgium: Belgian miner Vincent Theret (said to be the last miner of Belgium) works outside the 'Grand ouvrage' shale mine in Alle, near Semois. — AFP

Hamilton hopes to end frustrating pursuit of 100th win in Russia

SOCHI, Russia: Lewis Hamilton will be seeking to exploit every advantage he can find this weekend as he bids for an unprecedented and thus far elusive 100th Formula One win to regain the lead in the world championship at the Russian Grand Prix. Since grabbing victory in controversial circumstances at the British Grand Prix in July, the seven-time champion has been unable to add to his total of 99 victories and has struggled to reach his century.

But after surviving another spectacular crash with title rival Max Verstappen of Red Bull at Monza, to follow their high-speed first lap tangle at Silverstone, Hamilton has an inviting opportunity to make history for Mercedes at the Sochi Autodrom, on the shores of the Black Sea on Sunday. Not only is he seeking a record fifth triumph in the former Olympic Park but Mercedes are unbeaten in all seven races held there.

Verstappen, meanwhile, goes into the event with a three-place grid penalty for his part in their collision in Italy where his car ended up on top of Hamilton, who escaped injury or worse thanks to the 'halo' cockpit safety device. That all suggests that the 36-year-old Briton has a sumptuous chance to overhaul the Dutchman's five-point advantage in the championship.

Verstappen, at best, can only start fourth if he is fastest in qualifying, but insists he was not to blame for their latest crash. The 23-year-old is also bullish about his bid to take Hamilton's crown. "Of course, the penalty is not ideal, but nothing is lost—that's how I look at it," he said. "In the championship, there are a lot of races ahead and the margin is tiny. We will make the most of it and do our best.

"You can reflect all you want, but it's more important to look forward and keep pushing. I still believe it was a racing incident."

Verstappen finished second behind Hamilton's Mercedes teammate Valtteri Bottas last year and believes he can be highly competitive in what is likely to be a wet racing weekend. "It's completely different to Monza and I'm looking forward to it to see if we can improve on last year."

Hamilton 'laser-focused'

Hamilton is expected to have fully recovered from the headaches and neck pain he suffered in Italy and, according to Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff, is in determined mood. "Lewis is in the tenth championship battle of his F1 career and he is laser-focused on what he needs to deliver in the next eight races," he said, adding that Bottas, who leaves to join Alfa Romeo next year, is driving "better than ever". "There's a calm determination about the team right now and the business end of a season, fighting for championships, is exactly what we enjoy the most."

Mercedes lead Red Bull by 18 points in the constructors' title race with Sochi offering them a chance to extend that advantage while McLaren, who won in Italy thanks to a rousing drive from Daniel Ricciardo, may offer a threat. "I want to build on my Monza performance and will push to score important points," said the Australian. "But Sochi can be a tricky circuit to make a move."

To further complicate matters, it is possible that Verstappen may take a new Honda power unit - and with it another penalty that



SOCHI: Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton addresses the drivers' press conference for the Formula One Russian Grand Prix at the Sochi Autodrom circuit yesterday. — AFP

would drop him to the back of the grid, from where he could mount a charge to finish in the top five. Hamilton also faces the same prospect, but may delay it until a later race. With heavy rain forecast, it will be a weekend filled with jeopardy for teams and drivers as the tension builds again. Another collision remains likely, though Hamilton will this time hope to be beyond reach of the young Dutchman's boldest moves. —AFP

'Postman' Poulter aims to deliver again for Europe

KOHLER: England's Ian Poulter, dubbed "The Postman" for his consistent ability to deliver for Europe, says there's no secret to his Ryder Cup success. "I hate losing," the English veteran said when asked why the biennial match play showdown with the United States brings out his best golf.

"You see the guy when you play match play, you know what you have to do when you tee up on the first hole. You can control a match. You can dictate a match. You can play certain shots to try and put your opponent under pressure. You can't do that in stroke play really unless it comes down to the back nine and the group you're in you're actually clear of the rest of the field."

"It's just a fun game of chess, to be honest, to enjoy what that means, that you're under pressure right from the get-go. It just doesn't happen in stroke play. It's kind of like you plod your way into the tournament, but it's back nine Sunday mentality every single time you tee it up."

Poulter has been a key contributor to Europe's recent dominance. They have won four of the past five editions and Poulter, who made his debut in 2004, has played on five winning sides in six appearances. He says it will take a special effort for Europe to retain the Cup they won in France three years ago against a US side featuring eight of the world's top 10 players and no one ranked lower than 21st.

