AIS students attend Model United Nations in Switzerland

Kuwait drops seven spots in Corruption Perceptions Index

Indian FM: Nurse in Saudi infected with China virus

Baking Kuwait’s favorite ‘Iranian’ bread

SEE PAGE 2
Baking Kuwait’s favorite ‘Iranian’ bread

‘1,500 pieces of bread made daily’

By Nawara Fattahova

What does the life of a baker in Kuwait look like? Kuwait Times spoke to Naamatullah Pirmohammed, a 59-year-old Afghan, who has been working in local Iranian bakeries for the past 22 years. The wide, flat bread known as ‘Iranian bread’ is a local favorite.

As a baker, Naamatullah works daily on the traditional oven (tandoor) from 6:00 am till 10:00 am, then from 11:30 am till 2:00 pm, then from 5:00 pm till 10:00 pm. So Naamatullah actually remains at the bakery from 6:00 am till 10:00 pm, as he is still at the place during breaks when the oven is turned off.

He arrives early in the morning and gets to work. “I prepare the dough and bake the bread. I work in this bakery along with two colleagues. We produce around 1,500 pieces of bread every day,” he told Kuwait Times. He learnt this profession in Afghanistan, where he also worked as a baker. “The shape of the bread is different in Afghanistan, where it’s oval or elliptical, while here in Kuwait it’s round,” he said.

Naamatullah is married with six children. “I have three girls and three boys, who are all in Afghanistan. I travel every two years to see them, but once I couldn’t travel for seven years,” he said. His work is dangerous. “I like my work although I face many problems. The most dangerous thing about my work is the fire. I have got burned many times by the fire from the oven. But I have got used to it, as all my work is with fire. I haven’t faced any problem with customers, as the people here are good,” he remarked.

Naamatullah’s other problem is financial. “Since I came to Kuwait 22 years ago, the price of bread hasn’t changed. It still costs 20 fils, although the prices of all the ingredients including yeast, flour, salt and sesame have hiked many times in these 22 years. So the bakery is negatively affected by this difference,” he pointed out.

This situation led the co-op to relieve the bakery from paying rent. “Five years back, we were paying KD 50 in rent, but fortunately now we don’t have to pay anything. But even the rent that we used to pay in the past was symbolic compared to other areas, where the rent ranges between KD 150 in Mishref to KD 250 in Jahra, for instance. Also in Salwa it used to be KD 240, but they shut the bakery there a few years back,” Naamatullah said.

He has previously worked in bakeries in various areas. “I have worked in Jahra, Sabah Al-Salem, Fahahed and Salwa, where I was working before coming to this bakery in Bayan. I’m satisfied at this place, and I don’t know to do anything else other than baking,” concluded Naamatullah.
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This year, the American International School of Kuwait was proud to take 16 students from a multitude of nationalities to this prestigious event hosted in Geneva, Switzerland. On Jan 5, eleven grade 12 students (Jawa Al-Wahaib, Rianna Sarbajna, Fatma Al-Attar, Jassem Al-Sanea, David Gadelkarim, Mauricio Landin, Adam Musfi, Beata Romanova, Nouran Abdel latif, Rayanne Berrahmoun and myself), two grade 11 students (Maryam Abdal and Rea Alba Mehra) and three grade 10 students (David Hasler, Marcus Gurney and Reina Abo Chakra), accompanied by our dedicated directors, Rebecca Wyant, Kate Bowler and Adrian Kassissia, journeyed to the epicenter of diplomacy to seize this wonderful opportunity.

Hosted at the United Nations Human Rights Commission Assembly Hall, the opening ceremony emphasized the 75th anniversary of the United Nations and the need now, more than ever, for international cooperation. The combination of excited delegates and thought-provoking speeches was made especially spectacular by the artwork of Spanish artist Miquel Barcelo, whose magnificent creation beds the roof of the room.

A pioneer in international unity, the United Nations stands as the only route to resolving issues that plague global society. Through its Model United Nations (MUN) programs, it allows youth to join the global conversation by engaging with current real-world issues, empowering change-making, bridge-building and dream-forging sentiments that will undeniably propel us to a brighter tomorrow.

A trip to remember
Resembling colorful seafoam, it symbolizes the flowing, constantly moving waves of change that begin in this austere room.

The structure we followed for our three days of the conference was dependent on our roles and committees. Each delegate is paired up with another delegate to represent a specific country (this year we represented Kuwait and France), thus also representing the country’s stance on a specific issue. This year, the issues selected were centered around modern technological implications in various contexts. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) committees, for example, tackled the issue of the negative effects of 5G and how they could be resolved within respective countries.

The role of the delegate is to lobby for resolutions related to specific issues on the first day and debate them amongst their committees on the second and third days. Through debating two resolutions, the committee comes to a final consensus on each resolution, either passing it or rejecting it. At our closing ceremony, we discovered that the resolutions passed would be sent to the actual United Nations to guide future decisions regarding these same issues.

Part of why the concept of MUN works is how it chooses to tackle daunting issues in a uniquely civil and orderly manner that allows all insights to be voiced without fear of hostile response. As our MUN President Rianna Sarbajna puts it, “At first, the nuances of such debate are perceived as tedious, yet as a student exiting their fourth year of MUN, it has taught me valuable lessons in communication, diplomacy and the critical need for cooperation and understanding a society like ours needs”.

As the MUN conference is a trilingual program (French, English and Spanish), there are interpreters who are responsible for ensuring that delegates who do not share a common language can communicate in real time during debates, and translators who are tasked with translating resolution documents prior to debates in order for all delegates to access them. This role is integral to the diplomatic debates that are characteristic of the UN.

One of our own interpreters, Mauricio Landin Mestre, explains: “This experience expanded my vocabulary in all languages. I also realized how difficult interpretation is and how important it is to truly master a language.” Additionally, members of the press (such as myself) were tasked with reporting on the progress of committees, filming events and interviewing delegates in order to contribute to the MUN magazine at the commencement of the conference.

As we travelled internationally, we wanted to indulge in and learn more about Swiss culture. Thus, in addition to our time at the UN conference, we visited Geneva landmarks, took a day trip to Chamonix, (including Mont Blanc and the Mer de Glace glaciers), and took a tour of the United Nations. We also had our fair share of cheese fondue and Swiss chocolate! A unanimous favorite for us all was ice skating while surrounded by the beauty of European architecture and indulging in hot chocolate in the crisp Swiss air.

Experiences such as MUN are fundamental in today’s world, as they empower current youth and future leaders to initiate changes they want to see. MUN prepares youth to engage in and become more educated about the world around them, and thus more poised to take action.
Oil-rich Kuwait generates ‘green energy’ to stimulate economy

The annual World Future Energy Summit recently held in Abu Dhabi brought together tens of thousands of participants from 170 States and representatives of hundreds of companies. The conferences are particularly concerned with renewable energy and investment in emerging Middle East markets, at a time future energy has become a main stimulant for economic growth, in the shadow of billions of dollars’ worth of prospective investments - promoted by the summit.

Kuwait, a country situated in the northern Arabian Gulf, is quite qualified for harnessing ‘green energy,’ with available solar and wind energy for long times throughout the year. Such abundant resources make it prepared to meet mounting energy demand and establishing a more sustainable and diversified economy. Given these raw potentials came His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah’s visionary strategy, designed to diversify used energy in Kuwait, where renewable resources should constitute 15 percent.

Local stakeholders had already scrambled into action to materialize His Highness the Amir’s vision, inaugurating last year, the mega power Al-Shagaya complex to cover some of the local energy needs. The venture, located in the region of Al-Dibdibah and launched by Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KOC) kick started the ‘Sedra 500’ project to generate energy for electrical pumps in Umm Qadir field, West Kuwait, where half a million barrels of oil will be reserved in the next two decades. In March, the KOC, a subsidiary of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC), declared a plan to employ the solar energy for securing 20 percent of its energy needs from renewable resources.

‘Sedra 500’ project
Kuwait took first steps for harnessing the solar energy in 2016, when Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) kick started the ‘Sedra 500’ project to generate energy for electrical pumps in Umm Qadir field, West Kuwait, where half a million barrels of oil will be reserved in the next two decades. In March, the KOC, a subsidiary of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC), declared a plan to employ the solar energy for securing 20 percent of its energy needs from renewable resources.

Moreover developing the downstream and renewable segments falls in with the country’s goals to diversify the economy away from an over-reliance on hydrocarbons. Finally, and as mentioned above, significant employment opportunities are set to arise for Kuwait’s large youth population as a result of a successful expansion into renewable energies. Nick Butler of King’s College in London & FT Energy policy commentator said, “There is great potential to develop a new industry and to substitute renewables for existing energy supplies, which could be exported.”

Readily available
“The technology is readily available and local skills could easily be developed,” Butler said. “Kuwait clearly has the financial resources. Low oil prices make some people think that switching to renewables would be costly for consumers. But the costs of renewables have fallen dramatically and switching makes economic sense. Kuwait needs to think about the longer term future, to diversify its economy and to move beyond being a country completely dependent on exporting oil. The development of renewables is one important part of that process.”

Robin Mills, CEO of Qamar Energy, said the key issue is to move ahead with the next phase of the Shagaya renewable energy park, “which are much larger that the first phase.” “Renewables contribute to increasing power supply, saving oil that can be exported, lowering required gas imports, and creating local employment,” he said. “Kuwait has good solar conditions and plenty of flat, unused land in reasonable proximity to the city. It also has reasonable sources for wind power. Electricity demand is growing fast, and power generated by oil or imported LNG is expensive compared to modern solar and wind power. Lower oil prices reduce economic growth and funds available for new projects. They also lower the cost of conventional oil/gas-fired generation although solar is still cheaper now. However, lower oil prices also make it more urgent to diversify the economy and improve efficiency.” — KUNA
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Kuwaiti, Turkish parliament speakers meet in Ankara

Regional developments on top lawmakers’ table of discussion

ANKARA: Kuwaiti National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem and his parliamentary delegation met in Ankara yesterday with Speaker of the Grand Turkish National Assembly Mustafa Sentop. The talks addressed means of strengthening bilateral relations and strategic partnership, as well as reviewing aspects of joint work in all areas of cooperation, particularly in parliamentary field. The two sides also held discussions on current developments at the regional and international levels and ways to unify positions by the two parliaments in all various continental and international parliamentary forums, especially in the conference of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, to be held in Geneva next April. In addition, they stressed on importance of unifying and coordinating positions among Islamic parliaments on pressing issues in Islamic world and international community.

The meeting was attended by Kuwaiti MP Osama Al-Shaheen, Abdullah Fahad Al-Enezi, Dr Hammoud Al-Khudair and Faraj Al-Arbeed, and members of Turkish-Kuwaiti Friendship Committee in the Turkish Parliament, MP Ayoob Osuye, the Kuwaiti Ambassador to Turkey Ghassan Al-Zawawi and the Consul General of Kuwait in Istanbul, Mohammad Al-Mohammad. After the talks, the Turkish Parliament Speaker held a luncheon at the Parliament’s headquarters in honor of Kuwaiti Speaker Ghanem and his accompanying delegation. Ghanem and his entourage arrived in Ankara on Wednesday for a two-day official visit at the invitation of his Turkish counterpart. — KUNA

Kuwaitis urged to be cautious against China virus

BEIJING: Kuwait yesterday called on its nationals in China to be cautious as Coronavirus is spreading in a number of China’s cities and districts. Kuwaiti citizens residing in Guangzhou and nearby cities should take all the needed precautions. Kuwait’s Consul General in Guangzhou said in a statement yesterday. The precautionary procedures include wearing a medical mask, not attending crowded places, as well as following up on instructions by the National Health Commission of the People’s Republic of China, it affirmed. Kuwait’s Consulate General in Guangzhou provided a hotline to receive urgent calls and inquiries for Kuwaiti citizens (02038078070). China’s National Health Commission announced earlier yesterday an increase in the cases of pneumonia resulting Coronavirus to 571 people in various parts of China till Wednesday. The Commission announced that 193 other cases were suspected of being infected by the virus, while pneumonia infection caused death of 17 people in Hubei province in central China, since outbreak of Coronavirus in Wuhan city in the beginning of January. Ages of the deceased range between 48 and 89 years old, it added. — KUNA

Defense Minister meets UK advisor

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah met on Wednesday with the UK’s Senior Defense Advisor on the Middle East Lt Gen Sir John Lorimer and his accompanying delegation. During the meeting, they discussed several issues and subjects of mutual interest, primarily in the military domain, according to a statement by the Defense Ministry. The Kuwaiti defense minister lauded the deep relations between both friendly countries, pointing out their mutual willingness to bolster and develop them, it said. Several Kuwaiti high-ranking army officers, UK Ambassador to Kuwait Michael Davenport and the British Defense Attaché attended the meeting. Separately, Sheikh Ahmad met at his office yesterday with Director General of Kuwait Fire Service Directorate Lt Gen Khaled Al-Mikrad, as well as Jafra Governor Nasser Al-Hajraf. — KUNA

Foreign Minister meets ‘Somalia conference’ chief

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets with Dr Ghanim Al-Najjar, head of the organizing executive committee of an international conference due in Kuwait this year for promoting education in Somalia. During the encounter, they checked arrangements and preparations for the event and its agenda, in addition to existing coordination between concerned Kuwaiti bodies and international organizations over ongoing world efforts to promote security and stability in Somalia and to alleviate the humanitarian agony of its people. Assistant Foreign Minister for the Foreign Minister’s Office Affairs Ambassador Saleh Salem Al-Loughani, Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister for Protocols Advisor Abdulmohsen Jaber Al-Zaib and several other senior ministry officials attended the meeting. — KUNA
Kuwait drops seven spots in Corruption Perceptions Index

Kuwaiti watchdog blames ‘lack of legislations’ for decline

By A Saleh

KUWAIT: Kuwait is ranked 85th out of 180 countries in the annual Corruption Perceptions Index issued by Transparency International, down from 78th in 2018.

A source close to the government’s measures in this regard, especially since the parliament wishes to draw attention to confirmations made by the anti-corruption authority chairman that the current parliament is serious in its anti-corruption body’s efforts, through cooperation with all stakeholders for implementing the strategy for boosting integrity and combating corruption.

Speedy legislations

In the meantime, Kuwait’s Public Anti-Corruption Authority (Nazaha) said that the decline of Kuwait’s ranking in Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index was due to several reasons, namely delay in enacting relevant legislations. In a press release issued to comment on the Berlin-based international agency’s report, the Kuwaiti government said one of the main reasons of Kuwait’s record at this level was delay of issuing legislations that could have served Kuwait’s stance regarding the corruption perception index, most notably a law on fighting bribery civil servants and a penal code to render bribing civil servants a penal crime, in addition to criminalizing bribery in the private sector, expanding scope of responsibility to cover independent entities (persons and institutions) in tandem with international treaties and accords on revamping precautions against corruption.

Kuwait posted improvement in several indices with respect of the corruption perception, such as the index of easy business, in addition to improving its status in the global competition index. It called for continuing efforts for sustainable development to maintain the achievements, through cooperation with all stakeholders for implementing the strategy for boosting integrity and combating corruption.

Most corrupt

Arab-wise, the Corruption Perceptions Index 2019 ranked Sudan, Libya, Yemen and Syria amongst the world’s top 10 corruption-stricken countries showing that Syria has retreated 13 positions compared to 2012, while Yemen retreated by eight spots in the same period. On the other hand, the index showed UAE had the lowest corruption rate in the Arab world, followed by Qatar (with 9 points difference), while Saudi Arabia has achieved a four-point progress compared to the previous year.

Driving license replacement online on Sunday

By A Saleh

KUWAIT: The online issuance of replacement lost or damaged driving licenses will start on Sunday, well-informed security sources announced, adding that the Interior Ministry’s new decision to renew driving licenses online had largely contributed to reducing the number of people having to show up at traffic departments to do so. The sources said 31,884 licenses have been renewed over the past two months.

Full amnesty

With three votes to two, the parliamentary legislative affairs committee approved the proposals for a full amnesty after merging them in one report, said informed sources, noting that MPs Khaled Al-Shatti and Khalil Abul have voted for the proposal while Faisal Al-Kandari and Ahmed Al-Fadhil voted against it, which made the committee chairman vote in favor after the withdrawal of MPs Khaled Al-Otaibi and Mohammed Al-Hashal in protest over the merger. Commenting on his withdrawal, Al-Hashal justified it by some members’ insistence on merging the proposals and including all those accused in the cabinet and breaking into the parliament cases and fugitive former MP Abdulhamid Dashani in the amnesty. In the meantime, five MPs filed a motion asking for allocating two hours in the next session to debate the housing problem in the country, saying that the government has failed to resolve the housing problem.

Cold weather

Manager of the marine stations at the Meteorological Department Yasser Al-Bloushi said the coming days will witness cold weather by day and cold with low clouds and a chance of scattered rain by night. Bloushi added today’s weather will be rather cold with southerly moderate to southwesterly moderate winds with a chance of rain and probably thunderstorms in some areas, with temperatures of 6-8 degrees C and moderate waves of 3 to 6 feet. Bloushi forecast tomorrow’s weather to be considerably colder with fewer clouds and northwesterly moderate wind, high temperature of 14 to 16 degrees centigrade and moderate to high waves during daytime. He added tomorrow night will be extremely cold with light to moderate northwesterly wind, a chance of frost in some desert and agricultural areas and a low temperature of 2-5 degrees C and moderate to high waves of 3 to 6 feet.

Sewage plant

The Ministry of Public Works (MPW) announced signing a project contract with Um Al-Haiman Holding Company yesterday to expand the Um Al-Haiman sewage plant. MPW explained that the plant will serve southern Kuwait in the area between the Sixth Ring Road till Sabah Al-Ahmad City – almost one third of Kuwait’s total area – with a total capacity of 500,000 cu m of treated water per day that would be used for landscaping in southern areas. “The first phase of the project will be concluded in three years at a total cost of KD 382,131,000,”...
ICJ to Myanmar: Prevent Rohingya genocide

TUN Khin of the Burmese Rohingya Organization speaks to the press after the ruling of the International Court of Justice yesterday in the lawsuit filed by The Gambia against Myanmar in which Myanmar is accused of genocide against Rohingya Muslims. —AFP

The Hague, Netherlands: The UN’s highest court ordered Myanmar yesterday to do everything in its power to prevent the alleged genocide of Rohingya Muslims, as international justice stepped into the crisis for the first time. The International Court of Justice rejected arguments made by Myanmar’s civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in The Hague in December and set out urgent steps for the majority Buddhist nation to end the violence.

The mainly Muslim African state of The Gambia had asked the court to impose emergency measures following a 2017 military crackdown by Myanmar that sent around 740,000 Rohingya fleeing into neighboring Bangladesh. President of the court Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf said that “the court was of the opinion that the Rohingya in Myanmar remain extremely vulnerable” and needed to be protected from further bloodshed.

Thousands are suspected to have been killed in the crackdown and refugees brought widespread reports of rape and arson by Myanmar’s military and local Buddhist militias. The court ordered Myanmar to “take all measures within its power to prevent the commission of all acts” described by the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, under which Gambia brought the case. These acts included “killing members of the group” and “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.”

The court ordered Myanmar to report back within four months, and then every six months after that. It also told Myanmar to prevent the destruction of any evidence of crimes against the Rohingya.

Aung San Suu Kyi in The Hague in December hailed the court’s decision to uphold his country’s case, which was supported by the 57-nation Organization for Islamic Cooperation, Canada and the Netherlands. “This is a historic day today, not just for international law, for the international community, but especially for the Rohingya,” he told reporters outside the court.

