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— Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat
In the past few days, and after the announcement of the death of Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman, the world expressed condolences and regret for the loss and praised his achievements and hard work for many years for the interest and future of the sultanate. In Kuwait, HH the Amir personally visited Oman for condolences and all business in public and private sectors were shut for a full three days from Saturday to Monday, which means that the state was in a complete mourning, as Kuwait and Oman enjoy historical ties.

Kuwait has been associated with Oman by a strong and solid relationship forged by brotherhood, religion, history, geographical location and social relations between families. The death of the sultan left us all with many lessons to recall and learn from. The first was the amazing transfer of power that took place in astonishing transparency to the new Sultan, Haitham bin Tariq. This issue is a sensitive and delicate matter. But in Oman it was applied with utmost lucidity and calmness without chaos or confusion, and this is something we rarely see in the Arab world.

Another achievement is that Oman has reached the highest global increase in the Corruption Perceptions Index. All efforts were exerted to fight this scourge. I believe this is due to Oman’s concern to create and improve the business environment in support of the national economy and contribute to building national capabilities in the field of enhancing competitiveness, along with measuring and following up the assessment of the sultanate at the national, regional and international levels. In the Arab world, we need such lessons.

The late sultan was the architect of modern Oman, as the media called him. He worked all his life for the good of his people and his country. Therefore, all the people of Oman were in a state of great sadness over the loss of a man who devoted his life for his country and lived up to the principles of the Omani constitution until his death.

The late sultan was the architect of modern Oman.

Preserving the constitution and its principles are important, so upholding it must not be a subject of negotiation or changes to please anyone.

The late sultan was the architect of modern Oman.

What also distinguishes Oman is that there is no room for militancy and extremism that does not lead to good. Oman is a country that is open to all for business, investment, livelihood and tourism. I believe that Oman today is far from the vicissitudes of politics in the Arab world and is outstanding, but this did not come without work and effort. Oman has always enjoyed a flexible policy of dialogue with everyone, and it represents a lesson in real diplomacy that we need.

I am sorry for the demise of Sultan Qaboos bin Said, but I am confident that Oman is in safe hands under its new leader Sultan Haitham bin Tariq.

The sixth GCC heritage exhibition contains relics that reflect the historical depth of member states, Secretary-General of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL), Tahani Al-Adwani said on Wednesday. Speaking to KUNA on the sidelines of opening the event held at Kuwait National Museum, Adwani said the show, which is held on a rotating basis in GCC states, mirrors historical and civilized unity as well as cultural diversity.

NCCAL’s director of the department of antiquities and museums, Sultan Al-Duwaish said in a similar statement to KUNA that the month-long exhibition highlights GCC archeological discoveries made between the Stone Age and the Islamic era. He noted that the Gulf region has a common history and its nations share identical hopes and aspirations.

Meanwhile, historian Farhan Al-Farhan expressed his delight over the show, which is displaying examples of monuments existing in GCC countries and civilization of the Arab nation. The event shows the cohesion and unity of GCC member states, he pointed out. The first edition of the exhibition was hosted by the UAE in 2006, while the following editions were held in Saudi Arabia in 2009, Qatar in 2011, Bahrain in 2013 and Oman in 2015. — KUNA

GCC heritage show reflects historical depth: NCCAL chief

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The Kuwait Aviation Show continues until Saturday. Yesterday, Kuwait Times attended the aviation displays as well as a series of seminars at the event. On the last day further air shows will be presented and students from high schools will attend the event.

The Italian Air Force is one of the participants in this event and the air shows. With 623 aircraft ordered, the Eurofighter Typhoon is considered the most advanced swing-role combat aircraft currently available on the world market and can be deployed in the full spectrum of air operations including air policing and peace support.

Kuwait Times interviewed Test Pilot Major Domenico G. from the Italian Air Force, who was conducting the Eurofighter demo flights during the Kuwait Aviation Show. (Major Domenico’s surname is withheld due to Italian Air Force regulations).

“The Typhoon is able to provide a wide variety of operating capabilities and a great mission effectiveness,” said Major Domenico. “The Swing Role capacity of the aircraft is well established within the Italian Air Force. We are
trained to put it to good use and the aircraft responded aptly in all the operations it took part in. This is proved by the current deployment in Kuwait, under the aegis of operation Inherent Resolve/Prima Parthica, that sanctioned internationally the F-2000's capacity to operate both in the air-to-air and in the air-to-ground role or, more precisely, as a reconnaissance aircraft,” explained the Eurofighter pilot.

“Recent Eurofighter deployments in Kuwait and in NATO air policing operations, in different environments, such as in Romania, Iceland, Bulgaria and Baltic Republics, showed also outstanding operational results out of country,” he said.

“During the training, pilots acquire the qualification on the aircraft in accordance with a newly designed training program, that includes both air defense and air-to-ground missions,” explained Major Domenico. “In the course, we acquire the skills needed to join seamlessly the operational wings and accomplish every kind of mission that the Italian Eurofighter community already performs,” said the Italian Air Force pilot.

Kuwait’s fleet of Eurofighter Typhoons

The first Eurofighter combat aircraft configured for Kuwait made its maiden flight in late December. Instrumented Series Production Aircraft (ISPA 6), equipped with the Kuwait Air Force configuration, departed the Flight Test Centre of Leonardo Aircraft Division in Turin-Caselle on 23 December 2019, Eurofighter tweeted on 9 January.

As noted by Eurofighter, ISPA 6 is the most advanced iteration of the aircraft to date, and while other elements have previously been flight tested, this is the first time that all of the enhancements have been brought together.

ISPA 6 is the first to fly the Captor E-Scan Radar with Phase Enhancement 3 b (P3Eb), for which Kuwait is to be the launch customer. Other enhancements for Kuwait include the Lockheed Martin Sniper advanced targeting pod, the introduction of the BRS-Cubic, ACMPS5 combat training pod and an enhanced Very High Frequency (VHF) Omni-Directional Range (VOR) navigation aid. The Kuwait Air Force will also have the option to employ the MBDA Storm Shadow cruise missile, MBDA Meteor beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile, and the MBDA Brimstone low-yield air-to-surface missile.

In 2018, Kuwait inked an $8.7 billion contract to purchase 28 Eurofighter Typhoons from Finmeccanica, the Italian defense company. Kuwait will receive 22 single-seat and six twin-seat aircraft. Saudi Arabia and Oman have also bought Eurofighters. Kuwaiti pilots are also training in Italy in preparation and took part in maneuvers in Oman and Egypt. The Kuwait contract includes the building of infrastructure at Al-Salem airbase, training services for pilots and initial support services for three years, according to AINonline.
How to get married ‘by malaach’ in Kuwait

By Nawara Fattahova

It is possible for couples in Kuwait to officially get married and register the marriage contract by a “malaach” or “maathoun” in their homes. This service is available for Muslims of all nationalities. Kuwait Times spoke to Dr Davood Binessa, Professor of Islamic Law and Comparative Jurisprudence, who has been working as a malaach since 2003. Some excerpts:

Kuwait Times: Why did you choose this job?

Dr Davood Binessa: It’s a voluntary job under the supervision of the ministry of justice. This work is without pay, but it is a prestigious job and builds relations. The benefits of this work depend on the way of dealing with people.

The malaach does not get paid by the ministry for his work, nor is he allowed to demand any fees or charges from people using his services. But since the malaach goes to their homes, which takes time and effort, people take this into consideration and give him gifts or cash. In fact the malaach is not obliged to go to their place, as the rule is that they come to him. So when he does this favor, they usually give him something.

KT: How many marriages can a malaach register per day, week or month?

Binessa: This depends on his personality, performance and dealings with people. Some malaaches have relations with many people, so they are in demand. Other malaaches strictly respect their appointments, and have other qualities such as speaking English well. I do. Also, people shoot pictures and videos that are then circulated on social media, so people get to know me or other malaaches.

I have made a video for newly-married couples with 10 pieces of advice for them, and I send them a link to this video. This also helps more people learn about me. I also hand out my business cards.

KT: Can expats get married in this way in their homes?

Binessa: Yes. They should visit the document department at the ministry of justice with their original ID cards and fill an application for the permission of holding a marriage by a malaach outside the department (at their house for instance). So the malaach goes to their house and registers the marriage. They then take the marriage contract to the court for attestation, exactly like Kuwaitis.

KT: How many copies of the marriage certificate are given?

Binessa: The malaach makes three copies of the contract, including the serial number, for which he is responsible. One copy stays with the malaach, one with the husband and one with the wife. The couple will attest their copies at the ministry, and I as the malaach will pass my copy to the ministry to keep it in their register. In case they lose their contract, they can find it at the court in the file of the malaach and get a replacement copy.

KT: What are the conditions to become a malaach?

Binessa: He should be a university graduate, usually in sharia. Presently, only a Kuwaiti can become a malaach, but there are around five non-Kuwaitis who still have the license from a long time ago before this rule. They are old - all are above 60 years I guess - as this rule was applied around 20 years back.

KT: How many malaaches are there in Kuwait? Is there a shortage?

Binessa: There are over 150 malaaches. With each new area built, a new malaach is appointed to it. The number differs in each area. For instance in Yarmouk, there is only one malaach, while in Jahra, there are about six or seven. The shortage depends on the performance of the malaach. So if all work properly, their number will be enough. We can say there is a shortage if all malaaches are busy.

KT: Are there high seasons for marriages?

Binessa: Marriages don’t stop - people get married throughout the year. One day during the holy month of Ramadan marriages almost stop. This is the low season. There are some periods when the rate of marriages is higher, such as the beginning or end of the month, as this is the time of salaries, while it is lower during the middle of the month. Also, the period of final exams of high schools is a low season as families are busy with the exams.

Then there is a trend - not only in Kuwait but around the world in general - choosing a special date for marriage. For instance, 1/1 is the most demanded, while 20/2/2020 is also in high demand. Valentine’s Day is also much demanded. Once I heard on TV that the most people who got married on 7/7/2007 were in Russia. Also, some people like to get married on their birthday. The highest number of marriages that I experienced was on 12/12/2012.

KT: What is the most interesting thing that happened to you?

Binessa: Once I was disappointed when a groom called me to register his marriage, but shortly after I arrived and after people already saw me, the groom apologized for not using my services as his father had already brought his friend, who is a malaach. Also, once I went to a faraway area and the weather was very cold, but the marriage was not completed as the father of the bride set presenting the exams. The weather was very cold, but the marriage was not completed as the father of the bride set presenting the exams. Then I went to a faraway area and the weather was very cold, but the marriage was not completed as the father of the bride set presenting the exams. Then I went to a faraway area and the weather was very cold, but the marriage was not completed as the father of the bride set presenting the exams.
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Industrial activities are vital to keep pace with the times

Roudhan: Govt keen to support factories by rewarding them

KUWAIT: Minister of Commerce and Industry Khaled Al-Roudhan yesterday affirmed the need to develop new industrial activities to keep pace with the times and establish Kuwaiti industry that can compete in regional and international markets. “We have confidence in the ability of Kuwaitis to succeed and achieve leadership,” Roudhan said in his speech during the fifth edition of the HH the Amir Award for Outstanding Factories. He explained that numerous factories took the initiative to develop their products and adhere to quality standards in various aspects of the industry, which gave consumer confidence and security for the export of their products and increase their competitiveness in global markets.

The government is keen to support national industrial establishments by rewarding them for their achievements, he added. In addition, Roudhan expressed his goal to increase the participation of the industrial sector in the local economy. The new industrial revolution requires a comprehensive development of all sectors to keep pace with the global stakes in investment in new industries based on knowledge, innovation and sustainability, he pointed out.

Roudhan expressed his appreciation to HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for his continuous support to the national industry and his patronage of this award. The award is important nationwide in a framework of objective competition and its role in highlighting improvement in the performance of industrial companies by raising their production efficiency and providing job opportunities for national labor, he added.

Roudhan stated that the award is looking to achieve two main goals - the first is to spread the culture of institutional excellence in the industrial sector in Kuwait, while the other goal urges lagging factories to win the award to improve their performance by highlighting their weaknesses. HH the Amir Award for Outstanding Factories was launched in 2002 and achieved success during its past four editions, he noted. —KUNA

KFAED Vietnam project serves 3m people

HANOI: The Van Dinh waterlogging control project executed by Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) serves about three million people in Vietnam’s capital Hanoi, said project deputy manager Doug Tring. The project, launched in 1987, protects farming lands against natural disasters and provides clean drinking water to the residents, Tring told KUNA in a statement yesterday during a visit by outstanding Kuwaiti students to the project site, organized by KFAED in cooperation with the ministry of education.

The project worth KD four million ($13 million) contributes to the production of about five million cubic meters of gallons per day, covering 28,000 hectares of land in Hanoi, he noted. He thanked Kuwait and KFAED for the efforts to develop life in Vietnam and improve the country’s economy.

Meanwhile, the students said they were proud of Kuwait’s efforts to aid other countries in need and the fund’s prominent role in executing development projects around the world. KFAED is funding several agricultural, health and electricity development ventures in Vietnam. The fund has provided about 15 loans worth KD 54 million ($178 million) to the country. —KUNA

Tunisia commends Kuwait’s efforts during UNSC tenure

NEW YORK: Tunisian Ambassador to the UN Muncef Baati commended Kuwait’s efforts during its non-permanent Security Council’s membership and its staunch support of Arab causes, foremost the Palestinian question. Baati, during a reception to honor Kuwait’s permanent representative to the UN Mansour Al-Otaibi and members of the Kuwait mission, said Kuwait’s humanitarian diplomacy and its policies contributed to improving work of the UNSC to be more effective and transparent.

Kuwait was a non-permanent UNSC member in 2018-19. Otaibi said Kuwait believed its support to the Arab causes throughout its UNSC membership was a duty towards its Arab brothers. He hoped Arab causes will witness a breakthrough during Tunisia’s 2020-21 UNSC membership. —KUNA
Kuwaiti air force played heroic role

KUWAIT: Kuwait will mark the 29th anniversary of the first air strikes of operation “Desert Storm” launched by international coalition forces to liberate Kuwait from the Iraqi invasion today. Then US President George Bush made the decision to start the military operation on Jan 15, 1991, after a meeting with his senior national security advisers concluded that implementation of the operation should take place after the failure of all diplomatic means to persuade Iraq to withdraw troops.

In the morning of Jan 17, 1991 after the end of the ultimatum set by the UN Security Council, air raids were launched, with the participation of 1,800 warplanes from the US, UK, Saudi and Kuwait. The fighter jets took off from the Red Sea and Incirlik air base in Turkey, and other air bases in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. On the first day, the raids lasted 240 intermittent minutes, in which 400 warplanes participated. The coalition jets conducted 1,200 operations, including 302 by Saudi and Kuwaiti aircraft, destroying almost half of the Iraqi airpower.

Various types of warplanes participated in this operation, under the guidance of AWACS aircraft. The US aircraft carriers fired 100 Tomahawk missiles against Iraqi targets in Iraq and Kuwait. Jaguar warplanes participated in a major role in directing the attacking planes and jamming the counter devices and radars. F-117A warplanes had a primary role in the first strike to destroy and bomb targets in Baghdad, and Iraqi air defense could not shoot down any of them. The Kuwaiti air force played a heroic role in the war of liberation, striking targets inside Kuwait in order to preserve Kuwaiti properties, in addition to striking airports and Iraqi artillery positions and enemy gatherings. The coalition countries contributed $53 billion for these military operations, with Germany accounting for $6.572 billion, Japan $8.72 billion, South Korea $3.55 million, Kuwait $16 billion, Saudi Arabia $16.839 billion, UAE $4.88 billion and other countries $30 million.

More than 750,000 soldiers participated, including 500,000 Americans representing ground forces, marines, and air force. 50,000 Britons, and 13,000 French, in addition to some 200,000 troops who made up Arab units that joined the coalition. On Feb 24, coalition forces entered at dawn into Kuwaiti and Iraqi territories. The ground forces were divided into three main groups: The first went to liberate Kuwait City, the second to surround the wing of the Iraqi army west of Kuwait, while the third group was tasked with moving in the far west and entering the south of Iraqi territory to cut off all supplies to the army. On Feb 26, 1991, the Iraqi army withdrew from Kuwait after setting fire to Kuwait’s oilfields. President Bush announced on Feb 27 the liberation of Kuwait, 100 hours after the launch of the ground operations, saying his famous phrase “Kuwait today is free”. — KUNA

First air strikes of operation “Desert Storm”—KUNA

Apartment buildings: Option for rising demand for housing

KUWAIT: Living in spacious apartment buildings has been touted as a viable option for Kuwaiti citizens as the demand for housing continues to grow. While the option is virtually available for all citizens within the boundaries of an apartment, the decision is still governed by personal preferences as well as social status and financial capabilities. The 1993-established Public Authority for Housing Welfare (PAHW) is encouraging citizens to live in apartment buildings by displaying the many perks of a spacious apartment with facilities and services catering to the needs of each Kuwaiti family. Recently, PAHW – which implements government housing policies – prioritized requests for apartments in Jaber Al-Ahmad City within the 2019-20 budget and this included requests submitted until Dec 31 of last year. Requests for government apartments are on the rise, said PAHW spokesman Ibrahim Al-Nashiy in a statement to KUNA. He added that requests for apartments were increasing, especially in Jaber Al-Ahmad City and northwest Sabahdhat. For example, be indicated that in Jaber Al-Ahmad, there are 521 apartments, while around 610 citizens submitted housing requests.

The cost of a 400-sq-m apartment varies between KD 60,000 and 70,000 (about $189,000 and $230,000), with citizens paying back the government in monthly installments of KD 60 ($186), said Nashiy. As PAHW is trying to sell the idea of spacious apartment buildings to citizens, reactions vary amongst Kuwaitis, with some preferring to wait their turn for a government house while others are seriously contemplating the idea.

Head of the youth voluntary team for housing projects quality Khaled Al-Otaibi claimed that Kuwaitis are not too eager to live in apartment buildings, citing the 1980s’ Sawaber apartment project as an example of failure to gain social acceptance. Privacy is a major obstacle to overcome with apartment buildings, said Otaibi, adding this would be the main concern for those trying to sell the solution to the masses.

Ahmad Al-Enezi seconded Otaibi, saying apartments are a fixed deal with no room for improvements construction-wise if residents decided that in the future. Most citizens have increasing needs, whether it is welcoming newborns or trying to expand the space for the sake of expanding, and apartments lack that no matter how good the idea is, he added. Enezi said that with the lack of outdoor spaces and probably noise from neighbors, he failed to see the advantages of apartment buildings.

Enezi’s thoughts are also shared by Bader Al-Nasser, who indicated that most citizens would rather wait for housing or land allocated by the government than live in an apartment building. The only way Nasser saw apartment buildings being successful is that if the government made such structures closer to the center of the city and residential areas and more private for families.

In contrast, Sumayya Al-Ati said apartment buildings are interesting for those unwilling to wait for years to acquire a house, noting that reasonable installment rates paid back to the government and short waiting period are better than high rents in private apartments. Al-Ati added that apartment buildings are adequate to her familial needs at the moment, saying that she did not rule out the possibility of taking this option. Hashem Al-Mano, also an advocate of apartment buildings, affirmed that the solution was realistic for citizens, saying that units cater to the specific needs of five to six individuals within a family. He also noted that each apartment was built to address the private needs for each family, adding that the idea itself was successful in his eyes. — KUNA

Unstable weather forecast

KUWAIT: Meteorologist Abdellaziz Al-Qarawi said the country will experience unstable weather and strong winds with a chance of thundershowers. Qarawi expected today’s weather to be moderate and partially cloudy with south-easterly winds, while temperature will be between 21 to 23 degree Celsius. He said today evening will be cool and cloudy with a chance of scattered rains and a minimum temperature of 12-14 degree C. — A Saleh

Nafisi receives death threat

KUWAIT: Lawyer Adel Abdelbadi said political analyst and writer Abdullah Al-Nafisi has received a death threat, “I received a warning about an assassination attempt against my client Dr. Abdullah Al-Nafisi by placing an explosive device in his car. The threat came in a message posted on the Al-Qabas website of the company that produced the ‘Black Box’ program,” he said. Abdelbadi said this matter will not be taken lightly, especially since his client had received earlier threats, but this time it was directly against his life. Nafisi is accused of slandering certain people while talking about the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait during an episode of the ‘Black Box’ show. — Hanan Al-Saadoon

Cafe shisha ban rejected

KUWAIT: State Minister for Municipal Affairs Waleed Al-Jubair rejected a Municipal Council decision to approve a proposal by councilmember Ahmad Al-Hadyan to separate restaurant licensing from that of cafes and ban shisha in cafes. — Mosaall Al-Enezi

Maj Gen Khaled Al-Sabah promoted

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti army yesterday announced promoting Maj Gen Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah as deputy chairperson of the army chairmanship of staff with the rank of Lieutenant General. The army said in a statement that Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah congratulated the lieutenant general on the occasion for the confidence accorded to him by HH the Amir. — KUNA
Qatar eases restrictions on workers’ exit

DUBAI: Qatar said yesterday it had scrapped restrictions on leaving the country for nearly all migrant workers as part of reforms answering accusations of exploitation especially in the run-up to the 2022 World Cup.