"It's not easy to play away from home," Poulter said. "As much as we feel comfortable as a team, to know we're underdogs, to know that, we have to play extra special this week to get the job done." Poulter sparked Europe's "Miracle at Medinah" victory in 2012, making birdie at five straight holes to secure a point in the penultimate session as Europe rallied to win. He won two and lost two of four matches at Le Golf National in 2018, but maintained his unbeaten record in singles with a victory over then top-ranked Dustin Johnson.



KOHLER, Wisconsin: Lee Westwood, Ian Poulter, Paul Casey, Tyrrell Hatton, Matthew Fitzpatrick and Tommy Fleetwood of England and team Europe pose for a photo during the Team Europe Gala Dinner prior to the 43rd Ryder Cup at The American Club on Wednesday. —AFP

Lightning rod

It was no surprise when Pdraig Harrington made him a captain's pick for the fifth time. Harrington said Poulter's ability to perform under pressure isn't the only thing that makes him a valuable asset. "You have players who you want to just focus on playing golf," Harrington said. "They're just golfers. They want to concentrate. They want to know what they're doing just like a regular week, and you have other players who want a bit of a hyped up week, and Ian is one who can take that pressure and can deal with it."

"He can take it, handle it, and can be a lightning rod to inspire the team, and also maybe to give the other guys a quiet or an easy run." Poulter's opponents certainly can't expect anything to be easy, and the Englishman has no plans to make it so. "I'm sure I've annoyed plenty," he said. "I mean, my percentage has been really nice, for me, and not for the guys I've played against, so I'm sure that's been pretty frustrating to be on the receiving end of that. It feels nice. I enjoy holing putts and winning matches. It's been a great ride. I'm never going to apologize for it. It's how match play should be played." — AFP

US tries to win back Ryder Cup as Europe seeks upset

KOHLER, Wisconsin: An American squad featuring nine of the world's 11 top-ranked golfers tries to reclaim the Ryder Cup from Europe this weekend, aided by 40,000 loud supporters and a home course edge. The European side, however, has won nine of the past 12 editions of the biennial team matches, including three of the past six on US soil, and brings an experienced lineup to face a US team with six rookies on its 12-man roster.

"Everything is stacked against us," said European talisman Ian Poulter, who has never lost a Ryder Cup singles match. "When you have that, when you can go in as underdogs, when you can turn the tide and actually come out victorious, it means a little bit more. "If we can come out on top Sunday night, it'll be a pretty special one."

Four-time major winner Rory McIlroy of Europe says a win "would be massive" and rival Europe's rally from 10-6 down on Sunday to win the 2012 "Miracle at Medinah." "I'd certainly love to have that feeling again," McIlroy said. "It would be a huge achievement." Brisk winds at Whistling Straits along the Lake Michigan shoreline promise to make the layout, tucked among cliffs and hillsides, formidable for everyone when play starts Friday. "We like a bit of wind, but we're not asking for everybody to be blown off the golf course," Europe captain Pdraig Harrington said.

"You've got to hit wind shots. You've got to keep the ball down at times. You've got to aim off into trouble and trust the wind is going to take it back. Nobody wants it too windy. That's not conducive to a good, fair battle, but a bit of wind is a true test of golf."

Flag-stiffening winds will switch to southerly on Friday, unlike anything seen on practice days. "Wind has proved to be a challenge," US captain Steve Stricker said. "We're going to see something totally different come Friday." US players "had a good time with the wind," Stricker said. "They thought it was fun. They embraced it." —AFP

Sports

Afghanistan women taekwondo fighters feel defeated by Taleban

HERAT: Zarghunna Noori has always been a fighter, but the 22-year-old taekwondo champion - who dreamt of representing Afghanistan at the Olympics - says she has finally met her match. "In sports when we lose we are left feeling terrible," she told AFP at her home in the western city of Herat. "And now we have been defeated by the Taleban."

The Taleban's all-male government has shut down the ministry of women's affairs and replaced it with one that earned notoriety for enforcing religious doctrine during the hardliners' 1996-2001 stint in power. Although they have yet to publicize a formal policy on women in sport, the Taleban have made comments that indicate serious participation will be impossible.

With women and girls already effectively banned from work and school, fear of reprisal for practising sport is widespread. "All our lives have been overturned," said Noori, who since joining her provincial team a decade ago has become a national academy star, winning an Afghan title in 2018. "Each and every member of the national taekwondo team dreamed that one day we would make it to the Olympics and raise the Afghan flag in other countries, in international competitions," she said, surrounded by her medals and a golden trophy engraved 'Best Leader'. "But now we are all forced to stay home, and become more depressed with each passing day."

Taekwondo's popularity surged in Afghanistan in 2008 after local hero Rohullah Nikpai won bronze at the Beijing Olympics. Zakia Khudadadi, 22, gave Afghans another rea-

son to watch the Korean martial art last month when she competed in the Tokyo Paralympics.