Nobel peace laureate Suu Kyi - who was widely criticized for her defense of the same military that once locked her up for years - said yesterday that some Rohingya refugees may have “exaggerated” the extent of the abuses. “The international justice system may not yet be equipped to filter out misleading information before shadows of incrimination are cast over entire nations and governments,” she wrote in an opinion piece in the Financial Times published ahead of the ruling.

Suu Kyi also said Myanmar should have time to act on the results of an internal investigation by the country, which this week admitted war crimes may have been committed but ruled out genocide. The military dodged questions in the crackdown and refugees brought widespread reports of rape and arson by Myanmar’s military and local Buddhist militias. The court ordered Myanmar to report back within four months, and then every six months after that. It also told Myanmar to prevent the destruction of any evidence of crimes against the Rohingya.

Author and poet, told AFP by telephone from Cox’s Bazar. “When the international court made its ruling today, I felt the gate of justice had been opened. I have the first taste of justice.” Rights groups also hailed the ICJ ruling while calling on the international community to put pressure on Suu Kyi and Myanmar.

Tun Khin, president of the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK, who was dressed in traditional Rohingya clothing, said outside court: “The international community has to push to comply Burma with these provisional measures, otherwise (the) Rohingya will be much more destroyed.” “Today’s decision sends a message to Myanmar’s senior officials: the world will not tolerate their atrocities,” Amnesty International’s Regional Director Nicholas Bequelin said.

The ICJ’s orders are binding but it has no power to enforce them. However the “significant... shouldn’t be written off,” said Cecily Rose, assistant professor in international law at Leiden University in the Netherlands. “The court’s orders and judgments tend to carry relatively great authority or legitimacy. Even though the situation in Myanmar is highly political and fragile, international law still plays a role by informing decision-making among international actors,” she said. — AFP

Indian FM: Nurse in Saudi infected with China virus

NEW DELHI: An Indian nurse working in Saudi Arabia has tested positive for the SARs-like virus that has infected hundreds in China, the Indian foreign ministry said yesterday. Indian media reports said that the nurse may have contracted the virus while caring for a colleague from the Philippines who had tested positive.

However, neither Riyadh nor Delhi have reported any cases of the virus in their respective countries. “About 100 Indian nurses working at Al-Hayat hospital have been tested and none except one nurse was found infected by coronavirus,” said minister of state for foreign affairs, V Muraleedharan.

“Affected nurse is being treated at Aseer National Hospital and is recovering well,” he tweeted. Muraleedharan confirmed to AFP that it was the same respiratory virus that has claimed 17 lives since emerging in Wuhan, infecting more than 570 of other people nationwide. It has since been detected in Japan, Hong Kong, Macau, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore and the United States. — AFP
Sudanese vets scramble to save park’s malnourished lions

KHARTOUM: Sudanese vets scrambled to save four surviving captive lions of five that were left sick and malnourished in a Khartoum park during months of political and economic turmoil. The fifth, a lioness, died on Monday of dehydration and lack of food despite receiving intravenous fluids for several days following the launch of an online campaign for veterinary help. The animals had lost as much as two-thirds of their body weight as a result of going unfed for weeks as Sudan’s chronic cash shortage hit donations.

“It’s so upsetting. These lions have been suffering for so long,” said Osman Salih, a software engineer who launched the online campaign under the hashtag #SudanAnimalRescue. “We were so late in rescuing them and were unable to save the one that died.” A second lioness was also sick but her condition has improved, and AFP correspondent reported after touring Al-Qureshi Park in an upscale district of Khartoum.

Salih said a group of international wildlife conservationists had contacted him offering their help to save the lions. “They are specialists and are planning to come to Khartoum with their kits and resources,” he told AFP. Al-Qureshi Park is managed by Khartoum municipality but funded in part by private donors, which have dried up in the face of the economic crisis that triggered nationwide protests though much of last year.

The online campaign launched by Salih has grown over the past few days. It is not known how many lions survive in the wild in Sudan, but a population lives in Dinder National Park on the border with Ethiopia. African lions are classified as a “vulnerable” species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Their population dropped 43 percent between 1993 and 2014, with perhaps only 20,000 left in the wild.

Morocco adds West Sahara waters to its maritime territory

RABAT: Morocco on Wednesday integrated waters off the coast of Western Sahara into its maritime territory, adopting two laws that extend its legal jurisdiction over the disputed former Spanish colony. “These laws aim to update the national legal arsenal” in line with “the full sovereignty of the kingdom over its land and maritime borders,” Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita said before parliament in Rabat.

The laws, intended to establish Morocco’s jurisdiction over territorial waters stretching from Tanger, the northern coast as far as Lagosuira, on the border with Mauritania, were unanimously backed by lawmakers and greeted with applause. The vast desert territory of Western Sahara lies north of Mauritania and is bordered to the west by around 1,000 km of Atlantic coastline. Morocco has controlled 80 percent of the territory since the 1970s and views it as an integral part of the kingdom.

That is disputed by the Polisario Front, an Algerian-backed independence movement. In a written statement, AFP received in Algiers, the Polisario Front said Morocco’s decision would “never be sacrificed for the cause of reconciliation. Globally, Al-Jazeera operates hubs in Doha, Kuala Lumpur, London and Washington, with bureaus in more than 70 countries and a workforce of 3,500 to 4,000. In Salih’s office, an Al-Jazeera-branded tech startup than newsroom, complete with exposed brick-work and Apple computers. Its Facebook page has 11 million followers. But Facebook notified Al-Jazeera it has travelled a long International course through choppy waters

Doha: Qatar-based broadcaster Al Jazeera has travelled a long and bumpy road from the early 2000s when it was best known for airing tapes of former Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. It now cultivates a loyal youth audience on social media alongside the satellite channels which have won it both acclaim and scorn. But it faces twin existential threats – targeted by regional power Saudi Arabia which demands its closure, and with the credibility of its digital expansion questioned by social media labelling its output state-controlled.

Al-Jazeera’s boss Mostefa Souag still has a cassette player in his office, though he foresees a future dominated by viral clips, animation and interactivity. “When people start talking about Al-Jazeera and all the criticism, I say why don’t you watch it,” Souag said as his eyes darted across screens displaying its programs. The Arabic channel, the first to launch, revolutionized Middle Eastern news – broadcasting programs about social issues, taboos and politics to an audience previously offered only staid state television.

But it has drawn the ire of regional rulers from Rabat to Riyadh for allegedly fomenting unrest – a charge managers deny. Satellite news remains the heart of its operations, but an army of fashionable twenty-somethings also create GIFs, animations and short films purely for digital consumption, branded AJ+. “We have the values of Al-Jazeera, but we are the cool millennial version,” said AJ+ managing director Dima Khaiti, leader of the online expansion.

AJ+’s Doha base is more trendy tech startup than newsroom, complete with exposed brick-work and Apple computers. Its Facebook page has 11 million followers. But Facebook notified Al-Jazeera its YouTube output is already tagged Qatari-controlled, as state-controlled 80 percent of the territory since 1975 and views it as an integral part of the kingdom. That is disputed by the Polisario Front, an Algerian-backed independence movement. In a written statement, AFP received in Algiers, the Polisario Front said Morocco’s decision would “never be sacrificed for the cause of reconciliation. Globally, Al-Jazeera operates hubs in Doha, Kuala Lumpur, London and Washington, with bureaus in more than 70 countries and a workforce of 3,500 to 4,000. In Salih’s office, an Al-Jazeera-branded tech startup than newsroom, complete with exposed brick-work and Apple computers. Its Facebook page has 11 million followers. But Facebook notified Al-Jazeera its YouTube output is already tagged Qatari-controlled, as state-controlled 80 percent of the territory since 1975 and views it as an integral part of the kingdom. That is disputed by the Polisario Front, an Algerian-backed independence movement. In a written statement, AFP received in Algiers, the Polisario Front said Morocco’s decision would “never be sacrificed for the cause of reconciliation. Globally, Al-Jazeera operates hubs in Doha, Kuala Lumpur, London and Washington, with bureaus in more than 70 countries and a workforce of 3,500 to 4,000. In Salih’s office, an Al-Jazeera-branded tech startup than newsroom, complete with exposed brick-work and Apple computers. Its Facebook page has 11 million followers. But Facebook notified Al-Jazeera its YouTube output is already tagged Qatari-controlled, as state-controlled 80 percent of the territory since 1975 and views it as an integral part of the kingdom. That is disputed by the Polisario Front, an Algerian-backed independence movement.
Angola ex-first daughter Isabel dos Santos charged with fraud

Portuguese banker named in probe found dead

LCANAD: Angola’s billionaire former first daughter Isabel dos Santos has been charged with money laundering and mismanagement during her stewardship of state-owned oil firm Sonangol, as Luanda moves to try and bring her home to face trial for boosting the country’s coffers. Documents leaked this week alleged the daughter of ex-president Jose Eduardo dos Santos plundered state revenues to build her fortune, estimated at $2.1 billion.

“Isabel dos Santos is accused of mismanagement and embezzlement of funds during her tenure at Sonangol and is thus charged in the first instance with the crimes of money laundering, influence peddling, harmful management, forgery of documents, among other economic crimes,” prosecutor general Helder Pitta Gros said dos Santos was among five suspects.

Dos Santos is accused of using her father’s backing to steal money from the oil- and diamond-rich but poor southern African country and moving it abroad with the help of Western firms.

The “Luanda Leaks” scoop, published on Sunday by some of the world’s top media outlets, has put pressure on the government of Portugal, Angola’s former colonial ruler, and some of what they did. Dubbed “the princess” by Angolans, Isabel dos Santos was named Africa’s richest woman by Forbes in 2013. She stopped living in Angola after her father stepped down in 2017 for his anointed successor Joao Lourenco.

Most of the ex-president’s family have moved abroad since he stepped down, and jet between homes in London, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Some of the ex-President’s family have moved abroad since he stepped down, and jet between homes in London, Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Meanwhile, a Portuguese banker targeted in an investigation of dos Santos has been found dead in his Lisbon home after apparently committing suicide, police said yesterday. The body of Nuno Ribeiro da Cunha “was found last evening and all indications point to a suicide”, a Portuguese police spokesman told AFP.

Gros said dos Santos’s 18-month tenure as Sonangol head from June 2016 were opened after her successor Carlos Satrustegui told a news conference late Wednesday.

Isabel dos Santos succeeded her father in a hybrid of an “atomic bomb,” warned Richard Moncrieff of the International Crisis Group (ICG) think tank. “The arduously-created hybrid remains a seething source of tension. Tshisekedi on Sunday even publicly aired the possibility of dissolving the National Assembly to resolve persistent gridlock. The latter idea was bluntly rejected by one of his own allies, Jeanine Mabunda, the legislature’s speaker, who warned “any person who is ignorant of our basic law can be prosecuted for high treason for deliberate violation of the constitution.”

The National Assembly, elected on the same day as the presidential election of December 30 2018, is mandated to stay in office until 2023. Dissolving it would have the impact of an “atomic bomb,” warned Richard Moncrieff of the International Crisis Group (ICG) think tank. “The arduously-created hybrid remains a seething source of tension. Tshisekedi on Sunday even publicly aired the possibility of dissolving the National Assembly to resolve persistent gridlock. The latter idea was bluntly rejected by one of his own allies, Jeanine Mabunda, the legislature’s speaker, who warned “any person who is ignorant of our basic law can be prosecuted for high treason for deliberate violation of the constitution.”

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“The current situation in Libya cannot withstand an escalation,” Algeria’s Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum told yesterday’s meeting. He said neighboring countries had a role to play in fostering dialogue between the Libyan parties to “put an end to the bloody clashes and avoid leading the country towards the unknown.” Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who attended the Berlin summit, said Wednesday: “There are statements from Sarraj, statements from Haftar’s side, which indicate that the only power capable of settling the problem is Algeria.”

The Algerian meeting came as the UN Security Council urged Libya’s warring parties to reach a long-term deal paving the way for a political process aimed at ending the conflict. Algeria shares a border of almost 1,000 km with Libya, which has been rocked by violence since the 2011 toppling of dictator Muammar Gaddafi by NATO-backed insurgents. Mitiga, the Libyan capital’s only operational airport, closed again Wednesday evening after threats from pro-Haftar forces. Turkish President Reccep Tayyip Erdogan, who supports Sarraj’s GNA, is expected in Algiers Sunday. — AFP

Saturday January 24, 2020

FRIDAY TIMES
British parliament ratifies Brexit divorce law, after years of debate

Royal assent only remaining hurdle to formal ratification

LONDON: After years of acrimonious debate, British lawmakers yesterday finally approved the terms of their country’s historic departure from the European Union—due in just nine days’ time. MPs in the lower House of Commons had already backed the EU Withdrawal Agreement Bill, which ratifies the divorce deal that Prime Minister Boris Johnson struck with Brussels last year. But the unelected upper House of Lords made some changes this week, including on the rights of EU citizens and child refugees after Brexit. In a series of votes yesterday, the Commons—where Johnson’s Conservatives have a large majority—rejected all five amendments and sent the bill back to the Lords, who then reluctantly agreed to back down. The only hurdle left to formal ratification now is royal assent by Queen Elizabeth II, which could come as soon as Thursday, paving the way for Britain to leave the EU on January 31. The European Parliament still has to back the deal in a vote next week but its approval in London is a historic moment, as Britain edges closer to becoming the first country to leave the 28-member EU.

At times it felt like we would never cross the Brexit finish line, but we’ve done it,” Johnson said in a statement. “Now we can put the rancor behind us and division of the past three years behind us.”

New dynamic

It is a huge personal achievement for Johnson, his predecessor, Theresa May, negotiated a Brexit deal with Brussels in 2018 but the Commons rejected it three times, forcing her to resign. Johnson then agreed changes to the text with Brussels, only to be defeated again by MPs unable to agree on the timetable for turning his new deal into law.

He accused them of trying to frustrate the result of the landmark 2016 referendum vote for Brexit and forced a snap election last month. The result, with Johnson returned to office on a thumping majority, fundamentally upended the dynamic and MPs swiftly backed the agreement.

The Lords put up a minor fight this week. One amendment sought to alter the government’s scheme to register around 3.6 million EU citizens living in Britain, to give them physical documents proving their right to stay. Another change would have required the government to negotiate the right of unaccompanied child refugees in the EU to join relatives in Britain.

‘Tight timetable’

The Brexit deal protects the rights of EU citizens, makes special trading arrangements for the British province of Northern Ireland, and settles the UK’s EU debts. It also paves the way for transition phase until December 31, in which UK-EU ties will remain largely the same while both sides try to agree a new trading and security partnership.

But the shape of that future relationship remains unresolved—and negotiating it could pose an even bigger challenge than agreeing the divorce. In a speech early next month, Johnson is expected to set out more detail of his hopes for a free trade agreement with Brussels along the lines of the EU’s recent deal with Canada. “I’m absolutely confident that we can do that,” Johnson said yesterday while taking questions online from members of the public. He wants to both preserve free-flowing commerce between Britain and its largest trading partner across the Channel, and strike agreements with other countries—namely the United States. Brussels has warned that it is impossible to address all issues in that time, suggesting a more limited deal is now likely. But while UK finance minister Sajid Javid admitted yesterday that it was a “tight timetable”, he agreed with Johnson that it could be done. The premier’s office denied a row with Washington over London’s proposed tax on tech giants would affect trade negotiations after Brexit, saying: “It’s not part of the discussions.” —AFP

Two children killed in school bus crash in Germany

BERLIN: Two children were killed and 20 more injured when a school bus slipped off an icy road into a ditch in central Germany, local authorities said yesterday. The driver of the bus was also injured, the district office of Warthburg reported. Citing local police, Bild daily said the bus was carrying more than 20 children to their elementary school when the accident happened near the town of Berka in the state of Thuringia.

According to Bild, driving conditions were worse by “thick fog”. In a statement on Twitter, Thuringian state president Bodo Ramelow said he was “dismayed” by the news.

Separately yesterday, nine children were injured in a similar incident near the Bavarian-Austrian border. A police spokesman in Rosenheim said that a school bus had crashed into a tree in nearby Traunstein, for still unknown reasons. He added that the driver had been seriously injured, while the children had sustained light to medium injuries. —AFP

Harry, Meghan, their new neighbors and the paparazzi

VICTORIA: In explaining his decision to give up his work as a senior member of Britain’s royal family, Prince Harry laid part of the blame at the feet of the media, which he called a “powerful force.”

Indeed, in a 2017 BBC documentary, Harry decried the paparazzi who hounded his mother Diana as a “pack of dogs.” He surely hoped that with a move to Canada, the family could tame the tabloid scrum. But sure enough, journalists from as far away as Australia have arrived on Vancouver Island, and pictures of Harry’s wife Meghan walking the dogs, their son Archie strapped to her, quickly surfaced.

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex have threatened legal action over the pictures, but the photographers are also under fire from locals who say they are not going to tolerate invasions of privacy.

“It is a quiet place here,” said Kathryn Sandberg, a long-time resident of North Saanich, the tiny seaside community where Harry, Meghan and son Archie are living, in the greater Victoria area.

“I think maybe one of the reasons why Meghan and Harry want to come here is because of this quiet, and because there are people who are respectful of privacy,” Sandberg told AFP.

“And we wouldn’t want to see that change,” Meghan was snapped hiking in North Hill Regional Park-local news outlet Chem News published a video of locals confronting one photographer working on the story, Derek Shook. “Do you think a guy like you does anything for this community?” one resident says to Shook, who told a reporter:

“They don’t get it. (…) They don’t understand.” Shook said he had been camped out for 11 days in the area.

“It’s a worldwide story,” Shook told Chem News, adding that he felt Meghan had not exactly made it difficult for the snappers. “If she wanted to, she could have put her head down. But she stood up tall and smiled and made sure that, you know, we were able to get the shot,” Amelia Brace is the North America correspondent for Australia’s Channel 7. She is normally based in Los Angeles but arrived on Vancouver Island late Monday. “The royals in Australia are huge. It’s always one of our biggest stories,” Brace told AFP from a vantage point near Harry and Meghan’s temporary home, where she had just filmed her report. — AFP
WASHINGTON: A psychologist who helped design the CIA’s “war on terror” torture program after the September 11, 2001 attacks defended the program this week before its victims at the US military prison in Guantanamo, Cuba.

James Mitchell was unapologetic Tuesday when he appeared at a hearing to answer questions about waterboarding, stress positions, and sleep deprivation techniques applied to 9/11 plot suspects detained in secret prisons following the attacks.

“I’ll get up today and do it again,” he said before five of those men, whose slow-moving cases at the Guantanamo military tribunals have them facing possible death sentences.

Mitchell was one of the architects of the so-called “enhanced interrogation” operations designed to protect Al-Qaeda terrorists suspected of planning the 2001 attacks, which left 2,976 dead. While the techniques he and another psychologist helped devise have now been banned as illegal torture, Mitchell said it had been his “moral duty” to help protect the country.

“Failing to protect American lives outweighed the feelings of discomfort of terrorists who voluntarily took up arms against us,” he told the court, according to The New York Times. “For me it just seemed like it would be dereliction of my moral responsibilities.” Mitchell personally took part in some of the interrogations, including waterboarding Abu Zubaydah, one of the earliest CIA captives associated with Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden.

Abu Zubaydah, who remains imprisoned in Guantanamo, was not among those in the courtroom facing Mitchell on Tuesday. Those present included Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who was waterboarded 183 times by CIA interrogation teams which included Mitchell; Mohammed’s nephew, Ammar al-Baluchi; Waleed bin Attash; and two others, none of whom had seen Mitchell since they were sent to Guantanamo in the early-mid 2000s. Mitchell had been called to testify as some of the prisoners in Guantanamo were challenging the use of evidence in their coming trials that was derived from the government’s interrogation programs.

