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2 RIYALS



Huge turn out on first day of night seasonal vegetable markets

SANAULLAH ATAULLAH
THE PENINSULA

To give a hassle-free shopping experience to customers, especially fasting people during holy month of Ramadan, the night seasonal vegetable markets (agricultural yards) opened yesterday. The market witnessed a huge demand on the first day of its opening as customers turned up in large number to buy fresh local vegetables at lower rates.

The Agricultural Affairs Department at the Ministry of Municipality and Environment (MME) has decided to change the timing of the markets from day to night for the convenience of customers during holy month of Ramadan.

As per the decision, all five markets will open from 7pm to 11pm throughout the holy month of Ramadan. The vegetable markets located in Al Sheehaniya, Al Mazrouha, Al Wakrah, Al Khor-Al Zakhira and Al Shamal are operating during weekend from Thursday to Saturday.

Customers have welcomed the decision of the Ministry to open the markets at night during Ramadan. "I appreciate the decision of Agricultural Affairs Department for running the markets at night during Ramadan enabling fasting people to visit the market at their comfort," Abdul Aziz Ahmad, a visitor of Al Wakra Vegetable Market told *The Peninsula*.

- **All five markets will open from 7pm to 11pm throughout the holy month of Ramadan.**
- **The vegetable markets located in Al Sheehaniya, Al Mazrouha, Al Wakrah, Al Khor-Al Zakhira and Al Shamal are operating during weekend from Thursday to Saturday.**

Speaking about the importance of the seasonal markets for consumers, Ahmad said that markets offered farm fresh vegetables at lower prices this is why it attracted large number of customers – citizens and expatriates.

"I am a regular customer of vegetable market. I used to visit the market on Thursday to buy my stock of vegetables," said Abu Ahmad, another visitor of Al Wakra Vegetable Market.

He said that consumers preferred to buy vegetables from seasonal markets especially those with large families because it is fresh and cheaper.

The markets offered yesterday many produce including tomato, cucumber, zucchini, leafy vegetables, egg plants, pumpkins, cabbage, cauliflower, lettuce, mushroom and onions.

The markets attracted pretty good number of customers on first day of night market. "We received many customers on first day and expecting more in the coming days," said Iqbal Ahmad, a representative of a farm participating in the market. ➔P2



Visitors at t Al Wakra Yard, one of the five local produce yards in the country.
PIC: SALIM MATRAMKOT/THE PENINSULA



Minister of Education and Higher Education, H E Dr Mohammad bin Abdulwahid Al Hammadi, receiving the Social Responsibility Award for 2020 from Sheikh Dr. Khalid bin Thani bin Abdullah Al Thani, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Dar Al Sharq Group, yesterday.

Education Minister receives Social Responsibility Award for 2020

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Minister of Education and Higher Education, H E Dr. Mohammad bin Abdul Wahid Al Hammadi, yesterday received the Social Responsibility Award for 2020, which was presented by Sheikh Dr. Khalid bin Thani bin Abdullah Al Thani, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Dar Al Sharq Group.

This came in recognition of the remarkable efforts made by the Ministry to ensure the continuity of the educational process throughout this global pandemic.

During the award ceremony, Sheikh Dr. Khalid stressed to the Minister that it is the duty of the community and media institutions to contribute to this honouring in order to promote the efforts made to keep the educational process going forward without delay.

The award to Dr Al Hammadi was announced during the 8th Social Responsibility Conference, which was organised last week by Dar Al Sharq Group. During the conference, 18 local entities were selected for the Social Responsibility Awards in recognition of their efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020.

Eligible persons urged to receive vaccine soon

FAZEENA SALEEM
THE PENINSULA

To further intensify the National COVID-19 Vaccination Program, the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) has encouraged and reminded those eligible and hasn't received the vaccine to get it as soon as possible. The Ministry has also said that COVID-19 vaccine can lower the risk among elderly people and the vaccine is safe for pregnant and breast-feeding women.

The Ministry, in a video posted on its social media platform video, conveyed the message that getting vaccinated against COVID-19 will protect the health of individuals and other members of the community. It has encouraged older people who are much more vulnerable to severe complications from the virus to get vaccinated. ➔P3



MoPH has said that COVID-19 vaccine can lower the risk among elderly people and the vaccine is safe for pregnant and breast-feeding women.

August 29 is first day of new academic year

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Minister of Education and Higher Education, H E Dr. Mohammed bin Abdulwahed Al Hammadi has issued ministerial decision No.12 of 2021 for amending some provisions of the ministerial decision No.13 of 2020 to the calendar of the 2021-22 Academic Year.

As per the provisions of the new decision, the second round of 2020-21 exams for grades 1-12 (day/adult education) which will be from August 18 to 26.

The staff will return to schools on August 16 for the academic year 2021-22.

The first day of the new academic year 2021-22 for students will be August 29. The new decision came into effect from the date of issuance.

MME signs pacts with PIH to enhance cooperation in air quality monitoring

QNA – DOHA

The Ministry of Municipality and Environment (MME), represented by the Department of the Environmental Affairs Sector, signed through video conference technology, a number of cooperation agreements with Power International Holding (PIH) Company to enhance cooperation in the areas of air quality monitoring and building a reputation management system.

The Assistant Undersecretary for Environmental Affairs at the Ministry of Municipality and Environment Engineer Hassan Bojumhur Al Mohannadi emphasised that these agreements aim to strengthen cooperation in the field of air quality monitoring, and to build a reputation management system in the ministry, and that according to one of these agreements there will be support for the network of air quality monitoring stations in the Ministry as well as providing an air quality monitoring station according to the best international standards to be installed near one of the stadiums that will host the 2022 World Cup.

- **According to one of these agreements signed with Power International Holding Company, there will be support for the network of air quality monitoring stations in the Ministry as well as providing an air quality monitoring station with the best international standards to be installed near one of the stadiums that will host the 2022 World Cup.**

He added that the other agreement aims at scientific cooperation in building a "reputation management" system, which is a modern system for developing the Ministry's operations in line with the strategic plan of the Ministry of Municipality and Environment, and achieving communication with the public in a professional manner, in accordance with the latest scientific theories and preserving the Ministry's image.

He stressed that the Ministry promotes, through one of these agreements, an improvement in its reputation management, at the level of environmental sustainability indicators, by designing a reference tool for the components and features of the Ministry's reputation, and developing plans and mechanisms for disseminating the components of this reputation at the level of different segments.

For his part, the Vice-Chairman and Group CEO of Power International Holding Ramez Al Khayyat, affirmed that these agreements contribute to supporting environmental sustainability in the country, noting that the signing and implementation of such agreements comes within the framework of mutual cooperation with various entities operating in the country.

Ramadan Timing

Today's Iftar: 5:58pm
Tomorrow's Imsak: 03:41am

Mosques to open 10 minutes before second azan for Friday prayer

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs has said that the mosques will open 10 minutes before second azan (call for prayer) for Friday prayer starting from today until further notice.

The new decision came in a circular issued by the Mosques Management Department at the Ministry to Imams and Muezzins yesterday.

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR	03.52 am
SUNRISE	05.11 am
DHUHR	11.34 am
ASR	03.03 pm
MAGHRIB	05.58 pm
ISHA	07.28 pm

WEATHER TODAY

24°C Minimum | 33°C Maximum

Relatively hot day time and scattered clouds to partly cloudy with slight dust at times, mild by night.

- ALRUWAIS : 24° → 25°
- ALKHOR : 23° → 32°
- DUKHAN : 24° → 27°
- WAKRAH : 24° → 35°
- MESAIEED : 24° → 35°
- ABUSAMRA : 23° → 28°

HIGH TIDE 5:48- 19:53

LOW TIDE 2:00 - 13:28

Al Baker: Qatar Airways carried 3.8 million passengers amid pandemic

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Qatar Airways Group CEO, H E Akbar Al Baker has disclosed that the airline carried almost four million passengers when other airlines were not operational due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In an interview with an aviation and travel blogger, Sam Chui, Al Baker said he will always look for opportunities to keep the airline afloat and working.

"We carried 3.8 million passengers, and we repatriated people when other airlines left their passengers stranded. We were there. I will always take every single opportunity I see. I have to find revenue for my airline, and when everybody shuts their doors, people will still want to travel, and we are there to serve them," Al Baker told Chui.

"We are now the largest long-haul carrier operating in the world today. We received the lowest equity injection of any airline. Many other airlines have received billions in state aid and subsidies," he added.

"We carried 3.8 million passengers, and we repatriated people when other airlines left their passengers stranded. We were there. I will always take every single opportunity I see. I have to find revenue for my airline, and when everybody shuts their doors, people will still want to travel, and we are there to serve them," H E Akbar Al Baker told aviation and travel blogger, Sam Chui.



Speaking on the pandemic, vaccination, and its impact on the aviation industry, Al Baker said many countries might require vaccination passports for travelers. "Eventually, I think that it will be a mandatory requirement for many countries. For example, Australia will already not allow people that are not vaccinated to enter the country. If this pandemic continues, and if there is no proper robust treatment, I think many other countries will also require that you have a vaccination passport to enter their borders," he noted.

Al Baker has led Qatar Airways since 1997, seeing the airline grow into one of the biggest in the world. He stressed that a system is in place for the airline to succeed with or without him.

"We have a succession plan. It is something that I built with the full support of my rulers and the goodwill of the Qatari people. It is my duty to have a robust succession plan in place. So if I'm there or not, Qatar Airways is still a brand of my country and will continue. Till the last day I am on this chair as the group chief executive, I will continue to do my service towards my country and the mandate given to me by His Highness, my ruler," Al Baker said.

He also reiterated Qatar Airways' goal to keep on growing and become carbon neutral.

Huge turn out on first day of night seasonal vegetable markets

FROM PAGE 1

Speaking about the verities of the vegetables, Ahmad said that most of the vegetables which are produced in Qatari farms are available in the market.

To a question about the prices of the vegetables at the market, Ahmad said: "Markets offer vegetable at lower prices because there are no middlemen between farms and customers."

For example, he said a box of cucumber of 5kg is available at QR14, and number one quality cucumber of 6kg at QR20. Ahmad said that tomatoes are also available at QR10, QR15 per box as per the size and quality of the product.

Ramadan provides an opportune time to quit smoking, says HMC expert

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Head of the Hamad Medical Corporation's (HMC) Tobacco Control Center, Dr. Ahmad Al Mulla **(pictured),** has said that Ramadan is an opportune time to quit smoking. According to Dr. Al Mulla, fasting has a lot of positive effects on one's health, and those benefits are especially prominent in tobacco users who give up smoking.

"For smokers, quitting is often easier during Ramadan as those who fast are already required to abstain from food and drink, as well as from smoking cigarettes and using other tobacco products, from dawn to sunset," said Dr. Al Mulla.

"The positive health effects of quitting smoking begin quickly after your last cigarette. Your blood pressure and pulse will start to return to more normal levels and nicotine levels in the body start to decline gradually. The body also begins to cleanse itself of the toxic substances and blood viscosity returns to normal levels. Smokers who quit this habit also start to feel improvement in their sense of smell and taste and their immune system's ability to fight off diseases improves over time."

"During Ramadan the number of smokers who visit us with an intention to quit is higher than during other periods of the year because fasting, and the holy month in general, is an ideal time for smokers to be more thoughtful about their health and the impact lifestyle choices have on their wellbeing," added Dr. Al Mulla.



Dr. Al Mulla said the Smoking Cessation Clinic provides patients with the tools and support needed to replace their nicotine consumption habit and to cope with withdrawal symptoms. He says nicotine, which is one of the substances in tobacco products, is highly addictive.

Dr. Jamal Abdullah, Smoking Cessation Specialist at HMC's Tobacco Control Center, said Ramadan can make it easier for people to quit smoking. He explained that the sudden drop in nicotine levels in the blood during fasting can result in withdrawal symptoms such as strong cravings, poor concentration, nerviness, and headaches. These symptoms are normally most pronounced during the first week of quitting, but they gradually become less intense and disappear over time. Ramadan can help many smokers quit this habit by following a method known scientifically as the 'cold turkey' method, which is based on stopping smoking abruptly. However, some smokers might need professional support and nicotine replacement therapy to help them quit this habit.

"For many smokers, quitting is easier during Ramadan. We encourage smokers to quit this habit as soon as possible and before they develop serious chronic diseases as a result of smoking. Unfortunately, these diseases can be lifelong and can affect the health of the smoker for the rest of his life even if he quits smoking at a later age. We see every day in our clinics smokers in their thirties and forties who have developed heart diseases and had to be treated with cardiac stents as a result of smoking," said Dr. Abdullah.

HMC's Smoking Cessation Center urges smokers to benefit from the services provided by the center to help themselves quit smoking. People can contact the center by calling 40254981 or 50800959.

Dr. Omar Suleiman to speak at Ramadan edition of QF'S Education City Speaker Series

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Using Ramadan as an opportunity to reflect on how to make meaningful changes to lives, lifestyles, and society will be the topic of a special virtual edition of Qatar Foundation's Education City Speaker Series next week, as the platform for dialogue welcomes a renowned American Muslim scholar, writer, and civil rights leader.

Dr. Omar Suleiman will be the guest speaker for the online event on Wednesday, April 21, to discuss how the holy month enables people to explore ways in which they can make a lasting difference to the way they live their lives, and contribute to their communities.

The Ramadan-themed discussion – Crafting a Lifetime of Change from a Month of Reflection – mirrors Qatar Foundation's (QF) commitment to empowering people to lead and drive change, by providing opportunities for them to realize their potential and recognize the active role they can play in shaping the future.

The founder and president of the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research and professor of Islamic Studies at Southern Methodist University in the US, Dr. Suleiman is also the resident



Dr. Omar Suleiman

scholar of the Valley Ranch Islamic Center and Co-Chair Emeritus of Faith Forward Dallas at Thanks-Giving Square, a multi-faith coalition for peace and justice, for which he received a United Nations Global Goals Award in 2016.

He came to national recognition in the US as an advocate for community service, interfaith dialogue, and social justice for his work in directing the Muslims for Humanity relief effort in the wake of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Since then, his sense of activism and desire to be a leader of positive change has seen him contribute to causes including immigration reform and the plight of Syrian refugees. Dr. Suleiman has been named one of the world's 500 most influential Muslims by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Jordan, and as one of the 25 most influential Muslims in America by CNN.

Next week's talk will be the eighth online edition of the Education City Speaker Series, which has been held in virtual form since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic last year. Reflecting QF's belief in the power of dialogue to unearth solutions, open up conversations, and broaden perspective, it enables audiences from Qatar and beyond to learn from, and engage with, experts and thought leaders on topics shaping global society.

Taking place from 9-10pm Doha time on April 21, the Ramadan edition of the Education City Speaker Series with Dr. Suleiman will feature a 40-minute discussion moderated by QF communications specialist Shaymaa Ziara, followed by a 20-minute question-and-answer session, with the audience having the opportunity to pose their questions to the speaker. Viewers watching on Microsoft Teams will be able to access Arabic, English, French, Spanish, and Italian subtitles, and the event will also be streamed live on QF's YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter channels.

QU CHS holds webinar on staying healthy amid pandemic

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

In celebration of Nutrition Month, the Department of Human Nutrition at the College of Health Sciences, a QU-Health member at Qatar University (QU), organized a webinar entitled "Healthy and Active Employees during the Pandemic."

The COVID-19 pandemic has added various challenges and changes to everyday life. It represents a massive impact on human health, causing sudden lifestyle changes, especially for those working from home. Therefore, the webinar emphasized the importance of healthy eating habits, staying active during working hours, and working from home to support the human health and immune system. The virtual webinar targeted all employees at Qatar University.

Many employees, staff, and academics at (QU) attended the webinar. The symposium discussed the importance of scheduling balanced meals and snacks, including all food groups in the meal, choosing healthier options, staying hydrated, and limiting salt, sugar, and fat sources to meet the nutritional needs and provide the employees with the required energy. Healthy eating is essential no matter our age, race, or gender. Yet, it is probably something that we do not pay enough attention to and are ignorant about the damage we could potentially cause to our overall health. Parallel with measures taken by most countries worldwide, and lockdowns affected dietary habits and physical activity. Unfavorable dietary behaviors during the lockdown, such as increased caloric intake, more frequent snacking, reduced consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, and weight gain, can affect many areas. Most importantly, it can affect immune status.

The webinar emphasized the importance of physical activity during the pandemic in reducing stress, managing weight, and reducing health implications. Several home-exercise examples were presented, like yoga, rope jumping, walking, using the stairs, or using resistance bands and dumbbells. At the workplace, taking breaks for walking and stretching will help boost energy levels, improve employee's fitness levels and count toward meeting the guidelines. The correct diet with the appropriate activity level is an important and integral part of developing a robust immune system.

OFFICIAL NEWS

Deputy PM and FM receives call from WEF President

Doha: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs H E Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani yesterday received a video conferencing call from the President of the World Economic Forum (WEF) H E Borge Brende. During the call, they reviewed cooperation relations between the State of Qatar and the World Economic Forum. -**QNA**

Shura Council participates in conference on Counter-Terrorism

Doha: The Shura Council participated in a parliamentary conference held yesterday on the Global challenges and threats in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic related to terrorism and violent extremism. This came in the framework of the partnership between the Interparliamentary Assembly of Member Nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States (IPA CIS), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT).

Talks, which took place via video conference, focused on the importance of revising counter-terrorism policies and legislation. Participants also agreed on the importance of having a vibrant national dialogue and avoiding polarization.

The Shura Council was represented by Khalid bin Abdullah Al Buainain, member of the council. -**QNA**

Shariah College Boys Club at QU holds events to spread awareness of Islamic culture

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Qatar University (QU) College of Shariah Boys Club held several events during the year to spread Islamic culture among Qatar University students (QU) and preserve the noble customs and traditions of Islamic heritage.