Sport 'not necessary'

In Afghanistan, women have long faced open hostility to their involvement in sport and in rural areas it is extremely rare for them to participate. Even in cities, many women's leagues are at the fledgling stage. Around 130 girls and women aged 12-25 are members of a taekwondo gym in Herat, but they are not currently allowed to train and their ability to do so in the future looks bleak.

Last week, the country's new sports chief Bashir Ahmad Rustamzai said the Taleban would allow around 400 sports - but declined to say if women could participate in any of them. Ahmadullah Wasiq, of the Taleban's cultural commission, also raised alarm this month by saying it was "not necessary" for women to play sport. But the regime is under pressure: barring women from participating will likely halt recognition and funding from international sports bodies - including support for its popular cricket and football teams.

Desperate to train

For Noori, a fourth-year student of physical education at Kabul University, the Taleban's draconian interpretation of sharia law is personal. "Every woman in Afghanistan had a dream to be able to progress and reach a better place in the future," she said, standing alongside seven other members of the national taekwondo academy. "They all wanted to become role models... so that they could show the world how much we can progress. We all acted, practiced and tried our

The left-handed Dhawan leads the IPL batting chart with 422 runs including three half-centuries in nine matches. Delhi, who are still searching for their first IPL title, moved back to the top of the eight-team table. Hyderabad stay at the bottom with seven losses from eight matches. "We have one of the quickest bowlers in the world so I think they're great assets to have," Pant said of his team's pace duo of Nortje and Rabada.

Hyderabad, who are missing England star Jonny Bairstow, lost regular wickets after Australia's David Warner fell to Nortje without scoring on the third ball of the match. Bairstow was one of the many England and international stars including Ben Stokes and Pat Cummins of Australia to pull out of the pandemic-hit league. Nortje bowled express pace with one of his deliveries recorded at 151 kmph (93.8mph) and was ably supported by Rabada.

Left-arm spinner Axar Patel also kept down the opposition scoring and took two key wickets including skipper Kane Williamson for 18. Williamson called Nortje and Rabada "two of the best fast bowlers going around in world cricket". Marcus Stoinis bowled 1.1 overs before he went off the field with a strained hamstring and fellow Australian Steve Smith stood in as substitute fielder for the rest of the innings. The IPL only resumed Sunday in the United Arab Emirates after a five-month suspension because of a devastating surge in Covid-19 deaths in India. Teams returning to the event in the UAE have been put in strict bio bubbles. — AFP



HERAT: This picture taken on Sept 21, 2021 shows taekwondo champion Zarghunna Noori (center) speaking with other members of the national taekwondo academy at a house in Herat province. — AFP

best, but it has now come to nothing - all of it."

Noori said many young taekwondo athletes are now in hiding, and that when they do leave their homes, they cover themselves from head-to-toe in a burqa. The athlete is desperate to go back to training, she said, so that "ten years of hard work will not go to waste", but now feels she will be forced to leave Afghanistan. "No one who lives in their own country wants to ever leave it," she told AFP. "But the conditions are such that we don't see common ground that will allow us to progress; it doesn't exist in the country."

'Help us'

Noori called on the global sporting community to help, because "if we raise our own voices in Afghanistan, our voices will be cut off". "We ask all international, Olympic athletes and members of the Olympic Committee to help us so that we can get to a better place, even if it means to go to another country to continue our activities," she said. Zahra, 22, another member of the national team, also feels "helpless". "Even the men don't have all their freedoms," she said, adding the Taleban were "the same Taleban of the past". — AFP

Delhi thrash Hyderabad in COVID-hit IPL match

DUBAI: South African bowlers Anrich Nortje and Kagiso Rabada helped set up an eight-wicket win for Delhi Capitals on Wednesday in an Indian Premier League match that went ahead despite a Sunrisers Hyderabad player testing positive for coronavirus. Hyderabad left-arm quick Thangarasu Natarajan and six of his close contacts were isolated hours before the latest match in the Twenty20 tournament in Dubai.

An IPL release said Natarajan is "currently asymptomatic" while the contacts and other Hyderabad players all returned negative tests. On the field, Nortje returned figures of 2-12 and fellow Proteas quick Rabada took three wickets to further hurt Hyderabad who managed just 134-9 after electing to bat. Shikhar Dhawan lay the foundations for Delhi's chase with his brisk 42 and then Shreyas Iyer (47) and skipper Rishabh Pant (35) took the team home in 17.5 overs with an unbeaten stand of 67 for the third wicket.