Evidence garnered from the CIA’s interrogations already cannot be used in court; the defendants also want to exclude that from parallel FBI interrogations. All the defendants are still in the preliminary phases of their trials, which have been stalled for years by complex rules, poor administration and legal maneuvers from both sides.

Mitchell is a big part of the reason why the victims’ families still don’t have any justice,” said Amnesty International’s Julia Hall. “Mitchell has said he is giving this testimony for the victims and families,” she said. “However, it is in large measure because of the torture techniques that he himself created and used on the detainees that there has been delay after delay. Evidence extracted under torture can’t be used in these proceedings.” — AFP

**International**

Psychologist defends CIA’s ‘war on terror’ torture before Gitmo court

Man who ‘waterboarded’ for CIA ‘unapologetic’ during hearing

WASHINGTON: James Mitchell was unapologetic Tuesday when he appeared at a hearing to answer questions about waterboarding, stress position and sleep deprivation techniques applied to 9/11 plot suspects. — AFP

**Haiti pushes foster homes to ease problems in orphanages**

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti: Rose Boncoeur brought two emaciated little girls to live in her modest home in Haiti as part of a reform drive aimed at keeping children out of orphanages.

“People often asked me if I am crazy,” said Boncoeur, whose name means “good heart.” The government of the Americas’ poorest country is pushing to deinstitutionalize children as it seeks to avoid the darkest sides of orphanage life—trafficking of kids or even worse abuse. So far, 120 homes in Haiti have opened their doors for used clothing for her foster children—sisters, aged eight months and three years.

“Some people do not understand that I spend money on children who are not mine,” said Boncoeur, who is proud that her biological daughter treats those girls like siblings. Much of the violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. — AFP

**Mexico detained more than 2,000 after caravan border crossing**

MEXICO CITY: Mexican migration authorities released Wednesday an official count of the number of people detained along the country’s southern border two days before, estimating that more than 2,000 people were “rescued” after they crossed the border with Guatemala.

National Institute of Migration (INM) officials explained that among the detained were not only members of the so-called “2020 Caravan” that left Honduras about a week ago, but also many who had entered the country through other spots. About 1,300 people were detained in Tabasco and another 800 in Chiapas, the INM said, including some minors.

On Wednesday, Mexico-deportee 460 Hondurans via official planes and buses from the two southern states, the ministry of the interior said. Several hundred caravan members had tried to cross the Suchiate River at dawn on Monday from Tecun Uman in Guatemala, demanding migration authorities let them continue their journey to the United States.

When authorities did not immediately respond, the migrants began wading across the river, which is shallow this time of year. Mexican National Guard troops fired tear gas to force them back, leading to scenes of chaos as huge crowds of people fled across the river.

About 900 were able to enter the country illegally, though more than 400 of them were later arrested. Thousands of Central Americans have crossed Mexico toward the United States in caravans, fleeing chronic poverty and brutal gang violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. — AFP

**Pedophilia, organ trafficking**

The government has also finally signed an international convention designed to safeguard inter-country adoptions. Before, a foreigner could just go to an orphanage in Haiti, strike a deal with the director, and adopt a child, with IBSER only involved at the end of the process to act as a type of registrar of the match, said its director, Arielle Jeanty Villedrouin. IBSER now heads the process, deciding who the children will go to, “which averts some excesses because there has been talk of pedophilia and organ trafficking,” she said. Haiti is a critical to avoiding heartbreak for parents who give up their kids to orphanages. “People would entrust their children to an orphanage and maybe sign a document without even knowing how to read,” said Villedrouin.

She said the child welfare agency often had to deal with weeping mothers who came looking for children who had been adopted and taken out of the country. Eighty percent of the estimated 27,000 children living in orphanages in Haiti have at least one parent alive. Child welfare advocates here say it is a shame that abject poverty can destroy families and strip children from their parents when some orphanages actually have a lot of money. — AFP

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**Dems urge Republican ‘courage’ at Trump impeachment trial**

President accused of seeking to cheat to ensure re-election in November

WASHINGTON: Democrats on Wednesday accused Donald Trump at his historic Senate impeachment trial of seeking to cheat to ensure re-election in November, and called for “courage” by the president’s fellow Republicans while considering the case against him.

Adam Schiff, head of the House of Representatives’ prosecution team, took to the Senate floor to deliver hours of methodical arguments to a hushed chamber hearing only the third-ever impeachment trial of a US president. The Democratic lawmaker described how Trump solicited foreign interference in domestic elections, “abusing the powers of his office to seek help from abroad to improve his re-election prospects at home.”

“Whenever he was caught, he used the powers of that office to obstruct the investigation into his own misconduct,” said Schiff, who headed the probe that led to Trump’s December 18 impeachment by the Democratic-controlled House. Schiff shrugged off Republican arguments that American voters, and not the Senate, should decide whether Trump remains in the White House.

“The president’s misconduct cannot be excused at the ballot box for we cannot be assured that the vote will be fairly won,” Schiff said. Trump stands accused of withholding military aid from Ukraine to pressure his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky to launch an investigation into Democrat and potential election rival Joe Biden. “President Trump withheld hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid to a strategic partner at war with Russia to secure foreign help with his re-election,” Schiff said at the nationally televised proceedings.

“In other words, to cheat. If this conduct is not impeachable, then nothing is.” Interspersing his remarks with video of House inquiry testimony, and clips of Trump himself, Schiff appealed to the Senate’s 100 members to put aside partisan- ship in deciding Trump’s fate. He encouraged them to use an open mind when evaluating the testimony of people like ambassadors Gordon Sondland and Marie Yovanovitch, and former National Security Council official Fiona Hill.

They risked everything, their careers. And they know what you’ve asked to decide may risk yours too,” Schiff told the senators. “But if they could show the courage, so can we,” he said in concluding a nearly-nine-hour session.

Fairly quickly Republicans, who hold a 53–47 edge, have shown little inclination, however, to break ranks with a president who has a history of lashing out ferociously at his perceived enemies. “I didn’t hear anything new at all,” Republican Senator John Barrasso said during a trial break. Sixty-seven senators, a two-thirds majority, are needed to remove Trump from office and a series of votes Tuesday on the trial’s ground rules followed strict party lines.

Republicans defeated repeated efforts by Democrats to introduce White House witnesses and documents at the start of the trial. Trump called the proceedings a “hoax” and said he expected the Senate to clear him “fairly quickly.”

The president defended the Republicans’ rejection of Democratic efforts to force former national security advisor John Bolton and others to testify, saying of Bolton, for example, that it would present a “national security problem.” Trump then went on a Twitter tear, firing off a record number of tweets and retweets in a single day of his presidency — 150 as of 10.30 pm.

With reports swirling that some Democrats were mulling pushing for Biden or his son Hunter to testify in exchange for key administration officials being called as witnesses, the top Democrat waived it off. Hunter Biden served on the board of a Ukrainian energy company when his father was vice president.

But a witness trade is “off the table,” Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said. House impeachment “managers”—the prosecutors—have 24 hours over three days to make their case that Trump is guilty of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. Yesterday’s session focused on the legal and constitutional case for impeachment, while Friday will address facts surrounding the president’s misconduct, Schiff said. White House lawyers then have 24 hours, likely beginning tomorrow, to present their defense. Senators will then be able to ask written questions to be read out aloud by US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, who is presiding over the trial. Trump’s personal attorney, Jay Sekulow, said the White House will “challenge aggressively the case they’re putting forward.”

Adam Schiff’s appeal to Republican senators to support calling key witnesses, Sekulow gave a curt rationale for refusal. — AFP

**Gabbard sues Hillary for calling her ‘Russian asset’**

NEW YORK: US presidential hopeful Tulsi Gabbard, who is in near last place among Democrats in primary polling, filed a defamation suit Wednesday against Hillary Clinton after the former secretary of state called her a “Russian asset.” Gabbard alleges that Clinton made the comments in retaliation for her support of Bernie Sanders, the former secretary of state’s rival in 2016 for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Clinton never mentioned Gabbard by name, stating only that she was referring to “somebody who is currently in the Democratic primary.” “She’s the favorite of the Russians. They have a bunch of sites and bots and other ways of supporting her so far,” Clinton said in a podcast that aired in October, adding that “Yeah, she’s a Russian asset.”

The next day, CNN asked Clinton’s spokesman if she was referring to Gabbard. He replied: “If the nesting doll fits.” Gabbard, a 38-year-old Army veteran and Hawaii lawmaker who has criticized US involvement in Syria and received favorable coverage in Russian state media, said Clinton’s accusation, which was widely repeated on social media, was “devastating” to her reputation.

“Clinton’s peddling of this theory has harmed Tulsi, has harmed American voters, and has harmed American democracy,” said Gabbard, who added that she has “spent her entire adult life serving this country.” She said she had asked Clinton to retract the statement, to no avail. One of 11 Democratic candidates seeking the party’s presidential nomination, Gabbard is polling at 1.3 percent among likely primary voters, according to an average compiled by Real Clear Politics.

Clinton, a former first lady, was the Democratic nominee in 2016 but lost to Donald Trump in the November elections. — AFP

**Biden, Sanders trade barbs as US primary race tightens**

WASHINGTON: Democratic frontrunners Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders are trading barbs, each accusing the other of lying and having a smaller chance of defeating Donald Trump in November, as the race for the party’s nomination tightens.

Biden holds the lead in national polling averages, but Sanders has been on the rise since December. A new CNN/SSRS poll puts Sanders in first place with 27 percent, within the margin of error but slipping ahead of Biden, who came in at 24 percent. Results from another survey Wednesday by Morning Consult were virtually the inverse: Barack Obama’s former vice president scored 29 percent to 24 percent for the US senator from Vermont.

As the race has narrowed, the two septuagenarians—Biden the moderate, Sanders a self-described “Democratic socialist”—have grown testy, accusing each other of dishonesty. The change in tone recalls the bitter 2016 primary battle between Sanders and Hillary Clinton, who in the end won the Democratic nomination but lost the election to Trump. “I find it amazing that we go back and look at statements, many of them, most of them, taken out of context of 10, 20, 30, 35 years ago,” Biden said on MSNBC Wednesday.

The day before, Sanders had accused Biden of using a tweet accompanied by a video of having long wanted to cut funding for Social Security, the US public pension system. “Let’s be honest, Joe. One of us fought for decades to cut Social Security, and one of us didn’t. But don’t take it from me. Take it from you,” he wrote. A Sanders spokeswoman, Brianna Joy Gray, piled on, posting a long video comparing the two candidates’ positions, and concluding that Biden’s record on foreign or trade policy would crumble under Trump’s attacks if the two were to face off one-on-one. Then she called on the former vice president to “Tell the truth Joe,” invoking a hashtag popular with Sanders supporters.

In an ad posted on Twitter by his account, Biden had previously taken a shot at Sanders, “Bernie’s negative attacks won’t change the truth,” a narrator says. “Joe Biden is still the strongest Democrat to beat Donald Trump.” — Reuters
SARS lessons hang over China’s fight against new virus outbreak

BEIJING: China’s lockdown of an entire city to contain a virus outbreak stands in contrast to its handling of the deadly SARS crisis two decades ago, when it was criticized for being secretive and indecisive. The new virus has killed 17 and infected more than 500 other people, with most cases found in Wuhan, the central city of 11 million people where outward flights and trains were indefinitely suspended yesterday.

Like SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), China’s new disease is contagious between humans, and is part of the same family of coronaviruses. But unlike the 2003 SARS epidemic, when China drew international condemnation for covering up cases, Beijing is taking a starkly different approach to contain the new disease.

“In this case the Chinese authorities have expressed the willingness to collaborate more transparently and more quickly than for (the) SARS outbreak,” Antoine Flahault, deputy director of the Swiss School of Public Health, told AFP. “This is (a) tremendously different attitude from 2003, which has sharpened its vigilance,” said Zhong Nanshan, China’s top respiratory disease expert.

Effective controlled

The Chinese government has published regular updates of the new virus since announcing its appearance at the end of December, the exact opposite to its response in 2003. The country saw its first case of SARS in November 2002, but Beijing waited until February to officially acknowledge the disease, which it downplayed then as “effectively controlled.” Chinese authorities also repeatedly failed to coordinate with the WHO, which urged “full and open” reporting of cases. In addition to Guangdong province, WHO experts were also blocked from accessing Beijing military hospitals with suspected SARS patients.

BEIJING: A new strain of coronavirus that emerged in China may have originated in bats or snakes, according to genetic analysis of the virus released by authorities in the wake of the outbreak, with two studies pointing to the likely role of bats in the outbreak. One study, published Tuesday in the journal Science China Life Sciences, which is sponsored by Beijing’s Chinese Academy of Sciences, looked at the relations between the new strain and other viruses.

It found the coronavirus that emerged from China’s Wuhan was closely related to a strain that exists in bats. “Bats being the native host of the Wuhan CoV (coronavirus) would be the logical and convenient reasoning, though it remains likely there was intermediate host(s) in the transmission cascade from bats to humans,” the researchers from several institutions in China wrote in the paper.

That study did not speculate about which animal could have been an “intermediate host,” but a second study published yesterday in the Journal of Medical Virology identifies snakes as the possible culprit. “To search for (a) potential virus reservoir, we have carried out a comprehensive sequence analysis and comparison. Results from our analysis suggest that snake is the most probable wildlife animal reservoir,” the paper says.

The researchers caution that their conclusions require “further validation by experimental studies in animal models”. Neither study explained how the virus may have been transmitted from animals to humans. But they could offer clues to Chinese authorities as they hunt for the source of the outbreak that has sickened hundreds of people in the country and has been confirmed as far afield as the United States. The food market where the deadly virus surfaced offered a range of exotic wildlife for sale, including live foxes, crocodiles, wolf puppies, giant salamanders, snakes, rats, peacocks, porcupines, camel meat and other game. Gao Fu, director of the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, said in Beijing on Wednesday that authorities believe the virus came from “wild animals at the seafood market” though the exact source remains undetermined.

Harmon Ghebreyes, on Wednesday hailed the “very, very strong measures” taken by China this time around. “We’re seeing patient zero being isolated and people being quarantined,” he said.

Local news network RTHK said one of the first people to be transported to the quarantine site in Sai Kung was an Australian visitor who had stayed at the same hotel as a man who tested positive for the virus. “I feel so good right now,” RTHK quoted the unidentified man as saying. When asked what he had been told about why he was being placed in isolation, the visitor replied: “I have no idea why. I was just living in the hotel.” —AFP

HK holiday camps become quarantine zones as fears spike

HONG KONG: Hong Kong has turned two holiday camps, including a former military barracks, into quarantine zones for people who may have come into contact with the Wuhan virus, officials announced yesterday. The international financial hub has been on high alert for the virus, which has killed 17 people since the outbreak started in central China.

Nearly 300 people in Hong Kong were killed by SARS in the city’s year celebrations in response. City officials also announced it was cancelling all official Lunar New Year celebrations in response. City officials also announced it was cancelling all official Lunar New Year celebrations in response. City officials also announced two parks usually used by campers and holidaymakers had been prepared to isolate any potential cases while they await test results.

“We will have a full team of staff to operate the quarantine camps,” Wong Ka-hing, the director of the Centre for Health Protection, told reporters. Wong said three people who had come into close contact with the two confirmed cases would be taken to a camp in rural Sai Kung district. Another holiday camp, a former British military barracks on Hong Kong island, was being prepared to serve as a quarantine facility.

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Transparency concerns

In Washington, a US State Department official said on condition of anonymity that there have been encouraging signs that the Chinese government had understood the gravity of this problem. But he added: “We’re still concerned as far as transparency in the Chinese government.”

Prioritizing social stability over public health may have thwarted an earlier response to the Wuhan virus, said Dahl Yang, a political science professor at the University of Chicago, at the beginning of January, when Wuhan officials held an annual political meeting, the local government tried to "project this atmosphere of stability and calm in the region", he told AFP. The mayor of Wuhan has also faced scrutiny for allowing a massive Lunar New Year banquet - involving 40,000 families - to take place on Saturday. In an interview with CCTV Tuesday, he defended the decision by saying it was made before human-to-human transmission was officially confirmed on Monday. —AFP

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Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS, was linked to Chinese consumption of civet meat. Many exotic species are still widely consumed in China or other Asian countries where they are considered a delicacy - like the civet or some rats or bats - or for purported health benefits un

Studies suggest role of bats, snakes in outbreak of virus

BEIJING: A new strain of coronavirus that emerged in China may have originated in bats or snakes, according to genetic analysis of the virus that has so far killed 17 people. The theories are based on examination of the genome sequence of the virus released by authorities in the wake of the outbreak, with two studies pointing to the likely role of bats in the outbreak. One study, published Tuesday in the journal Science China Life Sciences, which is sponsored by Beijing’s Chinese Academy of Sciences, looked at the relations between the new strain and other viruses.

It found the coronavirus that emerged from China’s Wuhan was closely related to a strain that exists in bats. “Bats being the native host of the Wuhan CoV (coronavirus) would be the logical and convenient reasoning, though it remains likely there was intermediate host(s) in the transmission cascade from bats to humans,” the researchers from several institutions in China wrote in the paper.

That study did not speculate about which animal could have been an “intermediate host,” but a second study published yesterday in the Journal of Medical Virology identifies snakes as the possible culprit. “To search for (a) potential virus reservoir, we have carried out a comprehensive sequence analysis and comparison. Results from our analysis suggest that snake is the most probable wildlife animal reservoir,” the paper says.

The researchers caution that their conclusions require “further validation by experimental studies in animal models”. Neither study explained how the virus may have been transmitted from animals to humans. But they could offer clues to Chinese authorities as they hunt for the source of the outbreak that has sickened hundreds of people in the country and has been confirmed as far afield as the United States. The food market where the deadly virus surfaced offered a range of exotic wildlife for sale, including live foxes, crocodiles, wolf puppies, giant salamanders, snakes, rats, peacocks, porcupines, camel meat and other game. Gao Fu, director of the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, said in Beijing on Wednesday that authorities believe the virus came from “wild animals at the seafood market” though the exact source remains undetermined.

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China locks down two cities to curb coronavirus outbreak

**WUHAN, China:** China locked down nearly 20 million in two cities at the centre of a deadly virus outbreak yesterday, banning planes and trains from leaving in an unprecedented move aimed at containing the disease which has already spread to other countries. The respiratory virus has claimed 17 lives since emerging from a seafood and animal market in Wuhan, infected hundreds of other people nationwide and been detected as far away as the United States.

Streets and shopping centres in Wuhan, a major port city in central Hubei province with a population of 11 million people, were eerily quiet after authorities told residents not to leave town "without a special reason". Trains and planes out of Wuhan were indefinitely suspended, tollways on roads out the city were closed, leading to fear and panic for those who were trapped.

Hours later, authorities in neighboring Huanggang announced that public transport and train services would be suspended at midnight, while people were told to not leave the city of 7.5 million. All of Huanggang's cinemas, Internet cafes, and the central market will close. A third city, 1.1 million-population Ezhou, announced the train station had been temporarily closed earlier in the day.

**Fear, uncertainty on last flights from Wuhan**

**TOKYO:** Passengers who made it out of epicentre Wuhan just before quarantine measures effectively sealed off the Chinese city of 11 million spoke yesterday of shuttered stores and empty streets. Authorities have banned planes and trains in or out of the major transport hub in a bid to contain the coronavirus that has already claimed 17 lives, infected hundreds and spread beyond China.

One Japanese traveller arriving at Tokyo's Narita Airport described a deserted city in lockdown and said he did not know how he would get back in. "All stores have been shut since yesterday and no-one is in the streets. All the people are wearing masks," said Minoru Okada, a Japanese auto industry businessman in his 50s, who was returning for the Lunar New Year holidays.