The club organized seven lectures delivered by professors of the College of Sharia and Islamic Studies at QU. Over 1000 people participated in these lectures, more than 1000 connected on Facebook live, and an average of 70 people attended a single lecture.

The club also organized a series approaching Ramadan, including the requirements of fasting delivered by Dr. Turki Al-Marri, Assistant Professor of Usul Al-Fiqh at College of Sharia and Islamic Studies. Dr. Ahmed Raissouni, Professor of Usul Al-Fiqh at College of Sharia and Islamic Studies, delivered 'The Objectives of Fasting.'

134 people referred to Public Prosecution for violating COVID-19 measures

QNA – DOHA

The designated authorities referred 134 people to the Public Prosecution for violating the preventive and precautionary measures enforced by the country to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

Among them, 106 people were referred to the Public Prosecution for not wearing masks in places where they are mandatory, while 6 were found violating the maximum number of four people allowed in a vehicle including the driver, except when they are members of one family, 18 who did not adhere to the safe distance, and 4 people for not installing Ehteraz app on their mobile phones.

HBKU's College of Law Colloquium gathers industry experts to discuss taxpayer rights

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

The colloquium brought speakers together to review the 'Charter for QFC Taxpayers', which the QFC has introduced for QFC-licensed firms and the Charter published by Qatar's General Tax Authority (GTA).

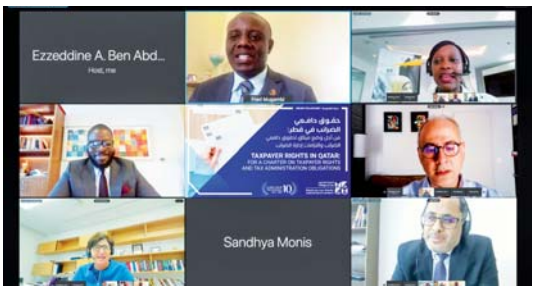
A recent tax colloquium organized by the College of Law at Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU) was the platform to discuss a charter on taxpayer rights and tax administration obligations for Qatar. The event took place online with participation by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Qatar Financial Centre (QFC) Authority, Ernst and Young Qatar, and the Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA).

The colloquium brought speakers together to review the 'Charter for QFC Taxpayers', which the QFC has introduced for QFC-licensed firms and the Charter published by Qatar's General Tax Authority (GTA). This was with a view to better understanding how their implementation, successes, and limitations could inform the process of further developing publicly available and acceptable taxpayer rights, applicable to all taxpayers in Qatar.

Dr. Alexander Paul Ezenagu, assistant professor at the College of Law, HBKU, chaired the panel discussion in which Mr. Salah Gueydi, director of tax, QFC, and Ms. Grace Murakha, tax manager, Ernst & Young Qatar, gave a comprehensive overview of Qatar's tax regimes. The panel also featured Mr. Mario Mansour, director of the Middle East Regional Technical Assistance Centre, IMF; and Dr. Fred Mugambi Mwirigi, Commissioner and head of the Kenya School of Revenue Administration (KESRA), KRA.

The speakers highlighted evidence from several other jurisdictions, which reveal that countries that have enacted charters generally witness voluntary tax compliance, effective tax administration, and reduced cost of enforcement, among other benefits. This is especially important given that taxation plays an integral role in the sustainable development of states. They also shared their views on what an acceptable 'charter on taxpayers rights' looks like and the processes to successfully enacting one.

Speaking after the event, Dr. Ezenagu said: "The prospect of a taxpayer charter has arisen in an academic context as part of the research and teaching HBKU faculty engage in at the College of Law. The colloquium put the topic firmly into its applied context and we had very fruitful discussions with speakers from the QFC and IMF, and other jurisdictions like Kenya's Tax Revenue Authority, who have practical, hands-on engagement. Though we discussed what an acceptable 'charter on taxpayers rights' looks like, a first step to publishing and enforcing a charter is agreeing on the rights and obligations of taxpayers and tax administrators, and we look forward to expanding on that during our next colloquium."



Participants at the tax colloquium organised by the College of Law at Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU).



Saudi Foreign Ministry official meets Qatari diplomat

Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Consular Affairs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, H E Tamim Al Dossary met with Acting Charge d'Affaires of the Embassy of the State of Qatar in Saudi Arabia, Hassan bin Mansour Al Khater. During the meeting, they reviewed bilateral cooperation relations.

MoPH reports 989 new COVID-19 cases, 597 recoveries, nine deaths

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) has reported 989 new cases of COVID-19 yesterday. Among them 168 were travellers returning from abroad.

A total of 597 people recovered from COVID-19 yesterday, bringing the total number of people recovered in Qatar to 171,985. The total number of positive COVID-19 cases recorded in Qatar is 193,952 and there are 21,610 active cases under treatment.

The Ministry announces nine new deaths, aged 41, 42, 56, 58, 53, 68, 69, 79 and 85 years of age, six of them had a history of chronic disease. All were receiving the necessary medical care. There are 167 cases of hospital admissions in the last 24 hours taking the total number of patients in the hospital to 1,467.

41were admitted to intensive care in the last 24 hours, and so 489 people continue to receive medical attention in ICU.

A total of 23,712 doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been administered in 24 hours. The total number of vaccine doses administered since the start of the vaccination campaign is 1,183,191 .

"Every day, hundreds of people are becoming sick due to the COVID-19 with many requiring admission to hospital to manage their symptoms. Since 1 February, the number of people with COVID-19 admitted to hospital has doubled," said the Ministry in its daily COVID-19 report.

"Qatar's strict quarantine policy for returning travelers enabled us to delay the introduction of new variants into this country for several months but we are now seeing positive COVID-19 cases in the region and in Qatar with the new variants from the UK," the Ministry added.

According to the Ministry, the new variant is much more contagious and spread more easily between people than the existing strain and may be associated with increased severity of disease.

"The good news is that the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines being used in our vaccination program are effective against the new variants. The pace of the vaccination program means that there is finally hope of a gradual return to normal for us here in Qatar and people around the world. But this will not happen in the next few weeks or months," said the Ministry.

"COVID-19 will continue to be a threat to our health for the majority of 2021 and until all eligible members of our population have been vaccinated, we must continue to follow the preventive measures," it added.

QU Health holds Cardiovascular Research Symposium

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Qatar University (QU) Health's Cardiovascular Research Network Group in Qatar successfully hosted the first Cardiovascular Research Symposium featuring local and international speakers within the cardiovascular research field.

The event took place virtually with over 40 attendees and five invited speakers. The event was moderated by the Research Coordinator within QU Health, Dr. Gerhild Zauner-Koudelka, from the Vice President for Medical and Health Sciences Office.

Dr. Fatima Mraiche, Section Head of Research and Graduate Studies - College of Pharmacy, Vice President for Medical and Health Sciences Office, QU Health, who is also leading the QU Health Cardiovascular Research Network Group, opened the session by introducing the group and its current and future aims.



The event progressed with the first lecture delivered by Dr. Mauro Giacci, Professor of Cardiovascular Sciences King's College London/ UK, School of Cardiovascular Medicine & Sciences. Dr. Mauro's presentation focused on 'Cardiac regeneration after myocardial infarction: an approachable goal', and the science behind his talk was absolutely groundbreaking, leading to some fruitful discussions.

After that, three QU internal presentations were given by Dr. MD Hassan Anwarul (Associate Professor, College of Engineering-QU), Dr. Huseyin Yalcin (Associate Professor, Biomedical Research Center-QU), and Dr. Patrick Burgon (Assistant Professor, College of Art and Sciences-QU). They presented their latest research advances in the cardiovascular field.

Dr. Dunja Akenstijevic Ricciarelli, Wellcome Trust Fellow, Assistant Professor Cardiovascular Physiology and Metabolism; Program Lead MSc/MRes Clinical Drug Development and Healthcare Research Methods Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry in the UK, delivered a speech on 'the power of cardiac metabolism: what feeds me, kills me.' Her presentation concluded the Symposium before Dr. Fatima closed the event with some remarks.

Dr. Feras Alali, Director of Research and Graduate Studies, Vice President for Medical and Health Sciences Office, QU Health, commented, "This was a well-organized activity with caliber scientists presenting on the cutting edge advancement of cardiovascular research. It is also an activity that stems from our efforts to bridge boundaries and integrate health colleges."

"I was also very impressed by the individual presentations and the discussion between participants and speakers, which I trust will lead to future collaboration," Dr. Fatima added.

Besides the above, the organizers received very positive feedback and are therefore looking forward to having this event annually.

Eligible persons urged to receive vaccine

FROM PAGE 1

"It is very important for people in older age to get vaccinated as they are at a higher risk of developing complications due to COVID-19. I urge everyone who is eager to have a better health for themselves and their family to get vaccinated against COVID-19 as soon as possible. Getting vaccinated is the only way out from the pandemic," said Ousama Mohamed Akif a senior citizen speaking in an awareness video posted by the MoPH.

In another development Qatar's National Health Strategy Lead for Healthy Women Leading to Healthy Pregnancies, Dr Najat Al Khenyab has said in a statement on Wednesday that pregnant women who have chronic medical conditions that could further increase their risk for severe COVID-19 as well as those whose work puts them at increased risk for getting infected should consider taking the vaccine. She said that a pregnant woman who is part of an at risk group recommended to receive COVID-19 vaccine such as healthcare personnel, may choose to be vaccinated and t the vaccine is also safe for women who are planning to become pregnant and those currently breastfeeding their babies.

Though, the vaccines have not yet been tested in on pregnant women, Dr. Al Khenyab has said that evidence from non-clinical studies of the Pfizer and BioNTech vaccine has been reviewed by the World Health Organization and the regulatory bodies in the USA, Canada and Europe and has raised no concerns about safety in pregnancy. "Pregnancy alters the body's immune system and generally affects a pregnant woman's response to viral infections in general, causing in some cases more severe symptoms. However, from research evidence so far, pregnant woman (just as anyone else) could acquire COVID-19 and most healthy pregnant women do recover before they deliver. All pregnant women affected by COVID-19 are being successfully cared for at Hamad Medical Corporation and most babies born to COVID-19-positive mothers have so far tested negative," said Dr. Al Khenyab.

Mandarin Oriental, Doha launches bespoke accommodation packages for Ramadan

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Mandarin Oriental, Doha is delighted to honour the Holy Month of Ramadan with new accommodation packages as part of the Fantastic Offers. Guests can also enjoy at-home dining by ordering from the hotel's renowned restaurants from Shop MO.

The hotel has designed two accommodation packages to relax with during Ramadan called Luxury Iftar Retreat and Ramadan by MO. The Luxury Iftar Retreat package includes one Iftar served for two guests or one Iftar for four guests for bookings of the two-bedroom serviced apartment. On the day of arrival, check-in is at 4 pm, and late check-out is available until midnight on the same day. An overnight supplement is available with applicable rates for an extended stay, including check-out at 12 pm the following day. Booking rates starting from QAR 800.

The Ramadan by MO offer includes one Iftar served for two guests or one Iftar for four guests for bookings of the two-bedroom serviced apartment. For bookings of selected suites, the stay includes both Iftar and Suhour. All bookings include early check-in at 12 pm on the day of arrival and late check-out until midnight the following day, with rates starting from QAR 1,400.

Guests can embark on a journey through the culinary traditions of Ramadan with authentic dishes ideal for sharing, including a variety of Mezze, Mixed Grill, Chicken Biryani, Sayadieh with Seabass, and the Whole Lamb Ouzi, which is the perfect choice to cater for a family feast. Also, share the Hazelnut Tiramisu Cake designed and inspired by the traditions of Ramadan for QAR 450, with coffee Crème Brûlée, layered with a gluten-free hazelnut sponge cake milk chocolate hazelnut crunch, and mascarpone cream.

Shop MO features selected dishes



from IZU, Liang, The Mandarin Cake Shop, and Gelato. From IZU, the menu combines traditional flavours of French Mediterranean cooking such as the famous Avocado Tartine, Truffle Rigatoni with Fresh Truffles, Grilled Wagyu Rib Eye Steak, Grilled Corn-fed Chicken Breast with Mushroom Sauce and Sautéed Spaetzli. Also on the menu is the IZU Club Sandwich and various salads, including the Quinoa Salad, Burrata with Cherry Tomatoes, and Watermelon Salad. Other delectable treats include IZU's famous Brioche French Toast and Passionfruit Cheesecake to end on a sweet note.

Choose from the authentic Chinese specialties by Liang offering unparalleled flavours. Guests can enjoy the Hot and Sour Soup and share various signature dishes, including Wagyu Beef Short Ribs, Kung Pao Tiger Prawns, Wok-fried Spicy Chicken and a selection of noodles like Peking-style Zha Jiang Noodles, Wok-fried Handmade Noodles with Chicken and Braised Lobster Noodles. The traditional Dim Sum selection includes Har Gau, Siu Mai, and Crispy Wonton Dumplings.

Also, explore the variety of delicate pâtisserie by The Mandarin Cake Shop. Each confection is carefully crafted by pâtissiers, including the new Lemon Meringue Cruffin, Chocolate Ganache Cruffin, and a variety of sweet Berliner pastries. The baked delights include croissants and artisan bread prepared using the finest ingredients.

Gelato offers homemade gelato and frozen desserts to take away. Innovative combinations of seasonal fruits such as passion fruit, blood orange, papaya, and mango are featured on the menu. Guests can also enjoy Gelato's wonderland of celebratory gelato cakes and classic gelato flavours, including Arabic Coffee, Medjool Date, Mango, Passionfruit, and the delicious Vegan options of Chocolate and Banana with Peanut Butter. To order from the Ramadan Delights menu and more, visit Shop MO, available for takeaway orders only at doha.mandarinorientalshop.com. For further information, please call WhatsApp at +974 4008 8888 or email modoh-reservations@mohg.com.

Iran, world powers resume nuclear talks

"Currently I think the nuclear working group is more advanced, much more advanced, than the sanctions-lifting working group," Wang Qun, China's ambassador to the UN atomic watchdog, told reporters after the Joint Commission meeting of senior officials.



Police officers stand outside a hotel, where a meeting of the JCPOA Joint Commission or Iran nuclear deal will be held, in Vienna, Austria, yesterday.

REUTERS — VIENNA

Iran and global powers resumed talks yesterday to rescue the 2015 nuclear deal in an effort potentially complicated by Tehran's decision to ramp up uranium enrichment and what it called Israeli sabotage at a nuclear site.

Casting a shadow over the Vienna talks, Tehran on Tuesday announced its decision to enrich uranium at 60 percent purity, a big step closer to the 90 percent that is weapons-grade material, in response to an explosion at its key Natanz facility on Sunday.

Calling the move "provocative", the United States and the European parties to the deal warned that Tehran's enrichment move was contrary to efforts to revive the accord abandoned by Washington three years ago.

The 2015 agreement sought to make it harder for Iran to develop an atomic bomb in return for lifting sanctions.

Tehran's refusal to hold direct talks with the United States forced European intermediaries to shuttle between separate hotels in Vienna last week when Iran and the other signatories – Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia – held what they described as a first round of "constructive" negotiations.

Senior diplomats, excluding the United States, initially met to set the tone yesterday in what diplomats anticipated would be a tougher round of talks to salvage the pact.

Two expert-level groups, seeking to marry lists of sanctions that the United States could lift with nuclear obligations Iran should meet, have now resumed their discussions.

"Currently I think the nuclear working group is more advanced, much more advanced, than (the) sanctions-lifting working group," Wang Qun, China's ambassador to the UN atomic watchdog, told reporters after the Joint Commission meeting of senior officials.

"So currently we should do away with all disruptive factors, moving forward as swiftly as we can on the work of negotiation, especially by zeroing in on sanctions-lifting."

Iran's foreign ministry said its negotiators had defended their decisions and expressed their disappointment at "the weak reaction" from European powers to the attack on Natanz.

Highlighting Western concerns, a senior diplomat said that while the desire was to make progress, Iran's latest violation could not be ignored and made efforts to achieve a breakthrough before the June 18 Iranian presidential election harder.

"The seriousness of Iran's latest decisions has hurt this process and raised tensions," said the senior Western diplomat.

"We will have to see how in the coming days we address these violations with the will to press ahead in the talks."

Tehran has repeatedly said that all sanctions must be rescinded first, warning that it may stop negotiations if the measures are not lifted. Washington wants Iran to reverse the breaches of the deal that it made in retaliation for tough sanctions imposed by former US President Donald Trump.

"Iran's "seriousness of purpose" in pursuing diplomacy was tested in the three years since Trump withdrew from the nuclear accord," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Twitter. "Iran — by remaining in the deal — passed with flying colors. The Biden administration, however, has only shown a commitment to Trump's maximum pressure."

Enrique Mora, EU chief coordinator for the talks, said in a tweet it was good to see participants resume the talks "despite very challenging events and announcements over the past days."

Israel, which Tehran refuses to recognise, opposes the deal, an accord that Iran and US President Joe Biden are trying to revive after Trump quit it in 2018 and reinstated sanctions. Israel has not formally commented on Sunday's Natanz incident.

The United Arab Emirates, urged Washington to push for a better accord and a Gulf diplomatic source said the Riyadh-based Gulf Cooperation Council had sent letters to global powers stressing the need for Gulf involvement in ongoing negotiations.

Iran to purchase 60 million vaccine doses from Russia

AP — TEHRAN

Iran has finalised a deal with Russia to purchase 60 million doses of Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, the state-run Irna news agency reported yesterday.