Italian football club Genoa sold to US investment firm

MILAN: Genoa announced yesterday they have been bought by American private equity fund 777 Partners for a reported €150 million (\$175 million) as Italian businessman Enrico Preziosi ends his 18-year ownership of Italy's oldest football club. "The new owner group, which will acquire 99.9 percent of Genoa's share capital, will pay new capital into the club and will assume some related liabilities," the statement said.

"The previous owner, Enrico Preziosi, will remain on the board of directors, while CEO Alessandro Zarboni will continue to manage the day-to-day operations of the club," it added. Preziosi, 73, took over Genoa, who were founded by Englishmen in 1893 as a cricket and athletics club, in 2003 with the nine-time Italian champions in the hands of liquidators.

Genoa fans have had little to cheer about since Preziosi's arrival though, winning no trophies and only finishing in the top 10 once in the past 10 seasons. When they did, taking

sixth place in 2015, they were denied a place in the Europa League as they were unable to obtain a UEFA license from the Italian Football Federation. Their place was given to their local rivals Sampdoria, who finished seventh.

They even spent one season in the third-tier Serie C1 early in Preziosi's tenure, when their 2005 promotion to Serie A was cancelled and they were relegated after authorities found evidence of fixing of their final game of the campaign against Venezia, won 3-2 by Genoa. The scandal was to become infamous in Italy as a few days after the game, which Genoa needed to win to assure themselves of a place in Italy's top flight, Venezia director Giuseppe Pagliari was stopped by police near the headquarters of Preziosi's toy company with a suitcase containing 250,000 euros in cash.

777, who reportedly hold a stake in La Liga side Sevilla, are a private investment firm based in Miami. They invest in six broad industries: insurance, consumer and commercial finance, litigation finance, direct lending, media and entertainment and aviation. "We understand and respect the responsibility we are inheriting, we want to preserve and protect the proud Rossoblu heritage by aiming for the best possible positions in Serie A," 777 founder Josh Wander said. — AFP

Australia pursue three in a row against wounded Pumas

Rising star Leota earns Wallabies run-on debut

BRISBANE: Flanker Rob Leota will make his run-on debut as Australia look to inflict more pain on Argentina in Townsville tomorrow, while Reece Hodge won the race to replace an injured Tom Banks at fullback. They were the only changes to the starting side yesterday for the Rugby Championship fifth-round clash in north Queensland, with coach Dave Rennie keen to build on consecutive upsets of world champions South Africa.

Melbourne Rebels' rising star Leota gets his chance in only his second Test, joined in the backrow by skipper Michael Hooper at openside flanker and Rob Valetini at No.8. "He's really impressed us with his work ethic on and off the field and worked hard for this opportunity," said Rennie of the 24-year-old Leota. "Big man and ball-carrier, he has been close to selection in the past."

Hodge comes in for Banks, who has been ruled out for up to 10 weeks with a fractured arm suffered in the team's 30-17 win over the Springboks last weekend. A fit-again James O'Connor was an option but Rennie instead went for the versatile Rebels star, despite Hodge struggling under the high ball when he came off the bench last week. "Hodge put down a couple of high balls last weekend but he was otherwise excellent," said Rennie.

O'Connor made the match-day 23 and will see his first action since May, when a groin injury sidelined him after he had made the fly-half role his own. That position has now been taken by Quade Cooper. "We were pretty keen to keep it as constant as we could," Rennie added of the selections. "We're determined to build on the past couple of performances on Saturday night."

In an otherwise unchanged backline, scrum-half Nic White kept Tate McDermott out of the side and will partner Cooper, with the impressive Len Ikitau alongside Samu Kerevi in midfield. Hodge will roam the backline with last week's two-try hero Marika Koroibete on the left wing and Andrew Kellaway on the right.

Among the forwards, James Slipper plays his 109th Test in the front row alongside Folau Fainga'a and powerhouse Taniela Tupou, while Izack Rodda partners Matt Philip in the second row. Argentina head into the game on the back of four straight tournament defeats, although they will take heart in earning draws against Australia twice last year. —AFP

BRISBANE: Wallabies coach Dave Rennie has urged his team to stay focused as they eye three wins in a row for the first time since 2017 against a wounded Argentina tomorrow. Australia head into the Rugby Championship fifth-round clash with momentum and confidence after consecutive victories over South Africa, propelling them to number three in the world.

In contrast, Los Pumas and coach Mario Ledesma are under mounting pressure after four straight defeats, scoring just two tries while conceding 136 points. Despite this Rennie remains cautious of a team battling to bounce back, and conscious that Argentina frustrated his side by grinding out two draws last season. "We know the Argentinians will be desperate because they have had four losses so far and they're a good side," he said yesterday ahead of the clash in Townsville, in northern Queensland, the second game of a double-header with New Zealand facing South Africa in the early match.