"Buses and subways have all stopped services," he added, voicing concerns for his company's colleagues now stranded in the city. "I'm supposed to return (to Wuhan) after the Lunar New Year but I don't know how it will actually turn out," he said.

The emergency committee was to meet again yesterday, after experts were split over declaring a public health emergency. WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said "more information" was needed but he also praised China's "very, very strong measures" that will help control the epidemic and "minimize the chances of this outbreak spreading internationally". — AFP

**WUHAN, China:** Wuhan residents called for family reunions, were almost empty except for workers yesterday afternoon. The few people wandering in the streets of the city were wearing masks as mandated by police. At a shopping centre that had been packed in normal times, a man who works there said he understood the government's measures. "Even if we can't celebrate the New Year this year, there's already next year," said the man, surnamed Sun. Taxis in Wuhan tripled their fares, a driver admitted. "It's very dangerous to be outside at this moment but we need to earn money," the driver told AFP.

More than 570 people have been infected with the virus across China - with most cases found in Wuhan, where a seafood market that illegally sold wild animals has been identified as the epicentre of the outbreak. The coronavirus has caused alarm because of its similarity to SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which killed nearly 650 people across mainland China and Hong Kong in 2002-2003. Like SARS, it can be passed among people through the respiratory tract.

"We are feeling as though it is the end of the world," said one Wuhan resident on China's Twitter-like Weibo platform, voicing concerns about shortages of food and disinfectant. Another described being on the "verge of tears" when the de facto quarantine was announced, with the misery compounded by the proximity to the Lunar New Year holiday.

Large-scale Lunar New Year events in Beijing have been cancelled as part of national efforts to control the spread of the virus. Chinese authorities have been telling people to avoid crowded places over the busy Spring Festival holiday. The city government said it would call off events including temple fairs - which have attracted massive crowds of tourists in past years - urging citizens "to strengthen prevention and support".

In a post on China's Twitter-like platform Weibo, city authorities added that the move was to help epidemic prevention and control. Beijing's city government said they would provide more information "as the epidemic situation evolves".

**Empty streets**

Wuhan's train station and airport, which should have been packed with people coming travelling for holiday Lunar New Year holiday, when hundreds of millions of Chinese take planes, trains and roads to visit relatives in what is the world's biggest annual movement of people.

The search term "Wuhan is sealed off" had been read over 1.2 billion times on China's Twitter-like Weibo platform by yesterday evening with some 376,000 discussion posts. We consciously avoid going out, disinfect diligently and wear masks," wrote one Wuhan resident in a Weibo post. "But there is a lack of food and disinfectants, and we need more resources. We hope everyone can understand that we are feeling as though it is the end of the world.

The number of confirmed deaths has risen to 17, with more than 570 confirmed infected, officials said. — AFP

Macau, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States. The 17 people who died in China were aged from 48 to 89, and had pre-existing health conditions, Chinese health authorities said yesterday. The World Health Organization on Wednesday delayed a decision on whether to declare a global health emergency - a rare instrument used only for the worst outbreaks.

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**End of the world**: Wuhan residents react to quarantine

**WUHAN, China:** Wuhan residents called for help and shared worries of food shortages yesterday, with streets in the virus-hit central Chinese city left deserted after it was put on lockdown. Planes and trains out of the city - the epicentre of a new SARS-like virus - were cancelled, with public transport suspended and residents ordered not to leave in a bid to control the spread of the disease. Streets decorated for Chinese New Year festivities in the city of 11 million were empty, with the few who ventured outside wearing masks as ordered by authorities.

"I try my best to stay home and only come out to buy the necessary goods when needed," a man surnamed Sun told AFP from a small supermarket, which already had a few empty shelves. The neighboring city of Huanggang was also placed on lockdown from yesterday night, while the train station was closed at an- other nearby city, Ezhou.

But near-empty trains and planes still headed into Wuhan, with hardy passengers donning surgical masks and gloves to brave the journey. The lockdown comes on the eve of the Lunar New Year holiday, when hundreds of millions of Chinese take planes, trains and roads to visit relatives in what is the world's biggest annual movement of people.

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Cloud cooking land: Indian housewives become chefs

MUMBAI: Rashmi Sahijwala never expected to start working at the age of 59, let alone join India’s gig economy — now she is part of an army of housewives turning their homes into “cloud kitchens” to feed time-starved millennials. Asia’s third-largest economy is battling a slowdown so sharp it is creating a drag on global growth, the International Monetary Fund said Monday, but there are some bright spots.

The gig economy, aided by cheap mobile data and abundant labor, has flourished in India, opening up new markets across the vast nation. Although Indian women have long battled for access to education and employment opportunities, the biggest hurdle for many is convincing conservative families to let them leave home. But new apps like Curryful, Homefoodi, and Nanighar are tapping the skills of housewives to slice, dice, and prepare meals for hungry urbanites from the comfort of their homes.

The so-called cloud kitchens - restaurants that have no physical presence and a delivery-only model - are rising in popularity as there is a boom in food delivery apps such as Swiggy and Zomato. “We want to be the Uber of home-cooked food,” said Ben Mathew, who launched Curryful in 2018, convinced that housewives cooked food,” said Ben Mathew, who launched Curryful in 2018, convinced that housewives in 2018, convinced that housewives.

“We could do more brands from one kitchen and cater to different customer requirements at multiple price points,” Banerjee told AFP. The chefs buy the ingredients, supply the cookware and pay the utility bills. The apps — which make their money through charging commission, such as more than 18 percent per order for Curryful — offer training and supply the chefs with containers and bags to pack the food in.

We’re trying to set up a lunch delivery business but fi- 

ally gave up after failing to compete with dab-
hawalas, Mumbai’s famously efficient food 

porters. Today Vyas works seven hours a day, 
five days a week in her kitchen, serving up a 
bevy of Indian vegetarian staples, from street 
food favorites to lentils and rice according to the 

app’s weekly set menus, “I don’t understand 
marketing or how to run a business but I know how to cook. So, the current partnership helps 
me focus on just that while Curryful takes care 
of the rest,” Vyas told AFP. She pockets up to 
$150 a month after accounting for the commis-
sions and costs, but hopes to earn more as the 
orders increase.

In contrast, a chef at a bricks-and-mortar restaurant 
takes home a monthly wage of between 
$300 and $1,000 for working six days a week. With India’s cloud kitchen sector ex-
pected to reach $1.05 billion by 2023, according 
to data platform Inc42, other companies are also keen to get a slice of the action. Swiggy, for ex-
ample, has invested 2.5 billion rupees ($35.3 mil-
lion) in opening 1,000 cloud kitchens across the 
nation.

Back in her Mumbai kitchen, Sahijwala is 
elated to have embarked on a career at an age 
when her contemporaries are eyeing retirement. 
Over the past year, she has seen her profit grow 
to $200 a month, but more importantly, she said, 
“my passion has finally found an outlet. “I am 
just glad life has given me this chance.” — AFP

Black ‘rock’ from Italy eruption part of exploded brain

ROME: It looks like a piece of rock - black, shiny and unexceptional. But Italian anthropologists say the fragment is actually part of an exploded brain from an unfortunate victim of the volcanic eruption of Italy’s Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. The gory discovery - published yesterday in The New England Journal of Medicine - is a rarity in archaeology, and re-
searchers called the find from the ruins of Her-
culaneum near Pompeii “sensational”.

Scholars who for years have studied the grisly remains of those trapped by ash, lava and toxic gasses when the volcano erupted in southern Italy were intrigued by a curious glassy material found inside one victim’s skull.

“In October 2018, I was able to look at these 
remnants and I saw that something was shaw-
merly in the shattered skull,” Pier Paolo Petrone, 
one of the researchers, told AFP. Petroni, a 
forensic anthropologist from the University of 
Naples Federico II, said he was “pretty sure 
this material was human brain”. Further analysis 
by Piero Pucci from the CENIGE advanced 
biochec centre in Naples confirmed that it did 
indeed contain bits of proteins and fatty acids 
from hair and brain tissue. Herculaneum, named 
after the Greek god Hercules, was a popular re-
sort town for the rich northwest of Pompeii when Vesuvius erupted. — AFP

3 US crew killed as firefighting plane crashes in Australia

SYDNEY: Three American crew helping to battle 
Australia’s devastating bushfires were killed yest-

day when their water-bombing plane crashed in 
mountainous terrain during a sortie to tackle 

another outbreak of the deadly blazes. Officials 

said the Hercules C-130 plane erupted in a large 
fireball on impact in a national park the Snowy 
Mountains shortly before 1300 GMT (0200 CMT).

The cause of the crash was not immediately 
known, but New South Wales Rural Fire Service 
commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons had said earlier 
in the day that high winds were making flying the 
water tankers “very difficult”. “We’ve got a number 
of firefighters and a number of crew that are in the area and working to contain and work around the 
fire,” Fitzsimmons said. The incident brought the 
death toll in Australia’s bushfires to at least 32 since the 
crisis began in September. The highly experi-
enced US firefighting trio was working for Canadian firm Coulson Aviation, which had been contracted to help fight the fires. Slate Premier Gladys Berejik-
lian said the crash highlighted the danger faced by 
firefighters as they attempted to extinguish massive 
blazes across Australia’s southeast.

“There are in excess of 70 aircraft that have 
been used today alone and today is a stark and 
horrrible reminder of the dangerous conditions 
that our volunteers, (and) our emergency services per-
sonnel… (face) on a daily basis,” she said. The crash 

drowned as at least seven fires, whipped up by 
scorching temperatures and strong winds, flared 
to emergency status following a brief full brought by 

rain and cooler temperatures. Bushfires also 
forced the closure of Canberra Airport yesterday, 
with all flights in and out of the country’s capital 
suspended to allow the deployment of aerial fire-
fighting crews to battle the approaching flames.

Temperatures soared to 40 degrees Celsius in 
Sydney, where a bushfire also broke out in a 

western suburbs of Australia’s biggest city.

Wind gusts had been forecast to reach 90 km 
per hour in some areas, but Fitzsimmons said the 

winds were stronger than expected, especially in 
the fire-ravaged southeast. Unprecedented bush-
fires fuelled by climate change have devastated 

vast swathes of the country since September, de-
stroying more than 2,000 homes and burning 10 

million hectares (100,000 sq km) of land - an area 
larger than South Korea or Portugal.” — AFP
Fashion legend Jean-Paul Gaultier bows out in style

French designer Jean Paul Gaultier acknowledges the audience at the end of his Women's Spring-Summer 2020 Haute Couture collection fashion show in Paris, on Wednesday. — AFP

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In Albania, a film follows communism’s star-crossed lovers

Inside the stone walls of a 13th-century fortress, Albanian and Russian actors are striving to re-enact a little-known but troubling chapter of their shared history. The first joint production between the two countries in almost 70 years. The working title for the love story is “Gjirokastra”, the southern Albanian city where the story unfolds. It will be the first feature film to delve into the tragic fate of mixed couples persecuted by Tirana’s communist regime.

The trouble started after Tirana severed ties with Moscow in 1961, a diplomatic break that, overnight, turned young Albanians with Soviet-born wives into suspected traitors. “The characters I’m interested in are forgotten or little-known victims of communism foreigners held in Albania and savagely persecuted by the regime,” Kadare told AFP. While this is his debut as a screenwriter, the novelist and poet has won string of literary prizes and is regularly mooted as a contender for Nobel honors.

“So many individual fates were shattered by history,” said Kadare, who co-wrote the script with the Russian screenwriter and director Yuri Arabov. In the 1950s many Albanian men studied abroad in the Soviet Union, some of them returning home with Russian, Polish, Hungarian or Bulgarian partners. The film follows the story of one such couple.

 executions and labor camps

For years, Albania and the USSR were close allies, and Tirana’s communist dictator Enver Hoxha an admirer of Joseph Stalin. But after the Soviet leader’s successor Nikita Khrushchev embarked on a series of de-Stalinisation reforms, Albania’s dictator broke with “revisionist” Moscow and its satellite states in 1961. Foreign women living inside Albania, whose borders were locked down under Hoxha, were given a choice: return home or stay with their husbands and risk persecution. There is no data on how many couples joined the tens of thousands of perceived regime opponents jailed or sentenced to hard labor during Albania’s 40 years of communism. Some 5,500 men and 450 women were also executed by the regime.

One survivor, however, is Irina Sallaku, an 88-year-old who now lives in Tirana. Born in Soviet Russia, Sallaku married an Albanian who was studying engineering in Leningrad. The couple returned to Tirana in 1955 with twins. Their lives were shattered two decades later, when her husband was executed by the Albanian regime on charges of “sabotage.” Sallaku was sent with their two daughters to a labor camp. They were not released until 1988. “Many foreigners who made an act of heartfelt resistance by choosing to live in Albania have had a tragic destiny,” Sal- laku told AFP.

Like many, she still doesn’t know the final resting place of her husband, a constant source of torment. But she welcomes the making of a movie that will tell a story similar to hers on a large scale. “This is a tragic episode in the story (of Albania) that needs to be told in order to understand the scale of the crime,” she said, speaking in a hushed voice.

Real love

The film, which Kadare started writing in 2010, traces the story of Russian student Katia, who meets her future Albanian husband, Arjan, in Moscow. Years after starting a new life together in Albania, the husband is arrested for “spying” and executed. Katia, also accused of spying, ends up imprisoned in the Gjirokastra fortress, where at that time was used as a jail. While most of the filming took place in Gjirokastra, the birth place of both Hoxha and Kadare, some scenes were also filmed in the late dictator’s villa in the center of Tirana.

Two Albanian actors play the Hoxhas, who died in 1985, and his wife Nezha, still alive at the age of 99. Director Arabov describes the film as a “tribute to all the innocent victims of totalitarian regimes”. With the shooting wrapped, editing starts at the end of the month. And the work has already given birth to a new love story—between Polina Grishina, the Russian actress who plays Katia, and Besmir Bitraku, the Albanian actor who plays her husband. “We are our history,” Bitraku, a popular actor in Albania, said with a smile. Loretta Mokini, the Albanian co-producer of the film, added: “Love is blind, it doesn’t learn from history.”—AFP
Rape trial told Weinstein a ‘seasoned’ predator

Harvey Weinstein was a “seasoned” sexual predator and rapist who abused his power as a movie-producing titan to prey on vulnerable aspiring actresses, prosecutors said Wednesday as his trial heard from its first witness. Weinstein, wearing a dark suit, shook his head as New York Assistant District Attorney Meghan Hast painted a picture of a 300-pound (140 kilogram) bully who violently raped, humiliated and manipulated several women, leaving them traumatized for years. His defense team hit back by saying the fallen film producer engaged in consensual relationships with his accusers, including a “loving one” in which the woman called Weinstein “her casual boyfriend.”

That woman, who says Weinstein raped her in a New York hotel room in 2013, was identified for the first time in court as actress Jessica Mann, having until now remained anonymous. “It will be clear throughout this trial that the defendant knew he was preying on the naïve and the defenseless,” Hast told the court, saying many of his victims came from broken homes. “They didn’t know they were being lured in on false pretenses. They thought they had got their big break. He was the old lady in the gingerbread house hiding the kids.”

Defense attorney Damon Cheronis countered that it was “untrue” and “quite the contrary” to call the “Pulp Fiction” producer a predator. Wednesday’s hearing started with Judge James Burke reminding the 12-member jury and six alternates that they must base their verdict on evidence heard in court and not discuss the trial with anyone outside. Hast then laid out the prosecution’s case in a lengthy statement that included graphic descriptions of sexual assaults.

She said Weinstein raped “The Sopranos” actress Annabella Sciorra in the winter of 1993-94 after a pursuit which included him introducing her to the drug valium. “He left her nine days later in a delirious, stupor-like state of confusion,” Hast said. “She had black and blue bruises on every limb, broken bones, and the smell of alcohol everywhere.”

Hast said Wednesday that the prosecution could call two other women as witnesses during the trial. They are Dawn Dunning, Lauren Young and Tarale Wulff, whose allegations were previously unknown.

Young will allege that Weinstein raped her in 2013. Dunning says Weinstein grabbed her in his New York apartment in July 2006. And Hast accused Weinstein of treating Mann like a “rag doll” after raping her in her hotel room in March 2013. Before that alleged assault, the court heard, Weinstein injected his penis with erection medication.

Weinstein, 67, faces life in prison if convicted of predatory sexual assault charges related to Sciorra and three other accusers who were named for the first time in court Wednesday. They are Dawn Dunning, Lauren Young and Tarale Wulff, whose allegations were previously unknown.

More than 80 women have accused Weinstein of sexual misconduct but many of the alleged crimes fall outside the timeframe for bringing charges. Arriving at court, Weinstein made his way unsteadily up a few steps but without the walking frame he has used for recent proceedings. The trial continues on Thursday. — AFP

Former Grammy head flatly denies rape allegation

The former CEO of the embattled Recording Academy, the institution behind the Grammys, on Wednesday rejected as “ludicrous and untrue” his ousted successor’s allegations that he raped an unnamed foreign female musician. Neil Portnow’s denial comes one day after Deborah Dugan filed an explosive discrimination complaint against the Academy, which included the rape allegation, days after she was put on leave—and just before Sunday’s Grammy awards. Dugan’s bombshell 44-page filing with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Los Angeles claims she was suspended after raising concerns of sexual harassment, voting irregularities and other misconduct within one of music’s most powerful organizations.

Portnow—who stepped down as CEO after 17 years at the helm, amid outrage over his controversial comments that women artists should “step up” to gain more recognition for their work—said Dugan’s filing “is filled with inaccurate, false and outrageous and terribly hurtful claims against me.” “The allegations of rape are ludicrous, and untrue. The suggestion that there was a rape is disingenuous at its core,” read Portnow’s statement, published in full on Rolling Stone’s website.

He also denied demanding a $750,000 consulting fee to stay on as a consultant, as a junior employee of the Recording Academy. Portnow said he never had a consulting deal, which he said was to help him transition to a new job with WPP. He said his stewardship of the Grammy awards “steamed in 2017. “We will show that the truth has changed since 2013 and the truth can’t change. There is only one truth,” he said.

Ignited #MeToo movement

The prosecution’s first witness, former Weinstein Company board member Lance Maerov, testified that the defendant regularly bragged about his powerful connections, including to the Clintons. Weinstein mattered inaudibly as Maerov—an executive with communications giant WPP—said the movie mogul’s charming public persona was “diametrically opposed” to the private man. “He was a big guy,” one of his friends told the court. “You big guys are,” another said.

“Members of the jury, that is not how you talk about predators, that is not how you talk about your abusers,” he said. Cheronis argued that Weinstein’s accusers changed their attitude towards him as the #MeToo movement gathered steam in 2017. “We will show that the truth has changed since 2013 and the truth can’t change. There is only one truth,” he said.

Hundreds of emails

Weinstein’s attorney Cheronis said the jurors would see hundreds of emails and other correspondence showing Mann and his client were “in a loving relationship.” “A year after the alleged assault,” Mann wrote, “Yes you big guy,” in one email, and another which said “Thank you for your unfailing support and kindness,” Cheronis said. In February 2017, she wrote to Weinstein: “I love you, I always do. But I hate feeling like a boot.” Cheronis told the court, “I’ve always been there for my clients.”
Teenage supermodel Kaia Gerber is to sit on the jury of one of fashion’s most prestigious prizes, its organizers said Wednesday. The 18-year-old American, the daughter of former catwalk queen Cindy Crawford, has been one of the stars of Paris fashion fortnight, which ends late Thursday. Gerber will sit on the jury of the Hyères fashion festival on the French Riviera at the end of April to decide one of the top prizes for rising young designers.