The measure removes exit visas for hundreds of thousands of domestic workers left out of earlier reforms - mainly from Asian nations like Nepal, India and the Philippines - whom rights groups said were left open to abuse by being excluded.

Unions and activists have documented labour exploitation, dangerous conditions and deaths of workers building stadiums and infrastructure for both the 2018 World Cup in Russia and the upcoming event in Qatar.

Under the new system, exit permit requirements will remain in place for members of the armed forces and for a limited number of workers in key company posts. “Employers have the right to identify a maximum of 5% of their workforce whose exit from Qatar will continue to require prior approval,” a government statement said.

A “kafala” sponsorship system for workers is common in Gulf states with large foreign communities. In gas-rich Qatar, it requires workers to obtain employers’ consent before changing jobs, which activists say fosters exploitation.

Qatar in 2018 eliminated exit visas for many foreign migrant workers. But the reform did not apply to domestic workers, government and public institution staff, the oil and gas sector, and workers employed at sea and in agriculture.

While exiled activists have routinely predicted the fall of the regime, Pahlavi said that Iranians could “smell the opportunity for the first time in 40 years this time.” The 59-year-old heir to the Peacock Throne, who has not been to Iran since he was a teenager, cited as evidence what he called an easing of fear among protesters and the growing distancing of self-described reformists from the Islamic regime.

In an address to the Hudson Institute, Pahlavi largely supported President Donald Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign that has sought to isolate the Iranian regime through severe sanctions, saying that past negotiations have failed.

“It has long been time to recognize that this is not a normal regime and that it will not change its behavior,” Pahlavi said. “My compatriots understand that this regime cannot be reformed and must be removed.”

Iranians “expect the world to show more than just moral support. They expect not to be thrown under the bus in the name of diplomacy and negotiation.” — AFP
Seeking peace in Libya and Iran, past inaction haunts EU diplomacy

CAIRO/BRUSSELS: After war broke out again in Libya early last year, a special team of EU diplomats in Tripoli was forced back to neighbouring Tunisia to do what they had been doing for several years before.

As Germany holds a UN summit on Sunday for a path to end the conflict in Libya, in turmoil since the 2011 fall of Muammar Gaddafi, European powers believe they can now begin to overcome such inaction and defend interests on their southern doorstep.

But like the bored EU experts tasked with supporting Libyan ministry officers at their temporary mission offices in Tunis over the past five years, EU diplomacy has often arrived too late to make an impact and, in Iran, been left exposed by US President Donald Trump’s “America First” policy. “We Europeans, since we don’t want to participate in a military solution, we barricade ourselves in the belief there is no military solution,” the EU’s new foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told the European Parliament this week.

“Nobody will be very happy if, on the Libyan coast, there is a ring of military bases from the Russian and Turkish navies in front of the Italian coast,” he said.

The economically powerful EU, once able to boast of a soft power that helped transform communist neighbours into thriving market economies, first sent a mission to Libya to train border guards in 2013 but was reduced to running all its training outside of Libya from 2015, returning briefly in 2017 and 2019.

With Libya’s migration routes close to European shores and its energy supplies in the Mediterranean sought by Turkey, policy towards a country that was an EU priority has instead become a symbol of its divisions.

Former colonial power Italy has supported the Tripoli-based, UN-backed government of Fayez al-Serraj, while France favoured Khalifa Haftar, commander of the eastern Libyan National Army.

Paris and Rome held rival peace conferences, while Russia and Turkey, two countries sometimes at odds with the EU’s values of democracy and human rights, sidelined the bloc. First talks on a ceasefire last week took place in Moscow, not Brussels.

Washington, Europe’s closed ally, has been largely absent, a far cry from 2011 when the United States and Europe cooperated under NATO in a bombing campaign that backed the rebels who overthrew Gaddafi.

“In the Middle East and North Africa, the EU never had a clear idea of what its objectives are, so it could not be proactive, only reactive. We have let many opportunities pass,” said Sven Biscop, an analyst at Belgium’s Egmont Institute.

The EU, facing a crisis in Iran over the unravelling of the 2015 nuclear deal, now senses an opportunity in Libya after Moscow failed to reach a ceasefire deal with Haftar.

Shock over the fallout from U.S. drone strike on an Iranian general on Jan. 3 has galvanized Europeans over Libya, some EU envoys say, settling on a new “European approach”.

Britain, France and Germany already this week showed a new determination to pressure Tehran to comply with the Iranian accord, triggering a dispute mechanism that could lead to the re-imposition of U.S. sanctions.

However, with Sunday’s conference on Libya approaching, Italy and France have yet to put aside their differences and rally behind the government in Tripoli.

Germany, which sees itself as more neutral than France and Italy, has sought to take the lead, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel investing time in seeking the support with her from Russia, Turkish and Egyptian counterparts.

The EU’s new leadership in Brussels also wants to be more “geopolitical” and stem the waning of Europe’s influence. It launched into a flurry of diplomacy in early January amid fears of a Middle East conflagration after the U.S. drone strike in Iran.

Top EU officials held talks with Serraj in Brussels, called an emergency meeting of EU foreign ministers, held calls with Iran’s president and joined French President Emmanuel Macron at a conference on the Sahel.

“We are not trying to have an aggressive external policy... but the heads of state need a new mindset to be more assertive,” said a senior EU official involved in foreign policy.
Lebanon anti-bank protests rock Beirut for second night

BEIRUT: Protesters in crisis-hit Lebanon clashed with security forces in Beirut, a day after demonstrators outraged by restrictions on dollar withdrawals attacked bank branches with metal rods, fire extinguishers and rocks.

Hundreds gathered again outside the central bank on Wednesday evening, moving to a police station where more than 100 people were still detained following clashes between demonstrators and security forces the previous night.

They chanted slogans and demanded the release of their comrades before security forces fired tear gas to disperse them. Four months into a protest movement against Lebanon’s political class, demonstrators have turned their anger at the banks, most of which have imposed informal capital controls to stave off a liquidity crunch.

That has trapped the savings of ordinary depositors in Lebanon’s worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war. Protester Yumna Mroute, 22, said the central bank’s financial policies had been harming small savers for years.

“We’re in free-fall now. What happened last night comes from people’s real pain and anger,” she said.

‘A lot of anger’

After a long day of protests and clashes, security forces released 10 people out of more than 50 who were detained Tuesday night, according to local media and activists.

The Red Cross said a total of 47 people were injured Wednesday night, 37 of whom were taken to nearby hospitals. The ten others were treated on the spot.

A lawyer in the place told local media that 17 protesters were also arrested during Wednesday’s clashes, the latest since Lebanon’s anti-govern ment protests demanding sweeping reforms began on October 17.

On Wednesday morning in Hamra, most bank branches were left with smashed windows, destroyed ATMs and graffiti-daubed walls after violent protest the previous night.

Banks opened despite the wreckage, as cleaners scrubbed paint off walls and workers replaced smashed windows.

‘There is a lot of anger,’ Alia, a passerby, told AFP in front of a damaged branch. ‘You have to go to the bank twice to withdraw just $200.”

Depositors ‘held hostage’

On Wednesday evening, hundreds of demonstrators gathered in front of the central bank, whose governor Riad Salameh they partly blame for the country’s financial crisis.

Security forces meanwhile imposed tight movement restrictions in Hamra, closing the main road to the central bank. The state-run National News Agency reported that some teargas canisters had fallen inside the Russian embassy, near the police station housing the detainees.

Activists said several people including at least one video journalist had been injured in the clashes. Since September, banks have limited the number of dollars customers can withdraw or transfer abroad, in a country where the greenback and the Lebanese pound are used interchangeably.

Although no formal policy is in place, most lenders have limited withdrawals to about $1,000 a month, while others have imposed tighter curbs. Promoted by a grinding liquidity crisis, the controls are increasingly forcing depositors to deal in the pound.

But the local currency has plunged by over a third against the dollar on the parallel market, hitting almost 2,500 against the US dollar over the past week. The official rate was pegged at 1,507 Lebanese pounds to the greenback in 1997.

Demonstrators accuse banks of holding their deposits hostage, allowing politicians, senior civil servants and bank owners to transfer funds abroad. The central bank has announced it is investigating capital flight, saying it wants to standardize and regulate the ad hoc banking restrictions.

In a draft deal, Ethiopia agreed that it will fill the dam — set to be Africa’s largest hydroelectric project — only in the wet season from July to August, or also in September if conditions are right.

Ethiopia will aim rapidly to reach the level of 595 meters (1,952 feet) above sea level, with later filling to be determined based on the conditions of the river.

The filling “will be executed in stages and will be undertaken in an adaptive and cooperative manner that takes into consideration the hydrological conditions of the Blue Nile and the potential impact of the filling on downstream reservoirs,” said the statement released by the United States.

The three foreign ministers “reaffirmed the importance of transboundary cooperation in the development of the Blue Nile and to improve the lives of the people of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan, and their shared commitment to concluding an agreement,” it said.

The draft deal also calls for special mitigation measures for Egypt and Sudan on years that they are especially dry.

In early negotiations, Ethiopia had said it would fill the dam’s reservoir in three years while Egypt wanted the process drawn out over 15 years.

Appeals for mediation

Ethiopia says the $4.2 billion hydroelectric barrage would double its electricity and be indispensable for a growing economy. It is expected to begin generating power by the end of 2020 and be fully operational by 2022.

But Egypt fears disruption in the river that provides 90 percent of its drinking water. Discussions between the three countries broke down, prompting Egypt to call for international mediation.

The US Treasury Department agreed to broker talks after Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi made a pitch to President Donald Trump, his close ally, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his democratic reforms, promised Sunday to take into consideration the other Nile nations’ concerns.

“Ethiopia always believes in a win-win approach with Egypt and Sudan,” Abiy said on a visit to South Africa, adding that peace was essential to “realize our vision of development and growth.” Abiy also invited South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa, the incoming chairperson of the African Union, to help push forward negotiations on the dam. The International Crisis Group, in a report last year, urged the three nations not to see the dam dispute as an “existential conflict” but as a way to improve resource-sharing.

“Waiting until the dam is operational — when its impact on downstream countries is clearer — would raise the risk of violent conflict,” it warned. — AFP

Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan make progress in dam row

WASHINGTON: Ethiopia made progress with Egypt and Sudan in US-brokered talks in casing concerns over a hotly contested mega-dam on the Nile, with a tentative agreement to fill it only during the rainy season.

The three countries had set a deadline of Wednesday to reach an accord over the Grand Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia, which Egypt fears could deplete its scarce drinking water.

After three days of talks in Washington, the countries’ foreign ministers “noted the progress achieved,” a joint statement said.

They stopped short of announcing a resolution, saying the three countries would meet again in the US capital on January 28-29 to finalize an agreement.

Analysis has feared that the three Nile basin countries could be drawn into a conflict if the dispute is not resolved before the colossal 1.8-kilometer-long dam, under construction since 2011, begins operating.
Putin’s new PM promises ‘real changes’ for Russians

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin’s new prime minister promised “real changes” yesterday as he won the backing of lawmakers after the Kremlin announced sweeping reform plans.

“People should already now be feeling real changes for the better,” Mishustin said. The naming of a new premier was one in a series of bombshell announcements that rocked Russia on Wednesday, when Putin said constitutional reform would change the country’s balance of power and his long-time prime minister Dmitry Medvedev resigned along with the cabinet.

Putin’s current term as president ends in 2024 and observers say the move is likely to be a bid by the 65-year-old leader to remove any constraints from Putin’s reform drive. Independent political analyst Maria Lipman said the announcements indicated that Putin wanted to “stay on as number one in the country, without any competitors”. She said he could be deliberately weakening the presidency before relinquishing the role. Russia’s opposition also said the proposals indicate Putin’s desire to stay in power. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny said on Twitter that Putin’s only goal was to “remain the sole leader for life”.

Mishustin “a new faceless functionary without ambition” who out any competitors”. She said he could be deliberately weakening the presidency before relinquishing the role. Independent political analyst Maria Lipman said the announcements indicated that Putin wanted to “stay on as number one in the country, without any competitors”. She said he could be deliberately weakening the presidency before relinquishing the role. Russia’s opposition also said the proposals indicate Putin’s desire to stay in power. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny said on Twitter that Putin’s only goal was to “remain the sole leader for life”.

Mishustin will have a week to propose a new government and ministers. The former head of an investment group who trained under Putin, Mishustin will take over a cabinet that was left with the unexpected task of implementing Putin’s new programme.

In his state of the nation speech, Putin said he wanted more reforms and the resignation of the government.

No MPs voted against his candidacy, although Communist lawmakers abstained. Speaking before his approval, Mishustin called on parliament to work with him to urgently enact Putin’s programme.

Yesterday, Putin’s new prime minister Mikhail Mishustin was speaking in parliament. Putin met his newly formed working group for amending the constitution. Putin said the amendments “would have no effect on the foundations of the constitution” but would make authorities “more effective” and ensure Russia’s development.

People already feel that the reforms will offer “real changes” for the better, Putin said.

Mishustin is a 55-year-old former head of an investment group who trained under Putin in the Soviet era. He is a professional who has held high-level positions in the Russian government since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Mishustin, who will be in charge of the portfolios of 11 federal ministers will also have the important role of overseeing state economic policy.

Mishustin joins the group of young, well-qualified officials formed by the 65-year-old leader to prepare for his succession when he decides to step down. The group also includes a number of figures who have been key to Putin’s rise to power.

Mishustin is seen as someone who can move all constraints from Putin’s reform drive. Independent political analyst Maria Lipman said the announcements indicated that Putin wanted to “stay on as number one in the country, without any competitors”. She said he could be deliberately weakening the presidency before relinquishing the role. Russia’s opposition also said the proposals indicate Putin’s desire to stay in power. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny said on Twitter that Putin’s only goal was to “remain the sole leader for life”.

Mishustin has a PhD in economics and has led Russia’s Federal Tax Service since 2010. He shares Putin’s love for hockey and has been a coach for the national team. He also headed a committee to study the country’s economy and has been involved in the development of the country’s nuclear industry.

But yesterday’s deal did not go far enough for protest group Ende Gelaende, which organised many of the “Hamb’s stays” demonstrations. “Exiting coal is not a technical challenge, but a question of political will... 2035 is much too late!” the group tweeted.

Costly exit

Ministers now plan to propose a draft law on the exit from coal “in January” and pass it “in the first half of 2020”. Germany is under pressure to clarify how it plans to accelerate its “energy transition” away from fossil fuels and towards renewables, with a target to generate 65 percent from carbon-neutral sources by 2030.

Over the same period, Berlin aims to reduce output of greenhouse gases by 55 percent compared with 1990s levels — a goal agreed last year under pressure from demonstrators like the worldwide “Fridays for Future” movement.

The dirty fuel currently powers around one-third of the country’s electricity. “We are the first country to make a binding decision to quit nuclear and coal,” environment minister Svenja Schulze said Thursday. “We need a massive build-up of solar and wind energy so that the exit is a real success.”

On top of climate and energy supply challenges, Germany must also wrestle with the social consequences for coal-producing regions of dropping fuel. Much brown coal production in particular is concentrated in economically weak regions in the former communist east and in de-industrialising areas of the west. An “adjustment fund” for workers in black and brown coal plants and brown coal mines is planned to compensate them until 2043, Schulze said. — AFP

Germany looks to step up coal exit timetable

FRANKFURT: Germany could end electricity generation from coal in 2035, three years earlier than planned, under a pact sealed yesterday as Chancellor Angela Merkel’s government faces growing pressure to take climate action.

Merkel and premiers from Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia and Brandenburg agreed overnight a “shutdown plan” for the country’s power plants using the highly polluting fossil fuel, her spokesman Steffen Seibert said in a statement.

Merkel and premiers are under pressure from environmentalists, especially after a climate summit in Glasgow last year. Merkel is seen as a leader with the power to push through change, and has made climate action a priority in her last term as chancellor.

Seibert said. — AFP
WASHINGTON: With tweets of solidarity in Farsi and technological tools to circumvent internet shutdowns, US President Donald Trump might be close to exhausting his options to support Iranian protesters rising up against their rulers. US officials say the administration needs to avoid any overtures that could draw accusations of foreign meddling - like direct financing - and increase the chances of a violent crackdown on the people it wants to support.

The day after protests broke out in Tehran and other cities following Iran's admission on Saturday after days of denials that it shot down a Ukrainian airliner, killing all 176 people aboard, Trump sent a tweet in Farsi aimed at Iran's leaders: "DON'T KILL YOUR PROTESTERS." It was re-tweeted almost 80,000 times. US officials said the intent of Trump's tweet and other voices of support within the administration was to reinforce the message that Washington stands in solidarity with the Iranian people, while helping shine a light on the motivation of the protesters and let the Tehran government know "we are paying attention."

The demonstrators met a fierce police response in several places during four days of protests. In November, a crackdown on protests caused by fuel price hikes killed hundreds of people.

The Ukraine International Airlines flight from Tehran to Kiev was downed by Iranian air defenses when the armed forces were on high alert for US reprisals, hours after Iran launched missiles against US targets in Iraq in retaliation for a US drone strike that killed top Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani.

CARACAS: A member of the Bolivarian militia holds a Venezuelan flag past a mural depicting Venezuelan late President Hugo Chavez during a march in support of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, in Caracas. — AFP

WASHINGTON, DC: Members of Code Pink protest as Former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley testifies before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Tuesday in Washington, DC. Hadley testified before the committee on the topic of From Sanctions to the Soleimani Strike to Escalation: Evaluating the Administration’s Iran Policy. — AFP

WASHINGTON: Nearly 4,500 guns were discovered at US airport security checkpoints in 2019, marking a new record, authorities said Wednesday. The number was a five percent uptick from the previous year and was the highest in the 18-year history of the US Transportation Security Administration (TSA). Of the 4,432 guns, which were found both in carry-on luggage and on passengers themselves, 87 percent were loaded, the TSA said in a statement.

"The continued increase in the number of firearms that travelers bring to airport checkpoints is deeply troubling," said TSA Administrator David Pekoske. The guns were discovered at checkpoints in 278 airports across the nation, with the highest rate occurring in Atlanta (323), Dallas/Fort Worth (217) and Denver (140).

Bringing a weapon to a checkpoint is a crime and can be punished with up to $10,000 in fines. Guns can, however, be transported in checked luggage if the owner follows proper protocol. In July TSA agents in Baltimore sized a missile launcher that its owner, a member of the US military, wanted to bring back as a souvenir from Kuwait. The weapon was not in working order, the agency said. —AFP

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CARACAS: Venezuelan opposition lawmakers had to abandon plans to hold a session at the legislature on Wednesday after claiming to have been shot at by armed groups loyal to President Nicolas Maduro. Groups of armed civilians known as "colectivos" have an infamous reputation in Venezuela where they have been described as pillaging, robbing and intimidating ordinary Iranians, experts say. "His words carry almost no credibility with an Iranian public who saw him just impose more sanctions," said Aaron David Miller, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"So if you ask me if Trump has a public relations strategy when it comes to supporting these protests, the answer is no. It's all driven by his moods, his political needs and his desire to separate himself from his predecessor." While the United States says its sanctions are laser-focused to hurt Iran's leaders, many foreign banks and companies are deterred from doing business with the Islamic Republic, even for supplies of food and medicine, which are exempt from sanctions. Democrats say there is more the White House can do to send a message to the Iranian people, such as lifting the ban on travel by Iranians to the United States. Iran was included in a travel ban imposed by Trump have hastened the economy's deterioration and worsened economic conditions for ordinary Iranians, experts say. "The dictatorship insists yet that Trump is considering doing so. While some analysts believe the United States would not be totally uncomfortable with a regime change, Washington has reason to be wary of overstepping too much. The latest example of foreign diplomats landing in hot water in Iran came last week, when Britain's ambassador to Tehran was briefly detained, accused of attending a protest. — Reuters

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WASHINGTON: Articles of impeachment charging President Donald Trump with abuse of power and obstruction of Congress were formally read to the Senate yesterday, setting in motion a historic trial that threatens the US leader with removal from office.

Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts will then be sworn in to preside over the trial and senators sworn in as jurors, as preparations get underway for an impeachment trial that will open on Tuesday, January 21. Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell said that the articles would be formally read to the chamber at noon (1700 GMT), in an announcement following their delivery to the Senate Wednesday.

"This is a difficult time for our country, but this is precisely the kind of time for which the framers created the Senate," McConnell said, referring to the authors of the US Constitution.

"I'm confident that this body can rise above short-termism and factional fever and serve the long-term best interests of our nation. We can do this, and we must." The two articles of impeachment—one for abuse of power and the other for obstructing the House investigation—were delivered in blue folders in a solemn procession by the newly appointed House managers, seven Democrats who will prosecute the case against the president.

"So said, so tragic for our country, that the actions taken by the president to undermine our national security, to violate his oath of office and to jeopardize the security of our elections, has taken us to this place." Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said as she signed the articles.

"This president will be held accountable," she said. "No one is above the law." The solemn formalities underscored the grimness of the occasion, Trump becoming only the third US president in history to be placed on trial in the Senate. "We feel we are carrying out the will of the framers of our constitution, and that's a pretty serious load," said Adam Schiff, the Democratic lawmaker tapped to lead the prosecution team.

**'Two weeks'**

Trump is accused of secretly holding up $381 million in aid to Ukraine between July and September to pressure Kiev to investigate former vice president Joe Biden, the Democratic frontrunner in this year's White House race. The president is also charged with obstruction for holding back witnesses and documents from the House impeachment investigation in defiance of Congressional subpoenas.

He was formally impeached on December 18. But Pelosi held back on delivering the articles to the Senate as she pressured McConnell to agree to subpoena the witnesses and documents that the White House blocked from the House probe. McConnell has refused to commit, saying the issue will only be decided after the trial's opening arguments and questioning, which could take two weeks.

A Trump administration official told reporters Wednesday that they expect the trial to last no longer than two weeks, suggesting McConnell could use his 53-47 Republican majority in the Senate to stifle calls for witnesses and quickly take the charges to a vote. "I think it's extraordinarily unlikely it will be going beyond two weeks," the official said, on condition of anonymity.

With impeachment rules requiring a two-thirds super-majority to convict and remove a president, Trump's acquittal is widely expected. Earlier Wednesday Trump ridiculed the investigation and trial, as he has for months.

"Here we go again, another Con Job by the Do Nothing Democrats," he wrote on Twitter. On Tuesday Democrats released newly acquired files that showed Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani working with Ukrainian-born American Lev Parnas early last year to pressure Kiev to investigate Biden. They also showed the two, working with Ukrainian officials, trying to force out the US ambassador to the country, Marie Yovanovitch, eventually removed by Trump.

In a televised interview that aired Wednesday, Parnas told MSNBC that "President Trump knew exactly what was going on." "He was aware of all of my movements. I wouldn't do anything without the consent of Rudy Giuliani or the president.

Underscoring the high level of politics surrounding the trial, Pelosi was immediately at odds to stifle calls for witnesses and documents to the Senate. She pressured McConnell to agree to subpoena the witnesses and documents that the White House blocked from the House probe. McConnell has refused to commit, saying the issue will only be decided after the trial's opening arguments and questioning, which could take two weeks.

**US indsict five for aiding Pakistan's weapons program**

WASHINGTON: Five men have been indicted in the United States for allegedly running an international network that purchased US products for Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. "The defendants smuggled US origin goods to entities that have been designated for years as threats to US national security for their ties to Pakistan's weapons programs," assistant attorney general John Demers said in a statement.

The five, who live outside the United States and have not been apprehended, were indicted by a grand jury in October, the Justice Department said. The indictment was unsealed on Wednesday and arrest warrants are pending. The five were accused of operating a front company called "Business World" in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. They were identified as Muhammad Kamran Wali, 41, of Pakistan, Muhammad Ahsan Wali, 48, and Haji Wali Muhammad Sheik, 82, both of Mississauga, Ontario, Ashraf Khan Muhammad of Hong Kong, and Ahmed Waheed, 52, of Ifford, England.

They were charged with conspiring to violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act and the Export Control Reform Act. "The alleged behavior of these five individuals presented more than a violation of US export laws," said Jason Molina, a special agent with the Department of Homeland Security. "It posed a potential threat to the national security interests of the United States and to the delicate balance of power among nations within the region." According to the indictment, between September 2014 and October 2019, the five procured US goods without export licenses for Pakistan's Advanced Engineering Research Organization and the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission. -AFP

**Ex-police chief in Philippines indicted for drugs war graft**

MANILA: The former chief police enforcer of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s deadly war on drugs will be charged with corruption for allegedly protecting officers linked to the narcotics trade, the justice department said yesterday. Oscar Albayalde resigned in October after serving as Philippine police chief for more than a year, having presided over an anti-narcotics crackdown that left thousands of drug suspects dead.

The episode that led to his sudden fall from grace was an unwelcome light on a drug war that is immensely popular with Filipinos, but which has faced international criticism over allegations that police were Summary executing suspects. The justice department said prosecutors found "probable cause" to charge Albayalde for not punishing officers accused of failing to account for 163 kilograms (359 pounds) of drugs and 9.7 million pesos ($191,000) sized from a drug raid. A justice department statement said 13 other police officers would be charged with drug offenses, corruption, and taking bribes for their role in the operation in Pampanga province, north of Manila.

Albayalde has repeatedly denied having protected the officers or profiting from the seized drugs. The charge leveled against him carries a penalty of up to 10 years in prison if convicted. The raid took place in November 2013 when Albayalde was Pampanga’s police chief. Allegations of police graft and abuse are not rare in the Philippines, with Duterte twice ordering police to stop the anti-narcotics campaign because of allegations of corruption and murder by officers. The Pampanga controversy, however, went right to the top of the force. Police said last month they had killed 5,582 suspects in anti-drug operations since Duterte came to office in June 2016. Human rights groups allege the real number is four times higher, and say the killings are a crime against humanity. International Criminal Court prosecutors have launched a preliminary probe of the campaign, and the United Nations’ top rights body voted in favor of an in-depth review. While overwhelmingly backed by Filipinos, critics allege the drug war targets the poor and leaves the rich and powerful untouched, while reinforcing a culture of impunity. —AFP
Illness believed to have been caused by a new virus from SARS family

A new coronavirus has already given rise to 41 pneumonia-like cases and one death in China.—AFP

CHENNAI: Thirty-two people were injured as bulls targeted tamers and spectators at massive ‘Jallikattu’ event in Tamil Nadu’s Madurai city on Wednesday. The traditional bull-taming sport event, which was organized as a part of harvest festival Pongal, kicked off on Wednesday. Four of them, who suffered serious injuries, have been shifted to Madurai government hospital, said officials.

More than 2,000 bulls would be brought to the event which will be held in Madurai district over the next two days and several thousand others in the state till January 31. The Supreme Court refused to entertain a petition challenging the Madras High Court order on conducting ‘Jallikattu’ in various districts of the state. The top court asked the petitioner to approach the Chennai Bench of Madras High Court and dismissed the petition. He had demanded that the event must be conducted under the supervision of the district collector.

In 2014, the top court had banned the traditional bull-taming sport after a plea was filed by the Animal Welfare Board of India and the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) but the state government insisted that ‘Jallikattu’ was a crucial part of its culture and identity. The ban was later lifted in January 2017 with an amendment to the law after massive protests in Chennai. Though the state government has put in place systems to check animal cruelty and ensure the safety of spectators and bull tamers following the court orders, animal rights activists allege that animal cruelty still continues.
Bangladesh eyes deal with Malaysia to protect migrant workers from abuse

Demand to keep unofficial middlemen out of recruitment system

DHAKA: Cutting recruitment fees for Bangladeshi migrants who move to Malaysia for work under a new deal could curb human trafficking, according to officials, yet activists said Bangladesh’s migration system must be revamped in order to protect workers. Malaysia last week said it was considering a zero-cost recruitment agreement with Bangladesh - having banned its migrant workers in September 2018 over concerns that they were being charged excessive fees by labor agencies and brokers.

Bangladesh’s current informal recruitment system involves unofficial middlemen - who despite being charged excessive fees by labor agencies in September 2018 over concerns that they were conducing a zero-cost recruitment agreement with Malaysia, and are seeking to avoid a downgrade this year that could trigger sanctions. From factories to construction sites and plantations, Malaysia is home to an estimated 4.5 million migrant workers and relies heavily on foreign migrants for jobs usually shunned by locals. Malaysia struck a deal with Nepal in 2018 to ensure Nepali migrant workers would not pay any fees - after Nepal temporarily suspended sending workers due to concerns about their treatment.

Accountability and oversight

Reducing or removing fees for workers will not protect them from abuse overseas, said Marina Sultan, co-founder of RIMUS. Migrants “always pay more,” she said. “No matter what the fee, the government needs to improve its monitoring system.” “The middlemen should be made official so that they can be made accountable for what they do,” said Robyn Duell, head of the Refugee and Migrant Workers’ Rights Research Unit - a migrants rights group. “Migrants always pay more, they’re forced to do it, the government needs to improve its monitoring system.”

Along the south coast of the state, locals who witnessed fires burning in forests being destroyed in recent weeks expressed cautious hope. “We’re thrilled and so relieved to have some dampness in the air because it makes things safe for a little while,” Virginia Connor told AFP near the town of Nowra. “But we need more, we need lots more.”

Clear air

Smoke from bushfires choked the southern city of Melbourne from Monday to Wednesday, disrupting the build-up to next week’s Australian Open tennis tournament. But thunderstorms late Wednesday cleared the smoke, with the wet weather moving east throughout yesterday towards fires in the southern state of Victoria. “Storms have improved air quality in most parts of the state,” the Victorian Environment Protection Agency said. More rain was forecast for Friday and the weekend which, if it does fall, would be the most sustained period of wet weather since the start of autumn in September last year.

Relief as rain falls over Australian bushfires

NOWRA, Australia: Heavy rain fell across parts of fire-ravaged eastern Australia yesterday and more wet weather was forecast, giving some relief following months of catastrophic blazes fuelled by climate change. The fires, unprecedented for Australia in terms of duration and intensity, have claimed 26 lives and killed an estimated billion animals.

Sustained hot weather and rare periods of light rain in the affected areas have deepened the crisis. Downpours yesterday in the state of New South Wales, where many of the worst fires have burnt, offered hope that dozens of blazes could be brought under control. “Relief is here for a number of firefighters working across NSW,” the state’s Rural Fire Service said in a social media post, accompanying footage of rain falling in a burning forest. “We’re thrilled and so relieved to have some dampness in the air because it makes things safe for a little while,” Virginia Connor told AFP near the town of Nowra. “But we need more, we need lots more.”

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Still, with January, February and March typically seeing some of the hottest weather in Australia, the bushfire crisis was far from over. “We still have a long way to go,” said Robyn Duell, a senior climatologist with the Bureau of Meteorology. “And with higher temperatures, we’ll continue to see an elevated risk of bushfires as we move through summer and early autumn.” —AFP

Pakistan says Taleban to reduce violence

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan’s foreign minister yesterday said the Taleban has shown “a willingness” to reduce violence in war-torn Afghanistan after more than 18 years fighting the US, sparking speculation that a potential breakthrough in talks with the Americans may be near.

Negotiations between the Taleban and the US have repeatedly stalled, with Washington calling on the insurgent group to reduce violence before they can resume. “Today, positive progress has been made, the Taleban have shown their willingness to reduce the violence, which was a demand… it’s a step towards the peace agreement,” said Pakistani foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi in a video statement. He gave no further details.

Zahibullah Mujahid, the official Taleban spokesman, told AFP the Taleban was looking into the comments. The Taleban and the US were on the brink of announcing a withdrawal deal in September last year when US President Donald Trump abruptly declared the process “dead”, citing Taliban violence.

Talks were later restarted between the two sides in December in Qatar, but were paused following an attack near the Bagram military base in Afghanistan. Islamabad has helped facilitate the talks between the militias and Washington in Qatar over the past year, seeking an agreement that would pave the way for a US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in return for various security promises from the insurgents.

Pakistan was one of only three countries to recognize the Taleban regime, and its shadowy military establishment - particularly the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) - is widely believed to back the bloody insurgency in Afghanistan.

Islamabad denies the accusation. Any agreement with the Taleban is expected to have two main pillars: an American withdrawal from Afghanistan and a commitment by the insurgents not to offer sanctuary to jihadists. The Taleban’s relationship with Al-Qaeda was the main reason cited for the US invasion nearly 18 years ago. The Taleban have until nearly 18 years ago. The Taleban have until
Philippine volcano shows signs of calming, but danger remains

53,000 residents have abandoned their homes

MANILA: A Philippine volcano that has been spewing ash for days appeared to be calming down yesterday, but seismologists said the danger of an eruption remained high and authorities warned evacuees not to return to their homes. Some residents took advantage of what they perceived as a lull in the activity of Taal, one of the country's most active and deadliest volcanoes, to return home even though a 14-km (nine-mile) exclusion zone remained in place.

“We are analyzing what this seeming calm of the volcano means,” Maria Antonia Bornas, chief science research specialist at the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs), told reporters. The lake inside Taal has dried up, Bornas said, which was to be expected since it began spewing lava fountains a day after it shot giant clouds of ash miles into the air on Sunday. Phivolcs said volcanic activity had “generally waned to weak emission of steam-laden plumes.” Even so, it had recorded more than 100 tremors since Wednesday, meaning magma was still rising.

More than 53,000 residents have abandoned their homes around Taal to take shelter in evacuation centres, but thousands more are refusing to leave or have already drifted back to check on their animals and possessions.

Power has been restored in some areas in nearby Tagaytay city where business owners were cleaning away the ash and preparing to start trading again. Although Taal is one of the world's smallest active volcanoes at only 311 metres (1,020 feet) high, it can be deadly. One eruption in 1754 lasted for six months. — Reuters

A bell of volcanoes circling the Pacific Ocean that is also prone to earthquakes.

At the crack of dawn yesterday, Manolito Malahuan set out with a band of rescuers to ferry to safety two horses trapped on a Philippine island where a volcano has been spewing ash for days. They took a motorboat across a lake, defying official warnings to stay out of danger around the Taal volcano, one of the most active in the southeast Asian nation, as they scrambled to reach the animals. “Both of them were neighing when we saw them,” Malahuan, 23, told Reuters, after reaching safer ground with his horses, named Cristina and Bakasan. “They were happy because I came back.”

More than 57,000 people have abandoned homes on the volcanic island and its environs, usually thronged by tourists, but many have also drifted back to check on animals and possessions. Authorities have thrown a 14-km (9-mile) exclusion zone around the volcano, with experts warning that an eruption could bring a devastating rain of rocks and magma and unleash a tsunami in the surrounding lake. The horses were among 3,000 living on the island, most earning money for their owners by carrying tourists to the rim of the volcano crater.

**Uncertain future**

As their sole means of livelihood, many islanders depend on the survival of the animals, but the future looks uncertain. “We won't have food on our tables if not for them,” said Jun Deespedia, 21, who used water from the lake to scrub volcanic ash from his horse's white coat. “I don't know what I would do now after what happened.” About 1,000 horses, as well as cows, goats and pigs were among the animals left behind by residents scurrying to safer areas for fear of a bigger eruption. One horse owner urged authorities to allow the rescue of as many animals as possible, taking advantage of what appeared to be a lull in volcano activity, but was rebuffed by the coast guard patrolling the lake. Horses were among the more than 70 animals brought to safety since Wednesday by another group of rescuers, led by a police maritime unit, but it has since been told to halt its activities, because of the eruption threat.

Many of the horses that had made it out looked exhausted and hungry, with at least one barely able to stand. While Taal appeared to be calming down on Thursday, seismologists said the danger of an eruption remained high and authorities warned evacuees to stay away. The Philippines lies on the “Ring of Fire,” a belt of volcanoes circling the Pacific Ocean that is also prone to earthquakes. One of the world's smallest active volcanoes, Taal has erupted more than 30 times in the past five centuries, most recently in 1977. The Philippines lies on the “Ring of Fire,” a belt of volcanoes circling the Pacific Ocean that is also prone to earthquakes. One of the world's smallest active volcanoes, Taal has erupted more than 30 times in the past five centuries, most recently in 1977.

In Japan, foreign parents lead charge against child ‘abduction’

**TOKYO: A growing number of foreigners in Japan are speaking out against what they say is a little-known but entrenched system that allows one parent in a broken relationship to take away the children and block the other from visiting them. The issue is. But non-profit organization Kizuna Child-Parent Reunion estimates that roughly 150,000 children lose contact with a parent every year in Japan because of estrangement from the non-custodial parent. — Reuters**

Time running out on US-S Korea troop talks: Envoy

SEOUL: Washington has compromised in its demands that South Korea should pay billions of dollars towards US troop presence and it was Seoul’s turn to reciprocate before time ran out, the American ambassador said yesterday.

The two allies are in a security alliance and Washington stations 28,500 troops in South Korea to defend it from the nuclear-armed North, which invaded in 1950.

They are a key part of US forces' deployment in Asia, but the Trump administration has been insisting Seoul pay more towards their costs. The initial US demand was around $5 billion a year—a more than fivefold increase on the roughly $900 million paid in 2019 — provoking consternation in Seoul. The latest round of negotiations concluded without an agreement in Washington on Wednesday. US negotiators had “adjusted our position, our top line number”, said Ambassador Harry Harris. “We are now waiting for the Korean side to do the same.”

“South Korea as an equal partner in the preservation of peace on the peninsula, and its position as the 12th largest economy in the entire world, can and should do more.” Time was “of the essence”, he told reporters in a group interview at his residence in the centre of Seoul.

Around 10,000 South Koreans working for United States Forces Korea (USFK) are paid from funds last year’s deal and when they run out, they will have to be put on furlough, he said. “That notice is going to go out soon.” Other US allies would face similar demands from Washington in the future, added Harris, a former vice admiral and commander of US Pacific Command. “Korea just happens to be the first country whose SMA expires,” he said. “Japan is next. And then we go around from there.”

Nuclear negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang have been at a standstill since the Hanoi summit between Trump and leader Kim Jong-Un collapsed in February, despite a high-profile meeting between them in the Demilitarized Zone that divides the Korean peninsula. — AFP
In Seychelles, nature prized above tourism
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Harry resurfaces but stays silent on royal rumpus
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Abloh refinds dancing feet
See Pages 20 & 21
Abloh refinds his dancing feet as Paris fashion parties

Virgil Abloh made headlines last week by predicting the end of streetwear, the trend he has ridden to the top of the fashion tree. His Off-White Paris men’s fashion week show Wednesday lived up to his prophecy - the least street that the American designer has produced for his ultra-hip label whose clothes are snapped up by rappers and copied by kids.

The hyperactive architect-artist, who also designs Louis Vuitton's menswear, turned out perhaps his most somber and beautifully tailored collection, led off with decidedly adult chocolate-brown and gun-metal grey double breasted suits. The style wunderkind - who was forced to curb his manic globe-trotting schedule in September for health reasons - marked his return to the fashion circuit with a comparatively muted and poetic show that seemed to channel his new seriousness.

As a hat tip to mortality - or perhaps a comment on his own condition - the invitation for the show featured an ironic mock-gothic painting of a teenage girl fighting off a skeleton, a packet of pills marked “Anything” falling from her jeans.