The report quotes Iran's ambassador to Russia, Kazem Jalali, as saying the contract has been "signed and finalized" for enough vaccinations to inoculate 30 million people. Jalali said Iran will receive the vaccines by the end of the year.

On Saturday, Iran began a 10-day lockdown amid a fourth wave of coronavirus infections.

Authorities ordered most shops closed and offices restricted to one-third capacity in cities declared as "red zones" with the highest infection rates.

The capital Tehran and 250 other cities and towns across the country have been declared red zones. They have the highest virus positivity rates and the most severe restrictions in place. Over 85% of the country now has either a red or orange — slightly lower — infection status, authorities said.

The severe surge in infections follows a two-week public holiday for Nowruz, the Persian New Year. Millions traveled to the Caspian coast and other popular vacation spots, packed markets to shop for new clothes and toys and congregated in homes for parties in defiance of government health guidelines.

The new lockdown restricts access to parks, restaurants, bakeries, beauty salons, malls and bookstores.

There appeared to be no respite in sight to the virus's spread as Iran's vaccine rollout lagged. Only some 200,000 doses have been administered in the country of 84 million, according to the World Health Organization.

COVAX, an international collaboration to deliver the vaccine equitably across the world, delivered its first shipment to Iran on Monday from the Netherlands, containing 700,000 Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine doses.

Iran in December began the human test phase of its homemade vaccine that it is expected to distribute in spring. The country has also began working on a joint vaccine with Cuba. It is also planning to import some 17 million doses of vaccine from COVAX and millions of doses from other countries.

Turkish FM briefs Afghan counterpart on Nato talks

REUTERS — ANKARA

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu yesterday briefed his Afghan counterpart Mohammad Hanif Atmar on NATO discussions in which the allies agreed to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan by September 11.

Nato allies agreed the withdrawal plan on Wednesday in coordination with a US pull-out by September 11, and pledged to mirror American plans to start removing troops on May 1 after two decades of war.

Cavusoglu attended the talks at Nato's headquarters in Brussels on Wednesday over Afghanistan, ahead of a peace summit planned from April 24 in Istanbul that would include the United Nations and more than 20 countries.

"Our Minister briefed his counterpart on developments from the Resolute Support Mission Framework Nations and Nato Council meetings held on April 14, as well as about what will happen in the coming period," Turkey's foreign ministry said.

The two ministers also discussed the peace process in the phone call, it said.

In a televised interview on Thursday, Cavusoglu said Nato was discussing how to support Afghanistan in the coming period.

"Whether it will be under a different mission – not the Resolute Support Mission – or whether a group of nations will be here, with Nato or other institutional support, or whether there will be another structure, on a bilateral or individual level, these all need to be discussed," he said.

Judge orders release of six detained over Beirut blast

AP — BEIRUT

The Lebanese judge leading the investigation into last year's massive blast at Beirut's port yesterday ordered the release of six people, including security officers, who had been detained for months, state news agency reported.

It was not immediately clear what triggered the release of the men, who include an officer who had written a detailed warning to top officials prior to the explosion about the dangers of the material stored at the port.

Nearly 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrates, a highly explosive material used in fertilizers that had been improperly stored in the port for years, exploded on August 4, killing 211 people, wounding more than 6,000 and damaging nearby neighbourhoods.

Judge Tarek Bitar was named to lead the investigation in February after his predecessor was removed following legal challenges by two former Cabinet ministers he had accused of negligence.

State-run National News Agency said Bitar ordered the release of the six including Maj. Joseph Naddaf of the State Security department and Maj. Charbel Fawaz of the General Security Directorate. The four others are customs and port employees.

The six will be banned from traveling outside Lebanon, according to a judicial official, speaking on condition of anonymity to follow regulations. The official added that 19 people are still being held in the case. Among those who are still held are the head of the customs department and his predecessor as well as the port's director general.

In a July 20 report, State Security warned that one of the doors of the warehouse where the material had been stored was separated from the wall enough to allow anyone to enter and steal the ammonium nitrate.

The report that was sent to President Michel Aoun and then-Prime Minister Hassan Diab warned that thieves could steal the material to make explosives. Or, it said, the mass of material could cause an explosion "that would practically destroy the port."

Holding Naddaf for months had angered some in Lebanon especially that his report two weeks before the blast was a clear warning of the dangers.

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Saudi university catches fire near Yemen border in attack

AP — JIDDAH

A Saudi university near the country's border with Yemen caught fire early yesterday after the kingdom's air defences intercepted a barrage of ballistic missiles and bomb-laden drones.

The interception scattered debris on Jizan University's campus, which caused a fire that has been contained, the Saudi-led coalition at war in Yemen said in a statement. It said no one was killed, and there were no immediate reports of injuries.

Video on social media purportedly showed a Patriot missile flying low across Jizan to intercept a missile or drone, with it detonating over the city.

The barrage came just hours after Saudi Arabia warned Iran its recent decision to push its nuclear enrichment to its highest level ever risked raising tensions in the Mideast.

The Saudi statement blamed the Iran-backed Houthi group for the attack, saying the five ballistic missiles and four bomb-laden drones specifically targeted civilian areas and had been launched from the rebels' stronghold of Saada in Yemen.

Houthi military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yehia Sarie tweeted yesterday that his group had launched 11 missiles and drones at Saudi Arabia, targeting the kingdom's Patriot defense system, oil sites and other "critical" areas in Jizan. Sarie did not mention the university.

The conflict in Yemen was sparked by the Houthis takeover of the capital, Sanaa, in 2014, which forced the internationally recognized government to flee the city. A Saudi-led coalition, which until recently was supported by the US, has been fighting the Houthis nearly ever since.

One killed, 12 wounded in Baghdad market explosion

AP — BAGHDAD

An explosion rocked a market in east Baghdad yesterday, killing one person and injuring 12 others, according to Iraq's military.

The military said the blast in the capital's Sadr City, in the Habibiya neighborhood, was caused by a car laden with highly explosive materials that blew up while passing through a popular used furniture market. It sent a cloud of black smoke above the area. Shortly afterward, a crowd of people gathered around the mangled wreckage of a charred car and a burned-out white van. A fire engine was parked nearby.

A military statement said one person was killed and 12 injured, according to a preliminary investigation. Five vehicles were burned, it added. It did not say what caused the detonation.

The driver of the car was killed in the explosion, the statement said.

Iraq's president condemned the attack, calling it a "shameless" attempt by terrorist groups to destabilize the country during the holy month of Ramadan. "We stand firmly against these attempts," Barham Salih tweeted.

Explosions in the Iraqi capital, particularly in the predominantly Shiite Muslim Sadr City district, were once almost daily occurrences but have become less frequent in the past few years, particularly following the defeat of the Islamic State group in 2017. In January, twin suicide bombings ripped through a busy market in the Iraqi capital, killing more than 30 people and wounding dozens.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for Thursday's bombing.

The development comes hours after a drone strike targeted US-led coalition troops near Irbil airport and a Turkish military base in northern Iraq.

On Wednesday night's drone attack targeted coalition forces based near Irbil international airport and caused a fire that damaged a building, according to the Kurdish region's Interior Ministry and coalition officials.

Separately, a rocket attack targeting a Turkish military base in northern Iraq's Bashiqa region killed one Turkish soldier and wounded a child in a nearby village, Turkey's Defense Ministry said.

There was no claim of responsibility for either attack.

Repentance a bountiful blessing

IMAM SUHAIB WEBB



The month of Ramadan is a time of serious reflection, increased awareness and devotion. Its beginning is mercy and its ending is marked by forgiveness and salvation. Let us take advantage of this time to set aright our affairs, rebounding from our mistakes and sins from the past. Let us turn to the Most Merciful.

As the warm breeze of Ramadan settles, we are reminded of the statement of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). "Upon the arrival of Ramadan the gates of Paradise are opened, the gates of Hell are closed and the devils are chained." Ramadan brings with it a host of possibilities. Look at it as a chance to enter into a garden filled with fresh fruits, luscious vegetables and beautiful flowers. Some will fill their baskets to the brim, others will fill them half way, and some will fail to fill their baskets with anything.

Those who filled their baskets will have done so with a varied harvest; some choosing the best the garden has to offer, while others simply settle for those of a lesser quality. One of the best fruits we can reap during this month is one of the most difficult to attain. Its fruit is not found on the ground having fallen from a tree, nor is it found amongst the lower branches. This fruit is found at the highest part of the tree and getting to it takes effort, patience and most importantly truthfulness with oneself. This is the fruit of repentance and reflection. 'Repent to God, oh believers, and you will be successful.'

Success is a tough word

Success is a tough word, it haunts us at work, home and school. And like a beneficial medicine, it is not easy to swallow. The reality of success is that it is anchored in the tangible; it is not a theoretical enterprise, but, as we say in the United States, "requires one to strap on his boots".

The Arabs understood this well, thus the word for success falah is associated with the one who farms or harvests al-falaah because the latter cannot come without diligence and hard work. So, repentance is a substantial enterprise, an effort, a struggle towards spiritual inventory. Caliph Umar (may Allah be pleased with him), said, "Audit yourselves before you are audited by God." Hassan, the Prophet's grandson also explains this concept. He said, "Those who have the easiest time in the hereafter are those who are keen to call themselves to account in this life."

Returning to God while struggling to swim the deep seas of life is a difficult enterprise, no one likes to hear bad things about themselves. But if we are able, during this blessed month, to sit and audit ourselves, to take account of our spiritual principals; investigating our true state and relation with God, family and others, we will have reaped the fruits of a blessed harvest; setting the stage for a new course in our relationship with the Most Merciful. Once the Prophet ascended the pulpit and at each step he was heard saying, "Ameen". Later the companions enquired about the Prophet's statement upon which he responded that Gabriel came to him supplicating against three types of people, one was he who failed to repent during the month of Ramadan thereby failing to be forgiven for his sins.

Overcoming the obstacles

There are a number of obstacles that lurk hidden for the one who seeks repentance. Perhaps the greatest is the feeling of fear and despondence. Many feel that it is simply too late to change: "I've done my dirt and there is simply no way to get back on track."

Firstly, let's understand that sinning is part of human nature. The Prophet, peace be upon him said, "Every person commits sins. And the best sinners are those who repent." Many have claimed that the feelings of profound guilt and depression regarding their state, chain them from turning to God. This is one of the greatest tricks of the Devil; closing the door of hope to God's mercy after sinning. Once a man came to the mosque of the Prophet complaining about his sins; the man was so overcome and saddened by his state that the Prophet said to him, "Say this: O God, your forgiveness is greater than my sins and my hope in Your mercy is greater to me than my [evil] actions."

The man said this and the Prophet said to him, "Say it again." The man repeated it, then the Prophet said to him, "Say it again." The man did it and the Prophet said to him, "Arise for, indeed, God has forgiven you!"

For this reason Ibn Kathir reports that the Prophet, upon him be peace, said about the verse, "Say [Muhammad] to My servants who have transgressed against themselves, do not despair of God's mercy. Indeed, God forgives all sins and He is the One who forgives and is Merciful", "It is more beloved to me than anything under the Heavens and on Earth."

Secondly, sins should be seen as a strategy for one to turn in humility back to God. One of the early scholars said that, "A person could enter Paradise because of a sin he committed." Upon hearing this, his student challenged him by asking, "How could that be?" The scholar responded: "The sinner persistently thinks about it, which causes him to fear it, regret it, weep over it and feel humiliated in front of his Lord due to it. He stands before God, broken-hearted, with his head lowered in humility. So this sin is more beneficial to him than doing many acts of obedience, since it caused him to have humility and humbleness – which leads to his happiness and success – to the extent that this sin prevents him from entering Paradise."

Thirdly, rebounding from sin is one of the simple fruits related to our success. If we were to ask many people what it was that brought them back to faith, many would mention a mistake they made in the past. The Prophet said, "Repentance is regret." That regret is one of our greatest fears. In reality, however, it is a mercy from God which pricks at our conscience until we ultimately return to Him.

Allah says, "And [He also forgave] the three who were left behind [and regretted their error] to the point that the Earth closed in on them in spite of its vastness, and their souls confined them and they were certain that there is no refuge from God except in Him. Then He turned to them so they could repent. Indeed, God is the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful." (9:118) Notice the wording at the end of this verse "Then He turned to them so they could repent." Thus, repentance doesn't start with the sinner, but begins when God turns to him with His mercy, love and compassion; awakening his heart with guilt, gently guiding him to His forgiveness. The sinner was lost in a sea of confusion and misery and God found him, guided him and forgave him.

The Prophet, upon him be peace, said: "Allah has greater joy at the repentance of one His servants when he turns towards Him than one of you would have over his mount, which, having escaped from him saddled with food and drink in the middle of the desert, so that he has despaired of finding it and gone to a tree to lie down in its shade, it suddenly appears standing by him while he is in that state, so that he takes its reins and then says out of the intensity of his joy, 'O God, You are my slave and I am Your Lord!' getting confused because of his intense joy."

Fourth, I've done so many things in the past and failed to repent. How is it that, after all of these years, I could face God with such a blackened record? The Prophet, upon him be peace, said, "God the Mighty and Majestic accepts the repentance of His servant as long as his death-rattle has not begun." Thus, no matter when, as long as one turns to God seeking His forgiveness, only then can that person expect to be forgiven.

Furthermore, there is no sin greater than God's ultimate mercy and forgiveness. The Prophet, upon him be peace said:"God the Almighty has said: 'O son of Adam, so long as you call upon Me, and hope in Me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds in the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of Me, I shall forgive you. O son of Adam, were you to come to Me with an earthful of sins and were you then to face Me, without having associated anything with Me, I shall grant you an earthful of pardon.'"

Ibn Rajab noted that this Prophetic tradition begins with "O son of Adam" because of its context, repentance and forgiveness. Thus, when one despairs over his mistakes and shortcomings, he should recall God's favour upon mankind, exercised upon their forefather Adam. Thus, just as Adam repented to his Lord and, as noted in the Quran, "He immediately forgave him," his offspring should do the same.

The qualities of repentance

Scholars noted that sound repentance should be coupled with the following qualities: 1) Leaving the sin 2) Regret, and 3) Resolving never to return to the sin again. The month of Ramadan is a time of serious reflection, increased awareness and devotion. Its beginning is mercy and its ending is marked by forgiveness and salvation. Let us take advantage of this time to set aright our affairs, rebounding from our mistakes and sins from the past. Let us turn to the Most Merciful.

Courtesy: Shuhaibwebb.com

Mending habits and developing character

SADULLAH KHAN

As we undertake the physical duty and spiritual responsibility of fasting in the blessed month of Ramadan, we reflect on the words of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who said that the practice of faith will not be correct unless actions are correct and actions will not be considered correct unless the heart is correct.

Ramadan is the month of heightened Allah-consciousness, of attaining taqwa (piety), of training ourselves to be the best we can be; a month to initiate improvement of reputation, character and for the cultivation of good habits.

People who try their best to live by the highest values are surely people of integrity and indeed people of moral conscience. What is morality though? Morality describes the principles that govern our behaviour and relates to our behaviour at three levels...

How we as individuals ensure that we are honest, just and compassionate.

How we interact with and contribute to society, as asset or liability.

How conscious we are of our accountability to our Creator.

Taqwa in an amoral world

In a world, increasingly amoral, perception is considered reality. How one appears to the world has overtaken the substance of who we really are. Impressions, whether real or fake, are given more credence than it deserves.

Though name, image and reputation are what we perceive of people; character is the essence of the "real self ". Taqwa is in reality character development coupled with God-consciousness.

Character and reputation

Character is not only the face in the mirror, but the real person behind the face. Character evolves from conscience; is sustained by conscience and is developed; piece by piece, with every thought, with every choice, and maintained with consistency and determination.

The pursuance of piety begins by making our reputation a reflection of our character. In many people, reputation precedes character and there is a distinction to be made...

Reputation is what you lead others to believe you are, character is what you really are – Reputation may be reflected in the combination of your name and your image, character is the essence of your being.

Reputation is the wrapping, character the content – Reputation is the outer reflection, character the inner reality – Reputation is made in a moment, character is built in a life time – Reputation may be reflected in what people write about you on your tombstone, character is what angels report about you to Allah –

Changing bad habits

The renowned philosopher, Aristotle, once said: " You are what you repeatedly do". Habits are conditioned responses, formed through repetition, until the actions or reactions become second nature; they end up as unconscious behaviour, automatic reactions in a particular situation; (e.g. The way you sign your name, the reprehensible habit of cigarette smoking after a meal...) It was the English writer, Shakespeare, who said: " First we make our habits, then our habits make us".

Thinking in a particular pattern creates a mental path, the mental path affects our attitude and our behaviour, and these reflect our personality and character.

In other words, our thoughts affect our attitude which affect our actions which determine our habits which reflects our character which could determines our destiny. The Roman poet Naso Ovid rightly said, " habits eventually become character ".

Virutes and vices

According to Islam, habits are classified as virtues or vices, as repeated actions that are in conformity with or contrary to the rules of morality.

Virtuous character emanates from good habits and good habits emanate from resisting negative temptations. Good habits, unfortunately, seem so much easier to give up than bad habits.

Bad habits are like a comfortable bed; easy to get into but difficult to get out.

The chain of bad habits are generally too light to be felt until they are too strong to be broken. Remember though, that every habit; whether good or bad, is acquired and can be developed or disowned.

Habits decrease or disappear by abstaining from exercising them and then replacing them. Ramadan is an ideal training period for filtering out bad habits, developing virtuous character and is thus referred to by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a shield against evil and wrongfulness. We are obligated to nurture our noble qualities; control our passions, our anger and emotions.

We are instructed to be considerate, generous and compassionate.

Spiritual rejuvenation

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) referred to Ramadan as a blessed month in which Allah has made fasting obligatory on those who are able; whosoever denies himself of the benefits of that month denies himself many virtues.