The model sparked fevered comment on social media when she wore a spectacular wedding dress that closed the Givenchy haute couture show late Tuesday. The gown with a showstopping structured veil that was somewhere between a halo and its own grotto-made headlines after the reported break-up of Gerber’s romance with US stand-up comedian Pete Davidson.

Critics raved about Clare Waight Keller’s embroidered creation. The British designer also made the wedding dress the Duchess of Sussex Megan Markle wore for her marriage to Prince Harry in 2018. Gerber said the dress had left her “speechless”, “Closing Givenchy haute couture”, she wrote on Instagram. “@clarewightkeller you have left me completely speechless. Words will never begin to express my gratitude and appreciation for this moment. “Thank you to the incredible atelier and everyone who worked so hard to make this so special.” The show, in a former convent in the French capital, was accompanied by musicians who were suspended from poles.

The Hyères jury will be presided over by the Northern Irish designer Jonathan Anderson. As well as his own JW Anderson brand, he is also artistic director of the Spanish house Loewe. The prize they will decide is the oldest in the world for young fashion designers and was won in 2018 by the Dutch couple Rushemy Botter and Lisi Herrebrugh, who were later snapped up to lead the French label Nina Ricci.

Their own brand, Botter, made its Paris debut during men’s fashion week. Other past winners include the Belgian Anthony Vaccarello, now at the head of Saint Laurent, and the Dutch duo Viktor & Rolf. The festival runs from April 25 to 29.—AFP
Jean-Paul Gaultier has bowed out of fashion with all the cheek and showmanship with which he has lit it up over the last half century. The legendary French provocateur bid farewell Wednesday with an hour-long feelgood musical spectacular with an orchestra and a cast of hundreds to celebrate the friends and the often outrageous looks that helped make him a star.

With what seemed like the entire fashion world gathered to pay tribute, the mammoth production began with a black coffin with two conical breasts sticking out of it being carried down a set worthy of Cecil B DeMille. It was Gaultier’s knowing joke that the conical bra he famously put on Madonna will probably end up on his tombstone.

British singer Boy George closed the show, with fashionistas on their feet as the designer emerged in the same blue work overalls as his studio staff when the curtain lifted to reveal the backstage. Raised onto the shoulders of some of the 220 models who had sashayed down the runway, he threw kisses as the audience chanted his name to the strains of the Culture Club hit “Church of the Poison Mind”.

The ode to freaks and outsiders echoed the way the maverick designer pioneered body positive thinking and gender fluidity long before they became fashionable. American singer Beth Ditto and the bearded Austrian drag queen Conchita Wurst were among the atypical models he managed to charm onto the catwalk.

While Madonna herself did not make it to the show, the “French Madonna” Mylene Farmer did, along with a galaxy of Gallic stars including “Betty Blue” actress Beatrice Dalle.

In a touching message before the curtain lifted, Gaultier gave the world a lesson in sustainability and making do.

\[\text{There are too many clothes and too many that are never...}\]
Don’t throw them away, recycle them,” he said, declaring his final collection was his first “upcycled haute couture” one.

“When I was a child my mother told me how she would turn my father’s old worn trousers into skirts. That marked me. You can love a garment again by transforming it,” Gaultier said. “I have been doing that since... In my first show and in this my last there are creations made with the jeans I’ve worn,” he said. “It’s the most beautiful of materials. Like a lot of humans, it becomes even more beautiful as it gets older.” The flamboyant creator stunned fans on Friday by announcing that the haute couture show in the French capital would be his last.

Laughing and crying

Many believe the 67-year-old showman may now throw himself into showbiz. His “Fashion Freak Show”, a cheeky cabaret revue based on his life has been a popular and critical hit. With its catchphrase “Tout le monde est beau!” (“Everybody looks so good!”), it was a feel-good smash when he premiered it at the Folies Bergere in Paris in 2018. It is now touring Russia after an acclaimed London run.

Gaultier’s perfume range and high-end haute couture business, Gaultier Paris, will live on, the brand told AFP. “For years now Jean Paul-Gaultier has been saying, ‘I am going to have to make a decision (about the future)’, said fashion historian...
Olivier Saillard, “I think the success of the show has shown him a way,” he added. “It has been wonderful for him to see the public laughing and crying with him,” the historian told AFP.

“It is so much more joyful than a fashion show, which lasts 11 minutes and where people are always on their phones taking photos.” The impish creator had previously carved out a cult following as a presenter of the late-night 1990s television show “Eurotrash”. Gaultier stopped designing ready-to-wear clothes in 2015 to concentrate on haute couture-extravagant handmade clothes which only the world’s richest women can afford.

**Body-positive pioneer**

Never less than flamboyant, Gaultier was a fashion prodigy. From the start he challenged gender stereotypes and conventional ideas of beauty, once placing an advert for “atypical” models. “The facially disfigured should not refrain from applying,” he added. Saillard said the couturier was “like a father” to many top designers he had mentored over the years, but “he feels fashion has changed terribly”. Nor was it a secret that Gaultier was unhappy with the Catalan luxury conglomerate Puig, who bought his brand in 2011. “He will be back, but in a different way,” said Saillard.—AFP
Mountain men disguised as devils, the Grim Reaper, horses and bears ring-in the New Year with a cacophony of drums, whistles, shouts and catchy melodies in a time-honored tradition still popular in Poland's mountains. For centuries, men have crisscrossed snowy villages nestled in the foothills of Poland's southern Beskid range around the New Year to wish neighbors happiness and prosperity in return for gifts of food or small sums of money.

Similar folk customs marking the winter solstice are practiced in neighboring countries and can be traced back to pagan times. For the last half-century lively troupes of characters have flocked to the Beskidy village of Milowka for the colorful and loud "Dziady Zywieckie" festival that ranks as part of Poland's intangible cultural heritage. "All this uproar, characters dressed in very bright colours, the noises, bells and whistles, cracking whips are meant to chase away spirits who want to descend to Earth," festival organizer Andrzej Maciejowski told AFP.

"The characters represent people and imaginary entities known to rural folk in days gone by: otherworldly beings, devils and the Grim Reaper, as well as ethnic minorities like Jews or Roma and old professions like peddlers or healers," he added. Bears and horses play a leading role in the custom signaling that spring and new life are on their way. Men parading as lively horses symbolize vigour while others, posing as bears, bear the power to "fertilize the Earth so that it bears more fruit than last year," adds Maciejowski. Cracking whips open the joyful if chaotic festivities before the Grim Reaper makes an appearance followed by troupes of horses and bears dancing wildly to symbolize new life.

"In popular tradition, death as represented by the Grim Reaper is never final, but rather marks the passage to a new and higher stage of life," explains ethnographer Barbara Rosiek. During the noisy procession through the village and in the courtyards of cozy old log cabins, the groups hail the eternal circle of life marked by order or disorder in nature. Horses run, devils bicker and taunt onlookers to whom peddlers also display their merchandise promising marvels, sometimes in a grumpy manner.

Amid the din, the Grim Reaper cuts a calm figure, waving his scythe at onlookers. "Death wants to take people's lives but even the devils prevent it. Death only scares people," says Szymon Sikora, 28, a truck driver dressed up as the Grim Reaper in a terrifying mask and with a large scythe in hand. Dressed up as a peddler, Robert Brzusnia, 45, has taken part in the festival for nearly all his life. "I've participated... for 40 years. My father did too," he said. "All December, the guys meet in their free time to prepare their masks and costumes, and to rehearse," says Maciejowski, who cannot contain his amusement. "Bells tinkle and whips crack loudly. In short, the tradition is alive and well."—AFP
Afghan drought forces shepherds into desperate measures

Nooruddin watched helplessly as his flock of 100 sheep began to die from hunger and thirst on the dry drought-ravaged hillsides of Balkh province. Rather than let more of the prized creatures die a slow death on the dry hillsides of Balkh province in the north, he made the decision to slaughter most of the rest. “I cut their heads off,” the 65-year-old herder said, adding that their malnourished frames meant their meat was “useless”. “We fed it to the dogs,” Nooruddin told AFP.

He’s one of many whose traditional livelihoods—from farmers to carpet weavers—are under threat as changing weather patterns wreak havoc. Experts warn the situation will only get worse, with Afghanistan one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, even though it produces just 0.1 percent of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions. For many this latest drought is the worst they can recall. “I’ve seen droughts before, but never as severe,” said livestock trader Mirza, who like many residents only uses one name. “A lot of sheep and animals died on the mountains and in the desert,” the 45-year-old added.

Mohammed Aref, a 19-year-old shepherd who raises karakul sheep—famed for their curly-haired lambs’ pelts that are turned into traditional hats—said shepherds sold off their emaciated animals for pittance to butchers. “A lot of us had a big loss,” Aref told AFP from the noisy livestock market outside Mazar-i-Sharif, on a crisp, early winter morning. “Most of us can’t afford to get more (livestock) and now our life is ruined.”

Huge temperature rise

Afghans have no notion of climate change as it is understood in places with better access to information and education, but all agreed things were changing. The last big drought they remembered was about a decade ago. Before that, there hadn’t been one for about 50 years, they said. “We had a drought 12 years ago,” recalled 68-year-old Ayoddin, another karakul sheep farmer, “but last year’s was the worst”. According to the United Nations Development Program, about 80 percent of Afghans rely on rain-fed crop and animal farming for their incomes.

Over the next four decades in Afghanistan, scientists predict a decrease in rainfall and a rise in average temperatures of up to 4 degrees Celsius compared to 1999, the UNDP said. The agency noted droughts could soon be considered the norm, unleashing further desertification and loss of arable land. Problems are only compounded when rains do eventually come. Last spring, flash floods swept entire villages and fields away.

The UN said in an overview of last year’s aid operations that nearly half of all rural residents now face some level of food insecurity in Afghanistan, a country where unemployment and poverty are already major drivers of the war. While light rains in the autumn eased woes for some, the weather has since dried up again. Asked if they worried for the coming year, several farmers gave a common Afghan response. “If there is a drought, God will decide, so I don’t worry,” Ayoddin said.

Looming crisis for weavers

The Global Adaptation Initiative, run by the University of Notre Dame in the US, currently ranks Afghanistan 173 out of the 181 countries it scored in terms of a nation’s vulnerability to climate change and its ability to adapt. The human cost is plain to see at a camp for internally displaced people just outside Mazar-i-Sharif, where rows of white UN tents house hundreds of families and the main source of water is from a large communal tank.

Shamayel, a 35-year-old mother from Faryab province in the northwest, said her family came to the camp to escape conflict and the drought. She used to weave colorful traditional kilim rugs, but increasing wool prices made it impossible. Seven kilograms of wool previously cost about $19, she said, but the price rose to $31 in the past year or two. Perhaps surprisingly, though, rising wool costs haven’t caused a price jump for Afghan rugs and carpets. Traders in Mazar complained the ongoing uncertainty and anxiety around delayed election results and talks between the Taliban and the US have essentially frozen the market. Another former weaver at the camp, Gulam Salchi, 50, said he too had been forced to give up his trade when he arrived. “I want to weave, I miss it,” he said, smiling as he described his craft. “Now I feel useless.”—AFP

A shopkeeper waits for customers at his carpet shop in Mazar-i-Sharif.

Workers wash a carpet in the compound of a carpet store on the outskirts of Mazar-i-Sharif.
Welcome to Esfahan!
Esfahan is Iran’s top tourist destination for good reason. Its profusion of tree-lined boulevards, Persian gardens and important Islamic buildings gives it a visual appeal unmatched by any other Iranian city, and the many artisans working here underpin its reputation as a living museum of traditional culture. Walking through the historic bazaar, over the picturesque bridges and across the Unesco-listed central square are sure to be highlights of a holiday.

Masjed-e Shah

As the country’s third-largest city, Esfahan is home to some heavy industry, including steel factories and a much-discussed nuclear facility in the outskirts of town. Inevitably, then, traffic jams are a regular occurrence. Despite these modern realities, the inner core of the city remains a priceless gem. This elegant mosque, with its iconic blue-tiled mosaics and its perfect proportions, forms a visually stunning monument at the head of Esfahan’s main square.

Unblemished since its construction 400 years ago, it stands as a monument to the vision of Shah Abbas I and the accomplishments of the Safavid dynasty. The mosque’s crowning dome was completed in 1629, the last year of the reign of Shah Abbas. Although each of the mosque’s parts is a masterpiece, it is the unity of the overall design that leaves a lasting impression, and the positioning of the much-photographed entrance portal is a case in point as it has more to do with its location on the square than with the mosque’s spiritual aims.

Bazar-e Bozorg

One of Iran’s most historic and fascinating bazaars, this sprawling covered market links Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq with the Masjed-e Jameh. At its busiest in the mornings, the bazaar’s arched passageways are topped by a series of small perforated domes, each spilling shafts of light onto the commerce below. While the oldest parts of the bazaar (those around the mosque) are more than a thousand years old, most of what can be seen today was built during Shah Abbas’ ambitious expansions of the early 1600s.

The bazaar is a maze of lanes, madrasehs, khans (caravanserais) and timchehs (domed halls or arcaded centres of a single trade, such as carpet vendors or coppersmiths). It can be entered at dozens of points, but the main entrance is via the Qeysarieh Portal at the northern end of Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq.

Cool in summer and warm in winter, it’s easy to lose half a day wandering the bustling lanes of the bazaar, sniffing the heaps of layered spices and dishes of dried dates, watching shoppers finger coloured lengths of material, and pausing to admire the rows of red and white teapots in the many crockery shops. Teahouses help punctuate the walk and a beryani restaurant is the perfect place for lunch.
Built at the very end of the 16th century as a residence for Shah Abbas I, this six-storey palace also served as a monumental gateway to the royal palaces that lay in the parklands beyond (Ali Qapu means ‘Gate of Ali’). Named after Abbas’ hero, the Imam Ali, it was built to make an impression, and at six storeys and 38m tall, with its impressive elevated terrace featuring 18 slender columns, it dominates one side of Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq.

The terrace affords a wonderful perspective over the square and one of the best views of the Masjed-e Shah and the mountains beyond. The attractive wooden ceiling with intricate inlay work and exposed beams has been painstakingly restored and now attention is turning towards the walls. Peer behind the scaffolding and watch the artisans at work and it’s easy to understand why the project is taking so long. Many of the valuable paintings and mosaics that once decorated the 52 small rooms, corridors and stairways were destroyed during the Qajar period and after the 1979 revolution. Fortunately, a few fine examples remain in the throne room off the terrace, but the real highlight of the palace is the music room on the upper floor. The stucco ceiling is stencilled with the shapes of vases and rose-water shakers to enhance the acoustics. This distinctive craftsmanship, considered by some to be one of the finest examples of secular Persian art, extends to the walls creating a mosaic of shadows. — www.lonelyplanet.com

Hemmed on four sides by architectural gems and embracing the formal fountains and gardens at its center, this wondrous space is a spectacle in its own right. It was laid out in 1602 under the reign of the Safavid ruler, Shah Abbas the Great, to signal the importance of Esfahan as a capital of a powerful empire. Cross the square on a clear winter’s day and it’s a hard heart that isn’t entranced by its beauty.

At 512m long and 163m wide, Naqsh-e Jahan is one of the largest squares in the world, earning a listing as a Unesco World Heritage site. The name means ‘pattern of the world’ and it was designed to showcase the finest jewels of the Safavid empire - the incomparable Masjed-e Shah, the elegant Masjed-e Sheikh Lotfollah and the lavishly decorated Kakh-e Ali Qapu and Qeysarieh Portal. It is has changed little since it was built, and at each end the goal posts used in regular polo games 400 years ago are still in place (these polo matches are depicted on miniatures for sale around the square). The only modern additions are the fountains, which were added by the Pahlavis, and the souvenir and craft shops, which occupy the spaces on either side of the arched arcades.

Resisting grumbles from shop owners who occupy the surrounding arcades, recent civic administrations have restored the square to its full glory by making the entire space a pedestrian zone. Horse-drawn carriages, a few electric carts and Shank’s pony are now the only transport in the square allowing visitors to enjoy the majesty of the view untroubled by traffic.

The square is at its best in late afternoon when the blue-tiled minarets and domes are lit up by the last rays of the sun and the mountains beyond turn red. This is the time when local families congregate for a promenade around the perimeter, the fountains are turned on and the light softens, illuminating the truly splendid architecture.
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<td>Hollywood Medium With Tyler Henry</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:45</td>
<td>Keeping Up With The Kardashish</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:35</td>
<td>E! News</td>
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<td>13:30</td>
<td>Pop Of The Morning</td>
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<tr>
<td>14:25</td>
<td>E! News: Daily Pop</td>
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<td>16:15</td>
<td>Revenge Body With Khloe Kardashish</td>
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<td>22:00</td>
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<td>The True Hollywood Story</td>
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<tr>
<td>22:00</td>
<td>Nightly Pop</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Aries (March 21-April 19)

As the sun moves into Aries and your social zone on Monday for a four-week stay, it encourages you to enjoy mingling and entertaining. Although there is still a powerful focus on your career and work, there may be still in the process of working through key issues, it's time to give yourself a break. Besides, the people you connect with on the social scene could be extremely helpful in furthering your goals and ambitions. Go easy around midweek, especially if someone encourages you to buy a membership to a club or gym, because it could be rather expensive. Check before you commit. Listen to your gut on Thursday. If you get an intuition to call someone, follow through. It could be worth your while. Are you ready for a major change? The new moon on Monday, Friday, and again in your social sector, could you be signing up to a community project or moving in new circles.

Libra (September 23-October 22)

If you've been a little intense, the focus on your pleasure zone could be just the tonic. You really deserve to get out and enjoy life and indulge in those things that recharge you. So, indulge yourself a little in a more relaxed sense. A luscious Venus-Jupiter angle suggests an event may not go as planned. Be flexible and you'll find something else to take its place. Luscious Venus angles toward jovial Jupiter on Thursday, so you may be in the mood to entertain at a time. So, this could be the quite the occasion. Whether you invite friends, work colleagues, or both, this is one of those events that you might be eager to repeat. If you're too for a new adventure, there are options, and one of them could take you by surprise. With lovely Venus angle toward the new moon on Friday, this could see you and another enjoying a wonderful date.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

It's your turn to the spotlight with the sun moving into your sector of career and ambition on Monday for a four-week stay. This is a chance to take stock and sort out your priorities. What do you want to accomplish?aving clear goals can cut both the battle and prevent obstacles from doing you wrong well. You're ready for a new beginning, this week's new moon can help. This week can also have a romantic quality, because lovely Venus links with thriving Mars on Thursday and moves toward flirty Mars on Friday. Ready to fly! Thursday can be warm and delightful, especially if you're hoping to get closer to someone for the first time. But the atmosphere can just abut perfect for any social event. The weekend is a tad different, though, as an awkward angle suggests an attraction of opposites.

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

You enjoy a few treats, and with the sun and thoughtful Mercury in your money zone, this is the time to go in search of a bargain. The sun's position in your financial sector of Mars could allow you to make some very good financial purchases. The sun can call to stock and sort out anything that's bothering you. If you're ready to commit to a budget or new financial habit, Monday could be the perfect time to do so. Even so, avoid spending wildly, because you could get an impulsive buy almost immediately. Your social life looks positive this week, with an endearing Venus-Jupiter tie encouraging you to attend an event that you might have been putting off. This week's new moon in this same zone on Friday, this is a perfect opportunity to kick-start a romantic new beginning? The new moon in your sign on Friday is the best of the year for you. It's a chance to release your inhibitions and let go. If you're ready to step out of your comfort zone, it's time to step back from life. This can give you a chance to reflect on all that's happened and come to some conclusions. It's also a chance to enjoy some self-care and nurturing and spend time with your nearest and dearest. If you've let yourself be consumed by a mission, particularly after the intense Saturn-Pluto transit, this homey energy can soothe and heal. A delightful Venus-Jupiter connection on Thursday will linger for a day or so and could see you getting on well with someone. This open-minded approach could allow you to gain new understandings and insights, and you may feel you can talk to them about anything. Could there be romantic potential here? Yes. Are you ready to make a new beginning?