New Air Jordan 5s
And rather than rush out to greet his army of fans at the end of the show, Abloh cultivated mystery by lingered brooding in the dark with his models in a little curtained-off room in the center of the stage. The 39-year-old de-
signer, who tends to put trainers with everything, sent out several of his models in shoes - granted sometimes in different colors. He did, however, give a sneak preview of the new Off-White x Air Jordan 5s he has created for Nike, hidden under long billowing trousers.

The show opened with a bravura tap-dancing display by American hoofer Cartier Williams, who wore an Off-White T-shirt with the legend, “I Support Young Black Businesses”. A master of little style details that often go viral, Abloh's latest wheeze is little fabric stubs on the cuff of his jackets cut in the same Swiss cheese–like motif as the objects he created for his art and furniture show that opened in a Paris gallery the night before.

“I have been trying to make work that responds to my generation, and it feels like I am getting into a space where that is translating,” he told a melee of reporters afterwards. Abloh, whose parents come from Ghana, created something of minor fashion storm last week by telling Dazed magazine that streetwear’s days may be numbered.

Belgian brass and decadence

“I would definitely say it is gonna die,” he said. “It’s time will be up... how many more T-shirts can we own, how many more hoodies, how many more sneakers?” he asked. But he later clarified his comments, predicting fashion will veer toward vintage. “I think that fashion is gonna go away from buying a boxfresh something. It'll be like, ‘Hey I'm gonna go into my archive.’”

Despite Abloh’s razzmatazz, it was the rising Belgian Glenn Martens who came come up with the day’s most surprising and decadent show. The Y/Project designer immersed fashionistas in a pool of red balloons up to their waists while his models strode around them to the strains of a Flemish carnival brass band. In grim times it was important for fashion to be fun, he insisted. “It’s a celebration,” Martens told AFP and “every single piece should be fun”.

“What we doing is very superficial. My mother's a nurse, she's doing way more important things in her life. We're talking about making clothes that are not even always meant for survival, it's really more for personal happiness and expression and I think we should not forget that.”

His compatriot Walter Van Beirendonck took a diametrically opposing view in his show, “War”, whose title “reflects what we are living in today” he told AFP with the planet threatened by unthinking consumption. His spiky creations were like armor against an increasingly hostile environment and carried slogans like “Care”, “Save Planet Earth”, “Stop buying fast fashion” and “Ban banality”. “I've always included (slogans) in my work, but I think today it's even more important than ever to do these kind of statements, so it's a little bit of an overdose this time,” he added. — AFP
Zhang Fangyong glances at a photograph of fellow boxer Floyd “Money” Mayweather. The retired American superstar could earn hundreds of millions of dollars from a bout, but China’s Zhang sometimes fights for nothing and supports himself by making deliveries on his motorbike. The 26-year-old bantamweight has recovered from losing three of his first four fights to improve his win-loss-draw record to 14-3-1, with three wins by knockout.

But it is Zhang’s determination to pursue his career despite numerous obstacles that has won him the hearts of Chinese sports fans and the admiration of the wider public. His story was part of a recent Chinese government-backed documentary film, “Changing China”, which charts the progress of the world’s most populous country through the stoic battles of ordinary young people trying to get by.

The good-natured Zhang, who grew up in rural poverty, earns so little from the sport that he has taken on an array of menial jobs to keep his boxing dream alive. He was a security guard but was fired after a few days because he was deemed too small. He also previously worked in a restaurant kitchen, in home removals and construction. His job as a delivery driver, first in the city of Kunming and now in the capital Beijing, comes with its own challenges.

Zhang’s electric scooter - bought for 6,000 yuan ($870) thanks to a small loan - was stolen while he was delivering a meal. “I chased the person wildly for more than two kilometres but I couldn’t catch up with him,” he said in an interview at Beijing’s M23 Boxing Club, home to WBA featherweight world champion Xu Can. “A delivery person always protects his meal, no matter what,” Zhang said, adding that he held on to the takeaway even while chasing the thief.
'I didn’t give in’

Once the adrenaline wore off, the helplessness of his situation came crashing down on him. “Suddenly my scooter was stolen and I felt it really seemed that the world was very unfair to me,” said Zhang, who is now back on the road with a replacement. Zhang's determination was forged during a tough childhood in a village several hours outside China’s southwestern megalopolis of Chongqing.

The nearest town was a hike down a mountain from Zhang's home, where his mother raised pigs and chickens and sold eggs to keep the family afloat. His father worked away from the village. Zhang started out in martial arts but his interest in boxing was piqued when he saw a documentary about the rags-to-riches story of Philippines boxing great Manny Pacquiao.

But if he hoped that he could one day earn a fortune to rival Pacquiao's, he was badly mistaken. Before this year, Zhang's highest appearance fee for a fight was just 3,600 yuan ($520), hence the need to juggle boxing with odd jobs. Zhang admits that he does not have the raw talent of someone like Pacquiao and boxing - which was banned under Mao Zedong - is not yet developed enough in China to provide a reliable living.

But what he lacks in talent Zhang makes up for in hand speed, heart and a desire to make his family and supportive girlfriend proud. “What we have to prove is my spirit, my willpower, and that while I may be lacking technically, I will improve,” said Zhang, whose goal is to become an Asian champion. “I've worked hard, I didn't give in, and I'm here now, in the best boxing club in China. ‘This shows that as long as you are willing to work hard and believe, I can stand here too.’ He looks once more at pictures on the gym wall of Mayweather, Pacquiao and champion compatriot Xu. ‘Maybe one day my photos will be posted there too.” —AFP
In Seychelles, nature is prized above mass tourism

In a shady patch along a pristine white beach on Mahe Island, a radio spits out reggae and snapper sizzles on the barbecue, as Seychelloise Nareen tops up her rum and coke on time off from her job aboard a luxury yacht. Her family is spending the weekend at the beach where a couple dipping their feet into the turquoise waters off in the distance are the only foreign tourists in sight. “We don’t have mass tourism in Seychelles, and that’s great. That is how we want it,” says Nareen, 32, who asked for her full name not to be published.

Nevertheless, like most citizens, she earns her living from tourism, which makes up more than 60 percent of GDP in the Seychelles, the only country in Africa considered “high income” by the World Bank. The Indian Ocean archipelago, a chain of 115 islands, is a byword for luxury holidays, Instagram-perfect beaches and has gained a reputation as a honeymoon idyll. But it is confronting a tug-of-war over how to keep the economy growing, while protecting its fragile ecosystem. “More tourists means it’s better for the economy, but it’s not the only thing that comes into play,” Nareen says.

High-end tourism, from Europe mainly, helped pull the Seychelles from the brink of financial ruin after the 2008 economic crisis. Visitor numbers almost doubled in the decade that followed, to around 360,000 in 2018, nearly four times the country’s population. But now the Seychelles is grappling with how many visitors it can realistically accommodate. An official study commissioned into the matter is due to begin soon.

In the meantime, the government placed a moratorium in 2015 on the construction of large resorts on the three main islands of Mahe, Praslin and La Digue. It wanted both to protect the environment and encourage the growth of smaller, locally-run hotels.

On further-flung islands, the Seychelles practices a “one island, one resort” policy.

“It’s about controlling the number of tourists that come here, through controlling the number of rooms in the hotels that exist,” Tourism Minister Didier Dogley told AFP. The Seychelles has 6,000 hotel rooms, but another 3,000 are in the pipeline, having been approved before the moratorium took effect, Dogley said. “We believe that we can go up to 500,000 tourists, that is just an estimate for the time being,” he said.

Nearly half of the Seychelles 455 sq km are classed as protected areas. By later this year, 30 percent of its 1.3 million square km of marine territory will have protected status too, under a special arrangement in which conservation groups agree in return to pay a small portion of Seychelles’ national debt. The country has two UNESCO world heritage sites: The Mai Valley and its indigenous coco de mer palm trees, and the Aldabra Atoll, home to the Seychelles’ famed giant tortoises.

With a few exceptions such as the popular Beau Vallon Beach on Mahe or Anse Source d’Argent on La Digue, regularly named one of the world’s most beautiful beaches, tranquility reigns on the islands. Most beachside resorts keep a low profile, blending into the jungle backdrop that reaches into the island’s interior from the white sands bordering the azure shores. “It all depends on the standards that you want to maintain,” said Nirmal Shah, executive director of environmental NGO Nature Seychelles.

He believes that some of the more popular sites have already reached their full capacity. The Seychelles, he said, “really do not want to become” an eyesore like some beaches in Europe, crowded by umbrellas and edged by concrete.

On Grand Police, in the south of Mahe island, locals have been angered by a Gulf company’s plans to build a new resort, approved before the 2015 ban. The project is unpopular over concerns about the health of a local marshland but also because most large resorts are owned by foreign groups. The government has promised to talk to those behind the new resort to explore how the proposal could be dropped. — AFP
Tiny Seychelles island coaxes bird back from brink

Giant tortoises amble across Cousin Island as rare birds flit above. The scene attests to a stunning success for BirdLife International, a conservation group that bought the tiny Seychelles isle in 1968 to save a songbird from extinction. Thick vegetation smothers ruins that are the only reminder of the coconut and cinnamon plantations that covered the island when the group stepped in to protect the Seychelles Warbler.

Now teeming with flora and fauna and boasting white beaches, Cousin Island is firmly on the tourist map, with managers scrambling to contain visitor numbers and soften their negative environmental impact. More than 16,000 people visited the island in 2018, compared with 12,000 a decade earlier. "Tourism is important for Cousin. That's what allows us to finance the conservation projects we run here. "But 16,000 tourists... that was too much," said Nirmal Shah, director of Nature Seychelles, which is charged with running the special reserve.

Before the island was in private hands, the population of Seychelles Warblers was thought to have shrunk to just 26, barely hanging on in a mangrove swamp after much of their native habitat had been destroyed. Now, they number more than 3,000 and the greenish-brown bird has been reintroduced to four other islands in the archipelago.

The former plantations have transformed into native forests, teeming with lizards, hermit crabs and seabirds, and the island is the most important nesting site for hawksbill turtles in the western Indian Ocean. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) waxes lyrical about the “unique biodiversity and conservation achievements” of Cousin, “the first island purchased for species conservation”, a model since replicated around the world.

Tourists have been allowed onto the island since 1972, but the message is clear: Nature comes first. In a well-oiled routine, every morning a handful of luxury sailboats and small motorboats anchor off the island, where their occupants wait for Nature Seychelles to skipper them ashore on their boats. "Tourist boats cannot land directly on the island, the biohazard risk is too big," Shah said. "Non-indigenous animals who may accidently be on board could come to the island and threaten its (ecological) balance."

Too many tourists can also upset this balance. Nature Seychelles in July increased the price of visits from 33 to 40 euros ($36 to $44) and removed a free pass for children under 15, resulting in a welcome 10-percent reduction in visitor numbers. "Something had to be done; there was too much pressure on the environment," said Dailus Laurence, the chief warden of the island. "When there are too many tourists it can bother nesting birds and turtles who want to come and lay their eggs on the island."

One guide said that some tourists, bothered by the island’s ubiquitous mosquitos, would “leave the paths, move away from the group and walk where they are not supposed to”, putting fragile habitats at risk. Shah said that if they wanted to increase the number of tourists, it would require hiring more wardens and guides who live on the island, which would also have a negative impact on nature. "Our absolute priority is nature, and it comes before tourists. If we have to take more steps to protect it and reduce the number of tourists, we will," he said. — AFP
Teenager Asha Charti Karki told her parents she was going out to study, but instead she ran off to wed her boyfriend - one of a growing number of Nepali teenagers who are marrying young by choice. “There were rumors about us in the village and I had fights at home. I felt I had no choice but to run away,” Karki told AFP at her home in the western district of Surkhet. Nepal has one of the world’s highest rates of child marriage even though the practice was banned five decades ago and the legal marrying age is 20.

Some 50 percent of Nepali women aged between 25 to 49 were married by their 18th birthday, according the Himalayan nation’s 2016 Demographic Health Survey. Marriages in the conservative country were traditionally arranged by parents, with many forcing their children to marry for cultural reasons or out of poverty. Such marriages are declining but child rights activists warn an increasing number of underage couples are eloping for “love marriage” - a term used to describe unions by choice.

A 2014 survey by Girls Not Brides Nepal, which is part of a global network set up to end child marriage, found that one-third of such unions were initiated by young couples, and that the trend was increasing. “This practice is posing a challenge for us and for the government. We can tell the parents but it is hard to convince young boys and girls when they marry by choice,” Anand Tamang of Girls Not Brides Nepal told AFP.

“Betraying my future”

Tamang said voluntary child marriages, like forced unions, still pose the same risks, including dropping out of school, domestic violence and health problems. Girls in particular lose the support of their families when they elope, he added. Karki was among those who quit school early after getting married, as she struggled to cope with household chores and family responsibilities. Soon after, she found out she was pregnant. “I was only 16, too young to understand what I was getting into,” she said, cradling her two-year-old daughter. “I had lied to my parents and run away, but I was actually betraying myself and my future.”

Her early pregnancy left her with uterine prolapse, a painful condition which sees the uterus or womb descend and protrude out of the vagina. “It is difficult. I often see my friends and wonder where I would be if I had not married,” she added. While the Nepali government has implemented a national strategy to end child marriages - punishable by jail terms and a fine - by 2030, it acknowledges the program can only be successful if the roots of the problem are tackled.

Some girls elope to avoid a potential forced marriage, or to escape poverty or chores at home. With teen romances seen as socially unacceptable in much of rural Nepal, young couples feel they have to run away and get married to legitimize their relationships. Others feel pushed to marry if they fall pregnant. Meanwhile, underage love marriages are rarely reported to authorities, with families only seeking legal recourse if they disapprove of unions such as inter-caste marriages.

“(The) main (thing) is education. It is important that they understand that being sexually active does not equate to marriage,” Krishna Prasad Bhusal of the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens told AFP. Karki hopes she can help other girls by sharing her experiences with them as part of a program called Sisters for Sisters’ Education run by British charity VSO Nepal.

“It was a mistake”

“I tell them that they should not have to marry and teach others like me that they should learn from my mistakes now,” she said.

In her role as “big sister”, Karki persuaded 17-year-old Aradhana Nepal to leave her abusive marriage and return to school. Nepal was only 13 when she eloped with a boy she barely knew. There had been gossip about them and she didn’t know what else to do to protect her reputation. It was only after they married that she discovered he was a violent drug addict. She endured beatings for months before she escaped. She recalled: “It was a mistake. Leaving that marriage saved my life.” — AFP
A secret operation by specialist firefighters has saved the world’s last stand of Wollemi Pines, a pre-historic species known as “dinosaur trees”, from Australia’s unprecedented bushfires, officials said. Fewer than 200 of the trees exist in the wild, hidden in a gorge in the World Heritage Blue Mountains, northwest of Sydney, an area hit by one of the biggest bushfires that have ravaged much of Australia for months.

With flames approaching the area late last year, air tankers dropped fire retardant in a protective ring around the trees while specialist firefighters were winched into the gorge to set up an irrigation system to provide moisture for the grove, officials said. Matt Kean, environment minister for New South Wales state where the Blue Mountains lie, described the operation as “an unprecedented environmental protection mission”.

While some of the trees were charred by the flames, the grove was saved from the fires, he said in a statement late Wednesday. “The fire did go through there, we had a few days of thick smoke so we couldn’t tell if they’d been damaged. We all waited with bated breath,” he told ABC radio. “It’s just been a phenomenal success story,” he added. He said this wildfire season was the first opportunity to monitor the response of the trees to fire in a natural setting, helping the park to refine how it manages the grove.

The Wollemi Pine which grows up to 40-m high is believed to have existed since the Jurassic period 200 million years ago, pre-dating many dinosaurs. They were believed to be extinct, only ever seen in fossils, until their accidental discovery by a park ranger in 1994. The grove’s remote location has remained a closely-guarded secret to protect the trees from contamination by visitors. “Illegal visitation remains a significant threat to the Wollemi Pines survival in the wild due to the risk of trampling regenerating plants and introducing diseases which could devastate the remaining populations and their recovery,” Kean said.

The trees have been propagated and distributed to botanic gardens around the world to preserve the species, but the Wollemi gorge is the only wild stand. Australia’s wildfires have since October claimed 28 lives, destroyed more than 2,000 homes and burned 10 million hectares (100,000 sq km) of land - an area larger than South Korea or Portugal.

About one billion animals may have died in fires which have driven many species closer to extinction, according to environmental groups. The country was enjoying a long-awaited respite yesterday as rainstorms blanketed much of Australia’s east, although a return to warm and dry weather was forecast for later in the southern summer. — AFP

This Jan 9, 2020 image shows a firefighter rappeling into a gorge in the Blue Mountains of Australia, as a crew tries to save the Wollemi Pines. — AFP photos
‘Invisible computing’ startup unveils smart contact lens

A startup focused on “invisible computing” yesterday unveiled a smart contact lens which delivers an augmented reality display in a user’s field of vision. The Mojo Vision contact lens offers a display with information and notifications, and allows the user to interact by focusing on certain points. The rigid contact lens, which the company has been developing in stealth mode for some 10 years, may also be used to help people with visual impairments by using enhanced image overlays, and has obtained US approval for testing it as a medical device.

“Mojo has a vision for invisible computing where you have the information you want when you want it and are not bombarded or distracted by data when you don’t,” said chief executive Drew Perkins. In a demonstration to an AFP reporter, company executives showed how the contact lens could enable users to see a virtual teleprompter, navigation instructions or other interactions that appear floating in the field of vision by projecting a micro-LED display to the retina.

A user, wearing two lenses which may be fitted with a correction prescription, could “click” by concentrating on an icon - to launch a music player, for example - and turn off by looking away. Mojo said it had no timetable for a commercial launch. But it has received approval from the US Food and Drug Administration as a “breakthrough” device to test the contact lens to help people with visual impairments such as macular degeneration or retinitis pigmentosa.

“These are people who are underserved by technology today,” said Steve Sinclair, senior vice president of the startup based in Saratoga, California. The company said the contact lens is designed to provide overlays that augment sight for people with “low vision” and may assist in mobility, reading and other functions.

Mojo has raised $100 million and has executives with experience at Google, Apple and other Silicon Valley firms, with opticians and ophthalmologists also working on the project. The contact lens aims to enable people to move away from physical devices and interact more naturally with technology. It also could have business applications, allowing workers or specialists access to real-time information in their field of vision without a bulky headset.

A challenge has been to pack into the lens the complex circuitry, image sensor, wireless radio and battery needed for the wearable device. Executives said the current version would transmit and receive information wirelessly through a portable relay box which could be clipped to a belt, but they hope to link directly to smartphones in the future. The company will be testing its vision-enhancing applications with the Vista Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Palo Alto, California.

Improving cancer treatment

There are still many unanswered questions, including why the structures form in some tumours and not others. And while it now seems clear that B-cells inside the structures play a key role in the success of immunotherapy, scientists are not sure precisely how. It may be that the B-cells are on the frontlines, producing antibodies that attack cancer cells efficiently. Or they may be bolstering T-cells, or perhaps doing both.

And not all TLS are created equal: the researchers found three categories, but only one type was “mature” enough to chum out cancer-fighting immune cells. The research opens several promising avenues, the authors said. Initially, it could help doctors screen patients to see which are most likely to respond well to immunotherapy. And eventually, the research could mean more patients are successfully treated with the technique, said Goran Jonsson, a professor of oncology and pathology at Lund University in Sweden who worked on a third study. “If we come up with a treatment that could enhance TLS formation, we could combine this with current immunotherapy regimens,” he told AFP. “Most likely this would lead to more patients responding to immunotherapy.” — AFP

Scientists find powerhouses that fight tumors from within

urling deep inside some tumors are “factories” full of immune cells that help the body fight a rearguard action against cancer and are key to helping some patients recover, new research has shown. In recent years, doctors have turned to a new treatment for cancer, immunotherapy, which works by leveraging the body’s immune system to fight tumors. The technique has largely focused on white blood cells called T-cells, which are “trained” to recognize and attack cancer cells.

But the innovative treatment only works well for around 20 percent of patients, and researchers have been trying to understand why some people respond better than others. Three papers published on Thursday in the journal Nature point the way, identifying a key formation inside some tumors: tertiary lymphoid structures (TLS).