"They'll want to express themselves, they throw more passes (than South Africa), they counter when given the opportunity and they are very good at it. They're also very good at filling the field, are disciplined around defence and can be hard to break down. What we've learned over the past few weeks is we have to hang in the fight for a long time, sometimes it takes 60 or 70 minutes to crack a side," he added. "We're certainly in no position to sit back and relax and be happy. We're still a long way from the team we reckon we could be."

Rennie has made two changes to his starting side, handing flanker Rob Leota a run-on debut in a backrow marshalled by skipper Michael Hooper and Rob Valetini. The versatile Reece Hodge got the



BRISBANE: New Zealand's Scott Barrett is tackled by Argentina's Tomas Lavanini during the rugby Championship match at the Suncorp Stadium on Sept 18, 2021. —AFP

nod to replace fullback Tom Banks, who is out for up to 10 weeks with a fractured arm. A fit-again James O'Connor was included on the bench and will see his first action since May, when a groin injury sidelined him after he had made the fly-half role his own. That position has now been taken by veteran Quade Cooper, who made a remarkable comeback earlier this month after four years in the international wilderness.

'Different beast'

While Argentina managed to bank two draws against the Wallabies last year, they have not scored more than 13 points in any Rugby Championship game this season and Ledesma admitted Rennie's team

was "a different beast" to 2020. "They've beaten the world champions twice and I thought they really dominated the game (last weekend)," said Ledesma, who has former Wallabies coach Michael Cheika assisting him.

"We're playing a different beast than last year. We have had a couple of bad games on the hop," he added. "We're really concentrating on getting better and we're playing against a team that is really confident." Ledesma named an unchanged run-on side to the one that crashed to a second-string New Zealand last week, with Santiago Carreras retained at fly-half with first-choice number 10 Nicolas Sanchez still out injured. —AFP

New Zealand recall big guns for Springboks clash

BRISBANE: New Zealand will return to full strength for the historic 100th Test match between the All Blacks and South Africa tomorrow as they seek to seal this year's Rugby Championship. Coach Ian Foster made eight changes to his starting line-up for the Test in Townsville, Australia recalling veterans including playmaker Beauden Barrett and influential lock Brodie Retallick. Flanker Ardie Savea again captains the team after leading an experimental side to victory over Argentina last week.

Foster said he was excited to face South Africa for the first time since taking over as head coach after the 2019 World Cup, when the Springboks became world champions. "This has got a bit of a legacy moment feel about it - 100 Tests and 100 years, it certainly

makes it special, along with the fact we haven't played South Africa for a couple of years," he said.

But Foster said the All Blacks, who top the Rugby Championship table and can wrap up the tournament with a win, were not dwelling on the match's historic importance. "We are all aware of the history and legacy of this match and respect that, but the only way we can do justice to that is to prepare well and focus on what we have to do," he said.

The majority of Foster's changes were up front, an area where he said the All Blacks expect a "torrid" time from the physical South Africans. Prop Joe Moody is the only remaining member of the tight five that started against Argentina, with Codie Taylor, Nepo Laulala, Scott Barrett and Retallick all brought in. Luke Jacobson and Akira Ioane line up alongside Savea in the back row.

Beauden Barrett returns at fly-half with Damian McKenzie moving to the bench and David Havili replaces Quinn Tupaea in the centers. "We're excited and getting ready for what will be a huge challenge," Foster said. "It will be the first time a number of our guys have played South Africa so they're excited and ready for it." —AFP

Sports

Hakimi's heroics maintain Messi-less PSG's 100% start

PARIS: Achraf Hakimi's dramatic injury-time winner rescued Paris Saint-Germain a 2-1 victory at bottom club Metz on Wednesday as the capital giants maintained their 100 percent start to the Ligue 1 season despite the absence of the injured Lionel Messi. Moroccan full-back Hakimi, a 60-million-euro signing from Inter Milan this year, gave PSG a fifth-minute lead before Kiki Kouyate's equalizer.

But a chaotic climax to the match saw Metz reduced to 10 men and have their coach Frederic Antonetti sent to the stands before Hakimi's 94th-minute strike. "The team fight to the end and never admit defeat, they have this ability to surpass themselves, with character, and the reward came at the end," said PSG boss Mauricio Pochettino.

PSG went into the new season as red-hot favorites to regain their French title after a raft of close-season signings, including six-time Ballon d'Or winner Messi. The former Barcelona icon was absent with a knee injury and Pochettino's men struggled against winless Metz. But PSG extended their early advantage at the top of the table to seven points over rivals Marseille - who drew 0-0 at third-placed Angers - after a seventh victory from as many league games.