Virgo (August 23-September 22)

After an intense focus on your sector of creativity, things could feel a little easier in this sector. And while you may be continuing to process through a key issue, there could be signs of progress that give you comfort and spur you on. Lifestyle issues may be more emphasized this week as the radiant sun enters this zone for four weeks. It joins Mercury, which could inspire you to take a closer look at your routines and consider what works and which areas require some work. This is your chance to experiment with various ways of doing things. For instance, if you're eager to do exercise, try different options so you can settle on those that suit you best. The new moon in this zone on Friday, perfect for finishing new habitats and letting go of those that no longer serve your best interests. There is also a pleasantly romantic transit on Thursday that could see you and another enjoying a wonderful date.
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- Member of many prestigious surgical societies.
- Colorectal Surgery & Endoscopic: Treatment
- Colonoscopy: endoscopic treatment
- Transanal rectal operations

Dr. Abduallah Al Haddad
Surgeron Department
Consultant General Surgery, Laparoscopic & Colo-Rectal Surgeon

**IC**
General Surgery Consultant

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Higher specialization in Hepato-Pancreato-Biliary surgery & Organ Transplantation

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Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital                        25312700
Chest Hospital                                                  24849400
Farwaniya Hospital                                       24892010
Adan Hospital                                                   23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital                                            24840300
Al-Razi Hospital                                               24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital                               24874330/9

Kaizen center 25716707
Rawda 22517733
Adaliya 22517144
Khaldiya 24848075
Kaifan 24849807
Shamiya 24848913
Shuwaikh 24814507
Abdullah Salem 22549134
Nuzha 22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh 24814764
Qadsiya 22515088
Dasmah 22532265
Bneid Al-Gar 22531908
Shaab 22518752
Qibla 22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla 22451082
Miqab 22456536
Sharq 22465401
Salmiya 25746401

I, Ceeyantagath Mannangadiyan Ashraf, F/O Ahnaf Ceeyantagath Mannangadiyan Ashraf residing at Ceeyam New House, Ayikara, Poovalap, Cannanore, 17 Kerala, holder of Passport No. N1900966 issued at Kuwait on 19/08/2015 have changed my minor son’s name as

Given Name: Ahnaf Ashraf,
Surname: Ceeyantagath
Mannangadiyan. (C 5619)

I, Mohamad Zuhara (given name) Zuhara Mohamed Palathara (surname), holder of Indian Passport No. T1938666, residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as given name: Zuhara Mohamed and surname: Palathara. (C 5618)

I, Hussain Ali Shaik, Arwa holder of Indian Passport No. J2315667 issued at Embassy of India, Kuwait. I am a permanent resident of Dungapur, Rajastan, India and presently residing in Kuwait hereby declare my given name is Arwa Hussaini and surname is Shaik. (C 5490) 21-1-2020

STATE OF KUWAIT
DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF CIVIL AVIATION METEOROLOGICAL DEPARTMENT

Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY NIGHT: Very cold with light to moderate north westerly wind to light variable wind, with speed of 06 - 26 km/h and some high clouds will appear, with a chance for frost forming over some agriculture and desert areas

BY DAY: Rather cold with light variable wind to light to moderate south westerly wind, with speed of 08 - 30 km/h.

WEATHER WARNING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATION</th>
<th>MAX. REC.</th>
<th>MIN. EXP.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KUWAIT CITY</td>
<td>17 °C</td>
<td>09 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KUWAIT AIRPORT</td>
<td>17 °C</td>
<td>04 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABDALY</td>
<td>16 °C</td>
<td>04 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUBYAN</td>
<td>16 °C</td>
<td>07 °C</td>
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<tr>
<td>JAHRA</td>
<td>17 °C</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAILAKA ISLAND</td>
<td>- °C</td>
<td>- °C</td>
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<tr>
<td>SALMIYAH</td>
<td>16 °C</td>
<td>11 °C</td>
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<tr>
<td>AHMADI</td>
<td>17 °C</td>
<td>09 °C</td>
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<td>NUWAISIB</td>
<td>20 °C</td>
<td>09 °C</td>
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<tr>
<td>WAFRA</td>
<td>18 °C</td>
<td>04 °C</td>
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<tr>
<td>SALMY</td>
<td>15 °C</td>
<td>02 °C</td>
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No Current Warnings

SFC CHART

4 DAYS FORECAST

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>DAY</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>WEATHER</th>
<th>Temperatures</th>
<th>Wind Direction</th>
<th>Wind Speed</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MAX.</td>
<td>MIN.</td>
<td>VRB-SW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>01/24</td>
<td>Rather cold</td>
<td>18 °C</td>
<td>04 °C</td>
<td>SE-NW</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>01/25</td>
<td>Rather cold and Partly cloudy with a chance for blowing dust over open areas with a chance for</td>
<td>16 °C</td>
<td>06 °C</td>
<td>SE-NW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>01/26</td>
<td>Rather cold with a chance for rising dust over open areas.</td>
<td>17 °C</td>
<td>03 °C</td>
<td>NW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>01/27</td>
<td>Rather cold and some scattered clouds will appear. With a chance for frost forming over</td>
<td>17 °C</td>
<td>03 °C</td>
<td>NW</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOMORROW PRAYER TIMES

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fajr</td>
<td>05:19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunrise</td>
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<td>Zuhur</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asr</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunset</td>
<td>17:19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isha</td>
<td>18:39</td>
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RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAX. Temp.</th>
<th>MIN. Temp.</th>
<th>MAX. RH</th>
<th>MIN. RH</th>
<th>MAX. Wind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21 °C</td>
<td>11 °C</td>
<td>80 %</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>SW 60 km/h</td>
</tr>
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</table>

TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR. 0 mm
France, US set aside ‘digital tax’ row for now

Nearly 140 governments to launch tax talks Jan 29-30

DAVOS, Switzerland: France and the United States agreed yesterday how to press ahead with a global rewrite of cross-border tax rules for the digital era, French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said. Le Maire said he and US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin had set aside a bilateral dispute over France’s digital tax on big tech companies to focus on securing a broader global deal this year that would include a minimal corporate tax rate.

The two hammered out a series of written proposals for the first redrafting of international tax rules since the 1920s that will be put to 137 governments when discussions start next week at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. “We had long talks this morning with the US Treasury Secretary and the OECD Secretary General, and I am happy to announce to you that we have found an agreement between France and the United States, providing the basis for work on digital taxation. Those efforts are now being accelerated to see if an agreement can be reached by December,” Le Maire said at the World Economic Forum in the Swiss resort of Davos.

“It’s good news, because it reduces the risk of American sanctions and opens up the prospect of an international solution on digital taxation,” he added. Preparations led in part by France and the United States to launch the OECD talks had been eclipsed by their bilateral row with Washington threatening retaliatory tariffs against Paris’ own national tax on big tech companies that book outsized profits on French income, despite a minimal physical presence.

US President Donald Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron had discussed the issue on Sunday. OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurria has been working for years on finding ways to create a level playing field on digital taxation. Those efforts are now being accelerated to see if an agreement can be reached by December.

Speaking on a panel at Davos with Le Maire, Gurria said he was hopeful of securing a draft framework by July. “We have no Plan B—we just have to get it done,” he said.

Other countries including Italy and Britain are also pursuing or imposing their own national digital-tax regimes. Le Maire said it was preferable to have an international framework rather than a proliferation of national digital taxes. France has said it will scrap its own tax if an international accord can be reached. “So we have to build something different and that’s exactly what we want to do during 2020.”

France’s existing digital tax is based on turnover. But Le Maire admitted that was not optimal from an economic point of view, saying the OECD’s plan to tax profits was more sound. There will be intense discussion over what level of profit would be taxed and how it would be collected. After meeting Mnuchin, Le Maire said a US proposal that any deal be optional for companies was no longer on the table. —Reuters

Dubai’s largest Islamic bank acquires smaller lender

Dubai Islamic Bank said yesterday it has completed the acquisition of Noor Bank to consolidate its position as the top Islamic lender in the United Arab Emirates. DIB said in a statement posted on Dubai bourse website the acquisition was carried out through a share swap after securing the necessary approvals from the regulatory authorities. The bank said the move raises its assets to $75 billion, making it one of the biggest Islamic banks in the world, but it remains the fourth largest lender in the UAE behind three conventional banks.

“The acquisition of Noor Bank is a landmark achievement, establishing DIB as one of the largest Islamic banks in the world and amongst the largest banking entities in the UAE,” chairman Mohammad Ibrahim Al-Shaibani said. CEO Adnan Chilwan said the acquisition will boost the UAE’s position in the world of Islamic finance. “This acquisition will undoubtedly strengthen Dubai’s role as a global hub for Islamic finance, allowing greater investment and growth in key sectors,” Chilwan said. Islamic finance, based on banning interest rates, has been growing at a fast pace in Islamic countries. —AFP
**Business**

**Investment-starved Ukraine plans ‘nanny’ for wealthy foreigners**

**FDI into Ukraine plummets since 2014 annexation of Crimea**

**DAVOS**: Ukraine, battling a sharp decline in foreign investment, yesterday announced a novel plan to attract more cash inflows—a “nanny” to look after foreigners wary of putting their money in the country. Prime Minister Oleksiy Goncharuk told investors at the economic forum in Davos that such a nanny would be a multilingual point person within the government for big foreign investors ready to help with any issue.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) into Ukraine has plummeted since the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Moscow and the war with pro-Russian separatists in the east which led to the rapid pullout of Russian investors. “We are offering an investment nanny,” Goncharuk told a breakfast meeting of investors at the Davos World Economic Forum (WEF) organized by the Viktor Pinchuk Foundation.

“You will have this opportunity to have a specific individual in the government who will hear you,” he added. He pledged that the government for big foreign investors ready to help with any issue.

FDI to Ukraine dropped in 2018 to under $2.4 billion, according to the UN’s trade agency, after registering over $8 billion in 2012.

**‘Miracles come true’**

Investors present pointed out to Goncharuk that one of the key needs of a foreign investor is political stability, a sentiment not helped in Ukraine by a political crisis this month that saw the premier offer to resign, Zelensky refused to accept the resignation of Goncharuk, saying he wanted to give the premier “a second chance” in the job after he offered to quit following a leaked recording emerged of him questioning the president’s grasp of economics. Repeatedly pressed over his intentions at the conference, Goncharuk insisted he had no plans to quit. “I am not planning to step down. We have wonderful relations within the team. “We will stay as long as we have trust,” he added. Zelensky, a former comedian and actor who in a bit show played the part of a teacher who unexpectedly became president, took office in May last year after winning a landslide election victory on pledges to reform the country and end the war in east.

“We do not have sufficient investments,” Zelensky told the forum on Wednesday. “Ukraine is the place where miracles come true. Today we are under-invested and under-loved, so don't miss out on Ukraine.” — AFP

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**Greece wants wriggle room on debt management**

**ATHENS**: Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis yesterday said his country, recovering from a decade-long debt crisis, wanted more freedom to manage its annual surplus.

“If we overperform in one year, let it count towards the next year,” Mitsotakis said at the Davos economic forum. “We don’t have a smoothing mechanism for our primary surplus. So if we deliver a bigger primary surplus, as we will in 2019, there’s no way for me to carry it over to the next year.”

“It doesn’t make any sense whatsoever. Then my incentive is to spend it at the end of the year. That’s not serious fiscal policy.”

Mitsotakis said. Under the terms of its final bailout, negotiated by the previous leftist government, Greece must produce a primary budget surplus of 3.5 percent of GDP until 2022 and of 2.2 percent of GDP on average to 2060.

Primary budget surpluses exclude government debt interest payments. In its latest budget, Athens forecasts a primary surplus of just over 3.5 percent of GDP in 2020. Elected in July on a ticket of tax cuts and growth, the conservative Mitsotakis has vowed to renegotiate the 3.5 percent target.

Athens is “on a good path to convince our creditors to relax our fiscal targets for 2021,” he said yesterday. Mitsotakis also insisted Thursday there was “no real issue” regarding Greece’s long-debated debt sustainability.

“We’re sitting on close to 40 billion (euros) on cash reserves,” he said, referring to a sum largely gathered by the previous government through high taxation believed to have contributed to their electoral loss. “Our debt may be high in objective terms but if you look at our repayment schedule until 2032 it’s extremely benign,” the PM said.

Greece aims to borrow between 4.0 and 8.0 billion euros ($4.4-9.0 billion) in 2020, following a year that saw the country’s once-soaring credit rates drop into negative territory. The Greek public debt agency says the country’s total debt burden is expected to decrease from 86.1 percent of GDP (335 billion euros) in 2018 to 173 percent of GDP (329 billion) in 2019. — AFP

**Too good to be true? The best investment that never was**

**LONDON**: Leading investors may well have been tempted by a startup prospectus offering a slice of a long-neglected sector that promises vast growth, low risks and healthy returns.

The catch?

“Unfounded Ltd” was not a real startup, but a company invented to throw light on the sorry state of investment in female entrepreneurs and the barriers women face to win funding.

The pitch was sent to 100 global venture capitalists by non-profit group H&M Foundation in an initiative launched yesterday to encourage funders to back women in business.

Unfounded Ltd is a tool to break the barriers that women entrepreneurs face in access to finance,” said Diana Amini, global manager of the H&M Foundation, founded by the owners of the Swedish fashion chain.

“By using the language of investors, we want to reach the individuals who make the judgment calls and write the cheques.” Women-owned companies perform better on average than those run by men, said the report, but often miss out on the money they need to grow.

Companies founded by women won 3 percent of venture capital funding in the United States last year, according to data cited by H&M. A recent United Nations report found 80 percent of female-owned firms in emerging markets struggle to get credit.

Surmounting sexism to invest more in women could boost the global economy by up to $5 trillion - about the size of Japan's economy, the Boston Consulting group said last year.

The report offers advice for investors and other financial businesses who it said are “uniquely positioned” to drive change - and also stand to benefit from businesses neglected by rivals.

Key steps include training men to shed bias, hiring more women to make funding decisions, and making investors aware that female pitches may be less bombastic - and much more realistic. Funding women can also create a “domino effect” beyond work, said Reintje van Haeringen of humanitarian organisation C4B, which works with the H&M Foundation to help women entrepreneurs.

“Women are often seen to have a modest role in their families’ decision making and the business gives them the self-confidence and opportunity to grow,” she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. “With the increased income and that extra power, they start transforming their whole communities,” she said. — Reuters
Business

Mexico goes ghost as its oil hedge bill spirals

Experts question effectiveness of hedging strategy

MEXICO CITY/NUEVA YORK: Mexico is playing a risky game of hide and seek with the oil market. To frustrate speculators and contain an annual bill of more than $1 billion, Mexico is going to new lengths to mask its attempts to insure its revenue from oil sales against falling prices - a move most do not feel for a hedging program known as Wall Street's biggest oil trade.

Getting the hedge right is crucial for Mexico as it offers stability at a time the government is planning to boost social welfare and security spending. The economy is stagnating and the country's credit-worthiness is under intense scrutiny. Once an emblematic agreement between a handful of finance industry officials and Wall Street banks, the hedge is now the most anticipated deal in the oil futures market, making it harder, and more costly, for Mexico to arrange.

For its 2020 hedge, however, Mexico has adopted a different strategy than in previous years, according to a Wall Street source with direct knowledge of the deal.

This time, an estimated two-thirds of the options Mexico bought in financial markets were indexed to the international Brent crude benchmark, shifting away from the Maya oil Mexico mainly produces, according to the source. By using such a heavily traded contract as Brent, Mexico should have been able to cut costs by getting lower quotes for its trades and to place bets more unobtrusively to avoid prices shifting ahead of its moves, market sources said. But critics say the strategy creates new risks. By using international oil contracts based on a different kind of oil, the structure of the hedge may not fully reflect Mexico's export mix dominated by Maya, which is typically cheaper than Brent.

Sweet or sour

"I would expect a divergence of prices over the long term. This pressure on Maya could move prices down faster than its hedge. This would cause a loss on the physical sale of Maya and minimal-to-possibly no benefit of the hedge," said Ryan Dusek, director at consulting firm Opportunity LLP based in Houston, who added that the trade could end up being "worthless." The Mexican finance ministry declined to comment on the structure of the hedge.

The Wall Street source said the proportion of Maya crude hedged for 2020 was significantly lower than in previous years. For the 2009 deal, for example, Barclays, Deutsche Bank, Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley hedged 305 million barrels of crude using Maya and only 25 million with Brent, data obtained by Reuters through a freedom of information request showed.

The Wall Street source said for 2020 Mexico had bought put options on Brent on the Intercontinental Exchange (ICE) at $54-$56 a barrel and hedged Maya at $42.

Brent is trading at around $63 a barrel while Maya's official selling price for deliveries to the U.S. Gulf Coast is about $55, according to S&P Global Platts pricing data.

The options give Mexico the right to sell oil at the predetermined price, so if the actual market price is lower, the options pay out and make up the difference - acting effectively as an insurance policy.

But if the price of Maya, a heavy sour crude, falls faster than Brent, a light sweet crude - or Maya drops and Brent rises - Mexico could miss out on oil revenues without the hedge kicking in, analysts and market sources said. Mexico has had to contend with the potential divergence in Maya and Brent crude prices before but the risk is now greater as demand for heavy crude globally is expected to slump.

Reuter's was unable to determine whether Mexico has taken additional steps to bridge any gaps between Maya and Brent.

'Hacienda hedge'

Mere rumors of Mexico's "Hacienda hedge," which gets its name from the country's finance ministry, can shift prices ahead of its anticipated deals and the government fears participants push up premiums when they suspect Mexico is about to trade. "Banks have become much better at accumulating information about it," said Victor Gomez, a former Mexican finance ministry official involved in the hedge until 2018.

In part due to this, the hedge's cost has increased 10-fold in peso terms since 2001, even though the number of barrels hedged has barely changed, the data obtained from the freedom of information request showed. Mexico spent the equivalent of $212 million to hedge 200 million barrels in 2001 but in 2018, hedging 212 million barrels cost $566 million. In 2017, Mexico stopped disclosing the number of barrels it has hedged.

Now, for the first time in at least 19 years, finance ministry officials have declined to reveal how much they're spending to protect 2020 reven-

US home sales surge to near two-year high

WASHINGTON: US home sales jumped to their highest level in nearly two years in December, the latest indication that lower mortgage rates are helping the housing market to regain its footing after hitting a soft patch in 2018, though record low inventory could be an obstacle to continued strong gains.

The report from the National Association of Realtors on Wednesday followed on the heels of government data last week showing homebuilding raced to a 13-year high in December. Renewed housing market momentum could soften some of the hit on the economy from manufacturing as the thaw in US-China trade tensions is offset by Boeing's suspension this month of production of its troubled 737 MAX plane.

"The previous weak link, housing, is coming back, but the current laggard, manufacturing, is slowing further," said Joel Naroff, chief economist at Naroff Economic Advisors in Holland, Pennsylvania.

Existing home sales increased 3.6 percent to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 5.54 million units last month, the highest level since February 2018, boosted by a surge in sales of multi-family housing units and gains in single-family home dwellings. November's sales pace was unseasoned at 5.35 million units.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast existing home sales would increase 1.3 percent to a rate of 5.43 million units in December. Last month, existing home sales rose in the Northeast, West and the populous South. But sales fell in the Midwest.