These structures function like “factories or schools” for immune cells that help the body fight cancer, said Wolf H Fridman, a professor emeritus of immunology at the Cordeliers Research Centre of the Paris Descartes University Medical school, who helped lead one of the studies. “The cells need to be educated in schools, which are the tertiary lymphoid structures,” where they effectively learn to recognize and attack cancer cells, Fridman told AFP.

No longer ‘innocent bystanders’

Key to the findings is that T-cells are far from the only immune cells capable of taking the fight to cancer, with researchers finding the TLS were full of B-cells, a kind of immune cell that produces antibodies. “We have been T-cell addicts for 15 years,” Fridman said with a laugh. “We analyzed these sarcomas to see what groups they had and what’s striking is that these B-cells appeared.”

Beth Hehranek, a fellow in surgical oncology at the University of Texas’s MD Anderson Cancer Center who worked on a second study, said the research changed perceptions of the role of B-cells in immunotherapy. “Through these studies, we find that B-cells are not just innocent bystanders, but are themselves contributing in a meaningful way to the anti-tumour immune response,” she said in a statement issued by the Center.

The discovery is something of a surprise, as an abundance of B-cells in cancer patients has sometimes been seen as a marker for poor prognosis. But the studies found that patients with high levels of B-cells inside TLS in their tumors were more likely to respond well to immunotherapy. “This series of studies are exciting because they represent real progress in the treatment of different types of cancer,” said Louisa James, a lecturer in immunology at Earl’s and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London.

“In the short term, these results provide a new tool to help predict which patients are likely to benefit from treatment with immunotherapy and may also pave the way for improved treatments in the future,” added James, who was not involved in the studies.

No longer ‘innocent bystanders’

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Improving cancer treatment

There are still many unanswered questions, including why the structures form in some tumours and not others. And while it now seems clear that B-cells inside the structures play a key role in the success of immunotherapy, scientists are not sure precisely how. It may be that the B-cells are on the frontlines, producing antibodies that attack cancer cells efficiently. Or they may be bolstering T-cells, or perhaps doing both.

And not all TLS are created equal: the researchers found three categories, but only one type was “mature” enough to chum out cancer-fighting immune cells. The research opens several promising avenues, the authors said. Initially, it could help doctors screen patients to see which are most likely to respond well to immunotherapy. And eventually, the research could mean more patients are successfully treated with the technique, said Goran Jonsson, a professor of oncology and pathology at Lund University in Sweden who worked on a third study. “If we come up with a treatment that could enhance TLS formation, we could combine this with current immunotherapy regimens,” he told AFP. “Most likely this would lead to more patients responding to immunotherapy.” — AFP
Scooping waste from a Malaysian river to stop it reaching the sea, a solar-powered barge named the “Interceptor” is the latest weapon in a global battle to rid the world’s waters of plastic. Trash is being dumped into seas and rivers in enormous quantities, polluting vital habitats, endangering a kaleidoscope of marine life and sullying once pristine tourist spots. Some eight million tons of plastics enter the world’s oceans every year, from straws tossed into gutters to mismanaged waste from rapidly growing economies, according to US-based group Ocean Conservancy.

But as governments and environmental protection groups struggle in the face of the growing tide, a Dutch non-profit group – The Ocean Cleanup – has come up with a novel solution in the form of the Interceptor. The 24-m-long vessel resembles a large houseboat and uses a curved barrier to catch waste floating downstream.

The trash, much of it plastic, is directed to the “mouth” of the barge – which operates autonomously and silently – from where it rolls up a conveyor belt and is dropped into dumpsters. The barge can collect up to 50 tons of waste a day. In October an Interceptor was stationed on the Klang River, a heavily polluted, major Malaysian waterway which flows through the capital Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding areas.

Ocean Cleanup is working with local government company Landasan Lumayan, which started cleaning the river in 2016, and says efforts are bearing fruit. “The Klang River was like a floating landfill,” said Syaiful Azmen Nordin, managing director of the Malaysian firm. “Boats could not pass through, and there was a lot of plastic. Now you can see the river is generally free from floating debris.”

Tyres and teddies
Ocean Cleanup hopes their project will have a major impact in fighting the waste crisis globally, as rivers are one of the greatest sources of plastic flowing into the seas. Some 80 percent of plastic waste that ends up in the sea floats down just 1,000 rivers worldwide, according to the group, which hopes to one day station trash-collecting barges in all these waterways. The Klang River alone sends more than 15,000 tons annually into the sea, a map on their website shows, making it one of the 50 most-polluting rivers across the globe.

“We know the goal of 1,000 rivers is ambitious, but it is a necessary one,” said group spokesman Joost Dubois, adding they aimed to deal with the problem within five years. But the group has some way to go to turn the tide – they have so far built four Interceptor boats at a cost of 700,000 euros ($775,000) each, although they expect the price will come down as more are produced.

As well as the barge in Malaysia, one has been stationed in Jakarta, the overcrowded capital of neighboring Indonesia, while two others will be sent to Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. Thailand has signed up to put one near Bangkok and an agreement is being negotiated to station a vessel in Los Angeles.

The barge on the 120-km Klang river complements seven existing log barriers placed along the waterway to catch trash. Rubbish taken out of the river is currently sent to a landfill, although efforts have begun to retrieve recyclables. Some 50,000 tons of garbage have been hauled from the water since clean-up work started four years ago, according to Syaiful. “We have (collected) tyres, teddy bears, even dead animals... but generally it is plastic,” he said.

While the barges may help, they will only succeed if people do their part and act responsibly by refraining from thoughtlessly tossing plastic away, Syaiful added. “Some people don’t see the impact of throwing rubbish. They throw the plastic on the streets and eventually the plastic will flow into the river,” he said. “If we change our behavior, we can help our rivers (become) clean.” — AFP
Prince Harry resurfaces but stays silent on royal rumpus

Prince Harry kept silent yesterday about the shock decision he and his wife took last week to quit as full-time royals at his first public appearance since the bombshell announcement. Harry, 35, took part in the draw for the 2021 Rugby League World Cup in an engagement at Buckingham Palace in London, planned long before he and Meghan triggered the still-unresolved royal crisis. He appeared relaxed and jovial despite the tumult surrounding him, with final decisions on the Duke and Duchess of Sussex’s future due within days.

After struggling in the spotlight, the couple said they wanted to step back as senior royals and split their time between Britain and Canada. They also said they wanted to become financially independent from official royal funding and pull out of the palace’s media arrangements. They made the announcement unilaterally on a new website - without first checking with Harry’s grandmother, Queen Elizabeth II.

But a confronted Harry, after meeting schoolchildren playing rugby on the lawns of the queen’s official London residence, said: “Look after the grass though, yeah? Other-wise I’ll get in trouble.” A reporter shouted out: “How are the discussions going on your future?” But Harry did not reply nor did he say anything on the crisis during the competition draw. He got a laugh as he turned his back to the official — stirring Christmas puddings at Buckingham Palace was reportedly a factor that led to Harry feeling edged out of the institution’s future.

Sport ‘saving lives’

Harry is patron of the Rugby Football League, the sport’s governing body in England. “Not only do I continue to see sport actually changing lives, but it’s saving lives as well,” he said, Jon Dutton, chief executive of the 16-team tournament, hoped Harry’s reduced role in the royal engagements would not affect his involvement with the World Cup, which takes place in October and November next year. “What happens next is for other people,” he told Sky News television. “He’s made a commitment to the sport and to the event and we very much hope to see him in the future. What that role is, it’s probably too early to say.”

Harry was summoned to a hastily arranged family meeting on Monday with his grandmother, Charles and William to thrash out a way forward. They said they would have preferred the Sussexes to remain as full-time royals but respected their wish for a more independent life. The final details of their new roles are set to be determined in the coming days.

Vancouver visits

Harry and Meghan spent six weeks over Christmas on Vancouver Island on Canada’s Pacific west coast - the Duchess has already returned after briefly coming back to Britain. The couple’s son Archie, born in May last year, had stayed in Canada. Meghan, a 38-year-old US former television actress, visited two women’s charities in Vancouver on Tuesday, one proving support to women fleeing violence and another which helps teenage girls living in poverty.

Harry is set to remain in Britain for meetings early next week. Queen Elizabeth, 93, is Canada’s head of state and Harry is therefore sixth in line to succeed her in that role. Despite Canadians’ affection for the royal couple, who married at Windsor Castle in May 2018, a large majority (73 percent) do not wish to foot security or other costs for their relocation, according to polling firm Angus Reid Institute. — AFP

Bollywood star slams Uber after ‘scariest experience’

Bollywood star Sonam Kapoor, Ahuja has warned Uber users against the ride-hailing app in London after suffering “the scariest experience” with a driver in the British capital. The award-winning actress, 34, daughter of “Slumdog Millionaire” star Anil Kapoor, said her driver was apparently “unstable and was yelling and shouting” during the journey. “I was shaking by the end of it,” she tweeted to her 12.8 million followers late Wednesday in London, tagging Uber, which responded with an apparently automated message.

“I tried complaining on your app, and just got multiple disconnected replies by bots. You guys need to update your system. The damage is done. There is nothing more you can do. The best and safest is just to use the local public transportation or cabs,” she suggested. Hours later, an Uber spokeswoman in London said the incident was “regrettable and concerning”.

Bide-hailing giant Uber has come under a storm of global criticism over its passenger safety record. The company lost its license in London after transport authorities said it had failed to fix a litany of safety issues - including at least 14,000 criticism over its passenger safety record. The company lost

YouTube steering viewers to climate denial videos: Avaaz

YouTube has driven millions of viewers to climate denial videos, a US advocacy group charged yesterday as it called for stopping “free promotion of misinformation” at the platform. In response to the report by US-based online activist group Avaaz, YouTube said it downplays “borderline” video content while spotlighting authoritative sources and displaying information boxes on searches related to climate change and other topics. The Google-owned video sharing platform has remained firm that while it removes content violating its policies against hate, violence, and scams it does not censor ideas expressed in accordance with rules.

“Our recommendations systems are not designed to filter or demote videos or channels based on specific perspectives,” YouTube said in response to an AFP inquiry. The company added that it has “significantly increased the number and mix of recommendations of borderline content and harmful misinformation, and raising up authoritative voices.”

New York-based Avaaz said it scrutinized results of YouTube searches using the terms “global warming”, “climate change,” and “climate manipulation” to see what was offered by an “up next” feature and as suggestions. Sixteen percent of the top 100 videos served up in relation to the term “global warming” contained misinformation, with the top 10 of those averaging more than a million views each, according to Avaaz.

The portion of potentially misleading videos climbed to 21 percent for YouTube searches on the term “climate manipulation” but fell to eight percent for searches using the term “climate change,” according to Avaaz. “This is not about free speech, this is about the free advertising,” Avaaz senior campaigner Julie Denny said in a release, “YouTube is giving factually inaccurate videos that risk confusing people about one of the biggest crises of our time.”

Who to believe?

An AFP search at YouTube using the term “global warming” yielded a results page topped by a box containing a Wikipedia summary of the subject and a link to the page at the online encyclopedia. A list of suggested videos on the topic was dominated by sources such as National Geographic, NASA, TED, and major news organizations including CBS, PBS, Sky News, and AFP. Last year, consumption on “channels” of authoritative news publishers at the platform grew by 60 percent, according to YouTube.

“We prioritize authoritative voices for millions of news and information queries, and surface information panels on topics prone to misinformation - including climate change - to provide users with context alongside their content,” YouTube said. Avaaz called on YouTube to yank climate change misinformation videos from its recommendation formula completely, and make certain such content doesn’t make money from ads at the platform. — AFP
Aries (March 21-April 19)

This week might be easier than last week, but you’re not quite out of the woods yet. There is still a lingering intensity, and this can relate to a key issue you’re dealing with. The sun aligns with lighter and easier waters. The fire and water sign combination can bring a greater understanding of the core issues and what you need to do to create the changes you desire. But there is still a lingering intensity, and this can relate to a key issue you’re dealing with. The sun aligns with lighter and easier waters. The fire and water sign combination can bring a greater understanding of the core issues and what you need to do to create the changes you desire.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)

To create the future you want, you might need to let go of whatever is stopping you from getting there. Last week, you may have become aware of what is going on, and this is the time to bring the conjuction of Jupiter and Saturn and Uranus on Monday, and this can bring a greater understanding of the core issues and what you need to do to create the changes you desire.

Gemini (May 21-June 21)

With an intense set of talents in a deeply emotional zone, it would be no surprise if you felt a tad exhausted. And yet, you could feel a sense of relief at letting some- thing go that really needed to leave your life. While you may have fought against this, you now might appreciate the wisdom of this release and the healing that can happen as a result. As the sun links with taskmaster Saturn and radical Pluto on Monday, you may now under- stand why this is so valuable. Even a small shift in attitude can bring positive results in your ex- perience. Once you get a taste of how this works, you can then master your destiny. Could romance be on the horizon? With luscious Venus moving into your romantic sector on Monday, this dreamy influence could see you eager to break the ice. This sensitive energy can make it easier to connect with others, because you can turn to them in your needs and feelings and get a sense of what moti- vates them.

Cancer (June 21-July 22)

Last week’s intense energies may continue to linger. However, by the weekend you could feel a little more relaxed and easier within. The sun’s link to Jupiter can bring a sense of closure to a relationship issue that has been going on for a while. Although there may be drinks to brizzle and further discussions in the pipeline, there may also be a sense of freedom and release. This doesn’t mean that a key bond is going to end, but rather that an opening for a reason can give you strength and courage. Charming Venus enters your sector of goals and power-broker Pluto on Monday, the awareness that everything is hap- pening for a reason can give you strength and courage. Charming Venus enters your sector of goals and power-broker Pluto on Monday, the awareness that everything is happening for a reason can give you strength and courage.

Leo (July 23-August 22)

Positive Jupiter is now in your lifestyle sector until late next year, and its presence over to a higher power. If it really is too complex for you to handle, hand it over to the force that is a spiritual component, too, as lovely Venus enters Pisces, and this can encourage you to turn the understanding of the core issues and what you need to do to create the changes you desire. But there is still a lingering intensity, and this can relate to a key issue you’re dealing with. The sun aligns with lighter and easier waters. The fire and water sign combination can bring a greater understanding of the core issues and what you need to do to create the changes you desire.

Virgo (August 23-September 22)

Are you ready to express your creativity? After last week’s focused and intense aspect, your perspective on self-expression and creativity may have shifted a little. This week, the sun conjuncts sobering Saturn and transformative Pluto early on, encouraging you to feel the silver lining to any issues you may have encountered. Whatever disappointments you’ve had, some- thing can come out of this that benefits you greatly. Do you need to talk things over? Once sweet Venus moves into your sector of socializing on Monday, her presence here can encourage you to share how you feel with loved ones and friends. If you’re usually reserved, this can help unburden you to a higher power. If it really is too complex for you to handle, hand it over to the force that is a spiritual component, too, as lovely Venus enters Pisces, and this can encourage you to turn the understanding of the core issues and what you need to do to create the changes you desire.

Libra (September 23-October 22)

Last week’s intense focus on your domestic sector could linger into this week, but you may feel generally lighter by the weekend. With the sun merging with prudent Saturn and power-broker Pluto on Monday, an opportunity could arise to resolve a family or domestic difficulty by big. If last week encouraged you to seek change, this week could see you act on this desire into action. And, step by step, you will begin to see a positive shift. Your ruler Venus moves into your sector of freedom and release. This doesn’t mean that a key bond is going to end, but rather that an opening for a reason can give you strength and courage. Charming Venus enters your sector of goals and power-broker Pluto on Monday, the awareness that everything is happening for a reason can give you strength and courage.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

Your mind holds the secret to success, and where you plant your attention can be the key to moving up the ladder or taking a step back. Last week’s intense focus on your sector of talk and thought may have made you aware of the need to change mindset. The sun can link to transformative Pluto and an internal Pluto on Monday, and you may now under- stand why this is so valuable. Even a small shift in attitude can bring positive results in your ex- perience. Once you get a taste of how this works, you can then master your destiny. Could romance be on the horizon? With luscious Venus moving into your romantic sector on Monday, this dreamy influence could see you eager to break the ice. This sensitive energy can make it easier to connect with others, because you can turn to them in your needs and feelings and get a sense of what moti- vates them.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

Positive Jupiter, your guide planet, is presently in your money zone and will be until late next year, so you have good fortune on your side. Still, it might not feel as though this week a little too intense energies continued to swirl deep. However, by the weekend you could feel a little more relaxed and easier within. The sun’s link to Jupiter can bring a sense of closure to a relationship issue that has been going on for a while. Although there may be drinks to brizzle and further discussions in the pipeline, there may also be a sense of freedom and release. This doesn’t mean that a key bond is going to end, but rather that an opening for a reason can give you strength and courage. Charming Venus enters your sector of goals and power-broker Pluto on Monday, the awareness that everything is happening for a reason can give you strength and courage.

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

If you were under intense pressure last week, this can now begin to ease. Still, with the sun linking to practical Saturn, your ruler, and exuberant Pluto, reflecting on recent expe- riences can yield some valuable insights. If you have lost something or had to give up something, this can help you avoid feeling overwhelmed when the pressure is on. Lovely Venus moves into your sector of communication on Monday, so this is the ideal time to talk things over. You might be surprised by how supportive others are and the advice they give you. And even if this has left you feeling a little vulnerable, you’ll soon be back on track with your sense of purpose restored. Go easy with spending from Thursday, though, be- cause inauspicious Mercury in your money zone this week might be easier than last week, but you’re not quite out of the woods yet. There is still a lingering intensity, and this can relate to a key issue you’re dealing with. The sun aligns with lighter and easier waters. The fire and water sign combination can bring a greater understanding of the core issues and what you need to do to create the changes you desire.
Established 1961

SHARING ACCOMMODATION

Sharing accommodation for Filipino ONLY Farwaniya block 4, near Big Jamiya, available on December 25, Contact 55571873.

I, Anmolika, My Passport No: N9725963 Permanent Address D/o Ranjit Singh R/o H No 23 Vivekanand Park Nicandarpur Maqada Distt Jalandhar have changed My Name to Anmolika Singh. (C 5489) 17-1-2020

Request for name correction on my passport Syed Mohammad Ehtesham Haider S/o S. M. Jamal Hyder change to S. M. Ehtsham Hyder, Indian national, Passport number RI452372. (C 5612)

Add Naigaon Christian Wadi Vasdi (W) Dist Patghat 401207) and I hereby declare that henceforth I will be called known and distinguished by my new name L.C. Austin Fulaji (Gazette No. X-26640) place vasai. (C 5611)

I have change my name from Sheikh Aslam Shaika Farid to Sheikh Aslam Shaikh Farid (C 5613) 16-1-2020

L, Mohammad Samsad Alam holder of Indian Passport No. M8779222 & Civil ID No. 2800101533006 has changed my name from Mohammad Samsad Alam to Mohammad Shamshad Alam (Given name) Alam (Surname) henceforth in all my dealings and documents, I will be known by name of Mohammad Shamshad Alam. (C 5610) 14-1-2020

I, I, Sreedharan Aniyan Kumbalaparambil, holder of Indian Passport No. M9886020 issued at Embassy of India, Kuwait. I am a permanent resident of Koorikkanchery, Thrissur, Kerala, India, and presently residing in Kuwait hereby declare my given name is Aniyan and surname is Kumbalaparambil Sreedharan. (C 5609)

BY DAY: Fair with light variable wind, with speed of 06 - 20 km/h.

BY NIGHT: Cold with light variable wind to light to moderate south easterly wind, with speed of 06 - 26 km/h.