Hakimi pounced early on but PSG were far from their best and Kouyate headed home from a corner six minutes before the break. Visiting goalkeeper Keylor Navas had to make a good save to deny Lamine Gueye a goal on the stroke of half-time, while Metz appeals for a penalty for handball against Hakimi early in the second period were turned down.

The real drama came after the clock had ticked past the 90 minutes, though, as Metz defender Dylan Bronn was shown a second yellow card for kicking the ball away. Coach Antonetti was

then promptly dismissed. PSG made the most of their brief man advantage as Hakimi latched onto Neymar's excellent pass, cut inside and fired into the bottom corner left-footed. Paris, champions in seven of the last nine seasons, celebrated wildly, with Neymar booked in the aftermath.

Shaqiri off the mark

Xherdan Shaqiri scored his first Lyon goal since joining from Liverpool as his new side saw off Troyes 3-1. Xavier Chavalierin gave Troyes a half-time lead, but Shaqiri's brilliant shot into the top corner dragged Lyon level. His fellow close-season arrival Emerson Palmieri completed the turnaround before Lucas Paqueta added a third. After a poor start to the campaign, Lyon have won three of their last four matches to climb to sixth in the table.

Nice are a place below them after Amine Gouiri missed a penalty for the second straight match in a 1-0 loss at Lorient. It was the first Ligue 1 defeat of the season for the club financed by British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe and Ineos. Thomas Monconduit scored the only goal midway through the first half for Lorient before Gouiri, who also failed from the spot late on in Sunday's 2-2 draw with Monaco, missed again in the 55th minute.

Lille get second win

Struggling Ligue 1 champions Lille held on to beat Reims 2-1 to claim just their second win of the season. Canada forward Jonathan David put the hosts ahead at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy just after the half-hour mark and midfielder Benjamin Andre doubled the advantage before the break with his first goal of the campaign. Lille, who saw title-winning coach Christophe Galtier leave in the close season for Nice, came through a nervy final 15 minutes



LONGEVILLE-LES-METZ, France: Paris Saint-Germain's Moroccan defender Achraf Hakimi (left) fights for the ball with Metz's French defender Sikou Niakate at the Saint-Symphorien Stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

after Alexis Flips' penalty cut the deficit for Reims.

Monaco are above Lille on goal difference after also sealing their second league win this term by seeing off 10-man Saint-Etienne 3-1. In a Ligue 1 first, Monaco made six substitutes due to the new concussion protocols as Krepin Diatta had to be replaced after a clash of heads with Yvan Neyou. Elsewhere, Rennes bounced back from three straight losses by thrashing Clermont 6-0, while Nigerian Samuel Kalu rescued Bordeaux a 3-3 draw at Montpellier. —AFP

Flamengo edge towards final as Barcelona downed

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazilian giants Flamengo took a huge stride towards the Copa Libertadores final on Wednesday, dominating Ecuadorian club Barcelona SC to seal a 2-0 victory in their semi-final first leg. Two first-half goals from striker Bruno Henrique set up a convincing win for Flamengo at the Maracana Stadium with the visitors outclassed for long periods of a one-sided encounter.

With Brazilian clubs Palmeiras and Atletico Mineiro battling it out in the other semi-final, Flamengo's win increases the chances of an all-Brazil Libertadores final for a second straight year. Barcelona made a bright start, with Gonzalo Mastriani and Byron Castillo forcing Flamengo keeper Diego Alves to save twice during a frenetic opening. But thereafter it was all Flamengo, and the Rio club took the lead on 21 minutes when Gabriel's perfectly flighted cross was met by Henrique, directing his header across goal and into the net. Barcelona midfielder Nixon Molina let his frustration get the better of him straight from the restart, earning a booking for taking out goalscorer Henrique.

Henrique should have had a second on 34 minutes, ghosting into the area to meet Gabriel's cross only to hit the bar with a header. Andreas Pereira, on loan from English giants Manchester United, also hit the woodwork soon afterwards with a dipping long range shot on 37 minutes. But a minute later, Flamengo's second goal duly arrived after a clinical counterattack from the hosts. —AFP

Milan join leaders Inter, Juve get first win of season

MILAN: AC Milan moved level with Serie A leaders Inter Milan on Wednesday thanks to a Theo Hernandez-inspired 2-0 win over Venezia, while Juventus won their first match of the season at the fifth attempt, 3-2 at Spezia. France international Hernandez laid on Brahim Diaz's opener and scored the other at the San Siro to move second-placed Milan onto 13 points alongside city rivals Inter, in a win which maintains an unbeaten record so far this season for Stefano Pioli's side.