As we undertake the physical duty and spiritual responsibility of fasting in the blessed month of Ramadan, we reflect on the words of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who said that the practice of faith will not be correct unless actions are correct and actions will not be considered correct unless the heart is correct.

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Sayings of the Prophet

Abu Huraira (may Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's messenger as saying:
"When any one of you gets up in the morning in the state of fasting, he should neither use obscene language nor do any act of ignorance. And if anyone slanders him or quarrels with him, he should say:" I am fasting, I am fasting."

"Every good deed of the son of Adam would be multiplied, a good deed receiving a tenfold to seven hundredfold reward. Allah, the Exalted and Majestic, has said: With the exception of fasting, for it is done for Me and I will give a reward for it, for one abandons his passion and food for My sake. There are two occasions of joy for one who fasts, joy when he breaks it, and joy when he meets his Lord, and the breath (of an observer of fast) is sweeter to Allah than the fragrance of musk."

Sahl bin Sa'd (may Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's messenger as saying:
"In Paradise there is a gate which is called Rayyan through which only the people who fast would enter on the Day on Resurrection. None else would enter along with them. It would be proclaimed: Where are the people who fast that they should be admitted into it? And when the last of them would enter, it would be closed and no one would enter it."

-Sahih Muslim

Africa CDC says cannot predict when 2nd batch of virus shots will arrive

REUTERS — NAIROBI

Many Africans who have received their first COVID-19 vaccine do not know when they will get a second shot because deliveries are delayed, the continent's top public health official said yesterday.

"We cannot predict when the second doses will come and that is not good for our vaccination programme," John Nkengasong, the head of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), told reporters yesterday.

Africa lags behind most other regions in COVID-19 vaccinations, with just less than 14 million doses having been administered on the continent of 1.3 billion, according to the Africa CDC.

Ghana, for example, has administered around 742,000 doses of the 815,000 shots it has so far received and will run out by the end of next week.

"Even if Ghana had the money, they will not know where to go get the vaccine, that's the challenge," said Nkengasong.

So far, the majority of the vaccines available in African countries have been delivered via the World Health Organization-backed COVAX facility. COVAX aims to deliver 600 million shots to some 40 African countries this year, enough to vaccinate 20 percent of their populations.

The majority of those doses are AstraZeneca shots produced by the Serum Institute of India (SII). But last month, India suspended its exports to meet rising domestic demand amid a surge in COVID-19 cases.

Richard Mihigo, immunisation programme coordinator for the WHO in Africa, said that COVAX was working to ensure that countries that received their first instalment of vaccines in early March would also soon receive their second instalment.

That has caused great uncertainty for Africa's vaccination rollout.

The African Union signed a deal last month with Johnson & Johnson. But those doses will not begin arriving until the third quarter, and Nkengasong said last week that Africa would find it hard to bridge the gap in the meantime.

"We are in a bind as a continent," he said yesterday. "Access to vaccines has been limited for us."

He said he hopes India, where new infections have topped 200,000 a day, will lift its restriction as soon as possible.

Speaking about the delays in shipments of more doses via COVAX from India, Richard Mihigo, immunisation programme coordinator for the WHO in Africa, said that COVAX was working to ensure that countries that received their first instalment of vaccines in early March would also soon receive their second instalment.

People who have received their first jab are already benefiting from some protection from the virus, the Africa CDC's Nkengasong said, and he urged nations to use their doses before they expire.

On Tuesday, a South Sudanese government official said that it would not use the 59,000 vaccines it had received last month as a donation from the MTN Group, a South African mobile operator. The vaccines expired on April 13, the official said.

And on Wednesday, a health official in Malawi said it would destroy more than 16,000 vaccines it had received via the same donation scheme because they had expired, Agence France-Presse reported.

Nkengasong said that SII, manufacturer of the AstraZeneca doses in question, had told the Africa CDC that the expiry date could be extended to June or July. But he said the disease control body had urged African governments to use the relatively small number of doses as quickly as possible. He told reporters he had not heard of Malawi's decision.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan meets with Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias in Ankara, Turkey, yesterday.

Turkey-Greek disputes can be resolved through talks: Cavusoglu

ANADOLU/AP — ANKARA

Turkey believes that disputes with Greece can be resolved through constructive dialogue, the Turkish foreign minister said on Thursday.

In a joint news conference with his Greek counterpart Nikos Dendias, Mevlut Cavusoglu said that faits accomplis and provocative rhetoric should be avoided in relations between the two countries.

"It is in our interests that minorities in both countries live in peace, it will have positive impact on our relations," he said.

Referring to the Turkish minority in Western Thrace, Cavusoglu stressed: "If they say they are Turkish, they are Turkish. You have to accept it." He noted that Ankara is capable of protecting rights of both Turkey and Turkish Cypriots in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias travelled to Ankara to discuss ties with his Turkish counterpart, following a slight easing of tensions. Appearing before the cameras to deliver their press statements, the two men initially spoke about keeping the channels of dialogue open and increasing economic cooperation in an effort to improve relations.

But their meeting soon turned sour after Dendias accused Turkey of violating Greece's sovereign rights in the eastern Mediterranean and warned that Ankara would face European Union sanctions if the violations continue. Cavusoglu retorted back calling Dendias' words as "unacceptable."

The two ministers then proceeded to list their grievances.

"The potential for taking measures is always on the table of the (European) Council," Dendias said. " If there are delinquent and illegal actions against sovereignty and our sovereign rights, there is always the possibility for measures to be taken. Of course we hope with all our hearts there will not be illegal actions.

Cavuoslug responded: "Nikos Dendias unfortunately made some extremely unacceptable accusations against my country... He said 'Turkey violated Greece's sovereign rights.' It is not possible for us to accept this."

At least one killed in anti-UN protest in eastern Congo

REUTERS — BENI

At least one person was killed by security forces yesterday during protests against United Nations peacekeepers in Oicha, a town in the restive east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the town's mayor said.

Residents in towns in Congo's eastern region have staged several protests since last week over killings by militias and armed groups, and anger over what they say is the UN mission's inability to prevent the wave of civilian killings.

Youths in Oicha, a town around 390km north of the eastern provincial capital of Goma, barricaded the main highway early on Thursday as part of the ongoing protests.

"In an attempt by the police to disperse the protesters and clear the barricade a young man was killed," Oicha's mayor Nicolas Kikuku told Reuters.

Jean Pierre Wumbi, the police commissioner in the region said security forces were carrying out their duty. He declined further comment on the death of the protester.

Demonstrations were held in other eastern towns including Beni and Butembo on Thursday.

The UN mission in Congo known as MONUSCO has around 12,000 troops. It took over from an earlier peacekeeping mission in 2010 at the invitation of the government.

UN envoy: S Sudan has potential, needs to hold elections

AP — UNITED NATIONS

David Shearer said on Wednesday he's leaving the top UN job in South Sudan convinced the world's youngest nation has the potential to become a tourist destination to rival any country in East Africa and the oil and mineral riches to spur economic progress - if it can eliminate corruption and establish a transparent and open government.

As the country approaches its 10th anniversary of independence from Sudan on July 11, it has a transitional government in place following a 2018 peace agreement, and a 2020 cease-fire. Shearer said in an interview that though "it's all moved too slowly," it's now time to focus on elections "and have a legitimate, popularly elected government.

"That needs to be the rallying cry as we go forward - to bring everybody on board and to put pressure on the government to actually speak up and hold those elections," he said. "That doesn't mean to say winner needs to take all, because that can create all sorts of problems. But we do have to allow people to have their say in what comes next."

There were high hopes for peace and stability once South Sudan gained its long-fought independence from Sudan. But the country slid into ethnic violence in December 2013 when forces loyal to President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, started battling those loyal to Riek Machar, his former vice president who belongs to the Nuer people.

Numerous attempts at peace failed, including a deal that saw Machar return as vice president in 2016 only to flee months later amid fresh fighting. The civil war has killed nearly 400,000 people and displaced millions.

Intense international pressure followed the most recent peace deal in 2018, and in February 2020 a coalition government led by Kiir, with Machar as his deputy, was formed.

As UN special representative for South Sudan, Shearer was head of the largest UN peacekeeping mission, with over 14,000 troops and 1,500 police, and in charge of political dealings as well. He was a former member of New Zealand's parliament and has held a variety of UN posts including in Iraq from 2007-2009.

Looking back on why an oil-rich country born with high expectations has ended up in such a dire situation, Shearer said that after independence "the elites" — the generals during the war who found themselves in government — had "huge animosities" toward each other and struggled to be on top.

He said transforming the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, which became the ruling party of the new country, into a state is still in progress.

"They're thinking as a movement: How can we continue to hold power as we move forward? And that's a very big difference... (from) the strategic vision of, where is South Sudan going to be in five, 10 years time?" he said.

Shearer said another key issue is that financial resources coming to the government "are siphoned off by these very people (the elites), and there is very little understanding of where the money's going." It's not going to services for the people of South Sudan and there's problems with holding the government accountable, he said.

Looking ahead, Shearer said the peace agreement ends with elections, though "I don't believe that's the end of the peace process - that's a step along the way."



Ethiopian migrants flown back home from Yemen

Ethiopian migrants leave an IOM shelter before they were flown back to Ethiopia, in Aden, Yemen.

Talks on Nile dam must focus on filling: Ethiopia

ANADOLU — ADDIS ABABA

Ethiopia yesterday reiterated its position that trilateral dialogue on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam should focus on the filling and operation.

Ethiopia already announced nearly 80 percent of work on its $5 billion hydro dam on one of the main tributaries of the Blue Nile was completed.

The Horn of Africa nation of 110 million population plans to test two turbines soon after the coming rainy season — June, July, August — to take the reservoir volume up to 18 billion cubic metres.

In a weekly press briefing, Foreign Ministry spokesman Dina Mufti said Ethiopia took it to Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), last week following its strong conviction on "African solutions for African problems".

However, the Kinshasa round of talks between the three countries – Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan – did not bring about progress as the downstream countries wanted to take the mediation out of the hands of the African Union (AU), the local broadcaster FANA quoted Dina as saying.

"Ethiopia will never accept such pressures," he said. Dina added: "Egypt did not leave any stone unturned in its bid to take the matter to countries and institutions that it deems friendly to it; it did so during its AU chairmanship [2019] through to DRC's." Ethiopia, he said, would not accept the idea of bringing other actors with equal footing with the AU as mediators.

South African youth project pays tribute to Britain's Prince Philip

AP — ORANGE FARM

Young South Africans enthusiastically performed Zulu dancing and traditional African music as part of the lessons provided by the Jabulile Arts and Culture Society in the poor Orange Farm township, 45km outside Johannesburg.

Amid the classes in dancing and marimba music, a leader of the culture group paid tribute to Britain's Prince Philip, who died last week and whose Duke of Edinburgh Awards helped to fund the cultural group's activities.

"As an organisation, we are quite saddened by the loss of His Royal Highness, but we also celebrate the life and the hope that he gave to millions of young people across the globe. This is really going to go beyond just the life that he has lived but we will continue his legacy," said Palesa Matuludi, head of development for the Jabulile cultural group.

The South African youth group has been operating for the past 11 years as part of The President's Award an initiative empowering youths aged between 14 and 24. It has been operating in the country for the past 35 years.

Originally formed as the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award in 1956, the organization was rebranded in South Africa as the President's Award in 1994, and its activities are overseen by the Duke of Edinburgh Foundation. The foundation supports youth programs in more 130 countries and territories around the world, including 18 countries in Africa.

"It's an amazing non-formal education program that empowers young people with various universal skills such as leadership, teamwork, confidence, being able to adapt to new environments," said Matuludi. "All those soft skills that are required (in life) but are not necessarily attained in a classroom."

Sinehlanhla Mthethwa has been dancing in the Jabulile group for the past 6 years and has dreams of starting her own group in the near future.

Many Indian hospitals face beds, oxygen shortages

REUTERS — NEW DELHI

Many Indian hospitals were scrambling for beds and oxygen as COVID-19 infections surged to a new daily record yesterday, with a second wave of infections centred on the rich western state of Maharashtra.

Experts blamed everything from official complacency to aggressive variants. The government blamed a widespread failure to practise physical distancing and wear face masks.

"The situation is horrible," said Avinash Gawande, an official at a government hospital in the industrial city of Nagpur that was battling a flood of patients, as were hospitals in neighbouring Gujarat state and New Delhi in the north.

"We are a 900-bed hospital, but there are about 60 patients waiting and we don't have space for them."

Maharashtra, home to the financial capital of Mumbai, began a lockdown at midnight, a move that spurred a rush to stockpile essential items in advance.

At Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan (LNJP) Hospital in New Delhi, the country's largest facility treating COVID-19 patients, two or three patients were seen sharing single beds in some wards as overworked doctors attended to them, a witness said.

"Last year also we have not seen such a bad situation. This time the number is very high and increasing very rapidly, going (at a) very fast speed, so the situation is really alarming," said LNJP Medical Director Suresh Kumar, adding "We are definitely overburdened..."

COVID-positive patients — from a one-and-a-half-year-old toddler to many elderly – and their relatives kept streaming in to the emergency ward at LNJP, arriving by ambulance, cars or auto-rickshaws through the day.

"Last year also we have not seen such a bad situation. This time the number is very high and increasing very rapidly, going (at a) very fast speed, so the situation is really alarming," said LNJP Medical Director Suresh Kumar.

"We are definitely overburdened... Today we have 158 admissions in Lok Nayak alone. All sick patients, all severe patients," Kumar added.

India has added 200,739 infections over the last 24 hours, health ministry data showed, for a seventh daily record surge in the last eight days, while 1,038 deaths took its toll to 173,123.

Its tally of 14.1 million infections is second only to the United States, with 31.4 million.

Despite injecting about 114 million vaccine doses, the highest figure worldwide after the United States and China, India has covered only a small part of its 1.4 billion people.

India said yesterday regulators would decide on emergency-use applications for foreign COVID-19 vaccines within three working days, as it tries to attract Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson and Moderna to sell their shots.

In New Delhi, authorities ordered a weekend curfew, placing curbs on shopping malls, gyms, restaurants and some weekly markets.

Outside a major city mortuary, weeping relatives gathered in the hot sun, waiting for the bodies of loved ones to be released.



A patient with breathing problem is rushed to a hospital for treatment, amidst the spread of the coronavirus disease in Ahmedabad, India, yesterday.

Forty-year-old Prashant Mehra said he had to pay a broker for preferential treatment before he could get his 90-year-old grandfather admitted to an overstretched government hospital.

"He died after six or seven hours," he said. "We've already asked for our money back."

Supplies of oxygen ran short in places such as Gujarat, the home state of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"If such conditions persist, the death toll will rise," the head of a medical body in the state's industrial city of Ahmedabad told its chief minister in a letter.

Television broadcast images of a long queue of ambulances carrying virus sufferers waiting to be admitted to a city hospital that can accommodate more than 1,000 patients.

India was producing oxygen at full capacity for each of the last two days, the government said, and it had boosted output.

"Along with the ramped up production... and the surplus stocks available, the present availability is sufficient," the health ministry said in a statement.

Billionaire Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries will supply 100 metric tonnes of additional oxygen to Maharashtra through its refinery in Jamnagar in western India, a state minister said.

In the northern city of Haridwar, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims had thronged to a Hindu religious festival on the banks of the river Ganges on Wednesday, stoking fears of a new surge.

Myanmar security forces arrest prominent protest leader

REUTERS — YANGON

Myanmar security forces arrested yesterday one of the main leaders of the campaign against military rule after ramming him with a car as he led a motorbike protest rally, friends and colleagues said.

Opponents of a February 1 coup that ousted an elected government led by Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi have kept up their campaign against the military this traditional New Year week with marches and various other displays of resistance.

"Our brother Wai Moe Naing was arrested. His motorbike was hit by an unmarked police car," Win Zaw Khiang, a member of a protest organising group, said on social media.

Wai Moe Naing, a 25-year-old Muslim, has emerged as one of the most high-profile leaders of opposition to the coup.

Video posted on social media showed an oncoming car swerving into a group of motorbikes. Reuters was not able to verify the footage.

The licence plate of the black car shown in two videos swerving into the rally did not match the vehicle model listed for that plate number on Myanmar's vehicle database. A spokesman for the junta could not be reached for comment.



People march during a protest against the military coup in Dawei, Myanmar.

Monywa has been one of main centres of the pro-democracy campaign with big rallies day after day and repeated crackdowns by the security forces. Some colleagues said they feared for Wai Moe Naing's safety.

The Swedish embassy said it was following his case and urged that all detainees be allowed proper health care and their human rights be respected.

Another protest leader, Tayzar San, said on Facebook: "We have to continue the fight by doubling our energy for Ko Wai Moe Naing, for the truth, for the present and future of the country."

In the main city of Yangon, security forces detained Myo Aye, director of the Solidarity Trade Union of Myanmar, activist Ei Thinzar Maung said on Facebook. Myo Aye has also played a major role in organising the protests.

The coup has plunged Myanmar into crisis after 10 years of tentative steps toward democracy, with, in addition to the daily protests, strikes by workers in many sectors that have brought the economy to a standstill.

An activist group, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, says the security forces have killed 715 protesters since the ousting of Suu Kyi's government.

Earlier yesterday, soldiers opened fire in the city of Mandalay to disperse protesting medical workers and one man was killed and several wounded when security forces fired in a nearby neighbourhood, media reported.

Medical workers, some of whom have been at the forefront of the campaign against the coup, gathered early in the second city but troops soon arrived, opening fire and detaining some people, witnesses and the BBC's Burmese-language service said.