WEATHER WATCH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATION</th>
<th>MAX. EXP.</th>
<th>MIN. REC.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KUWAIT CITY</td>
<td>21 °C</td>
<td>10 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KUWAIT AIRPORT</td>
<td>20 °C</td>
<td>05 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABDALY</td>
<td>20 °C</td>
<td>06 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUBYAN</td>
<td>19 °C</td>
<td>08 °C</td>
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<td>JAHRA</td>
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4 DAYS FORECAST

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<tr>
<th>DAY</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>WEATHER</th>
<th>Temperatures MAX.</th>
<th>Wind Direction</th>
<th>Wind Speed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>01/17</td>
<td>Fair and Partly cloudy</td>
<td>22 °C 08 °C</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>12 - 40 km/h</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>01/18</td>
<td>Cloudy with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times</td>
<td>23 °C 13 °C</td>
<td>SE-NW</td>
<td>20 - 50 km/h</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>01/19</td>
<td>Fair and some high clouds will appear</td>
<td>21 °C 07 °C</td>
<td>NW</td>
<td>12 - 42 km/h</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>01/20</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>20 °C 06 °C</td>
<td>NW</td>
<td>12 - 40 km/h</td>
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PRAYER TIMES

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fajr</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunrise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zuhr</td>
<td>11:58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asr</td>
<td>14:53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunset</td>
<td>17:11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isha</td>
<td>18:33</td>
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RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>MIN. Temp.</td>
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<td>MAX. RH</td>
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<td>MIN. RH</td>
<td>24 %</td>
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<td>MAX. Wind</td>
<td>NW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</table>
Zain platinum sponsor of Kuwait Aviation Show

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced its platinum sponsorship of the second edition of the Kuwait Aviation Show. The event, organized by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) from 15-18 January 2020 at Kuwait International Airport, comes under the patronage of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

The show's opening ceremony witnessed the attendance of HH the Amir's representative Deputy Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, President of the DGCA Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah, Head of the Show's Organizing Committee Ahmad Bahbahani, Chief Corporate Communications and Relations Officer of Zain Kuwait Waleed Al-Khashti during the inaugural ceremony of the Kuwait Aviation Show 2020.

Zain's support to this event comes as part of its commitment as a main contributing partner of the Kuwait National Development Plan (New Kuwait) that stems from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's conceptualized vision of a new Kuwait by 2035. The company is keen on reflecting its key role as a leading national company in the Kuwaiti private sector, which is considered a strategic partner in the country's developmental goals and one of its main pillars. The Kuwait Aviation Show aims at contributing to achieving one of the Plan's pillars by transforming Kuwait into a regional center that connects the East and West and developing the aviation infrastructure.

Zain takes part in the event through its own dedicated booth, where it showcases the latest innovations and most advanced services it offers via its Zain Drone subsidiary. Zain Drone’s Drone as-a-Service (DaaS) solutions unlock opportunities in various industries to fast-track growth and help organizations benefit from the Internet of Things (IoT) in an efficient, safer and faster way. The disruptive power of drone solutions bolsters efficiency as it offers state-of-the-art bespoke solutions while providing advanced analytics for governments and businesses.

The Kuwait Aviation Show 2020, organized by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), specializes in civil, military, commercial, and private aviation, as well as airport supplies and aviation services. During the event, airport and aircraft manufacturers showcase their latest commercial and military equipment, services, navigation tools, and more. The show also features products and services related to aircrafts and helicopters for businessmen, emergency services, and more.
Massive tariffs remain in place, but markets are relieved

WASHINGTON: The United States and China signed a truce in their trade war on Wednesday after nearly two years of tensions, bringing relief to markets but largely leaving massive tariffs in place. The “phase one” deal is also a boon for Donald Trump as he faces an impeachment trial and a tough re-election fight this year, with the US president hailing the agreement as “momentous”.

However, with tariffs still in place on two-thirds of more than $500 billion in imports from China, US consumers and businesses will be left to foot the bill. The agreement includes pledges from China to beef up purchases of US agricultural goods and other exports for two years, provides some protections for US technology, and new enforcement mechanisms that allow Washington to quickly impose penalties that Beijing cannot respond to.

“This deal is a massive step toward resolving the world’s most dangerous trade dispute,” US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He, who has led Beijing’s negotiations, said in a joint statement. “Together, we are righting the wrongs of the past.”

The agreement “heals the wounds of the past,” Mnuchin told reporters. “We are both winners.”

Trump signed the deal with China’s Vice Premier Liu He, who has led Beijing’s negotiations with US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin.

UK housing market gets a boost from election: RICS

LONDON: Britain’s housing market got a boost from Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s big election win in December, a survey showed yesterday, a pick-up that will be noted by the Bank of England as it considers whether to cut interest rates this month.

Agreed home sales rose for the first time since May and expectations of future sales also jumped, according to the report by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS). A measure of new buyer inquiries hit its highest level since before the Brexit referendum in 2016.

RICS Chief Economist Simon Rubinsohn said it remained to be seen if the recovery continued, given the uncertainty over whether Britain can strike a trade deal with the European Union before a deadline at the end of 2020. However, the sales expectations indicators clearly point to the prospect of more upbeat trends in transactions, Rubinsohn said, noting that potential buyers were increasingly following through on initial inquiries.

The RICS survey echoed other early signs of a pick-up in confidence among consumers and companies since Johnson’s Conservatives won the election emphatically on Dec. 12, clearing up some of the uncertainty that has weighed on the economy.

Rate decision

However, several officials from the Bank of England, including Governor Mark Carney, have said interest rates might need to be cut if the overall economy remains weak. The next BoE rate decision is due on Jan. 30. “The marked improvement in the December RICS survey provides further evidence that should persuade the BoE that there has been an upswing in sentiment following the election,” Allan Monks, an economist with JP Morgan, said.

He said the main focus of investors now was the preliminary PMI surveys of British businesses in January which are due to be published on Jan. 24. Andy Chaytor, a rates strategist at Nomura, said the housing market was one of the best early indicators of economic activity in Britain and he thought the stronger RICS report would lead to a modest increase in next week’s PMIs.

Britain’s housing market has slowed along with the broader economy since the Brexit referendum.

But in December, the monthly RICS house price balance rose to -2, its highest since June, from -11 in November. A rebound in the market in London and neighboring southeastern England pushed up new instructions for home sales at a national level. The housing market in the capital has been particularly hard hit by worries about Brexit in recent months, as well as higher taxes on expensive properties.

The RICS survey was conducted between Dec 20 and Jan 9.
Business

Malaysia talks to India over palm curbs as wider trade dispute looms

India placed curbs on refined palm oil imports last week

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia is talking to the Indian government and trade officials in a bid to resolve concerns over New Delhi's new palm oil import restrictions, a minister in Kuala Lumpur said yesterday amid a trade spat between the countries. India's Hindu nationalist government has repeatedly objected to Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad speaking out against recent policies which critics say discriminate against Muslims. Malaysia is a Muslim-majority nation.

India, the world's biggest buyer of edible oils, last week placed curbs on imports of refined palm oil and has informally asked traders to stop importing all kinds of palm oil from Malaysia, the world's second biggest producer and exporter of palm oil. Reuters reported on Wednesday, citing sources, that New Delhi could also restrict imports of petroleum, aluminum ingots, liquefied natural gas, computer parts and microprocessors from Malaysia.

However, India's Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal yesterday said New Delhi had not imposed any curbs on imports from Malaysia and Turkey, and that the government was not contemplating any restrictions on the two countries. "This year, we foresee more challenges in some of our major markets," Teresa Kok, Malaysia's Trade Minister, said yesterday amid a trade spat between the countries.

On the sidelines of a separate event yesterday. On question from Reuters on the spat with India on questions concerning the Malaysia-India dispute, Mahathir, the 94-year-old premier who is vocal on matters concerning the Malaysia-India dispute, said he will continue to speak out against "wrong things" even if it costs his country financially.

Last month, he criticized India's new religion-based citizenship laws, which critics say discriminate against Muslims, and its policies in Kashmir which is also claimed by Pakistan. India was Malaysia's biggest buyer of palm oil in 2018, buying 4.4 million tons. In 2020, purchases could fall below 1 million tons if relations do not improve, Indian traders say.

To make up for the potential loss, Malaysian officials say they are trying to sell more to countries such as Pakistan, the Philippines, Myanmar, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. But replacing a massive buyer like India will not be easy, and there have been calls for both countries to talk it out putting aside any "personal or diplomatic ego".

The other concern for Malaysia is that following the signing of an initial trade deal between the United States and China on Wednesday, China could buy more soyoil from the United States and less Malaysian palm oil. —Reuters

Nestle to invest 2bn Swiss francs in recycled plastics

GENEVA: Swiss food giant Nestle said yesterday it would invest 2 billion Swiss francs (1.8 billion euros, $2.1 billion) over five years to cut its use of virgin plastics in favor of food-grade recycled plastics. The company, whose brands include Nespresso coffee, Vittel water and Smarties chocolates, also plans to invest in new types of sustainable packaging to meet its target of making all its packaging recyclable or reusable by 2025.

Nestle also said in a statement it would reduce its use of virgin plastics by one third over the next five years and would set up a venture fund with 250 million Swiss francs to invest in start-up companies working in the recycling sector. To create a market for recycled plastics, it said it would source up to 2 million metric tons of food-grade recycled plastics and allocated more than 1.5 billion Swiss francs to pay a premium for the material between now and 2025.

"No plastic should end up in landfill or as litter," Nestle chief executive Mark Schneider said in the statement. Major corporations, often criticized by campaigners for putting profit before the environment, are trying to respond to growing pressure from consumers for more responsible practices. Food and cosmetics giant Unilever announced last September that it will cut its use of new plastic in packaging by half by 2025, acknowledging that the move was partly aimed at young, more environmentally conscious customers.

Fast food giant McDonald's pledged in October to speed up moves to minimize the use of plastic in its restaurants in Europe. "Making recycled plastics safe for food is an enormous challenge for our industry. That is why in addition to minimizing plastics use and collecting waste, we want to close the loop and make more plastics infinitely recyclable," said Nestle's Schneider. —AFP

Irish farmers fire election warning shot with Dublin tractor protest

DUBLIN: Irish farmers paralyzed parts of central Dublin for the second time in as many months by parking more than 100 tractors in the streets on Wednesday in a protest against the government on the first day of its re-election campaign. Prime Minister Leo Varadkar launched his party's campaign for the Feb. 8 vote - which he called on Tuesday night - near the border with Northern Ireland to focus on his key role in Britain's divorce deal with the European Union.

But in Dublin, farmers arrived on tractors from all over Ireland to protest over low beef prices and government climate-change initiatives they say unfairly target their livelihoods.

Varadkar acknowledged on Tuesday that more had to be done for people to feel the benefit of the booming economy in their own finances, and his re-election could hinge on the attitudes of those whom opposition parties say feel left behind. "(Varadkar's Fine Gael party) will suffer in rural Ireland," said protestor Ollie Gargan, 43, who runs a farm with 30 suckler cattle in the northern county of Cavan. He voted for Fine Gael in the 2016 election but ruled out doing so again. "They are just throwing crumbs from the top table. There's no future for young farmers," Gargan said.

Some farmers who left their tractors to protest at the gates of government buildings could be heard shouting at Varadkar as he greeted EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen outside his office ahead of a meeting between the pair. Farmers staged a similar protest in cordoned-off areas of Dublin in November when, rather than leave at the allotted time, many slept in their vehicles overnight and refused to leave until Agriculture Minister Michael Creed met them.

Creed said on Wednesday the government could not intervene on beef prices but had secured an extra 120 million euros ($133.8 million) of income support for farmers this year in what he acknowledged was a difficult year for the industry. At the wheel in tractors covered in placards with slogans such as "Stop Farmer Exploitation" and "Help Save Rural Ireland", angry farmers said that was not enough.

"There's been no effort, Zilch," said John Deash, a 50-year-old beef farmer from the western county of Roscommon. The woes farmers face, including potential losses from increased barriers to trade with post-Brexit Britain, may become a battleground in rural districts just as high rents and housing shortages is to dominate the campaign in urban areas. —Reuters
EU firms see lack of transparency in China’s Belt and Road projects

Survey finds fewer companies bid for BRI projects

BEIJING: A lack of information and transparency are top barriers for European companies seeking involvement in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, according to a survey published yesterday by the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China. Only 20 out of 132 firms polled said they have bid for projects related to the BRI, a massive global network of ports, railways, roads and industrial parks spanning Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe. The BRI—Chinese President Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy initiative—has also faced criticism for swaddling poor nations with crippling debt and for being too opaque.

A lack of information on deals and “non-transparent” procurement systems were the biggest barriers identified by European firms in the survey. Of the companies that bid to participate in BRI projects, only 10 percent got wind of the project through publicly available information. “The vast majority were informed either by a partner company or by the Chinese government, meaning that they were essentially hand-picked to participate,” the EU Chamber said in the report.

Chamber President Joerg Wuttke said the survey showed that for businesses, gains from the BRI have been “quite insignificant”, with European firms tending to fill only niche roles. More than half of the companies that won bids said in the report. “ternary, quality and fairness, the EU Chamber said in the report.

While a quarter of respondents said the BRI—which was launched in 2013—has improved transparency, quality and fairness, this trend is less evident when it comes to access to projects.

The EU Chamber urged China to take on an open and transparent procurement system for BRI-related projects as well as perform feasibility and environmental impact studies for them, in line with international standards. It also recommended that the EU prioritize its “connectivity strategy”—which aims to improve transport, digital and energy links between Europe and Asia while promoting environmental and labor standards—to complement and offer a credible alternative to the BRI. — AFP

Hyundai and Kia bet on London startup for electric cars

LONDON: South Korea’s Hyundai and its Kia affiliate announced plans yesterday for a major investment in London-based startup Arrival to produce next-generation electric vehicles that cost less than standard-engine models. The 100-million-euro ($110 million) bet on the five-year-old technology firm comes as some manufacturers abandon Britain because of uncertainties about how it will trade with EU nations once it leaves the bloc this month.

Arrival is focused on designing and producing so-called Generation 2 electric vehicles, which are environmentally friendly cars made from scratch rather than being retrofitted, standard-engine production models. “Generation 2 vehicles are assembled using small footprint micro-factories, located in areas of demand and profitable at thousands of units,” the three companies said in a joint statement.

Hyundai and Kia have a shared ownership structure but target slightly different markets and demographics. “The eco-friendly vehicle market in Europe is expected to grow rapidly due to re-inforcement of environmental regulations,” Hyundai’s research and development head said. “This strategic partnership will empower our companies to scale Generation 2 electric vehicles globally.” Arrival said its models are designed to match the performance and field of traditional vehicles, making the decision to switch to electric inevitable. — AFP

European auto market grew by 1.2% in 2019

PARIS: The European auto market grew by 1.2 percent last year, with a push in December raising the total number of sales to 15.3 million vehicles, sector association ACEA said yesterday. Regulatory changes were behind a jump of 21.7 percent in December compared with the same month a year earlier; the European Automobile Manufacturers’ Association said.

Throughout the year Volkswagen cemented its place at the top of Europe auto sales, with its figures up 3.1 percent. The group includes the Audi, Porsche, Seat and Skoda marques.

In second place was French automaker PSA, which owns Peugeot, Citroen, DS, Opel and Vauxhall, though it reported a 1.1 percent drop in sales. Its French rival the Renault group that includes the Alpine, Dacia and Lada brands, the third largest by European sales, increased by 1.1 percent for the year as a whole. ACEA data showed. The European market had started the year in decline, “but the last quarter, and the month of December in particular, pushed the annual performance into positive territory”, the ACEA, said in a statement. Of the main European markets Germany saw the highest sales increase, up a strong five percent, with France rising 1.9 percent and Italy up 0.3 percent.

On the other hand sales in Spain were down 4.8 percent and in Britain they slid 2.4 percent.

The European market has been “artificially boosted” by the tightening of standards on carbon dioxide emissions, said Flavien Neuvy, director of the Cetelem Observatory, a research unit of BNP Paribas. — AFP

Goldman Sachs Q4 profits hit as it readies for hefty 1MDB fine

NEW YORK: Goldman Sachs reported a drop in fourth-quarter profits on Wednesday following a mixed performance in its operating businesses as it set aside $1.1 billion in anticipation of settlements in the 1MDB scandal. Chief Executive David Solomon said the “preponderance” of the $1.1 billion was related to 1MDB, a scandal-plagued Malaysian investment fund for which the US bank helped raise $6.5 billion. The Justice Department has said more than $4.5 billion was stolen from 1MDB

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by high-level officials at the fund and their associates between 2009 and 2015.

The scandal has dramatically reshaped politics in Malaysia and led to US indictments of two ex-Goldman bankers, one of whom pleaded guilty. Settlement talks with US and Malaysian authorities are “progressing and remain active,” Solomon told analysts on a conference call. “We are working hard to bring closure to this matter as quickly as possible,” he added.

“Over the past several years, we have taken the time to be self-critical and reflective to ensure that our culture of integrity, collaboration and escalation only improves from this experience,” he said. “These efforts will continue.” The legal charge played a role in Goldman’s 25.8 percent drop in fourth-quarter profits to $1.7 billion, while revenues rose 25.4 percent to $8.9 billion.

In addition to higher legal costs, Goldman spent more on compensation, benefits and technology. — AFP

Goldman Sachs chairman says he takes ‘full responsibility’ for 1MDB

NEW YORK: Goldman Sachs chairman said on Wednesday the US investment bank’s $1 billion settlement with US authorities over its role in the 1MDB scandal was a “hard lesson.”

The company agreed to pay $1.1 billion to settle criminal and civil charges in the case of 1MDB, a Malaysian investment fund. The US bank helped raise $6.5 billion for the fund, of which more than $4 billion was thought to have been stolen.

“Today’s resolution... is testament to the hard work and dedication of the Goldman Sachs team,” the chairman said in a statement. “I take full responsibility for our work on 1MDB.”

Goldman is the latest in a line of banks including HSBC and Barclays that have faced scrutiny over 1MDB, a Malaysian government investment fund that helped fund projects in the country and across Asia. 1MDB, which issued billions of dollars in bonds backed by oil and gas reserves, has been under investigation by US and Malaysian authorities.

The US Department of Justice said on Monday that it had charged two current and former Goldman Sachs employees with crimes related to the fund.

Goldman, which has cooperated with US authorities throughout the investigation, has said it is transparent about the 1MDB scandal. The fund is led by former Goldman Sachs banker Roger Ng, who was arrested in Malaysia in July on fraud charges.

Goldman agreed to pay $2.8 billion to settle civil charges in the case of 1MDB in November. The company was accused of helping to raise billions of dollars for the fund that was supposed to be used to finance infrastructure projects.

Goldman has faced scrutiny over its role in the 1MDB scandal, which has led to the resignation of chief executive David Solomon and the departure of a number of other senior executives.

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Mideast stoked tensions but no shock on oil market: IEA

Agency sees ample stocks and continuous production

PARIS: The brief spike in Middle East tensions as the US and Iran faced off has served as a reminder of the havoc disruptions in supply from the key oil producing region could wreak on the global economy, the IEA said yesterday. But it said ample stocks and production elsewhere mean the world is relatively well placed to react to a crisis. Washington and Tehran are currently in a standoff after tit-for-tat military actions over the past two weeks that sparked fears of a large-scale confrontation that could choke off the Strait of Hormuz through which 20 percent of global oil supplies flows.

“We cannot know how the geopolitical situation will play out over time, but for now the risk of a major threat to oil supplies appears to have receded,” the International Energy Agency said in its latest monthly report on oil markets. It noted that oil prices have receded after jumping $4 per barrel, much as they did in September when a series of attacks on Saudi oil facilities briefly knocked out part of the production of the key exporter.

“Today’s market where non-OPEC production is rising strongly and OECD stocks are 9 million barrels above the five-year average, provides a solid base from which to react to any escalation in geopolitical tension,” said the Paris-based organization, which advises industrial nations that are members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development on energy policy.

“As a back-up resource, the value of strategic stocks has once again been confirmed,” The IEA was created in the wake of the 1973 oil shock provoked by an embargo imposed by the OPEC cartel and IEA members now hold strategic reserves worth three months of net imports. The oil market has been driven in recent years by a surge of non-OPEC production that has outstripped demand, with OPEC and its allies moving to restrain production to support prices.

The IEAs forecasts see faster growth in demand for oil this year thanks to expectations that global growth will pick up as trade tensions diminish. However, the 2.1 million barrels per day (mbd) growth in non-OPEC supplies will far outpace the increased demand of 1.2 mbd, putting further pressure on OPEC and its allies to further cut production. During 2019, falls in OPEC production nearly completely offset a rise in production from countries outside the cartel. OPEC and allied countries that include Russia agreed in December to curb crude oil production by an additional 0.9 mbd from January. —AFP

US economy continues ‘modest’ growth: Fed

WASHINGTON: The US economy showed less-than-stellar growth in final weeks of 2019, but produced solid holiday sales and enters 2020 with a “modestly favorable” outlook, the Federal Reserve said Wednesday. On the day the US and China signed a long awaited partial trade truce after months of conflict, the Fed said tariffs continued to weigh on growth in some economies.