Diaz opened up a stubborn Venezia side when he forced home Hernandez's volleyed cross in the 67th minute in a match in which up to that point the Rossoneri had been restricted to a handful of chances. Hernandez then sealed the three points with eight minutes remaining when he collected the ball following superb play from fellow substitute Alexis Saelemaekers and lashed in his first goal of the campaign.

Milan are a point ahead of Napoli who travel to Sampdoria looking to maintain their 100 percent record, while Atalanta and Roma lurk behind in fourth and fifth respectively. "We knew that Venezia were a difficult team to play against... We need to win all of these sorts of matches and now we need to win tomorrow (at Spezia) as well," said Hernandez to DAZN. "Our goal needs to be to win the title, and that's what we need to aim for."

Way back in 13th are Juventus, the 36-time Italian champions some eight points behind their Milan rivals following a hard-fought win at Spezia which at one point was looking like an embarrassing defeat. Emmanuel Gyasi and Janis Antiste put Spezia ahead shortly after the break with two deflected strikes following Moise Kean's 28th-minute opener, the Italian's first goal for Juventus since returning from Everton. However substitute Federico Chiesa levelled midway through the second half with his first league goal of the season and in the 72nd minute Matthijs de Ligt struck the winner when the ball



MILAN: Unione Venezia's Slovenian midfielder Domen Crnigoj (center) tackles AC Milan's French defender Theo Hernandez (right) at the San Siro stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

fell kindly to him from a Paulo Dybala corner. It was a far from convincing performance though and Spezia could have levelled late on, with Wojciech Szczesny at his best to push away Giulio Maggiore's volley with five minutes remaining. "It was a difficult match, in the first half we played well but they managed to fight back," said De Ligt, who has fallen down the pecking order and was only playing because Giorgio Chiellini wasn't fit. "We're in a period where everything that can go wrong does. Both of their goals came from deflections, let's hope we can have some luck in the future."

Juve have now conceded at least one goal in 19 consecutive league matches, a trend that needs to change with Chelsea visiting Turin in a week's time. Salernitana earned their first point of the season when they came back from two goals down to draw 2-2 at home with 15th-placed Verona. Nikola Kalinic put the away side ahead with a deft first-half brace but Cedric Gondo pulled one back just before half-time when the ball dropped to him following Franck Ribery's free-kick. —AFP

Sports

Man Utd crash out of League Cup, Spurs, Chelsea advance

LONDON: Manchester United crashed out of the League Cup as West Ham avenged their painful loss to Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side with a 1-0 win at Old Trafford, while Chelsea and Tottenham survived penalty shoot-outs to reach the fourth round on Wednesday. The Hammers suffered a gut-wrenching 2-1 defeat against United in the Premier League on Sunday when David De Gea saved Mark Noble's stoppage-time penalty after Jesse Lingard's late winner.

But David Moyes' men got a measure of revenge three days later as Manuel Lanzini's first half goal dumped United out in the third round. Solskjaer made 11 changes and Moyes opted for 10 alterations, with West Ham's understudies making the most of their moment in the spotlight. Ryan Fredericks ghosted past Alex Telles and cut back for Lanzini to sweep past United goalkeeper Dean Henderson in the ninth minute.

That was enough for Moyes to secure a first win over United since they sacked the Scot after less than a season in charge in 2014. It was also West Ham's first victory at Old Trafford since 2007, earning them a home tie against holders Manchester City in the last 16. Solskjaer criticized his team's tentative opening, saying: "A slow start again and that needs addressing. 'I've never actually won this tournament, so that hunt will keep going. But we have to make the decisions to have the squad up to speed for the rest of the season. Sometimes you have to take risks.'"

At Stamford Bridge, Chelsea won 4-3 on

penalties after a 1-1 draw against Aston Villa. Much-maligned German forward Timo Werner headed Chelsea into the lead in the 54th minute, finishing off Reece James' cross for his first goal in 11 games. With Villa fan Prince William watching from the stands, 19-year-old striker Cameron Archer equalised in the 64th minute with a close-range header from Matty Cash's cross. James scored Chelsea's winning penalty in the shoot-out after Ashley Young and Marvelous Nakamba missed for Villa.

Kane back on track

Harry Kane ended his goal drought as Tottenham boss Nuno Espirito Santo knocked out his former club Wolves 3-2 on penalties after a 2-2 draw at Molineux. Tanguy Ndombele gave Tottenham a 14th-minute lead when he charged down Conor Coady's clearance and shot past John Ruddy. Kane, without a goal in his four previous games, increased Tottenham's advantage after 23 minutes. Dele Alli's perfect pass sent Kane clear and the England captain found the bottom corner. Leander Dendoncker pulled one back for Wolves seven minutes before the break when he headed in Rayan Ait-Nouri's corner. Daniel Podence levelled 13 minutes into the second half from Dendoncker's pass. In the shootout, Dendoncker, Ruben Neves and Coady all missed for Wolves. "He has much more to give and it's about the game, improving and growing together," Nuno said of Kane.