Existing home sales, which make up about 90 percent of US home sales, surged 10.0 percent on a year-on-year basis in December. For all of 2019, sales were unchanged at 5.34 million units.

The report helped to lift the PHXL housing index, Stocks on Wall Street were trading higher, also cheered by an upbeat forecast from JPM and China's efforts to contain a new flu-like virus outbreak.

"Still, with rising incomes, more households being formed, and low mortgage rates, demand for housing should remain robust to keep home sales activity at an elevated level - although likely

Lift to GDP

December's increase in existing homes sales likely means more in brokers' commissions, which suggests that housing probably contributed to GDP growth again in the fourth quarter. Residential investment rebounded in the third quarter after contracting for six straight quarters, the longest such stretch since the 2007-2009 recession. The Atlanta Fed is forecasting GDP to rise at a 1.8 percent annualized rate in the fourth quarter.

The economy grew at a 2.1 percent rate in the July-September period. The government will publish its snapshot of fourth-quarter GDP next Thursday. There were a record-low 1.4 million previously owned homes on the market in December, down 14.6 percent from November and 8.5 percent from a year ago. As a result, the median existing home price soared 7.8 percent from a year ago, the most since January 2016, to $274,500 in December. House prices increased 4.8 percent in 2019. — Reuters

Friday, January 24, 2020
Nigerian rice farmers fall short after borders close

Imported rice becomes more scarce as consumption grows

MAKURDI, Nigeria: Thomas Tyawwva Maji is planting rice on more of his land in Nigeria’s Benue State than ever to take advantage of a surge in prices since the country shut its land borders in August.

But he says he cannot go much further. With no machinery or irrigation, limited manual labor and no spare cash for fertilizers, the 45-year-old is not expecting any dramatic change in his fortunes. “We work until we get exhausted, manually we get exhausted,” said Maji, as a woman nearby beat hand-harvested stalks on the ground to separate the grains from the chaff. Constraints Maji faces have bedevilled many rice farmers and millers across Nigeria for years. Despite government measures designed to spur production, farmers in Nigeria get far less from their land than other major rice growers and the West African country is only marginally less reliant on imports.

That’s a problem for a government that wants to grow all of its own food and boost the country’s agriculture, a sector that accounts for nearly a third of gross domestic product in Africa’s biggest economy. When he came to power in 2015, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari pledged to help the nation become self-sufficient in rice—once a luxury but now a staple for millions of Nigerians.

In 2015, Nigeria’s central bank banned the use of its foreign exchange to pay for rice imports and has backed loans of at least 40 billion naira ($130 million) to help small-holders boost output. It also banned rice imports across land borders and kept hefty 70 percent tariffs on imports coming through ports. In August last year, Nigeria went a step further and closed its land borders altogether to stamp out smuggling, often from neighboring Benin, with rice being one of the main targets.

Buhari’s spokesman, Garba Shehu, said the measures boosted rice production to 9.2 million tons last year from 7.2 million in 2015, making Nigeria more or less self-sufficient, though traders can import rice through ports if they pay the tariffs. Agricultural data specialist Geo Intelligence, however, put Nigeria’s rice output at 4.9 million tons in 2019, up 60 percent from 2013 but well below local consumption of 7 million tons. The US Department of Agriculture, meanwhile, expects Nigeria’s 2020 rice imports to rise 9 percent to 2.4 million tons, in part due to the high cost of unprocessed Nigerian paddy rice and elevated operating costs at mills.

In Lagos, Nigeria’s biggest city, supermarket shelves remain stocked with a plethora of imported rice brands. In the markets where most Nigerians buy their food, sacks of Nigerian rice are piled high but imported rice is still available, even though some traders keep the foreign grain under wraps to prevent it being confiscated by customs agents.

Low yields

Small-scale farmers such as Maji account for 80 percent of Nigeria’s rice production with a handful of large companies, such as Coscharis Group, Dangote and Olam, growing the rest, according to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization. In every aspect of Maji’s farming manual, from planting to harvesting to levelling out roads to take the crop to market, it’s a similar story on many Nigerian farms, leaving the average yield per hectare at just over 2 tons - half the global average and a fraction of Egypt’s 9.5 tons a hectare, according to UN data. Experts say there is little hope of improvement without significant investment in irrigation, mechanization, roads and storage. More than 12 percent of rice is also wasted due to poor roads and inefficient harvesting. It is parboiling, milling and storage, consultants KPMG said in a review of the Nigeria’s rice industry.

In a good year, Maji makes about 1.5 million naira ($4,900)—nowhere close to the 5 million, at least, a tractor would cost. Without irrigation, a goal so remote he doesn’t even know the cost, he can only plant one crop a year. “At this scale, we will not even be able to fetch a tractor. Talk less of fertilizer and other chemicals,” Maji said.

According to the FAO, less than 1 percent of Nigeria’s farmland is irrigated, compared with a global average of more than 20 percent. Small-scale and medium-scale rice millers, who account for more than 80 percent of the local market, also say they’re struggling to meet increased demand without proper equipment. At Warakum Rice Mill in Makurdi, Iveren Asan works alongside her sister, using a load diesel-powered generator to drive machinery processing paddy grains into consumable rice.

Nearby, rice grains that have been parboiled in vats heated by firewood dry on tarps. She said new buyers from across the country had surfaced since the border closures - but producing more would require significant investment in new machines and the higher prices were not enough on their own. “We can’t meet the demand. We are doing the process manually, so we cannot meet the demand,” she said.

More broadly, experts warned that extreme measures, such as border closures, taken in the name of food security were hurting Nigerians, stunting the development of other industries and holding back foreign investment. “The border closure has been incredibly disruptive,” said John Ashbourne, an economist at Capital Economics. “It stops industries from getting the imports they need, and it pushes up prices.”

The border closure is set for review Jan. 31 but the presidency’s Shehu said land frontiers would remain shut until Nigeria’s neighbors stopped smuggling on their side - and there was “no sign of compliance yet”. Ashbourne said even some farming has taken a hit from government policies.

After glass was added to a central bank list of items importers cannot buy with foreign exchange, some tomato paste plants shut because they couldn’t source the jars they needed. On another farm in Benue State, Abraham 51, weaves through rows of melons and corn before reaching his rice, the crop that generates the most money. “The prices look pretty good,” he said, as men cut stalks of rice by hand and laid them in piles on the ground. — Reuters

Chile CB hopeful of no recession, will prevent peso panic

LONDON: Chile’s central bank will intervene forcefully if violent protests threaten its peso currency again, though it hopes the relative calm in recent weeks will be enough to keep the country out of recession, its deputy governor Joaquin Vial said. Vial told Reuters in an interview that Chile’s most widespread protests since its return to democracy in 1990 had done serious damage to the economy.

He is hopeful though that it will not be worse than the central bank feared in December when its slashed its 2020 growth forecast to a range of 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent from 2.75 percent to 3.75 percent previously. “It looks to me that the estimate (for the economy) we made last quarter is very much in line with what happened,” Vial said. Asked if there was still a risk of a “technical” recession, defined as back-to-back quarterly contractions in the economy, he added: “If you look at the chart we are probably going to avoid that because the worst figures were from October and November.”

“December is going to be very bad also, but we have seen some normalization and the first quarter will most likely be somewhat better...But we have to see how fast confidence is going to restore.”

The protests initially erupted in October after metro ticket prices were raised, but quickly escalated to subway stations being set alight and riots on the streets that left 26 dead and upwards of $1.5 billion in losses for businesses. Vial warned that March and April could get rough again, with more student protests expected and then a referendum on replacing Chile’s dictator-era constitution. If tensions do flare again though the central bank is prepared after last year’s troubles saw the peso plunge 15 percent.

Vial said it looked like getting “out of control” at one point, but the central bank stepped in, putting $10 billion of its roughly $40 billion of currency reserves on the table to stem the rout.

It required a number of emergency meetings but it worked. It ended up using about $2 billion of its reserves and the peso made back some ground, but the bank is still on alert. “We have signalled very clearly that we may intervene again in the foreign exchange market if there is disruption again.”

At the same time, Vial stressed that the central bank does not want to change the trend of the exchange rate. “Among other things we think this is part of the normal reaction to the new reality of the Chilean economy,” he said referring to the sharp shock to growth. It could be argued that is should be lower, but “we don’t feel uncomfortable with this level of the exchange rate,” he added.

On interest rates, which did not change during the protests, there are opposing forces. The economy is under stress, but the sharp drop in the peso means inflation will soon be nearly 4 percent, well above the central bank’s preferred level of 3 percent. “We don’t feel the depreciation has created the pressure to raise rates,” Vial said. However, with the risk of more peso weakness if demonstrations become violent again, he added: “from my personal point of view, (a rate cut) is less likely that the opposite option.” — Reuters
Governors leave interest rates at historic lows, maintain quantitative easing

FRANKFURT AM, MAIN: European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde on Thursday left interest rates at historic lows, maintained “quantitative easing” (QE) bond-buying purchases, a spokesman said.

What’s more “the governing council also decided to launch a review of the ECB’s monetary policy strategy,” he added. At her first press conference as ECB chief last month, Lagarde vowed to “turn each and every stone” in the planned probe.

Slaughter to finish this year, the rethink is slated to look above all at the ECB’s just-below-two-percent inflation target and the tools the bank should use to achieve it. The institution’s last stock-taking in 2003 took place several years before it intervened massively in inter-bank markets amid the global financial and economic crisis.

Observers will be on the lookout for information on the review and any small changes in language regarding economic risks, after several weeks of mostly positive political tailwinds for the economy. This year marks a new phase for Lagarde in her presidency, after its early months were spent smoothing divisions among policymakers that erupted under predecessor Mario Draghi.

Inflation goal
“arithmetic part of the review will be an assessment of the definition of price stability and how to reach it,” said economist Carsten Brzeski of ING bank. For most of its active life, the ECB has aimed for inflation “close to, but below two percent” to fulfill its mandate to keep eurozone prices stable. But over the past seven years, it has failed to achieve that goal despite unprecedented policy experiments.

One option would be to simply target inflation “around” two percent. Such “symmetry” in the inflation target could mean the bank would not immediately hit the brakes once inflation approaches two percent, instead potentially allowing it to overshoot a bit. “That would allow the ECB to actually take it easy” and stick to its present negative interest rates for longer, Brzeski said. What’s more, “such a clarification of the target would be helpful...to limit disagreement in the governing council,” added Goldman Sachs chief economist Alain Durrer.

On top of the ECB’s headline goal, the review could also tackle issues like making decisions more consensual, side effects of policy tools like bond-buying and negative rates, and how to take climate change more into consideration. Lagarde has identified climate action as a new frontier for central banking, including via its bond-buying scheme and bank supervision role, while retaining price stability as the ECB’s primary mandate.

Shifting risks
The ECB’s chief’s judgment of risks facing the euro area will also be closely scrutinized. Lagarde suggested in December that dangers have become “less pronounced”, a nuance quickly picked up by financial markets.

Since then, signs of clouds beginning to clear over the global economy have multiplied, including prospects for an orderly British exit from the EU at the end of January. The International Monetary Fund — Lagarde’s old patch — this week pointed to a “moderate pick-up in global growth” ahead, although “policy missteps” could still derail it. And the US-China trade conflict, with its harmful knock-on effects on Europe, has been soothed for now by a new trade deal. On Wednesday however, President Donald Trump levied new threats of car import taxes against the EU. — AFP

Brexit brings jobs boost for Germany

BERLIN: About two dozen British firms told German authorities in 2019 they plan to open offices in Germany and will create 680 new jobs. More than in the previous two years combined, the government’s business marketing arm said yesterday.

Germany Trade and Invest (GTI) linked the increase to Britain’s departure from the European Union on January 1, and said the number of planned new jobs may rise as firms registered plans directly with Germany’s federal states. “We are witnessing a constant increase in the activity of British companies in Germany,” said GTI chief Robert Hermann.

Some companies were moving to Germany to skirt tariffs that could be imposed on British goods and services once Britain leaves the EU while others were attracted by favorable conditions, Hermann added. About a third were finance and business services companies, just under a third specialized in IT and some 40 percent were a mix that included engineering and consumer specialists.

Britain’s parliament has approved a divorce settlement with the EU, which includes a business-as-usual transition deal covering the period after Brexit Day on Jan. 31 until the end of December.

Hermann said British business leaders appear undeterred by Germany’s weakening economy, whose export-oriented manufacturing sector is in recession. Germany is Britain’s second-biggest export market after the United States. — Reuters

Can Lebanon’s new govt revive the economy?

BEIRUT: After three months of political paralysis, Lebanon has finally formed a government under Prime Minister Hassan Diab. Now comes the task of saving the country from a biting financial crisis and winning over investors and foreign donors.

How likely is a debt default or restructuring?
Lebanon’s public debt burden, equivalent to around 150 percent of GDP, and its twin current account and fiscal deficits looked unsustainable even before anti-government protesters took to the streets three months ago.

With many of the international sovereign bonds trading at less than half their face value, market observers see an increasing likelihood of Lebanon struggling to repay some of its obligations and seek a restructuring with creditors at some point.

One of the first tasks of the government will be to decide whether to proceed with a central bank proposal to ask local holders of some of this year’s bonds, including a $1.2 billion issue maturing in March, to swap them for longer-dated ones to ease pressure on state finances. Any move to delay bond repayments could constitute a default in the eyes of credit rating agencies and risk pushing its credit rating further into junk territory.

Is a currency devaluation a given?
The Lebanese pound’s 22-year-old peg to the US dollar has been strained to breaking point by the country’s political and banking crisis. With the pound losing roughly a third of its official value on the black market as dollars have dried up, a devaluation has loomed increasingly large.

Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh has previously ruled out any such move, saying the government has the means to maintain the peg. But without a revival in sagging capital flows and a recovery in Lebanon’s external balance sheet, the central bank’s ability to defend the peg will diminish.

How can the banking system be revived?
Banks have long served as a vital cog in keeping Lebanon’s economy moving. By taking deposits from Lebanon’s millions of scattered diaspora and snapping up the government’s local debt, banks helped prop up the state’s finances. But that system has broken as foreign deposits dry up in the face of a collapse in confidence in the banking system. Non-resident private sector deposits in the banking sector fell by 13 percent on an annual basis in November, while Lebanon faces a hard currency shortage — leaving Lebanese at home and abroad with restricted access to their bank funds. Some financial experts believe banks will require a deeper injection of cash than the 20 percent of capital they’ve been told by the central bank to raise.

What about securing foreign financial support?
Lebanon is mired in recession and its recovery remains largely dependent on the government’s ability to make reforms needed to secure international financial support. Lebanon needs a $20 billion-$25 billion bailout including International Monetary Fund support to emerge from its financial crisis, according to former economy minister Nassar Safadi. But assistance appears uncertain given Diab’s support from the Iranian-backed Hezbollah and its allies. — Reuters
DOHA: International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) president Tamas Ajan agreed late Wednesday to step aside for corruption probe

Ajan claimed he had been the victim of “an unjust attack” by ARD. “It should be stressed that yes, there are two bank accounts, but neither is secret,” said Ajan in an interview with Hungarian TV. “This film has completely ruined my life and 50 years of my work. A large part of my work has been about doping prevention,” he added. “That’s my work. A large part of my work has been completely ruined my life and 50 years of my work.”

Williamson, described by former New Zealand skipper Brendon McCullum as a “reluctant leader”, said he was always open to doing anything to keep the respect of his team-mates and he has the trust of his team-mates.

The series launches a six-week tour by Virat Kohli’s men with three one-day internationals and two Tests to follow. However, in a Twenty20 World Cup year it is form in cricket’s shortest format that will command considerable attention.

India have just completed a successful three-match ODI series against Australia and Kohli’s immediate concern on arriving in New Zealand was to get the team ready for the Twenty20 series starting today.

Kohli, who also leads all three Indian sides, said leadership was not always determined by results. “It’s also about how you can get the team together and get the guys functioning under you as well, which I think Kane has done wonderfully well,” Kohli said. “He has the respect of his team-mates and he has the trust of his team-mates, which is what I can see, and he’s also a very, very smart cricketer.”

Williamson, described by former New Zealand skipper Brendon McCullum as a “reluctant leader”, said he was always open to doing what is best for the team. “I do feel fortunate to be leading such a great group of guys that share a similar passion, which is to keep moving this team forward,” Williamson said. “If those (leadership) discussions are to eventuate and collectively there’s a thought that it would be best for the team, then my stance is whatever is right and fits the group.”

New Zealand head into the series with injuries in the pace bowling, with Tim Southee and Neil Williams both ruled out. The team remained in a slump in Australia late last year, losing 2-0 in the Twenty20s and by the same margin in two Tests. Now the selectors have recalled veterans Mohammad Hafeez and Shoaib Malik, but they need all the experience they can get. Bangladesh, who last toured Pakistan in 2008, are coming off the back of an impressive series in India, where they won one of their three matches. They also have a 2-1 advantage against Pakistan in the last three Twenty20 internationals.

India are capable of hosting international cricket when they take on Bangladesh in a Twenty20 series starting today.

If the host team lose just one of the three matches scheduled they will slide to second behind England or India in the rankings after holding the top spot since January 2018. But they also want to show the security situation has improved enough for the team to start regularly hosting home international fixtures.

Following an attack in 2009 by Islamist militants on a convoy ferrying the Sri Lanka team to a fixture in Lahore, Pakistan became a wilderness for the national side who had to play home fixtures in the Middle East.

That ended in December when Sri Lanka returned to give Pakistan their first home series in a decade. The first priority for skipper Babar Azam is to stay top of the world in the shortest international version of the game.

“When the focus is to continue the number one ranking,” said Babar yesterday. “We can hang on to that only if we win all three matches, so it is a do-or-die situation and we have planned for that,” he told a press conference.

Pakistan’s rise started in 2016 under Sarfaraz Ahmed as they won eleven consecutive Twenty20 series before losing three on the trot. A poor finish in the 50-over World Cup in England, where they failed to reach the semi-finals, resulted in the sacking of Sarfaraz and head coach Mickey Arthur, to be replaced by Azam and Mubashir-ul-Haq respectively.

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Nadal, Kyrgios through as freak weather hits Australian Open

Zverev advances; Thiem taken to five sets before win

MELBOURNE: Rafael Nadal and Nick Kyrgios reached the Australian Open third round yesterday after the weather-disrupted tournament faced a new challenge: dirty rain which left courts muddy and unplayable.

After a day of clean-up operations and delays, Australia's Kyrgios fought his way past Frenchman Gilles Simon in four sets and Wimbledon champion Simona Halep stamped her class with a win over Britain's Harriet Dart.

Nadal, a 6-3, 7-6 (7/4), 6-1 winner over Argentina's Federico Delbonis, misused a shot that hit a ballgirl in the head, but he melted hearts when he apologized and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I was so scared for her, honestly," said the 19-time Grand Slam winner. "The ball was quick and straight on the head. She's a very brave girl."

Kyrgios, increasingly popular with home fans after his fund-raising efforts to help Australia's bushfire crisis, was cruisin at two sets up when he dropped the third set and with it, his composure. But just when it looked like he would suffer one of his trademark implosions, he rallied for a 6-2, 6-4, 6-7, 7-5 victory. "I definitely lost my way a little bit... but I decided to refocus," Kyrgios said of his mini-meltdown in the third set. "I could have gone to a very dark place in the fourth set but I put it away."

Kyrgios and Nadal stay on course for a fourth-round clash and the next installment in their grudge match after the Aussie hit back at criticism from the "super salty" Spaniard last year. Their victories followed a day of upheaval caused by the dirty rain, the latest weather problem at a tournament which has contended with bushfire smoke, heavy downpours and strong wind. Rain mixed with a dust storm coated the Melbourne Park facilities in a fine layer of mud which took hours to clean and made many outside courts temporarily unusable.