The Fed’s “beige book” survey of conditions nationwide painted a mixed picture, with circumstances improving in the Richmond and Dallas areas but lagging in the Philadelphia, St. Louis and Kansas City regions. “In many districts, tariffs and trade uncertainty continued to weigh on some businesses,” the report said. However, “Expectations for the near-term outlook remained modestly favorable across the nation.” President Donald Trump last month relieved some of the pressure on American businesses by canceling a planned round of tariffs on Chinese goods, and slashing some others as part of a partial tariff deal with Beijing, ending nearly two years of escalating conflict.

The two sides signed the deal on Wednesday. But many of the China tariffs remain in place, costs borne by US businesses and consumers, which are weighing on investment and growth. Trump also has slapped tariffs on European exports including wine, and threatened to do more. In the Philadelphia region, the looming wine tariffs “prompted an area merchant to stock up with over 35,000 cases” to beat the sanctions and minimize price hikes, according to the report. Overall economic growth in the area “slowed to a slight pace,” it said. Across the United States, “holiday sales were said to be sold” in the crucial annual shopping period, while tourism was “mixed” and manufacturing—a sector hit badly by Trump’s trade wars—was “essentially flat” in most areas. Labor remained scarce, with employers struggling to fill open positions, a trend that now dates back more than a year.

But in the manufacturing, transportation and energy sectors, there were jobs cuts and reduced hiring. The Kansas City region was mixed, with strong retail sales and solid performance in the professional and high-tech services industries, but manufacturing and transport “continued to decline.” Fed policymakers cut interest rates three times in 2019 but said toward the end of the year they did not expect to do so again unless circumstances changed substantially. The beige book report was prepared in advance of the Fed’s next policy meeting January 28-29.

Markets overwhelmingly expect policymakers to leave interest rates untouched until November at the earliest. —AFP

US uncorks a bottle of wine tariffs on American firms

WASHINGTON: Would you pay $28 for a 14 glass of French wine? Most people would balk and instead substitute a more reasonably priced option, from Australia or Virginia or California, which means the importer of that French wine, and the warehouse workers who stored it and the truck driver who delivered it all will find their jobs in jeopardy. It’s a bad time for the wine industry in the United States, French, Spanish and German wines, with a few exceptions, have been hit by 25 percent US tariffs in a longstanding fight between the United States and the European Union over illegal government subsidies to aircraft manufacturer Airbus. But President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly shown his preference for tough talk and steep tariffs, is threatening to raise those tariffs to 100 percent and remove the exemptions.

One wine importer already has had to lay off staff—including his own son. “I just finished 35 years in business. Over that time I’ve probably fired eight or 10 people. They all had it coming and most of them were expecting it,” said Dan Kravitz, founder of Hand Picked Selections, which specializes in wines from the French Mediterranean and Spain. “I never laid off anybody until October 18,” when the tariffs on wine and other European goods took effect.

Krivitz said he cut four of 13 full-time employees and two part-timers “and that included my son.” Raising the tariff to 100 percent would put him and many others in the industry out of business, he said in an interview. Ironically, he started his wine importing business so that he could spend more time with his young son, shifting years ago from working in restaurants. But in the changing business environment, his son’s design skills became expendable.

Uncertainty means delayed investment

Unlike Trump’s multiple, unilateral trade conflicts—over steel, aluminum, autos and with China—the Airbus dispute predates his administration, and the tariffs on $7.5 billion in products from the European Union were authorized by the World Trade Organization following 15 years of litigation. The tariffs are a bid to hurt European companies to pressure their governments to abide by global trade rules and withdraw the subsidies—which the United States argues allow Airbus to compete unfairly against Boeing. But American businesses argue they are collateral damage in the dispute and many may not survive. “They might be putting a sanction toward the EU but it’s going to directly impact the small businesses in America and also the customers,” said Shelley Lindgren, wine director and co-owner of A16, an Italian restaurant with locations in San Francisco and Oakland.

“So we’re all going to lose big and maybe a lot of businesses will close for something not related to food and wine.” The Distilled Spirits Council of the United States said “jobs have been eliminated and hiring halted” due to the tariffs, “and up to 78,600 US jobs could ultimately be lost if these tariffs remain in effect or are increased.” —AFP
Mickelson has Ryder Cup, not senior circuit, in his sights

NEW YORK: Phil Mickelson will be eligible for the PGA Tour’s senior circuit this year but the five-times major champion said on Wednesday he has not given it much thought and is focused instead on making the US Ryder Cup team.

Mickelson, who turns 50 in June, feels that a decision he made years ago to have a greater work ethic and commitment to physical health has left him in no rush to tee it up on the PGA Tour Champions with players he idolised as a child.

“It’s nice to have the option to move over to another tour, but it’s also nice to have the challenge of competing out here,” Mickelson told a news conference in La Quinta, California, where he is tournament host for this week’s The American Express.

“And I don’t often voice too many goals, but one of them is to make the Ryder Cup, it should be a pretty obvious goal so I need to play enough tournaments out here and play well to be able to achieve that particular goal.”

In 20 PGA Tour events last season, Mickelson made the cut 12 times and had two top-10 finishes, including a three-shot victory at the Pebble Beach Pro-Am in February.

The left-hander will be in action over the next four weeks with starts at La Quinta followed by the Farmers Insurance Open in San Diego, the Saudi International and then back to Pebble Beach to defend his title. “There’s a chance that if I do what I expect then I may end up competing for years out here. And there’s a chance that maybe I am misguided in my thinking and that I should move over,” said Mickelson, who added that he feels better now than 15 years ago.

“But a lot will be decided or seen in the first six months because I feel like I’m ready to play.”

Apart from aiming for his first major title since the 2013 British Open, Mickelson is eager to earn a spot on Steve Stricker’s US squad for the Sept. 25-27 Ryder Cup against Europe at Whistling Straits in Wisconsin. Mickelson was one of four of Jim Furyk’s captain’s picks for the 2018 edition of the biennial event and he had an 0-2 record as Europe regained the cup.

His overall Ryder Cup record is far from spectacular, having won only 18 of his 47 matches in 12 appearances, but he said he had let Stricker know how badly he wants to be on this year’s team.

He does not, however, want to get on by virtue of being a captain’s pick. “If I play to the level that I believe I’m capable of I’ll make the team. But if not, you’ve got to give those spots to some younger guys that haven’t had the chance to play and compete the way I have,” said Mickelson. “So I have six, eight months to get it done and I’ve got plenty of time, every bit of fair opportunity to go out and prove myself and play some great golf.”

“So there’s not much he’s going to be able to do as a captain because I need to… earn my way on the team.” — Reuters

Amir’s 9th Int’l shooting grand prix to conclude today

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Competitions of HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber 9th International Shooting Grand Prix will be concluded today as the final two gold medals will be given out for the sporting event, by shooting at 100 targets, as competition will start at 9 am.

The competition will include the open category of men and women, and the seniors over 50 years.

Meanwhile, Kuwait’s shooters Mansour Al-Rashidi, who qualified for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics won the skeet bronze medal Wednesday, as Serbia maintained its position at the top of the medal table with two gold, one silver and one bronze, followed by Czech Republic with two gold, Italy with one gold, three silver and a bronze, Kazakhstan won one gold, two silver and three bronze, Kuwait one gold, one silver and two bronze, UAE and Greece one gold, Bulgaria and Pakistan one silver, Armenia and Lithuania one bronze.

Mansour Al-Rashidi ended in third place following very stiff competition with Kazakhstan’s Alexander Mukhamediyev and Italy’s Giancarlo Tozza. Meanwhile, in the women’s category Czech Barbora Sumova won the gold medal followed by Kazakh Assem Orynbay in second and her compatriot Anas-Matissiya Molchanova won third place.

President of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations, President of Higher Organizing Committee Eng Duaaj Al-Otaibi said he is happy with the results made in the tournament which was held with the participation of a large number of world champions. He said Kuwait won a bronze medal in the skeet event by Mansour Al-Rashidi who competed with Italian, Czech and Kazakh shooters. Al-Otaibi congratulated all winners, volunteers committees and media for their contribution to the success of the Grand Prix.

Shooter Mansour Al-Rashidi said HH the Amir Grand Prix is one tournament many shooters are keen to participate in, adding that such tournament helps in preparing for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic for those who already qualified. He said competition was very strong, and dedicated his win to HH the Amir.

Kazakh shooter Mukhamediyev on his part agreed that the competition was very tough as elite group of shooters competed and remained very strong until the very end. He said the weather contributed to making it tough, and he gained more experience by his participation. He said his country’s shooting federation is keen on participating in HH the Amir of Kuwait Grand Prix, which has a good reputation.

Czech shooter Barbora Sumova said she expected to win a medal before being able to win the gold medal, adding that she needed high concentration and continued training to be able to win. She said she thanked the officials of the Grand Prix, which added to the sport of shooting in the Middle East and Europe due to the broad participation from various countries.
India’s cricket ‘superfan’ granny dead

NEW DELHI: India’s cricket bosses led nationwide tributes yesterday following the death of the country’s wheelchair-bound “superfan” Charulata Patel at the age of 87. The grandmother shot to attention after being spotted in the crowd watching India play Bangladesh at last year’s World Cup in England, enthusiastically blowing a vuvuzela and with the Indian tricolour painted on her cheeks.

After the match — which India won — captain Virat Kohli and deputy captain Rohit Sharma sought out Patel and asked for her blessings for the rest of their campaign. She later featured in a Pepsi advert cheering on the Indian team for the tournament.

Kohli said that she was “one of the most passionate and dedicated fans I’ve ever seen”. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) paid tribute on Twitter after Patel’s family announced her death.

#TeamIndia’s Superfan Charulata Patel-ji will always remain in our hearts and her passion for the game will keep motivating us. May her soul rest in peace,” said the BCCI. The family said on Patel’s official Instagram account, cricket.daadi (grandmother), that she died on Monday.

They thanked Kohli for making her a social media sensation last year, saying “she loved the attention.” Meeting Kohli and Sharma had been “the best day of her life,” they added. “She told us this on multiple occasions.” —AFP

Ireland stun world champions Windies by 4 runs in T20 opener

ST GEORGE’S, GRENADA: Ireland rode a career-best 95 from opener Paul Stirling before keeping their nerve in a nail-biting final over to pull off a four-run win over world champions West Indies in the first of a three-match Twenty20 series on Wednesday.

The burly Stirling steered Ireland to 208-7 in their 20 overs. However, the home side appeared comfortably on course for victory — bringing up their hundred inside 10 overs with just two wickets down — until the game was decided in the last over.

Needing 5 to win, all-rounder Josh Little (3-29) got rid of the dangerous Dwayne Bravo, one of two wickets to fall in the last over. With five needed off the last ball and seven wickets down, Hayden Walsh could only wave his bat into thin air in a desperate attempt to win the game.

It was only Ireland’s second victory in T20 cricket over the West Indies who went into the game having swept the ODI series 3-0.

“Everyone is ecstatic, we came so close in that second ODI (lost by one wicket) and it maybe affected us in that third ODI, so to show the bottle and come out against one of the top teams in T20 cricket and get a win was great for the vibe of the team,” said Ireland skipper Andrew Balbirnie.

For the home side, opener Evin Lewis top scored with 53 off 28 balls with six fours and three sixes. It was Lewis’s sixth T20 half-century and followed knocks of 95 and 102 in the one-dayers. West Indian captain Kieron Pollard hit a breezy 31 from 18 balls, threatening to take the game away from Ireland.

But the Irish fielders continued to hold their catches to take the game into the last over. Earlier, Stirling carted six fours and eight sixes in his 47-ball innings for his seventh T20 half-century. He put on 154 for the first wicket with fellow opener Kevin O’Brien (48).

“It was a really good pitch and I think we put a par score on which showed in the end, we felt we were in the game the whole way through,” said Stirling. “It was touch and go, but we’re enjoying the tight games — we came out the right side this time, so it’s a nice feeling.”

Ireland made 100 off just 6.3 overs and 150 in the 12th over before the West Indies bowlers applied the brakes after the openers fell within two runs of each other.

Bravo, playing an international match for the first time since September 2016, was taken for 18 runs by Stirling in his first over. But the veteran star recovered to finish with 2-28 off his four overs, clean bowling O’Brien.

Leg-spinner Walsh took 1-25, his sole victim being Stirling caught at deep-midwicket going for the big shot which would have brought him a century. The second and third games in the series take place on Saturday and Sunday in St Kitts. —AFP

Finch wary of India fightback in 2nd ODI

NEW DELHI: Australia are braced for an Indian backlash when they meet today in their second one-day international, captain Aaron Finch said.

The hosts suffered a crushing 10-wicket defeat Tuesday in the opening game of the three-match showdown after Finch and opening partner David Warner hit unbeaten centuries in Mumbai.

Finch, who smashed 110, believes the loss will sting India into action in Rajkot today.

“They will fight back, no doubt,” Finch told the Cricket Australia website. “They are a great side, got some world-class players.”

Left-handed Warner led the rout of the Indian bowlers with a destructive 128 off 112 deliveries in Australia’s chase of 256. The openers put on a record 258-run stand — the highest for any wicket in a 50-over game against India — as Australia reached their target with almost 13 overs to spare. Finch said Warner is playing unbelievably well. “I think it’s so hard to bowl to him once he gets in,” he said.

“His footwork is pretty good, his mental state is unbelievable when he is out in the middle. He is just so clear with his thoughts and his game. He is in top shape,” he said.

Australian bowlers also played their part, with pace pair Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins sharing five wickets. Finch lauded his lead bowlers, but hinted pacerman Josh Hazlewood could still be involved in the series which ends in Bangalore on Sunday.

“With back-to-back games... and a reasonably heavy Test load, I’m sure Josh will come in for one of them at some point,” he said. —AFP
NEW DELHI: MS Dhoni was absent from the list of centrally contracted players published by the Indian cricket board yesterday, raising fresh speculation about the 38-year-old warhorse’s future.

Dhoni has not appeared for club or country since the World Cup in July and the wicket-keeper-batsman has been expected to announce his retirement for some time.

The former captain of the national side, who serves as an honorary lieutenant colonel in the army reserves, spent part of last year with his unit in strife-torn Kashmir — missing an ODI tour of the West Indies.

He has not featured in any series since and was not named as part of the squad to tour New Zealand later this month.

He quit Test cricket in 2014 but continued to be India’s batting mainstay in limited-overs cricket despite passing on the captaincy to Virat Kohli in 2017.

However Dhoni may be eyeing a last hurrah at the Twenty20 World Cup in October and November in Australia.

He is expected to lead the Chennai Super Kings in the Indian Premier League (IPL) this April-May.

The Indian selectors have been grooming young stumper Rishabh Pant, 22, to fill Dhoni’s gloves. Previously Dhoni was in the A-grade category of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) central list, earning a guaranteed $715,000.

Pant is among 11 players listed in the A-grade contract with batsman KL Rahul taking Dhoni’s place. Kohli, senior batsman Rohit Sharma and paceman Jasprit Bumrah are guaranteed at least $1 million each in the A-plus category for the period October 2019 to September 2020.— AFP

Injury-hit NZ call up Bennett for India T20

WELLINGTON: New Zealand have called in Hamish Bennett to shore up their attack for the Twenty20 series against India this month, while Trent Boult and Lockie Ferguson remain on the injured list.

The 32-year-old Bennett was a regular in the New Zealand one-day international side in 2011 but has played only four ODIs since, the last against Bangladesh in 2017 when several regulars were busy with Indian Premier League commitments.

Although he has not played Twenty20 at international level, Bennett has been a consistent achiever in the domestic league and selector Gavin Larson said his call-up was a reward for his form and perseverance.

“Over the past few seasons he’s consistently been one of the top domestic white-ball bowlers and we’ve been impressed how he’s been able to evolve his game,” Larson said. “We all know he brings good pace and bounce but it’s the clever variations he’s added that make him such a well-rounded Twenty20 bowler.”

Bennett is joined in the pace bowling ranks by Tim Southee, Blair Tickner and Scott Kuggeleijn, by Tim Southee, Blair Tickner and Scott Kuggeleijn, with Mitchell Santner and Ish Sodhi the spinners.

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TOKYO: Cricket is barely on the radar in Japan, where baseball, soccer and sumo wrestling dominate the sporting landscape, but all that could be about to change after his under-19 (U-19) team qualified for the World Cup in South Africa.

It is early days yet, of course, with the Japanese Cricket Association (JCA) founded in 1984 and made an ICC member only in 1995. The U-19 side was founded in 2017 and took part in 2019’s East-Asia Pacific qualifying tournament to get some practice.

After a 170-run win over Samoa in their opener, however, they went unbeaten to book their place in the U-19 World Cup, which starts on Friday. The team includes five players of Indian origin and several with mixed heritage, reflecting Japan’s slowly increasing cultural diversity.

“Cricket is an international sport and with the changing Japanese domestic demographic, this is what the future is going to be,” said JCA chief executive Naoki Alex Miyaji, who has a Japanese father and Scottish mother.

Miyaji pointed to the success of Japan’s rugby team at the 2019 World Cup, where a squad featuring 16 players born outside the country reached the quarter-finals for the first time.

“We need to change and see that traditional Japanese thinking is not going to help Japan in the future. Japan needs to open up a bit,” Miyaji said.

“We need to learn (from) ... the really good reception from the Japanese people after the World Cup. Those players ... are Japanese, they speak the language and they represent the values that people can relate to.”

In a bid to increase the number of people playing cricket from the current 3,000, the JCA have targeted two “Cities of Cricket” – Sano, which is 80 km (49.71 miles) north of Tokyo, and Akishima, which is to the west of the capital.

“Rather than throw a massive blanket over Tokyo and capture everyone we can, we have gone for a more targeted approach,” said the JCA’s head of operations, Alan Curr.

“We got cricket into the schools and set up the junior Cricket Blast programme. It is six-a-side, fun cricket where everyone gets a bat, everyone gets a bowl. It is all about being inclusive and having a laugh.”

The programme has produced 11 of the 14 players in the under-19s squad including Kazumasa Takahashi, an all-rounder who debuted in Japan’s senior team the day after his 15th birthday.

Japanese cricket is keen to differentiate itself from the harsh, disciplined approach to training at junior level in baseball and other more popular sports.

“We want to be seen as a Japanese sport, of course, as we are a Japanese organisation ultimately, but there are parts of Japanese sport we aren’t particularly fond of,” Englishman Curr added. “Kids should be kids.”

Curr recently took the squad on a whirlwind 10-day, five-match tour of Australia to prepare for the World Cup and vice-captain Neel Date said he was living the dream.

“Playing international cricket in some form was always a huge dream for me and the under-19 World Cup is making that dream a reality,” the 18-year-old said. Date, who has Indian heritage but has lived in Japan since he was an infant, said his love for cricket had begun to rub off on his Japanese school friends.

“For them, my name has almost become synonymous with cricket,” said Date. “They are immensely proud of my pursuits and I know they will be following my cricket in South Africa very eagerly.

“They may be even more excited for the World Cup than I am.” Regardless of how they perform in South Africa – where they have been drawn in a pool with Sri Lanka, New Zealand and defending champion India - the players hope this is just the beginning for cricket in Japan.

“It will be a matter of utmost joy to see not just expats but also Japanese kids playing cricket in the park like we did when we were 10,” said Date. “If I get to see this sight 20 years from now, and know that I contributed a tiny fraction to make the situation of cricket in Japan that way, it would be boundlessly satisfying to experience.” —Reuters

Japan hoping surprise U-19 WCup appearance is just the start

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**Sports**

**Orlando Magic halt Lakers’ nine-game winning streak**

LOS ANGELES: Markelle Fultz amassed 21 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists, and the visiting Orlando Magic ended the Los Angeles Lakers’ nine-game winning streak with a 119-118 victory on Wednesday night. The triple-double was the second of Fultz’s career. The other came on April 11, 2018, for the Philadelphia 76ers against the Milwaukee Bucks. Aaron Gordon also scored 21 points for the Magic. Wes Iwundu scored a career-high 19 points, Nikola Vucevic also had 19, and Terrence Ross had 15 off the bench for Orlando, which built a lead as big as 21 before withstanding several late Lakers rallies. Quinn Cook led the Lakers with 22 points while LeBron James finished with 19 points and 19 of the team’s 34 assists. Los Angeles forward Anthony Davis missed his fourth consecutive game with a bruised tailbone, and the Lakers also played without reserve point guard Rajon Rondo (fractured finger).