The BBC and other news outlets did not have details of casualties or arrests at the protest but Khit Thit media said a man was shot and killed in the compound of a nearby mosque as security forces broke up the medics' protest.

"There was no protest here. The soldiers came and seemed to be searching for someone," a resident of the neighbourhood where the mosque is located said by telephone, declining to be identified.

The five-day New Year holiday, known as Thingyan, began on Tuesday but pro-democracy activists cancelled the usual festivities to focus on their opposition to the generals.

Ousted Myanmar envoy appeals for UK govt help

AP — LONDON

The ousted Myanmar ambassador to Britain has appealed to the British government to help him as he faced eviction from his London residence.

Kyaw Zwar Minn had to spend a night in his car last week after his country's military attache barred him from the embassy in central London.

He told reporters from behind the padlocked gates of his residence in northwest London on Thursday that he is "not going to go today" and intends to stay despite orders from his former staff that he has to move out.

The former diplomat had criticized the February 1 coup in his country and called for the release of former elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was detained after the military took power.

Asked what he would do over the next few days, he replied: "Who can tell? The last time they seized the embassy without warning, so I need to be careful."

He only spoke briefly to reporters and did not elaborate on what kind of help he wanted from the British government.

Australian govt urged to rethink vaccination hubs

REUTERS — SYDNEY

Australian authorities should add more clinics to speed up the country's struggling COVID-19 vaccine rollout, its main medical association said yesterday, dismissing a government plan to create mass inoculation hubs as unworkable in the near term.

Australian Medical Association (AMA) President Omar Khorshid said establishing mass centres would pose "huge logistical challenges", including the difficulty of finding enough medical staff to manage the facilities.

"You need to find a workforce from somewhere, and we are not aware of large numbers of registered nurses and doctors who are available to manage these centres," Khorshid told ABC Radio.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Wednesday he would discuss with state and territory leaders setting up mass centres to vaccinate people above the age of 50 from as early as June.

Morrison has been under pressure to put the country's vaccination programme back on track after problems with the rollout, caused in part by patchy international vaccine supplies and changing medical advice, led to significant delays.

Australia earlier this week abandoned a target to provide at least one vaccine dose to the near 26 million population by year-end after restricting the rollout of its favoured AstraZeneca vaccine to people under 50 over clotting concerns.

Findings by Europe's drug regulator of rare cases of blood clots among some recipients of the AstraZeneca vaccine were a major blow for Australia, which planned to produce 50 million doses locally after manufacture began at the end of last month.

Australian officials overhauled the programme in response, doubling an earlier order of Pfizer vaccines to 40 million shots.

Khorshid said it made sense to delay the creation of mass vaccination hubs until bulk deliveries of the Pfizer vaccine are due later in the year.

Sydney man finds snake in lettuce bought at supermarket

AP — CANBERRA

Alex White thought he was watching a huge worm writhing in plastic-wrapped lettuce he'd just brought home from a Sydney supermarket - until a snake tongue flicked.

"I kind of completely freaked out when I saw this little tongue come out of its mouth and start flicking around and realised it was a snake because worms don't have tongues," White said yesterday. "I definitely kind of panicked a bit," he added.

It was a venomous pale-headed snake that authorities say made an 870km journey to Sydney from a packing plant in the Australian city of Toowoomba wrapped in plastic with two heads of cos lettuce.

The refrigerated supermarket supply chain likely lulled the cold-blooded juvenile into a stupor until White bought the lettuce at an inner-city ALDI supermarket on Monday evening and rode his bicycle home with salad and snake in his backpack.

Philippines lifts 9-year ban on new mines to boost revenues

REUTERS — MANILA

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has lifted a moratorium on new mineral agreements imposed in 2012, reopening the door to investments in a move that will boost state coffers but has dismayed environmental activists.

The Philippines, the top supplier of nickel ore to China and a major producer of copper and gold, imposed the moratorium while the government worked on legislation to boost the state's share of mining revenues. Since 2018, the excise tax on minerals has doubled to four percent.

Duterte's new executive order allows new mining deals and reviews of existing contracts for possible renegotiation. It also directs the environment ministry to formulate terms and conditions and to strictly implement rules on mine safety and environmental policies.

Mining is a highly contentious issue in the Philippines after past cases of environmental mismanagement fuelled a strong lobby against the industry led by local governments, legislators, advocacy groups and the Catholic church.

Shortly after coming to office in 2016, Duterte warned miners to follow tighter environmental rules or be shut down and the new executive order does not undo a ban on new open pit mines.

More than a third of the Philippines' total land area of 30 million hectares has been identified as having "high mineral potential", according to the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) and less than Five percent of the Philippines' mineral reserves is estimated to have been extracted so far.

Several pending mining projects will now proceed to the development and commercial extraction stages, MGB Director Wilfredo Moncano said.

"This will not, however, mean that the protection of the environment and safety will be taken lightly," he said.

Scrambling for funds for infrastructure projects and to help support the pandemic-hit economy, the government has pushed for the revival and sale of idle state mining projects.

"(The executive order) will help bring the Philippines back on the investment map," the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines said in a statement.

"There will be a need for a lot of raw materials like nickel, copper, gold, manganese, chromite, etcetera when the world returns to normal," said Dante Bravo, president of the country's second-biggest nickel ore miner and exporter Global Ferronickel Holdings Inc.

The Southeast Asian nation became the biggest supplier of nickel ore to top metals consumer China in 2020 after Indonesia banned exports of unprocessed ore.

Anti-mining activists said they were alarmed.

"In the middle of a climate crisis and this pandemic, corporate interests and profit have won again over the welfare and benefits of the many," Alyansa Tigil Mina (Stop Mining Alliance) said in a statement.

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EDITORIAL

Supporting private sector

QATAR'S private sector is playing an important role in stimulating country's economic growth. In order to support businesses affected with the COVID-19, the Cabinet on Wednesday announced economic support package for private sector. The steps announced by the Cabinet will be very effective in helping the businesses, especially the small and medium enterprises, in facing the challenges posed the spread of coronavirus.

The measures include, exemption from electricity and water fees for closed sectors until the end of September 2021 and extension of the National Guarantees Program at Qatar Development Bank until the end of September 2021. It also includes extension of the period of the exemption from interest for an additional year for the National Guarantees Program to become two years without interest, in addition to two years of payment with interest that does not exceed the Qatar Central Bank rate +2 percent. The support package also includes raising the limits of funding salaries and wages for closed sectors to QR15m for a single identity card, while retaining the rest of the relevant terms and conditions.

Qatar has made great progress in containing the spread of COVID-19 because of its successful vaccination programme. Until Wednesday, over 1,168,000 doses of the vaccine have been administered in Qatar since the start of the national vaccination program. The percentage of people who received the first dose of vaccination reached 27 percent of the total number of population and the percentage of people who received the two doses is 15 percent of the total population.

Qatar has reached another major milestone for the National COVID-19 Vaccination Programme with 81 percent of people over 60 years of age having now received at least one vaccine dose since the start of the programme. This is an important achievement as data in Qatar has showed that within the over-60 years age group, non-vaccinated people are 40 times more likely to be admitted to ICU than those who are fully vaccinated.

Due to the success of vaccinations programme, Qatar now ranks ninth in the world in terms of the proportion of people who have received vaccination. All the indicators show that the fight against COVID-19 will be over soon. Due to the proactive steps taken by the government and with close cooperation of all the stakeholders, Qatar will emerge stronger from this challenging situations created by the spread of coronavirus.

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Higher infections rate gives COVID-19 more opportunity to mutate



DR. YOUSUF ALI AL MULLA



A health worker explains the vaccination process to people as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak continues, at the Tecnopolis Park, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, yesterday.

Even with the increase in infection rates again and with this new wave of the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in the world, some people still violate the rules that govern how to behave with others and adhere to health requirements. Perhaps people's alertness to staying away from public gathering appears to be slowing. Regardless of the immunization of some groups so far, unfortunately it has become clear that we are slowly losing our grip with the increase in cases in the past few days.

Nevertheless, we still have reason for optimism. Vaccination rates are on the rise and without a doubt, the vaccine is the main key to slow the spread of the virus, which is often silent. Now is not the time to relax. As we all are wishing that this pandemic ends in the near future, we must also be more careful at the present time and cooperate to reduce the spread of the virus.

Vaccination rates are on the rise and without a doubt, the vaccine is the main key to slow the spread of the virus, which is often silent. Now is not the time to relax. As we all are wishing that this pandemic ends in the near future, we must also be more careful at the present time and cooperate to reduce the spread of the virus.

The problem is that the lapses of individuals in our society not only slow us down, but rather we have gone backwards. Somehow, after we made a lot of progress in collaboration with Health Authorities, at the present time we are very much risking our impatience – if I am right to say – we are in grave danger of failing the end of the major pandemic and its hurricane - if other waves do not develop in the future -!

Did you not notice that some people are looking for any loophole in those instructions recommended by health ministry for instance to fit them? What I mean is that some people (especially those who have been vaccinated) are seeing that if I can meet with another unvaccinated family, why can't we have big meetings? However, here we all realize that many of these decisions, despite good intentions, will create a mixture of post-vaccination behaviors. Many of which will be miscalculations of risk – if I can say so – as some people who believe they have acted responsibly during last year they feel more immune to the virus. Even worse, the feeling of exception makes it easy to say: Well, family gathering, for instance eight to ten people, might be fine. Hence, a new focus of the coronavirus outbreak is generated.

On the other hand, it is true that vaccines gave hope in our conversations and it is a tool that increases the level of safety that we work with day after day – especially if we reach vaccination for most of the community members in the near future.

However, this new trend may with time create small illusion. As soon as they hear the phrase (It's getting safer), people can unintentionally push them to fully focus on (safe) and begin to quickly reduce the interest in health requirements.

However, the goal here is not to reduce the importance of vaccines. It's excellent and actually protects millions of people from the many complications of coronavirus (COVID-19), but it is good to remember that the virus that the vaccines are fighting against continues to change.

At end, we cannot take the end of the pandemic game for granted. As we know that more infections, will be followed by more opportunities for the virus to spread between people and possible mutations and may also slip away from our defenses...Is not it? Really my message to everyone here is: that to stop this possibility, we still have to consider our collective risks, not just our individual risks!

Dr.Yousuf Ali Al Mulla is a physician, medical innovator and writer. For any queries regarding the contents of the article can be contacted at: dryusufalmulla@gmail.com

New study offers disturbing insight into trust in media



MARGARET SULLIVAN
THE WASHINGTON POST

Ask almost any group of journalists to name the core values of their profession, and they'll probably deliver a list like this:

Oversight. We're the watchdogs keeping an eye on government officials and other powerful people and institutions.

Transparency. We believe it's best to put information out in the open, not keep it hidden.

Factuality. It's crucial to provide as much accurate information as possible to get to the truth.

Spotlighting wrongdoing. We think society's problems are best solved by exposing them to public criticism.

Giving a voice to the voiceless. It's our job to advocate for those lacking power or social standing.

These ideas are so ingrained that we have adopted certain aphorisms to express them. "Sunlight is the best disinfectant," we might observe. "Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," we counsel each other.

"Journalism is a tribe," said Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute. "These are our core values, and we think that everybody shares them."

But, according to some major new research released today, these values can be a turnoff for the general public. And it suggests that journalists who want to reach the broadest audience and have the greatest impact should consider changing how they think about and present their work.

The study, "A New Way of Looking at Trust in Media," is from the Media Insight Project, a collaboration between API and the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. It builds on research led by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt into the importance of moral values – such as fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity – in people's lives.

Researchers asked participants how much they support the values I mentioned above – transparency, factuality, etc. – but kept it in the abstract, without specifying a focus on journalism.

The results indicated that only one of five core values touted by journalists also shares the support of a majority of Americans – the idea that more facts get us closer to the truth. About 7 people in 10 support this.

The value drawing the least support is the idea that a good way to make society better is to spotlight its problems. Only about 3 in 10 agree.

And only about 1 in 10 Americans fully support all five of the journalism values that were tested.

Support for these values does not break cleanly along party, demographic or ideological lines but rather seems to be driven by "moral instincts."

People who most prize loyalty and authority are much less likely than others to see the need for a "watchdog" over the powerful; while people who put a high value on fairness are more likely to think society should amplify the voices of those lacking power.

I must confess that my first impulse was to resist these findings. After all, I've spent decades with the ideas described above as my lodestar, convinced that journalism serves the public good. And after all, investigative journalism is built on the idea of being society's watchdog.

However, given that trust in the news media has fallen from about 70 percent in the early 1970s to about 40 percent now, according to Gallup – it seems worth viewing this report with an open mind.

"This at least opens a new window," Rosenstiel told me. "It gets us out of the endless loop."

Too often, the discussion about media trust is a Mobius strip with "the feel of people talking past each other," as the report aptly sums it up. Journalists hotly deny that they slant the news to help one political party vs. another, while critics on the right scoff at them, and some on the left question the entire point of objectivity: Why not just have journalists declare their biases up front and proceed from there?

Over and over again, we try to explain to a distrustful public that, "we're not biased, we're just doing our jobs," Rosenstiel said.

The report divides respondents into four groups, according to their various moral principles: Upholders, Loyalists, Moralists, and Journalism Supporters. Alas, that last group is the smallest of the four. But we have a chance of making inroads with some of the others.

Upholders, for example, put a high value on respect for leaders and groups. "They worry that some of the things journalists believe in can be intrusive and get in the way of officials doing their jobs," the report notes. They would like to see more stories about what works, not just what is going wrong. In general, there is an appetite for more solutions-oriented journalism.

The report's authors, in a follow-up study, tested different ways of presenting the same story. For example, one about pollution whose "standard" headline would have been: "At-risk neighborhood now facing health threat from toxic drinking water."



Quote of the day

Increase in cases reflects a worrying trend that many people across the region are still not realizing the gravity of the situation, or adhering to the preventive measures that we know work to stop transmission.

Ahmed Al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director

Blinken reassures Afghans of US commitment

AP — KABUL

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made an unannounced visit to Afghanistan yesterday to sell Afghan leaders and a wary public on President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw all American troops from the country and end America's longest war.

Blinken sought to assure senior Afghan politicians that the United States remains committed to the country despite Biden's announcement a day earlier that the 2,500 US soldiers remaining in the country would be coming home by the 20th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks that led to the US invasion in 2001.

"I wanted to demonstrate with my visit the ongoing to commitment of the United States to the Islamic Republic and the people of Afghanistan," Blinken told Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as they met at the presidential palace in Kabul. "The partnership is changing, but the partnership itself is enduring."

"We respect the decision and are adjusting our priorities," Ghani told Blinken, expressing gratitude for the sacrifices of US troops.

Later, in a meeting with Abdullah Abdullah, who heads the National Reconciliation Council, Blinken repeated his message, saying that "we have a new chapter, but it is a new chapter that we're writing together."

Blinken sought to assure senior Afghan politicians that the United States remains committed to the country despite Biden's announcement a day earlier that the 2,500 US soldiers remaining in the country would be withdrawn before September 11.

"We are grateful to your people, your country, your administration," Abdullah said.

Nato immediately followed Biden's lead on Wednesday, saying its roughly 7,000 non-American forces in Afghanistan would be departing within a few months, ending the foreign military presence that had been a fact of life for a generation of Afghans already reeling from more than 40 years of conflict.

Blinken arrived in the Afghan capital from Brussels, where he and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin briefed Nato officials on the US decision and won quick approval from the allies to end their Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan.

Biden, Blinken, Austin have all tried to put a brave face on the pullout, maintaining that the US- and Nato-led missions to Afghanistan had achieved their goal of decimating Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network that launched the 9/11 attacks and clearing the country of terrorist elements that could use Afghan soil to plot similar strikes.

However, that argument has faced pushback from some US lawmakers and human rights advocates, who say the withdrawal will result in the loss of freedoms that Afghans enjoyed after the Taliban was ousted from power in late 2001.

"My views are very pessimistic," Naheed Farid, a member of parliament, told reporters when asked her thoughts about the future of her country. Farid was one of a half-dozen, mostly women, civic leaders who met with Blinken at the US Embassy in Kabul. She did not elaborate.

Despite billions of US dollars in aid, 20 years after the invasion, more than half of Afghanistan's 36 million people live on less than $1.90 a day, according to World Bank figures. Afghanistan is also considered one of the worst countries in the world for women's rights and wellbeing, according to the Georgetown Institute for Women Peace and Security.



Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani (right) meets US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in Kabul, Afghanistan, yesterday.

For many Afghans the past two decades have been disappointing, as corruption has overtaken successive governments and powerful warlords have amassed wealth and loyal militias who are well armed. Many Afghans fear the chaos will worsen even more once America leaves.

In his meeting with Ghani, Blinken pledged to work with Afghanistan to build a strong civil society and protect the rights of women, in a statement issued by State Department spokesman Ned Price.

Peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government are at a stalemate but are supposed to resume later this month in Istanbul.

Under an agreement signed between the Trump administration and the Taliban last year, the US was to have completed its military withdrawal by May 1. Although Biden is blowing through that deadline, angering the Taliban leadership, his plan calls for the pullout to begin on May 1.

Beijing official in Hong Kong warns against foreign meddling

AP — HONG KONG

Beijing's top official in Hong Kong yesterday warned foreign forces not to interfere with the "bottom line" of national security in the city, threatening retaliation amid tensions between China and Western powers.

The US, Britain and their allies have condemned China's tightening control over Hong Kong's freedoms, including the sweeping national security law and electoral reforms that have all but silenced the once-vibrant opposition in the semi-autonomous territory.

"When it is time, actions must be taken in relation to any external or foreign forces that may interfere Hong Kong affairs or attempts to use Hong Kong as a pawn," said Luo Huining, director of the central government's liaison office in Hong Kong.