"I was freaking out"

As action resumed Alexander Zverev, another man who has a running feud with Kyrgios, showed signs of a return to form as he downed Egor Gerasimov 7-6 (7/5), 6-4, 7-5. The German seventh seed has been practicing up to seven hours a day after a winless ATP Cup and the hard work paid off as he safely reached the third round. "Definitely much better than the ATP Cup. Now in the third round, I'm very happy about that," said the 22-year-old, who beat Italy's Marco Cecchinato in round one.

However, fifth seed Dominic Thiem had a scare as he was taken to five sets by Australia's 140th-ranked Alex Bolt before recovering his composure to win 6-2, 5-7, 6-7 (5/7), 6-1, 6-2. "It was all of a sudden a really tight third set that shouldn't happen. That's why I was freaking out inside and also outside today," said the two-time French Open finalist.

A nosebleed was one of Daniil Medvedev's biggest challenges in his win over Spanish qualifier Pedro Martinez, while Gael Monfils, who injured his racquet hand playing computer games before the tournament, downed Ivo Karlovic.

In the women's draw Halep beat Dart 6-2, 6-4, while Belinda Bencic knocked out former French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko — she was playing despite the sudden death of her father this month. Two-time Major winner Garbine Muguruza, who scaled Mount Kilimanjaro in the off-season as she searches for a return to form, dispatched home hope Aija Tomljanovic 6-3, 3-6, 6-3. —KUNA

Asian Handball Championship semi start tomorrow

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Semifinals of the 19th Asian Handball Championship, which qualifies for the World Cup in Egypt 2021, are set to start tomorrow at Sheikh Saad Al-Abdullah Hall in Kuwait City.

"Luck was against us"

Iraq's assistant coach Mahmoud Subhi expressed regret that his team failed to reach the World Cup, adding that the team prepared well and had good players, but luck was against them. Subhi predicts that Bahrain and South Korea will go on to join Qatar and Japan to the World Cup in Egypt.

China gets first win

China secured its first win in the consolation round, after losing twice in the tournament, beating Australia yesterday which suffered its second loss in the same round. Despite the close performance between the two teams in the first half which ended in favor of China 14-13, the second half saw tactical superiority for the Chinese who increased the goal difference to eight five minutes before the end of the match.
Eli Manning calling time on 16-year NFL career

One of five players in history with at least two Super Bowl MVPs

NEW YORK: Quarterback Eli Manning, who won two Super Bowls and was the face of the New York Giants franchise for more than a decade, is retiring from the NFL, the team said Wednesday. The Giants said Manning — who spent all 16 seasons of his NFL career with the Giants after a draft-day trade in 2004 — will formally announce his retirement on Wednesday.

"For 16 seasons, Eli Manning defined what it is to be a New York Giant both on and off the field," said John Mara, the Giants’ president and chief executive officer. "Eli is our only two-time Super Bowl MVP and one of the very best players in our franchise's history. He represented our franchise as a consummate professional with dignity and accountability. It meant something to Eli to be the Giants' quarterback, and it meant even more to us."

Manning, 39, led the Giants to Super Bowl victories over the New England Patriots after the 2007 and 2011 seasons. He is one of just five players in NFL history with at least two Super Bowl MVPs, a club that also includes Joe Montana, Bart Starr, Tom Brady and Terry Bradshaw.

Manning, younger brother of another superstar quarterback, Peyton Manning, started 234 games for the Giants — the fourth most by a quarterback for one club. He was drafted first overall by the San Diego Chargers in the 2004 draft but he made it known he didn't want to play in San Diego and was traded to the Giants.

"A privilege to coach" He finishes his career seventh all-time with 366 touchdown passes, seventh in passing yards with 57,023, and tied with Joe Montana for 11th in career wins with 117. But he'll be best remembered for two of the biggest upsets in Super Bowl history. In February of 2008 the Giants stared down Tom Brady and the New England Patriots, ending New England's bid for a perfect season.

Manning’s MVP performance included a miraculous completion to David Tyree, Manning escaping the grip of Pats defenders to find Tyree, who held the ball against his helmet long enough to make the pass complete. Manning then found Plaxico Burress with the game-winning pass with 35 seconds to play. Manning and the Giants beat the Patriots again to cap the 2011 season.

"It was an honor and privilege to coach Eli, and to go through the wonderful and magnificent moments that he and his teammates provided for all of us in the world championship ’07-’08 and ’11-’12 seasons," former Giants coach Tom Coughlin said.

"He’s an incredible big-game performer. You talk about a guy that’s great to coach, focused every day, took tremendous pride in preparing, practice, had a great sense of humor, was a cynic in the locker room. But the guys loved him, and they loved him for it, and they played for him." —AFP

Police issue arrest warrant for Antonio Brown

MIAMI: US police in Florida issued an arrest warrant for former NFL player Antonio Brown after an alleged battery and burglary at his home on Tuesday. Brown, 31, faces charges of burglary with battery, burglary of an unoccupied conveyance and criminal mischief less than $1,000, said officer Christian Lata of the police in Hollywood, a city between Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

The incident, in which police responded to a 911 emergency call on Tuesday afternoon, had already resulted in the arrest of Brown's trainer, Glenn Holt. The alleged victim told officers he was battered by Brown and Holt.

According to local television station WPLG, Holt's arrest report said the charge stemmed from a disagreement between Brown and the driver of a moving company truck over payment for the release of Brown's property. Star wide-receiver Brown said he was finished with the NFL after his release by the New England Patriots in September amid an ongoing NFL investigation into rape and sexual assault allegations. Brown had landed in New England just three days after he was cut by the Oakland Raiders. Over the past month police had been called to his Florida house because of clashes between Brown and his girlfriend of eight years, the mother of three of his children. —AFP
Pelicans’ Williamson thrills in NBA debut; Lakers bounce back

First overall pick finishes with 22 points in 18 minutes

LOS ANGELES: New Orleans rookie Zion Williamson flashed some brilliance in his long-awaited NBA debut Wednesday, but the San Antonio Spurs spoiled the party at Smoothie King Center with a 121-117 victory over the Pelicans.

Williamson, who was the number one overall draft pick in June, offered a tantalizing glimpse of what’s to come in his career when he exploded for 17 points in little more than three minutes in the fourth quarter.

The 19-year-old sensation had been sidelined since arthroscopic surgery on his right knee on the eve of the Pelicans’ season-opener in October. He made a tentative start, scoring five points with four rebounds, one assist four turnovers in less than 12 minutes on the floor over the first three quarters.

With 8:52 remaining and the Spurs up 99-91, Williamson connected with a three-pointer from the top of the key that ignited the crowd of 18,365. He followed up with an alley-oop layup, fed by Lonzo Ball, drained a trey and put back his own miss with a spinning layup before adding two more three-pointers.

MVP chants

The crowd was chanting “M-V-P!” as he capped the burst with a free-throw, but he was soon subbed out of the game as Pelicans coach Alvin Gentry stuck to the plan of playing Williamson only in short bursts. “I think what you saw there is a taste,” Gentry said. “There’s a lot of potential there.”

He said he had counselled Williamson at halftime to be more aggressive, and he was pleased to see him deliver. “I think there’s a really, really high ceiling that he can reach, and he can reach it soon,” added Gentry, who nevertheless was impervious to the cries of “We want Zion” from fans late in the fourth quarter.

“It was very hard,” Williamson admitted of coming out of the game just as he had found his rhythm. “I’m 19, Honestly, in that moment I’m not thinking about longevity I’m thinking about winning that game. So it was very tough.”

Williamson, who finished with 22 points, seven rebounds and three assists.

“You can’t keep playing defensively, keep pushing the pace way, shape or form,” Davis said. “We try not to lose two in a row, we bounced back tonight with a great win against a hungry team. We just want to make sure we keep playing the game defensively, keep pushing the pace aggressively. When we do those things we’re a tough team to beat.”

The Lakers, who improved to 35-9, had 13 points from Kentavious Caldwell-Pope and 10 from Kyle Kuzma. James connected on eight of 10 shots in 17 minutes in the first half, but the Lakers were 48-48 at halftime against a Knicks team that is third from bottom in the East.

Although he had a quiet second half in terms of scoring, James came up with four of his five steals after the break. “It was a slow-paced game so defensive stops were very key to our success tonight,” James said. “I tried to start off the game being aggressive and I was able to get myself going, AD was able to facilitate down the stretch and it was good basketball.”

New Orleans’ Williamson thrills in NBA debut; Lakers bounce back

First overall pick finishes with 22 points in 18 minutes

NBA results/standings

New Orleans 117, San Antonio 121; Atlanta 102, LA Clippers 95; Boston 119, Memphis 95; Miami 134, Washington 129 (OT); New York 92, LA Lakers 100; Golden State 109, Atlanta 108; Oklahoma City 120, Sacramento 110; Houston 121, Denver 108; Detroit 127, Sacramento 106; Orlando 114, Oklahoma City 120.

Eastern Conference

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— AFP
Barcelona and Madrid made to sweat by Ibia and Unionistas

Griezmann saves Messi-less Barca with two goals in second half

MADRID: La Liga’s heavyweights were both given a scare by third tier opponents in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday as Barcelona needed two late goals to beat Ibiza and Real Madrid dug deep for victory over Unionistas de Salamanca. Barca sit 44 places ahead of Ibiza and Madrid 56 above Unionistas but the lowly duo both came close to extraordinary upsets, only for Ibiza to lose 2-1 and Unionistas 3-1 in front of their jubilant home fans.

With Lionel Messi rested and not even on the bench, Antoine Griezmann proved the savior for Barcelona, scoring twice in the second half, including a 94th-minute winner, after Pep Guardiola had given the hosts a fairytale lead at Can Misses. “Scoring gave them confidence,” said Barca coach Quique Setien. “We were a bit sloppy, we gave the ball away and that gave them life. It wasn’t easy.”

Discomfort was more fleeting for Madrid, who conceded an equaliser in the second half following a brilliant run and finish from Unionistas’ Alvaro Romero, only to restore their advantage five minutes later. Juan Gongora turned the ball into his own net after Gareth Bale, back from injury and illness, scored his first goal for his club since September 1. Bale’s celebrations were notably muted and he had to go off in the 57th minute with a muscle strain in his ankle, a little,” said coach Zinedine Zidane, “I don’t think it’s much but tomorrow we’ll see.”

At the end, Unionistas fans were waving their scarves with pride just as Ibiza’s supporters had applauded their team off, even though Griezmann had dashed their hopes just moments before. Only last week, Barcelona toppled Deloitte’s annual Football Money League with a total revenue of $859.3m for 2018/19 while Madrid were just behind, the world’s second richest club with $864m.

Unionistas, meanwhile, only came into existence in 2013, launching their club after UD Salamanca went out of business. It was a dream draw to get Real Madrid but they almost had to move grounds because their Las Pistas has one stand and lighting that needed upgrading.

Ibiza are even younger, formed in 2015 and played in the fifth tier only three years ago. Griezmann’s rescue act was cruel but important for Setien, who enjoyed a 1-0 victory in his first game in charge against Granada on Saturday but could hardly afford a loss of this magnitude so early in his tenure.

Snapping at their heels

For all the dominance of the ball, there was a lack of cutting edge against Ibiza, who restricted their star-studded opponents to one shot in the first half, Barca’s lowest in any game they have played this season.

With a trip to Valencia to come in La Liga on Saturday, Setien left Messi, Sergio Busquets and Gerard Pique out of the squad. Youngsters Ansu Fati, Riqui Puig and Carles Perez all started. Ibiza were at their visitors from the off, closing the gaps and snapping at their heels. If the home side’s aim was to contain, they went one better by taking the lead in the ninth minute.

Puig was at fault, caught napping by Caballe, who fired through Javi Lara’s cross. Twice Ibiza almost added a second as Angel Rodado scored after bundling through Clement Lenglet but too mobile missed a penalty in the first 25 minutes. Rodrigo Bentancur added a second goal after 38 minutes with defender Leonardo Bonucci nodding in from a distance with the ball hitting the crossbar and bouncing off goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon in the Juventus goal.

Buffon denied Alessandro Florenzi and Aleksandar Kolarov to keep Juventus on course in the competition they have won 13 times but excited in the quarter-finals last season to Atalanta. Brazilian Danilo limped off before the break to be replaced by Juan Cuadrado, leaving Sarri with an injury worry ahead of this weekend’s trip to Napoli.

Roma, fourth in the league, were struggling with injuries while Edin Dzeko was sitting out a ban, but their form was worryingly just four days before their derby clash against city rivals Lazio. “The difference in the first half was efficiency,” said Roma coach Paulo Fonseca. “The first chance they had, they scored. The same for the second. We know that Edin Dzeko is a very important player for us and his ban was damaging, but the forwards could have done much better this evening.”

Ibiza’s pressing lost intensity in the second half and in the 72nd minute, Griezmann equalised. Frenkie de Jong’s reverse pass was perfectly weighted, with Griezmann able to hit an excellent, lifted finish but parity was brief.

Bale announced his return to the Real Madrid line-up with a goal as his right-footed efforttook an awkward deflection on its way in, even if there was little sign that he enjoyed it. In the 57th minute, Romero, who was playing in the Spanish third tier last season, capitalised on a slip from Eder Militao to weave through and apply an excellent, lifted finish but parity was briefer.

Gongora turned the ball into his own net under pressure from Brahim Diaz, who then added a third in injury-time. Elsewhere, holders Valencia beat Logrones 1-0 while Segunda strugglers Tenerife knocked out La Liga’s Real Valladolid with a surprise 2-1 win.
Solskjaer in firing line but Man Utd malaise runs deep

LONDON: Manchester United played out the final stages of Wednesday's humiliating 2-0 defeat to Burnley in front of banks of empty seats, raising fresh questions over how long beleaguered boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer will survive.

The United teams that Solskjaer played in during the glory years of Alex Ferguson were famed for their great escapes but his young, jaded players are struggling to live up to the club's swashbuckling traditions.

Solskjaer has now lost more Premier League games than he has won since being handed the job on a permanent basis in March after an exhilarating three-month stint as caretaker boss. His appointment increasingly looks a rash and misjudged decision by the club's executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward, who is blamed by large sections of United's support for the club's malaise. Should Solskjaer be the fall guy for yet another disappointing season, he would be the fourth manager to come and go since Ferguson retired in 2013.

Transfer errors

But a change in the dugout would not address the deeper-lying problems at the club, with repeated errors made in the transfer market. United have spent close to £1 billion ($1.3 billion) on transfers in the past seven years and still have the highest wage bill in the Premier League.

Yet they find themselves 30 points adrift of league leaders Liverpool, who also have two games in hand, and just 11 above the relegation zone. "If you don't lose your job for essentially over-seeing that investment, that wage bill, and putting that team out on the pitch then I have to say something is really wrong," former United captain Gary Neville said of Woodward. "In terms of what the club needed to do for a number of years now — put the best in class football operators into that club and they're not doing it. They're not doing it and it's a mess."

Mauricio Pochettino is likely to be the man United turn to should Solskjaer go. The Argentine proved his ability to work wonders with a young squad on a far more restricted budget than he would have at United in five years at Spurs before being sacked earlier this season. But it is change further up the hierarchy United fans most crave, starting with Woodward letting go of his grip on football operations. — AFP

English Premier League table

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‘Embarrassing’ Man Utd suffer fresh woe, Spurs boost top four bid

Manchester end drought with big win over West Ham

LONDON: Manchester United were labeled an “embarrassment” as pressure mounted on Ole Gunnar Solskjaer following Burnley’s shock 2-0 victory, while Tottenham boosted their top four prospects with a 2-1 win over Norwich on Wednesday.

Solskjaer’s side suffered a third defeat in their last four Premier League games to put the United boss’s job security back under the microscope.

Burnley’s first top-flight win at Old Trafford since 1962, secured by Chris Wood’s 39th minute opener and a Jay Rodriguez thunderbolt after the break, exposed the flaws in a lacklustre United side who have made their worst start to a season since 1989-90.

The majority of Old Trafford was on its feet when chants of “stand up if you hate Glazers” echoed around the ground in reference to United’s owners. Executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward was also subjected to many other abusive chants, while those few fans who remained in the stadium booed Solskjaer and his players at full-time.

Former United defender Rio Ferdinand, a Premier League and Champions League winner with the club, slammed the performance and called for the US-based Glazer family to take action to stop the rot. “I can’t defend this,” Ferdinand told BT Sport. “These young kids now in schools around the country, they are not going to be wearing Manchester United shirts. Fans are walking out after 84 minutes! It’s an embarrassment. People at the top need to look and see this and make changes, put a plan in place that people can sit there and see where we are going now, I don’t see it.”

Fifth placed United are six points behind fourth placed Chelsea as they battle to qualify for next season’s Champions League via a top four finish. Solskjaer admitted United had only themselves to blame, but he claimed the youngsters in his side deserved some patience.

“The boys have given everything they’ve got. They are experiencing this period for the first time in their lives, some of them,” he said. “It’s very difficult for them. The expectations of this club as well are high, and some of them have played 10, 12 or 15 games and it’s not easy for them. Of course I’m going to back them, I’m going to be here to help them get through this. When you’re at Man United there’s always going to be criticism. We can’t do anything but hold our hands up and say ‘this isn’t good enough it’s this club’. Of course we’re disappointed in the points tally and performances, we’re still fifth in the table.”

Alli ends Spurs drought

Tottenham needed a late winner from Son Heung-min to snap a four-game winless streak in the league and breathe new life into their push for next season’s Champions League via a top four place. Solskjaer in firing line but Man Utd malaise runs deep

LONDON: Manchester United played out the final stages of Wednesday’s humiliating 2-0 defeat to Burnley in front of banks of empty seats, raising fresh questions over how long beleaguered boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer will survive.

The United teams that Solskjaer played in during the glory years of Alex Ferguson were famed for their great escapes but his young, jaded players are struggling to live up to the club’s swashbuckling traditions.

Solskjaer has now lost more Premier League games than he has won since being handed the job on a permanent basis in March after an exhilarating three-month stint as caretaker boss. His appointment increasingly looks a rash and misjudged decision by the club’s executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward, who is blamed by large sections of United’s support for the club’s malaise. Should Solskjaer be the fall guy for yet another disappointing season, he would be the fourth manager to come and go since Ferguson retired in 2013.

Transfer errors

But a change in the dugout would not address the deeper-lying problems at the club, with repeated errors made in the transfer market. United have spent close to £1 billion ($1.3 billion) on transfers in the past seven years and still have the highest wage bill in the Premier League.

Yet they find themselves 30 points adrift of league leaders Liverpool, who also have two games in hand, and just 11 above the relegation zone. “If you don’t lose your job for essentially over-seeing that investment, that wage bill, and putting that team out on the pitch then I have to say something is really wrong,” former United captain Gary Neville said of Woodward. “In terms of what the club needed to do for a number of years now — put the best in class football operators into that club and they’re not doing it. They’re not doing it and it’s a mess.”

Mauricio Pochettino is likely to be the man United turn to should Solskjaer go. The Argentine proved his ability to work wonders with a young squad on a far more restricted budget than he would have at United in five years at Spurs before being sacked earlier this season. But it is change further up the hierarchy United fans most crave, starting with Woodward letting go of his grip on football operations. — AFP
NEW ORLEANS: Zion Williamson #1 of the New Orleans Pelicans shoots the ball against the San Antonio Spurs on January 22, 2020 at the Smoothie King Center in New Orleans, Louisiana. — AFP

Pelicans’ Zion Williamson thrills in NBA debut