**Detroit Pistons 116 - Boston Celtics 103**

Career nights from Sekou Doumbouya and Svi Mykhailiuk and a vintage performance by Derrick Rose led short-handed Detroit past host Boston. Doumbouya and Mykhailiuk had career bests with 24 and 21 points, respectively, and Rose scored 22 on 11-of-13 shooting. Markieff Morris added 23 points off the bench, and Andre Drummond (13 points, 13 rebounds) chipped in a double-double as the Pistons won for just the fourth time in their past 16 games. Gordon Hayward had 25 points, and Jaylen Brown added 24 points and 12 rebounds as the Celtics lost for just the fourth time in their past six. Boston played without forward Jayson Tatum, who was held out due to a knee injury.

**Toronto Raptors 130 - Oklahoma City Thunder 121**

Norman Powell had 23 points off the bench to help Toronto beat Oklahoma City on the road. Toronto shot a season-high 61.2 percent from the floor, with Powell going 9 of 11. Toronto has battled injuries that recently left the team without three regular starters. While Fred VanVleet remains sidelined, the Raptors got back Pascal Siakam back Sunday and then Marc Gasol returned to the lineup Wednesday. Siakam scored 21 points on 9-of-15 shooting, while Gasol added 15. Gasol was playing for the first time since Dec. 18. Dennis Schroder scored 25 points off the bench to lead the Thunder. Oklahoma City got 57 points from its reserves.

**Portland Trail Blazers 117 - Houston Rockets 107**

Damian Lillard and CJ McCollum combined for 49 points as Portland controlled the tempo throughout its victory over host Houston. Lillard posted 25 points, seven rebounds and seven assists while McCollum added 24 points and six assists to lead a Portland attack that featured all five scorers tallying double figures. Anthony, playing in Houston for the first time since the Rockets released him early last season, posted a double-double of 18 points and 12 rebounds. Russell Westbrook produced a triple-double of 31 points, 11 rebounds and 12 assists while Eric Gordon scored 20 points off the Houston bench. Ben McLemore added 17 points and Clint Capela had 14 points and 18 rebounds, but with Harden taking just 12 shots, Houston lacked the offensive thrust to keep pace with the Trail Blazers.

**Philadelphia 76ers 117 - Brooklyn Nets 106**

Tobias Harris posted 34 points with 10 rebounds and hit three clutch shots in the final 2:20 as Philadelphia continued its home dominance by making all the plays down the stretch in beating Brooklyn. Harris scored 11 of his points in the last 5:07 of the fourth quarter, when the Sixers outscored Brooklyn 31-16. He scored nine of his points in Philadelphia’s game-ending, 13-2 run over the final 3 1/2 minutes in Philadelphia’s 10th home win in 21 games this season. Ben Simmons also posted 20 points and 11 rebounds for Philadelphia, which shot 51.1 percent from the floor, Kyrie Irving was held to 14 points on 6-of-21 shooting in his third game back from right shoulder impingement.

**Denver Nuggets 110 - Charlotte Hornets 86**

Michael Porter Jr. had 19 points, Mason Plumlee scored 15, and host Denver beat Charlotte. Jerami Grant scored 14, Will Barton had 13 and Nikola Jokic and PJ Dozier produced 12 each for the Nuggets. Denver played the second half without guard Jamal Murray, who sustained a left ankle injury late in the second quarter and did not return. Terry Rozier scored a game-high 20 points and handed out nine assists for the Hornets. Devonte’ Graham, PJ. Washington and Miles Bridges had 14 points each, and Cody Zeller finished with 11.

**Miami Heat 106 - San Antonio Spurs 100**

Kendrick Nunn scored 33 points to lead host Miami over San Antonio. The 24-year-old rookie hit 13 of 18 shots from the field, including 5 of 7 from 3-point range, for the Heat, who snapped their first two-game losing streak of the season and improved to a league-best 18-1 at home. DeMar DeRozan scored 30 points to lead the Spurs. DeRozan, who shot 12 of 14 from the field, has scored 20 or more points in 12 consecutive games.

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**Peterhansel sneaks 11th stage win in Dakar rally**

HARADF: Stephane Peterhansel snatched a dramatic 11th stage of the Dakar Rally yesterday when he pipped Nasser Al-Attiyah to the line by just 10 seconds. Frenchman Peterhansel won his fourth stage of this year’s race in his Mini ahead of Toyota’s Al-Attiyah in Haradh, and finished more than eight minutes ahead of overall leader and teammate Carlos Sainz.

“We fought hard, we pushed all day long and we gained some time, but not enough. Now, if Carlos can bring it home, he’ll be great for the team,” said Peterhansel. Sainz, 57, remains 10 minutes 23 seconds ahead of Peterhansel, who is third in the overall standings going into Friday’s final 374-kilometre stage between Haradh and Qiddiya. The Spaniard has been on course for his third Dakar victory.

“If I say I’ll never do it, I’ll be forever lying to you,” Peterhansel also said.

However, ‘Mr. Dakar’ Peterhansel, who has won the rally 13 times (seven in a car, six on a bike), is just six seconds behind Qatar defending champion Al-Attiyah, who sits second.

On the bikes Pablo Quintanilla won the 11th stage by just nine seconds ahead of Red Bull’s Matthias Walkner, significantly closing the gap between him and overall leader Ricky Brabec, who finished the stage 11 minutes 48 seconds back in 10th.

Chilian Quintanilla is however still nearly 14 minutes behind Brabec going into the final stage. “I’m really happy with this stage. It is always a nice feeling to win a stage. It was really difficult and I gave it my 100 percent from the beginning,” said Quintanilla.

“I took a lot of time from Ricky, but there is still a bit difference between us. We still have a few kilometres to push tomorrow.” — AFP
Wimbledon champion Halep knocked out in Adelaide quarter-finals

ADELAIDE: Two-time Grand Slam winner Simona Halep will head into the Australian Open with room for improvement after being upset 6-4, 6-2 by Aryna Sabalenka yesterday at the ATP-WTA Adelaide International.

The reigning Wimbledon champion and former world number one dropped serve five times and was flattened in the second set by her opponent from Belarus. The 71-minute rout leaves Halep standing 1-1 for the season with the first Grand Slam of the year starting on Monday in Melbourne.

Sabalenka will battle Dayana Yastremska on Friday for a place in the final after the Ukrainian 19-year-old beat a second top 20 opponent this week when she put out Croatian Donna Vekic 6-4, 6-3.

Sabalenka, ranked 12th to Halep’s fourth, won her first match after two losses to the Romanian, coached by Australian Darren Cahill. “It feels great. We had a tough match and she played well,” Sabalenka said. “I tried to stay focused on each point, I don’t care about the Grand Slam, I’m just playing each match.”

“I didn’t care about the past, I stayed in the moment, that helped me to win.” In the first set, Halep twice lose break advantages, with Sabalenka coming through with a third break of serve in the final game on a double-fault from the seed.

In the second, the Belarussian ran away with it — Halep drew applause and raised her arms in mock triumph as she finally won a game while trailing 5-0, but the youngster fired a winning return to seal match point.

Yastremska, ranked 24th, was thrilled to get past Vekic. “It’s nice to be in the semi-finals just in the beginning of the year,” she said. “I’m not playing my best game, but it’s still nice.”

“I’m just getting my form, I have a big goal for Australia, but I’m going to try to stay really realistic and play match by match. That’s all I can think about.”

Last year’s 2019 Australian Open semi-finalist Danielle Collins crushed fourth seed Belinda Bencic, sending the Swiss out in barely an hour with four breaks of serve. The 27th-ranked American will play either Australian top seed Ashleigh Barty or Marketa Vondrousova next.

In men’s play, South African Lloyd Harris beat Spanish fourth seed Pablo Carreno Busta 6-3, 6-3 to book a semi-final berth. He will play a fellow qualifier after Tommy Paul advanced over Spain’s Albert Ramos-Vinolas 6-3, 6-4.

Russian third seed Andrey Rublev won his sixth match of the season, with last weekend’s Doha champion defeating Britain’s Dan Evans 6-4, 3-6, 6-3. — AFP

Shapovalov falls to French qualifier Humbert in Auckland

AUCKLAND: World number 13 Denis Shapovalov crashed out of the ATP Auckland Classic yesterday, beaten in straight sets by French qualifier Ugo Humbert.

There was only one break in each set of the evenly contested clash with Humbert winning 7-5, 6-4, clinching the victory with the Canadian’s sixth double fault.

“I really, really, happy, it’s one of the biggest wins of my career,” the 57th-ranked Humbert said as he advanced to a semi-final showdown big-serving American John Isner.

“I tried to play each ball, I tried to stay focused and my plans were working.”

Isner survived on his thunderous serve with an impressive 25 aces to overcome Kyle Edmund in the opening quarter-final.

While Edmund had the better of the fourth seed for much of the match, Isner served his way out of trouble when it mattered and the Briton was unable to convert any of his nine break points.

Both sets went to a tiebreak before the American won 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/5) and expressed relief at making the final four.

“I know I was a bit fortunate to win today, that’s how tennis goes, but I’m happy I’m in the semi-finals,” said the two-time Auckland champion who holds the world record for the most aces in a match with 113 against Frenchman Nicolas Mahut at Wimbledon two years ago. “That match point, I played it very aggressively and very well. Winning a match like this can give me a lot of confidence going forward for the rest of this tournament, the Australian Open and for the rest of the year.”

Fifth-seed Benoit Paire battled through his third three-setter in as many matches to beat Australian John Millman.

The Frenchman made a nervous start, dropping his first serve and losing the opening set 6-3.

But once he added a touch of finesse to his power game, drawing Millman forward with delicate drop shots, Paire won the next two sets 6-1, 6-4.

Hubert Hurkacz, the 20-year-old sixth seed from Poland, ousted the 38-year-old Feliciano Lopez in a titanic three-set battle to determine Paire’s semi-final opponent.

After taking the first set 6-4, Hurkacz held three match points at 6/3 in the second set tie break but Lopez, who had knocked out top seed Fabio Fognini in three sets the previous day, refused to quit.

He won three consecutive points to draw level and the pair then went point for point until Lopez triumphed at 13/11.

Hurkacz broke immediately at the start of the deciding set and held the advantage until the end to complete a 6-4, 6-7 (11/13), 6-4 victory. — AFP

Comfortable Australian Open starts for Nadal, Williams

MELBOURNE: World number one Rafael Nadal will take on Bolivian Hugo Dellien in the Australian Open first round next week while Serena Williams faces Anastasia Potapova next.

The Spaniard is attempting to match Roger Federer’s record 20 Grand Slam singles titles on his least favourite surface, having won in Melbourne just once, back in 2009. Australian Nick Kyrgios could be waiting for him in the fourth round, the draw revealed yesterday.

Defending champion Novak Djokovic will start his bid to lift a record eighth Australian Open title against Jan-Lennard Struff. The Serb had a fine 2019, winning five titles including at Melbourne Park and Wimbledon on the way to ending the year as number two, behind only Nadal.

Fresh from helping his country win the ATP Cup, he will start his drive to extend his incredible Melbourne run — he holds a 68-8 record — against a German who crashed at the first hurdle last year.

Djokovic could meet Greek young gun Stefanos Tsitsipas in the last eight. The ageless Federer, 38, is up against American Steve Johnson in the third quarter of the men’s draw as he targets a seventh Australian Open title, winning his last in 2018.

Williams, who is seeking to match Australian Margaret Court’s record 24 major singles titles, gets underway against 90th ranked Russian Potapova with a potential quarter-final against defending champion Naomi Osaka.

Seeded eight, she heads into the tournament on the back of ending a three-year title drought by winning the Auckland Classic. She is running for an eighth Australian Open crown and her first Slam title since Melbourne in 2017.

Her sister Venus has a blockbuster first round clash against exciting young American Coco Gauff, with the winner potentially facing Osaka in the third round. Third seed Osaka starts her title defence against Marie Bouzkova.

World number one Ashleigh Barty opens against Ukraine’s Lesia Tsurenko, with the French Open champion on a collision course with last year’s finalist Petra Kvitova in the last eight. Fourth seed Simona Halep has a tough opening task against Jennifer Brady, who beat Barty and Maria Sharapova at the Brisbane International. Second seed Karolina Pliskova takes on Kristina Mladenovic. — AFP
Juventus score ‘goal of rare beauty’ in Italian Cup cruise

MILAN: Cristiano Ronaldo was too ill to play, while Zlatan Ibrahimovic spent the evening resting on the bench, even without their biggest stars, Juventus and AC Milan cruised into the last eight of the Italian Cup on Wednesday.

Juventus beat visiting Udinese 4-0 in the late game, after Milan had dispatched SPAL, 3-0. In the first game of the evening, 10-man Fiorentina beat Atalanta 2-1. Ronaldo was sidelined after suffering an attack of sinusitis in the afternoon, but he is not the only ace in the Juventus pack. After 16 minutes, Paulo Dybala carved through Udinese with a series of quick one-twos, finishing with a couple of exchanges with centre forward Gonzalo Higuain. When his Argentine compatriot played a pass one little behind him, Dybala spun and floated the ball onto Higuain’s chest and he strode forward and scored.

“That was a goal of rare beauty, to see three or four exchanges like that at high speed. It was worth the price of the ticket,” said Juve coach Maurizio Sarri. “I love to see goals like that with fast passing, but they can only work with players of great technical quality.”

Ten minutes after the opener, Udinese goalkeeper Nicolas tripped Federico Bernardeschi and Dybala converted the penalty. Dybala scored a in the 58th minute, clipping the ball over Nicolas from the right edge of the box. Two minutes later Douglas Costa converted Juve’s second penalty after Branislav Ivanovic handled.

In Milan, Krzysztof Piatek, who is reportedly on the verge of a move to Tottenham Hotspur, outpaced the sluggish SPAL offside trap to give the home team the lead after 20 minutes. Samuel Castillejo curled a precise left-foot shot inside the far post just before half time.

Fullback Theo Hernandez added a third in the 66th minute, surging upfield and smashing home a left-foot shot from just outside the penalty area. In Tuscany, Spaniard Pol Lirola collected Erik Piqul’s long pass before charging towards goal and slotting home his first Fiorentina goal six minutes from time, winning the tie for the hosts despite German Pezzella’s sending off 14 minutes earlier. Patrick Cutrone also scored his first goal for the club when he put Fiorentina ahead in the 11th minute of his first start since arriving on loan from Wolverhampton Wanderers last week.

The away side scored a deserved leveller when former Fiorentina man Illicic turned in a superb Ruslan Malinovskiy cross. But Lirola won the tie to set up a tough match with Serie A title chasers Inter Milan. The winner of that clash face either Lazio or Napoli in the semis.

On Tuesday, Inter thumped Cagliari 4-1 with Romina Laiciku scoring twice. Holders Juventus are on a club-record run of 10 straight wins in Serie A, made short work of Cremone in their 4-0 victory in Rome. Troubled Napoli eased into the quarters with a 2-0 win over Perugia thanks to two Lorenzo Insigne penalties.

In the last eight, AC Milan will face Torino who beat Genoa on penalties last week. Juventus will play the winner of the last tie of the round, Roma at Parma later.

PSG crush Monaco

PARIS: Paris St Germain secured a convincing 4-1 victory at Monaco in a rescheduled game to open an eight-point lead at the top of the Ligue 1 standings on Wednesday.

Three days after the sides drew 3-3 at the Parc des Princes, Kylian Mbappe scored twice. Neymar netted a penalty and second-half substitute Pablo Sarabia was also on target for PSG, while Tiemoue Bakayoko briefly reduced the arrears for Monaco.

PSG moved to 49 points from 20 games and have clear water between themselves and second-placed Olympique de Marseille on 41. Stade Rennais are five points further adrift in third after the Brittany side beat Nimes 1-0 away courtesy of a second-half Adrien Hamou goal on Wednesday.

Monaco are ninth on 29 points. PSG won ahead in the 24th minute when Mbappe beat the offside trap to collect Angel Di Maria’s through-ball and beat Benjamin Lecomte with a left-foot angled shot.

Keeper Kevin Trapp saved PSG’s advantage with a fine save to deny Gelson Martins’ volley after four minutes later. Neymar made it 2-0 two minutes into the second half, converting a penalty, after Layvin Kurzawa had been brought down by Kamil Glik, for his ninth goal in his last eight appearances for the capital side.

Sarabia put the result beyond doubt in the 72nd by volleysing home from fellow substitute Marco Verratti’s pass a minute after the pair had come off the bench. Bakayoko pulled one back for the hosts, policing the ball home from Adrien Silva’s free kick in the 87th, only for Mbappe to score again one minute into stoppage time at the end of a sharp counter attack after being set up by Neymar.

Mbappe has now scored 13 goals in 14 games, one fewer than Monaco’s Wissam Ben Yedder, the league’s top scorer.

Man Utd bid to halt Liverpool juggernaut again

LONDON: Manchester United are the only club to take points off runaway leaders Liverpool in the Premier League this season and they will try and do so again in Sunday’s match at Anfield.

Even the dreamiest of dreamers from the Old Trafford Theatre of Dreams would recognise, however, that it would be against the odds to come away from Merseyside with another positive result after the 1-1 draw in October. One of the fiercest rivalries in English football has been one-sided of late, Liverpool, the European and world club champions and on course to become Premier League invincibles, have won their last 18 matches at Anfield and not lost at home in the top flight since April 2017.

The Reds have 61 points from a possible 63 and are on a club record 38-match unbeaten run — their last defeat coming in January last year against Manchester City. Jurgen Klopp’s men have also scored in every league match this campaign, equalling the club’s best streak from the start of a season while going 556 minutes without conceding — six successive clean sheets.

United have lost six times this season and are fifth in the league, 27 points adrift of their arch-rivals having played one game more. Klopp, however, is preparing for another tricky challenge. “The rest of the season is still quite long and we have a lot of tough games to play, the next one especially tough, and we have to make sure we are ready for that,” he said after Liverpool beat Tottenham Hotspur 1-0 on Sunday.

United striker Marcus Rashford, who scored against Liverpool at Old Trafford, started Wednesday’s FA Cup third-round replay against Wolverhampton Wanderers on the bench but he was sent on in the second half and lasted only 15 minutes before leaving the field due to injury. That will be a major concern for manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer but better news for him is the likely return of defender Eric Bailly, sidelined since July with a knee injury.

OLD BOSS

Liverpool’s city rivals Everton will be in London for a clash at West Ham United on Saturday that puts the Toffees against their old foes David Moyes, The Scot spent more than 11 years at Everton, before moving to Manchester United for a short and unhappy tenure, and guided them to fourth in the league in 2004-05.

Fond memories aside, defeat by Everton would be a serious blow to the 16th-placed Hammers’ bid to stay well clear of the relegation zone with only a point separating them from Aston Villa in 18th.

Second-placed Manchester City, the champions, host Crystal Palace on Saturday while Leicester City, third, are at Burnley in Sunday’s early kickoff. Jose Mourinho’s Tottenham Hotspur travel to Watford, revitalised under new manager Nigel Pearson.

Fourth-placed Chelsea are at Newcastle United while Arsenal, in 10th, host high-flying Sheffield United at the Emirates. Arsenal have top scorer Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang suspended, however, after he collected a red card in the last match against Crystal Palace.

Bournemouh will be hoping to leap clear of the drop zone when they travel to Norwich City for a basement battle between the two bottom sides. — Reuters

LOCAL TIMING

FRIDAY

CD Leganes v Getafe CF
beIN Sports 23:00

GERMAN BUNDESLIGA
Schalke 04 v Borussia Monchengladbach
beIN Sports HD 5 22:30

MATCHES ON TV LOCAL TIMING

SPANISH LEAGUE
Peterhansel sneaks 11th stage win in Dakar rally

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