"We will propose strong objections and teach them a lesson," he said at the opening ceremony for Hong Kong's National Security Education Day.

Authorities marked the event with a police college open house, where police personnel demonstrated the Chinese military's goose step march, replacing British-style foot drills from the time Hong Kong was ruled by the UK until the 1997 handover to China.

Critics say Beijing's crackdown — aimed at reining in dissent after months of anti-government protests in 2019 — has eroded freedoms promised to Hong Kong when it returned to China's rule. Most of the city's prominent pro-democracy activists and advocates are currently facing charges, are in jail or have fled abroad.

During his speech, Luo said that everyone in Hong Kong needs to respect the legal responsibility of upholding national security in the city.

"Anyone who wants to go beyond the bottom line of national security, and people's livelihood, the central authorities will never allow such acts."

Hong Kong's leader Carrie Lam described the 2019 protests, which sometimes erupted in violence, as "almost like terrorist activities."

She also called efforts by those advocating Hong Kong's independence and self-determination a huge safety risk as the goal was to snatch power from the government.

France asks citizens to leave Pakistan amid protests

AP — LAHORE

The French embassy in Pakistan yesterday advised all of its nationals and companies to temporarily leave the country after anti-France violence erupted in the Islamic nation over the arrest of a radical leader.

Saad Rizvi was arrested on Monday for threatening the government with mass protests if it did not expel French envoy Marc Barété over the publication depictions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

French Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Agnes Von Der Muhll said about 400 to 500 French nationals live in Pakistan and they will be able to leave via commercial flights.

There was no immediate comment by Pakistan's foreign ministry.

But, interior minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmad said French citizens living in Pakistan were safe and security had been provided to them. At a news conference Wednesday, he the operation against Rizvi supporters was launched when they refused to end their sit-in peacefully. He said a government order was being formally issued to outlaw Rizvi's party so that it never creates such a situation in the future.

The latest development comes a day after the government announced to ban the Tehreek-e-Labiak Pakistan party, which is headed by Rizvi.

The arrest sparked violent protests by Rizvi's followers, who disrupted traffic by staging sit-ins on highways and later blocked roads in major cities, including the southern port city of Karachi and the garrison city of Rawalpindi.

They also staged a sit-in in the capital, Islamabad, and blocked a key road from Monday to Wednesday when police launched a nationwide crackdown, triggering clashes that killed two policemen and wounded 580 others. Three demonstrators also died in the clashes with police.

Thousands of Rizvi's followers were still rallying in Lahore, the capital of eastern Punjab province where they have a strong presence.

According to Ahmed, the country's interior minister, the Cabinet had approved his proposal for outlawing Rizvi's party. He said Rizvi's demand could not be accepted as the expulsion of the French ambassador and ban on French products could harm the country's national interest.

He said the supporters of Rizvi who were still rallying will be sternly dealt with by security forces.

Rizvi emerged as the leader of the Tehreek-e-Labiak Pakistan party in November after the sudden death of his father, Khadim Hussein Rizvi. His party wants the government to boycott French products and expel the French ambassador before April 20 under an agreement signed by it.

Rizvi's Tehreek-e-Labiak and other Islamist parties have denounced French President Emmanuel Macron since October last year, saying he tried to defend caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as freedom of expression. Macron's comments came after a young Muslim beheaded a French school teacher who had shown caricatures in class.

The images had been republished by the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo to mark the opening of the trial over the deadly 2015 attack against the publication for the original caricatures. That enraged many Muslims in Pakistan and elsewhere who believe those depictions were blasphemous.



People wearing protective face masks watch a fire, during the coronavirus disease outbreak, in Bangkok, Thailand, yesterday.

Thailand readies restrictions as coronavirus cases surge

REUTERS — BANGKOK

Thailand reported 1,543 new coronavirus cases yesterday, the sharpest increase since the start of the pandemic and the fourth record rise this week, prompting authorities to prepare new restrictions that would include closing schools and clubs.

Thailand has so far managed to contain the number of cases relative to other countries, but the new outbreak comes as many have travelled during the country's Songkran new year holidays and as vaccination rates are still low.

Asked whether lockdowns would be imposed, health official Chawetsan Namwat said measures were being formulated based on case numbers in each area and would be proposed to the coronavirus taskforce for approval on Friday.

"We have to divide up the areas based on seriousness, which is different and so measures have to be suitable for each area," Chawetsan told a briefing.

The measures include closing entertainment venues, clubs, bars, massage parlours and schools nationwide for at least two weeks, health minister Anutin Charnvirakul said in a statement.

Activities involving over 50 people would be prohibited and 18 provinces, including Bangkok, classified as red zones and the remaining 59 provinces as orange.

Restaurants would not be able to serve alcohol and must close by 9pm in red zones.

Authorities have already urged people to limit travel and begin working from home. Shopping malls will also close at 9pm and the banking association said branches outside malls will shut at 3.30pm and limit customer numbers.

Thailand's last major lockdown was in late March last year, with a curfew imposed in April, before months of relatively relaxed curbs as cases were mainly contained.

Of the new infections reported yesterday, 409 were in Bangkok, the outbreak's epicentre. The new cases took total infections to 37,453, with deaths remaining at 97.

All positive cases have to be admitted into care under Thai rules, with 8,973 patients currently being treated, which could stretch a healthcare system already strained by the last outbreak.

Suga heads to US for China-focused talks

AP — TOKYO

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga left for Washington yesterday for talks with President Joe Biden meant to show the strength of their security alliance at a time when both nations are concerned with China's growing economic and military clout.

The talks will be Biden's first face-to-face meeting with a foreign leader since he took office, and they follow four years of uncertainty for the Japan-US alliance under former President Donald Trump's administration.

Japan's Foreign Ministry said Suga hopes to reaffirm the alliance's "strong bond" and discuss a multinational effort to defend democratic values and counter China's growing global influence and disputed territorial claims.

"I hope to develop a relationship of trust with President Biden and further strengthen the Japan-US alliance bound by the universal values of freedom, democracy, human rights and rule of law," Suga told reporters at his office before heading to Tokyo's Haneda International Airport.

At today's talks at the White House, Suga said he and Biden will "compare and adjust our policies, and we will demonstrate to the rest of the world the leadership of Japan and the United States toward achieving a free and open Indo-Pacific region."

Japanese officials said Biden and Suga are expected to discuss how to manage the peace and stability of regional seas, including the Taiwan Strait, where tensions are rising. The two leaders are also expected to discuss the human rights situation in Hong Kong and China's northwestern Xinjiang region.

Japan has taken a milder approach to allegations of Chinese human rights violations and has not joined the United States and European nations in imposing sanctions. Gen Nakatani, a ruling party lawmaker and former defence minister, is leading a nonpartisan parliamentary group calling for Suga's government to take tougher steps, including sanctions, to be in line with Western democracies, but a decision has not been made.

Japan considers China's growing military activity in the region as well as its broad territorial claims to be a security threat. Japan is itself locked in dispute with China over Beijing's claim to the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands, called Diaoyu in China, in the East China Sea.

Elsewhere Tokyo has watched with concern as China has built military installations on disputed territory it claims in the South China Sea.

The US, meanwhile, has butted heads with China over numerous issues, including the coronavirus pandemic, human rights, Chinese policy in Hong Kong, Xinjaing and Tibet and trade. To erode China's claims on the South China Sea, US ships regularly conduct so-called "freedom of navigation" operations, sailing into international waters that China is trying to claim as its own.

China denies it is expansionist and says it is only defending its territorial rights. It says that the largest threat to regional peace and stability is the US.

Coronavirus deaths in France exceed 100,000

AP — PARIS

France yesterday became the third country in Europe after the UK and Italy to reach the unwanted milestone of 100,000 COVID-19-related deaths as new infections and deaths surged due to virus variants.

The country of 67 million is the eighth nation in the world to reach the mark after a year of overwhelmed hospitals, on-and-off coronavirus lockdowns and enormous personal losses that have left families nationwide grieving the pandemic's impact.

France added 300 new deaths Thursday to the previous day's tally of 99,777, bringing the total to 100,077 deaths.

Lionel Petitpas, president of the group Victims of COVID-19 told The Associated Press that the number was "an important threshold." After months of people getting accustomed to the virus, the figure "is piercing a lot of minds. It is a figure we thought would never be reached," he said.

Petitpas, who lost his wife Joelle on March 29 last year from the virus, said families of victims "want the government to make a collective gesture to recognize our collective loss." French President Emmanuel Macron told Le Parisien newspaper he thinks about all of the people who died in the pandemic and their families.

The pandemic was "so cruel" to individuals "who sometimes were not able to accompany, during the last moments and in death, a father, a mother, a loved one, a friend," Macron said. Yet the crisis also shows "the ability of the French people to unite." French government spokesperson Gabriel Attal suggested it is too soon to set a specific date to honor those who died as France is now fighting another rapid rise in confirmed cases.

The country of 67 million is the eighth nation in the world to reach the mark after a year of overwhelmed hospitals, on-and-off coronavirus lockdowns and enormous personal losses.

"There will be an homage for sure, a national mourning for the victims of COVID-19," Attal said Wednesday. "That time will come.... today, we throw all our forces in the battle against the epidemic."

Experts say the 100,000 mark is an underestimate by thousands. An analysis of death certificates shows that some COVID-19 cases were not reported or patients were not tested when people died at home, or in psychiatric units or chronic care facilities.

Petitpas started a Facebook group last year for families of victims to share memories of their loved ones. Nearly every day, new testimonies appear.

"My wife, like so many others, was just put in a body bag," he recalled. "It was like a luxury garbage bag. And then she was put in a coffin and sent to cremation." He was not allowed to see her.

Petitpas said despite a decree in January allowing people in France to see their deceased loved ones, many places still aren't allowing it.

"All these people who left us (are) like people with the plague, without human dignity, with nothing at all," he said.

Celia Prioux-Schwab, a social services worker, lost her 82-year-old grandmother in January, four days after she was sent home from the Reims hospital - even though her family had no home-care option and she still had COVID-19.

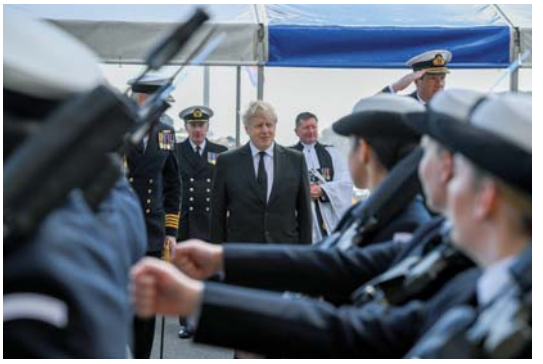
She is now pushing for a change in French law to guarantee the right of families to visit hospitalized patients even during a pandemic, "to offer support, or even just to say goodbye."

Corine Maysounabe, a journalist in western France, has been involved in a group advising officials on a future protocols for deaths during pandemics.

She lost her 88-year-old father last year to the virus. She described the "enormous trauma" of mourning rites being trampled on and bodies "treated at the level of objects." "When you're told your father was put in a bag and covered in bleach: imagine the image you get in your head," she said.

Maysounabe feels families and victims "are forgotten" still today. "We have gotten accustomed to 300, 400 deaths a day."

Since Macron declared "war" on the virus while announcing the country's first lockdown on March 17, 2020, the French have faced domestic and international travel restrictions that have weighed heavily on everyday life.



Prime Minister Boris Johnson attends Passing-out parade at Britannia Royal Naval College during his visit in commemoration of Britain's Prince Philip, in Dartmouth, Britain, yesterday.

Senior royals to skip uniforms at Prince Philip's funeral

AP — LONDON

Senior royals must wear civilian clothes to Prince Philip's funeral, defusing potential tensions over who would be allowed to don military uniforms.

Queen Elizabeth II's decision means Prince Harry won't risk being the only member of the royal family not in uniform during Saturday's funeral for his grandfather, who died last week at the age of 99.

Members of the royal family often wear uniforms to public events by virtue of their honorary roles with the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. But Harry lost his honorary military titles when he decided to give up frontline royal duties last year.

As a result, protocol suggests that Harry, an army veteran who served two tours of duty in Afghanistan, may only wear a suit with medals at royal functions, Britain's Press Association reported.

The decision also sidesteps another potential controversy after reports that Prince Andrew considered wearing an admiral's uniform to his father's funeral. Andrew retains his military titles even though he was forced to step away from royal duties after a disastrous interview with the BBC about his acquaintance with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

The funeral is scheduled to take place tomorrow at Windsor Castle, with attendance limited to 30 because of coronavirus restrictions.

Philip, also known as the Duke of Edinburgh, served in the Royal Navy for 12 years and maintained close ties to the armed forces throughout his life. Military personnel will have a large role in honouring him despite the attendance limit.

Members of the Royal Navy, the Royal Marines, the Royal Air Force and the British Army plan to take part in the funeral procession. Philip's coffin will be carried to St George's Chapel on a specially adapted Land Rover, which he designed himself.

Military personnel rehearsed for the event on Wednesday at Army Training Centre Pirbright, near London. One of the four Royal Marine buglers who will play "The Last Post" at the service said it was an "honour and privilege" to perform the role.

Europe has surpassed one million COVID-19 deaths: WHO

AP — GENEVA

A top official from the World Health Organisation says Europe has surpassed one million deaths from COVID-19 and the situation remains "serious," with about 1.6 million new cases reported each week in the region.

The comments by Dr. Hans Kluge yesterday aimed to emphasize that Europe must keep up its guard with social distancing and speed up vaccinations as virus variants drive new infections to record levels in some nations.

Overall, a tally by Johns Hopkins University shows nearly three million deaths have been linked to COVID-19 worldwide — with the Americas hardest hit, followed by Europe. The United States, Brazil and Mexico have reported the highest number of deaths, collectively at more than 1.1 million.

Speaking to reporters during a visit to Greece, Kluge did point to "early signs that transmission may be slowing across several countries" in WHO's 53-country European region, which stretches into Central Asia -and cited "declining incidence" among the oldest people.

He said the proportion of COVID-19 deaths among people over 80, who have been prioritised for vaccines, had dropped to nearly 30 percent — the lowest level in the pandemic.

Britain in particular has seen new infections and COVID-19 deaths drop dramatically since January, due to a successful vaccination program and a prolonged national lockdown that is only being reversed in stages.

Addressing recent concerns about vaccines, Kluge also said the risk of people suffering blood clots is far higher for people with COVID-19 than for people who receive AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine.

"Let there be no doubt about it, the AstraZeneca vaccine is effective in reducing COVID-19 hospitalization and preventing deaths," he said.

UK scientists find higher risk of brain clots from virus

REUTERS — LONDON

There is a much higher risk of brain blood clots from COVID-19 infection than there is from vaccines against the disease, British researchers said yesterday, after the rollout of inoculations was disrupted by reports of rare clots.

AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson have both seen very rare reports of cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST) linked to their vaccines. On Wednesday, the United States paused vaccinations using J&J's shot while a link with clots was investigated, with Denmark ditching AstraZeneca's shot over the issue.

British and European regulators have stressed that the benefits of vaccination outweigh the risks.

A study of 500,000 COVID-19 patients found CVST had occurred at a rate of 39 people out of a million following infection, researchers said. That compares with European Medicines Agency (EMA) figures showing that 5 in a million people reported CVST after getting AstraZeneca's shot.

The researchers said in a pre-print study that the risk of CVST was 8-10 times higher following COVID-19 infection than it was from existing vaccines for the disease.

"The risk of having a (CVST) after COVID-19 appears to be substantially and significantly higher than it is after receiving the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine," Maxime Taquet of Oxford's Department of Psychiatry told reporters.

The study was based on a US health database, and so did not accrue new data on the risk of clots from AstraZeneca's vaccine directly, as the shot is not being rolled out there.

Taquet said that the mortality rate from CVST was around 20 percent whether it occurred after COVID-19 infection or a vaccine, indicating the clots were the main risk factor.

Regulators had also observed low platelet levels in reports of vaccine side effects, but the researchers said data was limited on whether that was also the case in those reporting CVST after infection.

The researchers highlighted that COVID-19 was associated with more common clotting disorders than CVST, such as strokes, and that recent debate around vaccines had lost sight of how bad the disease itself could be.

"The importance of this finding is it brings it back to the fact this is a really horrible illness as a whole variety of effects including increased risk of (CVST)," John Geddes, director of NIHR Oxford Health Biomedical Research Centre.

The research team, from Oxford University, said they worked independently from the Oxford vaccine team which developed AstraZeneca's shot

Germany sees record vaccinations amid hospital warning

AP — BERLIN

German officials said yesterday that the country has set a new record for the number of COVID-19 vaccinations in a single day, even as authorities warned that hospitals are seeing a "dramatic" rise in the number of coronavirus patients needing treatment.

The Health Ministry said 738,501 people received a first or second dose of vaccine Wednesday, continuing a sharp upward trend that began last week with the start of vaccinations in GP practices. German daily Die Welt reported that Chancellor Angela Merkel is scheduled to get the shot today.

But the head of the country's disease control agency noted that most Germans are still waiting for their first vaccination.

"We are in the third wave (of infections) and the situation in some hospitals is becoming dramatic," said Lothar Wieler, who heads the Robert Koch Institute. "We can already see that some cities and conurbations have temporarily run out of free intensive care beds," he said.

Wieler called for elective surgeries to be postponed, to free up ICU capacity that he said would soon be needed for COVID-19 patients.

Some hospitals in the central state of Thuringia planned to start transferring a number of seriously ill patients to other regions, the dpa news agency reported.



An Allianz employee gets a coronavirus disease test before working at the Allianz Campus in Berlin, Germany, yesterday.