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Ivorian defender Eric Bailly (left) reacts to a challenge from West Ham United's English midfielder Mark Noble during the English League Cup third round football match at Old Trafford on Wednesday. — AFP

Arsenal eased to a 3-0 win against third tier AFC Wimbledon at the Emirates Stadium, setting up a last 16 clash with Leeds. The Gunners, featuring 10 changes from the weekend win at Burnley, went ahead in the 11th minute. Gabriel

Martinelli was fouled by Nesta Guinness-Walker and Alexandre Lacazette slotted home the penalty. Emile Smith-Rowe doubled the lead in the 77th minute and Eddie Nketiah's impudent flick wrapped up the win three minutes later. — AFP

Asensio bags hat-trick as Real Madrid hit Mallorca for six

MADRID: Marco Asensio scored his first hat-trick for Real Madrid on Wednesday against Mallorca, his boyhood club, as Madrid cruised to a 6-1 win to go top of La Liga. Karim Benzema capitalised on an early Mallorca mistake at the Santiago Bernabeu before three goals in five minutes put Madrid 3-1 ahead, two Asensio strikes coming either side of a curling effort from Mallorca's Lee Kang-in.

Asensio completed his treble with a bending shot of his own in the second half and went off to a standing ovation, leaving Benzema to add his second and Isco to tap in Madrid's sixth late on. Benzema's second goal was his 200th in La Liga, making him only the 10th player to reach the milestone. "Clearly Karim is playing very well," said Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti. "Not just himself but for the team. He is a complete striker."

Victory lifts Real Madrid two points clear of Atletico at the top of La Liga, with Sevilla up to third after they had earlier eased past Valencia 3-1. Asensio was born in Palma and began playing for Mallorca aged 10, only to join Real Madrid in 2016. He declined to celebrate any of his three goals but will have made an impression on Ancelotti, who was giving the 25-year-old his first start of the season. "Asensio did very well. It is true that from that position he can hurt the opponent, between the lines he has a lot of quality," Ancelotti said.

Benzema now has eight goals this term and there were noteworthy displays too from Eduardo Camavinga, the hugely exciting 18-year-old midfielder, as well as Madrid's two central defenders,



MADRID: Real Madrid's Spanish midfielder Marco Asensio scores his team's third goal against Real Mallorca at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium on Wednesday. — AFP

David Alaba and Eder Militao, whose distribution was instrumental in almost all the goals. Despite scoring two late goals to beat Valencia on Sunday, Ancelotti criticised his team for again being too open at the back. Mallorca had chances but they were blown away by Madrid's revitalised attack.

The first goal, though, was a gift, as Josep Gaya failed to control a routine pass across the defense and then slipped trying to recover, allowing Benzema to race clear and finish. Militao instigated the second with a driven pass out to Vinicius, whose angled pass sent Rodrygo in behind. His deflected cross was prodded out by Mallorca goalkeeper Manolo Reina, for Asensio to finish. Lee hit back almost immediately, weaving past Militao and Alaba and curving a shot into the bottom corner. But hope of a comeback was brief, as Asensio scored his second, latching onto a slick Benzema touch before sliding home. — AFP

Lewandowski drops hint on his future

BERLIN: Robert Lewandowski has hinted he could finish his career at Bayern Munich as the Bundesliga leaders prepare for today's away match at bottom side Greuther Fuerth. Lewandowski won Europe's "Golden Shoe" on Tuesday as top scorer in European football after he scored a Bundesliga record 41 goals in 29 games last season. The Poland forward is already the German league's joint top-scorer this season alongside Dortmund star striker Erling Braut Haaland with seven goals in five league games.

The 33-year-old Lewandowski has a Bayern contract until June 2023 and despite having often been linked to a move to Real Madrid in the past, he told reporters that he "doesn't need to prove myself in another league". "I can compete with the best from other leagues in the Champions League. I'm 100 percent focused on Bayern Munich - I don't think about anything else, but my team," he added.

Lewandowski caused a stir when he brought his newly-won Golden Shoe award to training on Wednesday and his Bayern teammates queued up for photos with the trophy. The Bavarian giants grabbed top spot in the Bundesliga last weekend with a 7-0 demolition of Bochum. Bayern have chalked up 38 goals in their first eight games this season in all competitions and more goals are expected at Fuerth on Friday. Since winning promotion last season, Fuerth have taken one point from a home draw against Bielefeld in their first five Bundesliga games. — AFP



Afghanistan women taekwondo fighters feel defeated by Taleban