The Robert Koch Institute reported 29,425 newly confirmed coronavirus infections in the past day, and 293 deaths.

Since the start of the outbreak, Germany has recorded almost 3.1 million COVID-19 infections and 79,381 deaths.

The German government this week asked Parliament to approve a bill giving federal authorities greater powers to set uniform pandemic restrictions in regions with high infection rates. Germany's decentralized system has often resulted in a patchwork of different rules as state governors disagreed on what measures to impose.

Lawmakers are due to debate the bill today. Berlin-based newspaper *Die Welt* reported that Chancellor Angela Merkel will receive her coronavirus vaccine today.

Citing unnamed government sources, the newspaper reported that the 66-year-old leader will receive the shot made by British-Swedish company AstraZeneca.

Merkel's office declined to confirm the report, referring instead to her spokesman's comments Monday that the chancellor would be vaccinated "soon and the public will be informed about it then."

German authorities have restricted use of the AstraZeneca shot to people over 60 amid concerns over a small but significant number of unusual blood clots in vaccine recipients.

The European Medicines Agency has said the benefits of the vaccine far outweigh the potential risk, especially for older people who are more likely to suffer a serious form of COVID-19.

Ruling Scottish party pledges referendum by end of next year

REUTERS — LONDON

The ruling Scottish National Party pledged yesterday to hold an independence referendum by the end of 2023, a step that could fracture the United Kingdom by ripping apart the 314-year union between England and Scotland.

If there was another referendum and the Scots voted out, it would mark the biggest shock to the United Kingdom since Irish independence a century ago - just as London grapples with the impact of both Brexit and the COVID-19 crisis.

Scotland voted against independence by 55% to 45% in 2014, but Nicola Sturgeon's Scottish National Party (SNP) wants another referendum if it wins the Scottish Parliament election on May 6. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has repeatedly dismissed SNP calls for a referendum.

"We believe the people of Scotland should have the opportunity in a referendum when the COVID crisis is over to decide whether Scotland should be an independent country," the SNP said in its manifesto published yeserday.

"The SNP intention is for the referendum to be within the first half of the five year term," the SNP said.

Top associate of Navalny convicted of trespassing

AP — MOSCOW

A court in Moscow found Lyubov Sobol, a politician and a key figure in Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, guilty of forcing her way into the apartment of a relative of the alleged operative whom Navalny had previously duped into revealing details of his supposed poisoning.

A top associate of Russia's imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny was convicted of trespassing yesterday and handed a suspended sentence of one year community service after she tried to doorstep an alleged security operative believed to be involved in Navalny's poisoning with a Soviet-era nerve agent.

A court in Moscow found Lyubov Sobol, a politician and a key figure in Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, guilty of forcing her way into the apartment of a relative of the alleged operative whom Navalny had previously duped into revealing details of his supposed poisoning.

Sobol condemned the verdict as "shame and disgrace" and vowed to appeal.

"In the meantime, a (criminal) case into the attempt upon Navalny's life hasn't been even opened," she said in a tweet.

Navalny, Russian President Vladimir Putin's fiercest critic, fell sick during an Aug. 20 flight in Russia and was flown to Berlin while still in a coma for treatment two days later. Labs in Germany, France and Sweden, and tests by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, established that he was exposed to a Soviet-era Novichok nerve agent.

The 44-year-old politician has blamed the poisoning on the Kremlin, accusations Russian officials have rejected.

In December, while still convalescing in Germany, Navalny released a recording of a phone call he said he made to a man he identified as Konstantin Kudryavtsev and described as an alleged member of a group of officers of the Federal Security Service, or FSB, who purportedly poisoned him with Novichok and then tried to cover it up.

In the call, Navalny introduced himself as a security official and beguiled his interlocutor into sharing details of the alleged poisoning operation and acknowledging that he was involved in the "processing" of Navalny's underwear so "there wouldn't be any traces" of poison.

After the recording was released, Sobol showed up at the residential building in Moscow where Kudryavtsev supposedly lived.

Sobol addressed the court on Wednesday and said the case against her was "completely deceitful" and designed to prevent her from asking Kudryavtsev questions.

Sobol is currently awaiting another trial - she and other top associates of Navalny were accused of violating coronavirus regulations during protests that followed Navalny's jailing in January. Navalny was arrested upon returning from Germany, triggering mass nationwide protests that posed a major challenge to the Kremlin.

The opposition leader is currently serving a 2 1/2-year prison sentence for a 2014 embezzlement conviction he said was fabricated and the European Court of Human Rights declared "arbitrary and manifestly unreasonable." For more then two weeks, Navalny has been on a hunger strike over prison officials' refusal to allow a visit from his doctor after he developed severe back and leg pain.



Lyubov Sobol, a Russian opposition figure and a close ally of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, speaks with journalists after a court hearing in Moscow, Russia, yesterday.

Polish govt critic should leave ombudsman role: Court

REUTERS — WARSAW

Poland's Constitutional Tribunal ruled yesterday that the human rights ombudsman be removed from his post, drawing opposition accusations that the court sought to illegally end the mandate of a staunch government critic.

After the nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) won power in 2015, Adam Bodnar emerged as a leading defender of liberal values such as women's and minority rights, as well as judicial independence, which critics say are under threat from PiS.

His five-year term ended in September, but parliament could not agree on a replacement, with the lower and upper houses controlled, respectively, by the government and the opposition.

In its ruling, the Tribunal said the legislation that stipulates that in such cases the ombudsman stays in office until lawmakers pick a new one was unconstitutional.

"The term is clearly defined and its extension is unacceptable," it said in a statement.

Critics say the Tribunal is part of sweeping judiciary reforms conducted by PiS which the European Union has branded as subversive of democratic checks and balances. PiS denies this. The European Commission expressed concern over the verdict.

"It is of paramount importance to ensure that this institution, which defends citizens' rights and plays an important role in upholding the rule of law, remains independent," spokesman Christian Wigand told a regular news briefing.

Bodnar urged lawmakers to decide quickly on his successor, saying PiS could otherwise appoint a commissioner, turning the post into one not sufficiently independent from the government.

The Tribunal said Bodnar would stay in his post for three months as an interim solution.

Bodnar's activities came into focus this week when a Warsaw court halted the purchase of several local newspapers from a German owner by state-backed refiner PKN Orlen following an appeal by Bodnar.

Opposition parties have said the takeover — approved by competition watchdog UOKiK and completed by PKN earlier this year — is part of a wider effort to increase government control of the media.

In another sign of tensions over reforms in Poland, the EU's top court's Advocate General said Warsaw could be in breach of the bloc's law in how it appointed judges to two new chambers of the Supreme Court because the process was "indicative of a flagrant breach of the rules of national law".

Court upholds Canada-US asylum-seeker agreement

REUTERS — TORONTO

A Canadian appeals court yesterday upheld a Canada-US agreement to turn back asylum-seekers, overturning a lower court ruling, siding with the federal government and setting up a possible Supreme Court showdown.

The ruling is a victory for Canada's federal government, which had launched an appeal defending the agreement and, by association, US immigration detention practices, which it said do not "shock the conscience."

At issue was whether the Safe Third Country Agreement, a pact signed in 2002 and under which asylum-seekers trying to cross between Canada and the United States at a formal border crossing are turned around and sent back, violates an asylum-seeker's fundamental rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

It was not the agreement itself that may have been causing these alleged infringements on the claimants' rights, the ruling said, but the periodic reviews of the designation of the United States as a "safe" country as well as "related administrative conduct."

The challenge should have focused on those reviews, the ruling said, even though the government has kept them secret.

The ruling also said that the experiences of just 10 asylum-seekers cited were not enough to draw conclusions about the US immigration detention system and potential rights violations.

That's a problematic bar to set, said University of Ottawa immigration law professor Jamie Chai Yun Liew, adding that the ruling and the continuation of the agreement fly in the face of the reputation Canada builds for itself as a champion of refugees,

"It erodes our commitment to refugee protection and also erodes our reputation in upholding the rights of refugees," she said.

Last year a federal court ruled that the agreement violated asylum-seekers' right to life, liberty and security of the person. Refugee lawyers argued the agreement also violated asylum-seekers' equality rights at the Federal Court of Appeal this year.

They said the agreement should be struck down because asylum-seekers who were turned back often found themselves locked up indefinitely in immigration detention. They also argued that people trying to make refugee claims that might be accepted in Canada, such as those on the grounds of gender-based discrimination, risk being sent back by the United States to their countries of origin.

Canada's government argued that the pact was a necessary part of managing a shared border and that people in US immigration detention had access to counsel and due process. Should the agreement be dissolved and asylum-seekers allowed to enter through land border crossings and make refugee claims, the government argued, it would suffer "irreparable harm."

The legal battle may not be over, however: Refugee lawyers may apply to be heard by Canada's Supreme Court.

Denmark looking to share unwanted AstraZeneca vaccine: WHO

REUTERS — ZURICH

Denmark is examining options for sharing AstraZeneca's vaccines with poorer nations after it halted use of the shots over concerns about rare blood clots, the World Health Organization's Europe head said yesterday.

Denmark this week became the first country to stop using AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine altogether, as European officials investigate reports of very rare blood clots combined with low platelet counts that have occurred in the bloc, as well as Britain.

The WHO, which along with Britain and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) continue to recommend AstraZeneca's shot on the grounds that the benefits outweigh the risks, has been pushing countries not to hoard vaccines that they are not using.

The lion's share of vaccines distributed globally, so far, have gone to wealthier nations.

"I did have this conversation with Dr. Soren Brostrom, director general of the Danish (Health Authority) yesterday and I understand that the ministry of foreign affairs of Denmark is ready to, or looking already into options, for sharing AstraZeneca vaccines with poorer countries," WHO Europe Director Hans Kluge told reporters.

Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte said her country would gladly take the shots: "We still have less vaccines then people willing to be vaccinated.

Therefore, Lithuania has expressed readiness to take as many doses of Astra Zeneca, as Denmark is ready to share."



Canada ramps up vaccination drive

Nurses from Humber River Hospital's mobile vaccine clinic depart Christian Horizons charitable organisation to go and set up another mobile vaccine clinic as part of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccination campaign, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, yesterday

Argentine tensions erupt over lockdowns as cases spike

REUTERS — BUENOS AIRES

Argentina's national government and authorities in capital Buenos Aires are clashing over tightened COVID-19 restrictions and the closure of schools in and around the city.

The mayor of Buenos Aires on Thursday slammed the national government over new measures that include a two-week closure of schools and restrictions on movement after 8pm in the populous metropolitan area that is a hot spot for new cases.

"Yesterday, the national government decided to break the mechanism of dialogue and consensus that we had for more than a year," Horacio Rodriguez Larreta, head of the city government, told a news conference. "I want to be very clear: we were not consulted about any of the measures taken."

Larreta, part of the political opposition, pledged to do all he could to keep schools open. He called for immediate talks with center-left Peronist President Alberto Fernandez and said his administration would take the matter to the country's supreme court.

"We totally disagree with the decision of the national government to close schools... We know the damage that closed schools do," he said.

"The boys and girls of Buenos Aires have to be in the classrooms on Monday. We have three or four days to do everything in our power to achieve that."

Fernandez said on Wednesday that Argentina needed to "gain time" in the fight against COVID-19 after cases hit a record this week.

Brazil court allows probe of president's virus response

AP — SAO PAULO

Brazil's Supreme Court on Wednesday allowed a Senate investigation of President Jair Bolsonaro's handling of the pandemic to go forward, one of two cases it tackled that could affect the leader's bid for reelection next year.

The full court started weighing the political future of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a potential powerful rival to Bolsonaro. One of the judges earlier ruled he had been unjustly convicted in a corruption case, a decision that effectively reinstated his right to run for the presidency again.

The court voted 10-1 Wednesday to uphold Justice Luís Roberto Barroso's order that the Senate should start an investigation of into Bolsonaro's management of the crisis because a required number of senators had sponsored such a call. The Senate president had tried to delay the probe, citing pandemic health restrictions.

Critics, including those calling for or leading the investigation, say Bolsonaro has bungled Brazil's response to the pandemic by resisting health-driven restrictions on activity, failing to marshal resources for vaccines and stimulating the use of drugs that don't work against the virus.

Bolsonaro and his allies say he's being unfairly blamed for Brazil's surge in COVID-19 deaths, a toll that trails only that of the United States. Brazil's seven-day average death toll hit a new record on Monday.

The Senate probe "is an attempted political coup against the president," said Senator Márcio Bittar, a Bolsonaro ally, in a Twitter post on Wednesday.

He's also cried foul as the Supreme Court has issued rulings that go against him, prompting outrage from his conservative base that claims the court is overstepping constitutional bounds.

Carlos Melo, a political science professor at Insper University in Sao Paulo, said the investigation poses the risks for Bolsonaro

"The desperation with the pandemic tends to increase as deaths continue to grow. Economic issues are also far from being solved. And at the same time his administration is fighting with its base in congress over next year's budget," Melo said. "The surroundings of the inquiry don't favour Bolsonaro."

US imposes array of sanctions on Russia

REUTERS — WASHINGTON/ MOSCOW

The United States yesterday imposed a broad array of sanctions on Russia, including curbs to its sovereign debt market, to punish it for interfering in last year's US election, cyber-hacking, bullying Ukraine and other alleged "malign" actions.

The US government blacklisted Russian companies, expelled Russian diplomats and barred US banks from buying sovereign bonds from Russia's central bank, national wealth fund and finance ministry. The United States warned Russia that more penalties were possible but said it did not want to escalate.

The Russian foreign ministry reacted angrily, summoning the US ambassador for a diplomatic dressing-down to tell him "a series of retaliatory measures will follow soon." A ministry spokeswoman also said a possible summit could be imperiled.

Russia denies meddling in US elections, orchestrating a cyber hack that used US tech company SolarWinds Corp to penetrate US government networks and using a nerve agent to poison Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

US President Joe Biden on Tuesday spoke to Russian President Vladimir Putin to raise concerns about these issues and the build-up of Russian forces in Crimea and along the border with Ukraine, though a top US general saw only a "low to medium" risk of a Russian invasion in the next few weeks.

Biden, who also proposed a US-Russian summit, is trying to strike a balance between deterring what Washington sees as hostile Russian behavior while avoiding a deeper deterioration in US-Russian ties and preserving some room for cooperation.

"Our objective here is not to escalate. Our objective here is to impose costs for what we feel are unacceptable actions by the Russian government," said White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki.

"Our objective here is not to escalate. Our objective here is to impose costs for what we feel are unacceptable actions by the Russian government," said White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki.

Among his moves, Biden signed an executive order authorizing the US government to sanction any area of the Russian economy and used it to restrict Russia's ability to issue sovereign debt to punish Moscow for interfering in the 2020 US election.

Biden barred US financial institutions from taking part in the primary market for rouble-denominated Russian sovereign bonds from June 14. US banks have been barred from taking part in the primary market for non-rouble sovereign bonds since 2019.

He did not, however, prohibit them from buying such debt in the secondary market, a step likely to have a far more dramatic effect on the Russian bond and currency markets, which fell as news of the sanctions seeped out before recovering some losses.

"The president signed this sweeping new authority to confront Russia's continued and growing malign activity," US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a statement.

The Treasury also blacklisted 32 entities and individuals that it said had carried out Russian government-directed attempts to influence the 2020 US presidential election and other "acts of disinformation and interference."

In concert with the European Union, Britain, Australia and Canada, the Treasury also sanctioned eight individuals associated with Russia's ongoing occupation and repression in Crimea, which Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

The White House said it was expelling 10 Russian diplomats in Washington DC, including representatives of the Russian intelligence services and for the first time, formally named the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) as the perpetrator of the SolarWinds Corp hack. The agency said the allegations were "nonsense" and "windbaggery."

The US government plans a new executive order to strengthen its cybersecurity, a US official told reporters, suggesting it could include such elements as encryption and multifactor authentication.



Biden meets Asian Pacific American Caucus members

US President Joe Biden speaks during a meeting with members of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, DC, US, yesterday.

Cool reception for Democratic proposal to expand US Supreme Court

REUTERS — WASHINGTON

A group of liberal Democratic lawmakers yesterday proposed expanding the US Supreme Court by four justices, aiming to end its conservative majority, but the plan drew an unenthusiastic response from the White House and top Democrats and was denounced by Republicans.

Senator Ed Markey and House of Representatives members Jerrold Nadler, Hank Johnson and Mondaire Jones introduced legislation in both chambers that would expand the number of justices to 13 from the current nine.

Markey said that Republicans had politicized the court, undermining its legitimacy, and the measure would "restore balance." Republican former President Donald Trump was able to appoint three justices during his four years in office, giving the court a 6-3 conservative majority.

"Our democracy is in jeopardy today because the Supreme Court's standing is sorely damaged. And the way we repair it is straightforward," Markey said at a news conference in front of the court.

President Joe Biden, a Democrat, last Friday established a bipartisan commission to study potential Supreme Court changes including expansion or imposing term limits on the justices instead of the current lifetime appointments.

The number of Supreme Court justices has remained at nine since 1869. Congress has the power to change the number and did so several times before that. Democrats hold slim majorities in the House and Senate. The Senate is divided 50-50, with Vice President Kamala Harris casting a tie-breaking vote. Most legislation needs 60 votes to advance in the Senate.

Expanding the court, an idea popular among some liberals and activists on the left, has not drawn broad-based support, with some Democratic leaders expressing uncertainty and Republicans firmly opposed to what is sometimes called "court packing."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi expressed reservations, saying she favours Biden's proposal to study the issue. "It's an idea that should be considered. And I think the president's taking the right approach to have a commission to study such a thing," Pelosi said.

Merck plans large outpatient trial of pills for virus patients

REUTERS — NEW YORK

Merck & Co Inc yesterday said it plans a large study of what could become the first pill to target the coronavirus in people at risk of severe COVID-19, but will no longer pursue use of the experimental antiviral drug in hospitalized patients.

The company said it would study the drug molnupiravir in a Phase 3 trial among COVID-19 patients out of hospitals who have at least one risk factor for poor outcomes, such as advanced age, obesity or diabetes.

Trial participants can have had symptoms for no more than five days, shortened from seven days in a prior study.

"We had some encouraging signals in the outpatient trial. That was not the case in the inpatient trial, but that was not unexpected," Roy Baynes, Merck's chief medical officer, said. He said COVID-19 patients who need hospital treatment are often in the "inflammatory" phase of the disease, which is too late for an antiviral drug to provide much help.

Molnupiravir, which Merck is developing with Ridgeback Biotherapeutics, is designed to interfere with the ability of the coronavirus to replicate.

Merck also said it discontinued development of an experimental immune modulator, known as MK-7110, for treating COVID-19 after concluding that clinical trial and manufacturing preparations would take too long.

Capitol Police watchdog says force needs a 'culture change'

AP — WASHINGTON

The top watchdog for the US Capitol Police will tell a House committee yesterday that there is a need for a culture change within the force after broad failures in its response to the Jan. 6 insurrection, including missed intelligence predicting a "war" and weapons that were so old that officers didn't feel comfortable using them.

Capitol Police Inspector General Michael A Bolton has investigated the force's missteps since the siege, when hundreds of President Donald Trump's supporters broke into the building and sent lawmakers fleeing for their lives. In a 104-page report obtained by The Associated Press, he paints a dire picture of his agency's ability to respond to future threats and casts serious doubt on whether the force would be able to respond to another large-scale attack.

In prepared remarks, Bolton says the Capitol Police needs to improve its intelligence gathering, training, and operational planning. There also needs to be a change in the way that the force views its own mission, he says.

"In regards to culture change, we see that the Department needs to move away from the thought process as a traditional Police Department and move to the posture as a Protective Agency," Bolton writes in the remarks. "A police department is a reactive force. A crime is committed; police respond and make an arrest. Whereas, a Protective Agency is postured to being proactive to prevent events such as January 6th."

The Capitol Police have so far refused to publicly release the report - prepared in March and marked as "law enforcement sensitive" — despite congressional pressure. Democratic Rep. Zoe Lofgren of California, who heads the House Administration Committee, said last month that she found the report, along with another so-called "flash report" the department had circulated internally, "detailed and disturbing." Lofgren's committee is holding Thursday's hearing.

Bolton found that the department's deficiencies were — and remain — widespread: Equipment was old and stored badly; officers didn't complete required training; and there was a lack of direction at the Civil Disturbance Unit, which exists to ensure that legislative functions of Congress are not disrupted by civil unrest or protest activity.

That was exactly what happened on January 6 when Trump supporters violently pushed past police and broke into the Capitol as Congress counted the Electoral College votes that certified Joe Biden's victory.

The report also focuses on several pieces of missed intelligence, including the force's own inconsistent information gathering and an FBI memo sent the day before the insurrection that then-Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund has told lawmakers he never saw. That memo, which is included in the report's appendix, warned of threatening online postings by Trump backers, including one comment that Congress "needs to hear glass breaking, doors being kicked in" and blood being spilled.



House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence meets

DIA Director Lieutenant General Scott Berrier (right) and NSA Director General Paul Nakasone (centre) speak with Chairman Adam Schiff, as the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence holds its annual World-Wide Threat Hearing at the US Capitol in Washington, yesterday.

Chicago releases video of police shooting boy

AP — CHICAGO

Chicago's police review board released body camera video on Thursday of a police officer's fatal shooting of a 13-year-old boy late last month.

The Civilian Office of Police Accountability, an independent board that investigates Chicago police shootings, released the footage of the March 29 fatal shooting of Adam Toledo after allowing the boy's family to view it on Tuesday.

In the jumpy body camera video of the officer who shot Toledo, the officer chases the teen on foot down an alley for several seconds and yells "Police! Stop! Stop right (expletive) now!"

As the teen slows down, the officer yells "Hands! Hands! Show me your (expletive) hands!"

Toledo then turns toward the camera, the officer yells "Drop it!" and midway between repeating that command, he opens fire and the teen drops to the ground. While approaching the wounded Toledo, the officer radios in for an ambulance. He can be heard imploring the boy to "stay awake," and as other officers arrive, the officer who apparently fired the shot says he can't feel a heartbeat and begins administering CPR.

Shortly before the board posted the video and other investigation materials on its website, Mayor Lori Lightfoot urged the public to remain peaceful and reserve judgment until the board can complete its investigation.

Defense rests without Chauvin testimony

AP — MINNEAPOLIS

The defence at the murder trial of former Officer Derek Chauvin in the death of George Floyd rested its case yesterday without putting Chauvin on the stand, presenting a total of two days of testimony to the prosecution's two weeks.

Closing arguments are set to begin Monday morning, after which the jury will get the case.

Before the jury was brought into the courtroom, Chauvin, his COVID-19 mask removed in a rare courtroom moment, informed the judge that he would not testify, saying he would invoke his Fifth Amendment right not to take the stand.

It would have been the first time Chauvin publicly told his side of the story. "Is this your decision not to testify?" Judge Peter Cahill asked. "It is, your honor," Chauvin said.

The prosecution briefly recalled a lung and critical care expert to knock down a defense witness' theory that carbon monoxide poisoning from a squad car's exhaust might have contributed to Floyd's death. Dr. Martin Tobin noted hospital tests that showed Floyd's level was at most 2%, within the normal range.

And with that, both sides finished presenting their cases.

After closing arguments, the racially diverse jury will begin deliberating at the barbed-wire-ringed courthouse, with Minneapolis on edge against a repeat of the protests and violence that broke out last spring over Floyd's death.

Cahill reminded the jurors they will be sequestered starting Monday, and said: "If I were you, I would plan for long and hope for short."

The question of whether Chauvin would testify was the subject of weeks of speculation.

The risks were high: Testifying could have opened him up to devastating cross-examination, with prosecutors replaying the video of the arrest and forcing Chauvin to explain, one frame at a time, why he kept pressing down on Floyd.

But taking the stand could have also given the jury the opportunity to see or hear any remorse or sympathy he might feel. He would have been able to remove the mask he has had to wear at the defense table.

After an ambulance had taken Floyd away, Chauvin told a bystander: "We gotta control this guy 'cause he's a sizable guy... and it looks like he's probably on something."





Amazon must treat workers better: Bezos

While the voting results were lopsided and our direct relationship with employees is strong, it's clear to me that we need a better vision for how we create value for employees - a vision for their success.

Jeff Bezos
Amazon CEO

Business | 14



QSE 10,899.06 +293.68 (+2.77%)↑ **FTSE 100** 6,983.50 +43.92 (0.63%)↑ **DOW** 33,983.58 +252.69 (0.75%)↑ **BRENT** $66.58 (+2.91)↑







MoCI obtains ISO certificate in information security

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI), represented by the Information Technology Department, obtained the ISO certificate ISO 27001, presented by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), upon adopting the latest international standards for information security management and risk assessment.

The certificate was received by Ali Khalid Al Khulaifi, Director of the Information Technology Department at the Ministry.

The ISO-certified ISO 27001 is one of the most trusted and internationally accredited certificates for information security. It is widely recognised for providing institutions with a model for operating, implementing, monitoring, and improving their information security management systems.

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The Ministry indicated that obtaining the ISO certificate ISO 27001 assured its ability to adopt and implement internationally recognized standards, as well as its full commitment to providing its customers with a service of the highest level.

Furthermore, obtaining the ISO 27001 confirms the Ministry's commitment to ensuring complete confidentiality for all parties that deal with it, by providing an environment that is both effective and safe.

The requirements for obtaining the ISO certification ISO 27001 include the Ministry's commitment to implementing a fully-fledged program to ensure that all information security controls are applied and individuals' information is fully protected.

The Ministry is additionally required to continuously assess all information security risks at the level of its services, in addition to designing and implementing a comprehensive and effective set of information security controls that apply to the services and technology used at the Ministry.



Ali Khalid Al Khulaifi, Director of the Information Technology Department at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, receiving the certificate.

German institutes cut 2021 GDP forecast

BLOOMBERG

Germany's leading research institutes cut their joint 2021 growth forecast for Europe's biggest economy as prolonged lockdowns hold back the nation's recovery.

The downgrade to a 3.7 percent expansion in gross domestic product, from 4.7 percent previously, reflects a sluggish vaccination campaign which has forced the government to extend virus restrictions. The outlook for 2022 was upgraded to 3.9 percent from 2.7 percent.

The economy likely shrank by 1.8 percent in the first quarter of this year, Torsten Schmidt, Economic Director of RWI Leibniz Institute for Economic Research, said in the report.

Germany has struggled to control a third wave of infections, and Chancellor Angela Merkel is seeking to impose even harsher curbs in virus hot spots. The institutes said they don't expect rules to be loosened again until the middle of the second quarter, and that restrictions will likely remain in place until the end of the third quarter.



German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz speaks during a session of the lower house of parliament Bundestag in Berlin, Germany, yesterday.

The twice-yearly outlook is prepared for the economy ministry by the DIW, Ifo, IfW, IWH and RWI institutes, and helps guide the government's own forecasts and budget planning.

The government's forecast is for growth of 3 percent this year, after a contraction of around 5 percent in 2020, and it expects a return to pre-pandemic levels of output in mid-2022. The economy ministry has said the signs point to a recovery over the rest of this year, and that a pickup in the pace of inoculations is fostering confidence.

Economy Minister Peter Altmaier said yesterday that he'll publish an update to the government's forecasts on April 27, and the prediction for this year would likely be "well above the previous forecast."

"In particular, manufacturing is currently robust," he said in an emailed statement. "However, we still have major problems in the area of retail and services," he said.

Merkel's ruling coalition has made tens of billions of euros available to offset the economic impact of the pandemic, and Finance Minister Olaf Scholz said yesterday it'll continue to help businesses and households for as long as necessary.

"We must ensure that we can support companies and jobs with financial aid until the end of the crisis," Scholz said during a lower house of parliament debate on the his supplementary budget for this year.

"We can afford to finance everything that is needed," he said, adding that Germany's budget will be in better shape than other countries after the crisis thanks to sensible policies in the past that laid a solid foundation.

QE Index gains over 357 points last week

QNA — DOHA

Qatar Stock Exchange (QSE) index gained 357.530 points or 3.39 percent last week when the bourse closed yesterday at 10,899.06 points.

Qatar Stock Exchange index gained 293.68 points, or 2.77 percent, to close at 10,899.06 yesterday.

Trading value during this week accounted QR3,265,065,378 and the trading volume reached 1,426,031,438 with 59,225 transactions. Market capitalization accounted QR627,078,185,024 as compared to QR616,015,819,861 at the end of previous week.

Banking and Financial Services sector increased 183.60 points (+4.22 percent) to 4,536.61 points and Consumer Goods and Services sector increased 148.45 points (+1.82 percent) to 8,308.42 points.

Industries sector gained to 45.70 points (+1.32 percent) to 3,510.36 and the Insurance sector gained 25.10 points (+0.97 percent) to 2,623.03 points.

The Real Estate sector increased 4.020 points (+0.21 percent) to 1,926.75 points. The Telecom sector dropped 26.08 points (-2.35 percent) to 1,086.06 points and Transportation sector lost 36 points (-1.02 percent) to 3,503.94 points. From the 48 listed companies 25 ended this week higher, while 23 lower.

Citigroup, Bank of America earnings rise in Q1

ANADOLU — ANKARA

US-based international investment banking firms Bank of America and Citigroup saw their earnings increase in the first quarter, according to financial results statements released yesterday.

Bank of America saw revenues reach $22.8bn in the first three months of this year, unchanged from the same quarter last year. Its net income more than doubled to $8.1bn from $4bn.

"While low interest rates continued to challenge revenue, credit costs improved and we believe that progress in the health crisis and the economy point to an accelerating recovery," said Chairman and CEO Brian Moynihan **(pictured)**. Citigroup saw a 6.7 percent decline in revenue which fell to $19.3bn in the January-March period from $20.7bn in the same period in 2020. Net income soared 216 percent to $7.9bn, from $2.5bn.

"We are optimistic about the macro environment," according to CEO Jane Fraser who added that revenue numbers were a result of the coronavirus pandemic. "This is the healthiest we have seen the consumer emerge from a crisis in recent history," she said.



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More than QR783m volume of real estate transactions during past week

QNA — DOHA

The volume of real estate transactions in sales contracts registered within the Real Estate Registration Department at the Ministry of Justice during the period from April 4 to 8 this year reached QR783,154,483.

The weekly bulletin issued by the department stated that the list of real estate traded for sale included vacant lands, residences, residential buildings, and residential complexes.

Most of the trading took place in the municipalities of Al Wakrah, Al Da'ayen, Doha, Al Rayyan, Al Khor, Al Dhakira, Umm Salal, and Al Shamal.

The total value of real estate transactions in the period between March 28 to April 1 was QR681,27,69.

Turkish Central Bank holds key policy rate steady

QNA — ANKARA

Turkish Central Bank on Thursday left its benchmark interest rate unchanged. In a statement issued after a meeting held by the Monetary Policy Committee under new governor Sahap Kavcioglu, the bank kept the one-week repo rate at 19 percent and the bank pledged to use all available instruments to ensure the primary objective of price stability.

In the statement reported by Turkish DAILY SABAH, the bank did not repeat last month's pledges to deliver more rate hikes if needed and to "decisively" maintain a tight monetary policy "for an extended period" to address inflation.

The policy committee said the interest rate "will continue to be determined at a level above inflation to maintain a strong disinflationary effect until strong indicators point to a permanent fall in inflation."

Aramco oil pipeline investors to refinance loan with bonds next year

REUTERS — DUBAI

EIG Global Energy Partners will lead a yet-unnamed consortium to issue billions of dollars in bonds across two or three transactions to replace bank debt backing an investment in Saudi Aramco's oil pipeline assets, two sources said.

The Washington, DC-based firm's consortium will issue bonds to replace $10.5bn in so-called staple financing that was arranged by Aramco for potential suitors to take the 49 percent stake, the sources said.

The $12.4bn deal, announced last Friday, gives the EIG-led group a stake in Aramco Oil Pipelines, which has the rights to 25 years of tariff payments for oil transported through Aramco's oil pipeline network that traverses the world's largest crude exporter.

The staple financing backing the deal had a five-year maturity and one-year extension option, the sources said.

EIG will replace the full amount with long-tenor bonds across two or three bond deals, they said.

The first bond issuance will likely be in the first quarter of next year and the entire refinancing will be done within two years, the sources said.

The equity portion of the $12.4bn deal was $1.9bn and the rest was the staple financing, one of the sources said.

EIG is in talks to sell part of the equity portion to investors including Abu Dhabi state fund Mubadala, Chinese investors, pension funds in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as a small piece to US pension funds, the source added. Mubadala has said it is looking at the deal.

EIG is a Washington, DC-based investment firm that has invested more than $34bn in energy and energy infrastructure projects around the world.

Turkey registers over 263,000 housing sales in first quarter

ANADOLU — ANKARA



The number of residential properties sold in Turkey decreased 23 percent year-on-year to 263,050 in the first quarter of this year, the country's statistical office announced yesterday.

Some 182,680 houses were sold for the first time while the remaining were second-hand sales in January-March, according to TurkStat.

Istanbul - Turkey's largest city by population and one of its top tourist centers — took the largest share of house sales with 20 percent, or 51,602 houses, in the first three months of this year.

The capital Ankara and the Aegean province of Izmir racked up 25,395 (10 percent) and 15,358 (6 percent) of total housing sales, respectively.

Mortgaged house sales were recorded at 47,216 — an 18 percent share of all house sales over the same period.

TurkStat data showed that the number of properties sold to foreigners fell 9.6 percent during the same period.

Some 9,887 houses were sold to foreigners, with more than half, or 5,024 units, of them in Istanbul. It was followed by the Mediterranean holiday resort city of Antalya with sales of 1,884 properties.

Amazon must treat workers better: Bezos

BLOOMBERG



Bezos is stepping down as CEO later this year to become executive chairman, and it was clear that legacy was on his mind in the final missive to investors in his current role.

For years, Jeff Bezos has made a religion of putting the customer first at Amazon.com Inc. Now, with a contentious union vote behind him and the end of his reign as chief executive officer nearing, the world's wealthiest person says it's time to focus more on the welfare of the company's workers as well.

"I think we need to do a better job for employees," he said in a letter to shareholders. "While the voting results were lopsided and our direct relationship with employees is strong, it's clear to me that we need a better vision for how we create value for employees - a vision for their success."

Bezos is stepping down as CEO later this year to become executive chairman, and it was clear that legacy was on his mind in the final missive to investors in his current role.

The company he founded is the world's largest online retailer and cloud-computing company and ranks highly in polls of popular brands and trusted institutions. But Amazon has found itself challenged by regulators, labour unions and activists around the world in the last year, some of whom make the case that the company reached its perch through aggressive business tactics that left a trail of vanquished competitors, shortchanged partners and burnt out workers.

In the letter, released yesterday, Bezos argues that Amazon's success emanates from its track record of invention and adding value to society. "Any business that doesn't create value for those it touches, even if it appears successful on the surface, isn't long for this world," he said.

US retail sales surge; weekly jobless claims drop to one-year low

REUTERS – BENGALURU

US retail sales rebounded more than expected in March as Americans received additional pandemic relief checks from the government and increased COVID-19 vaccinations allowed broader economic re-engagement, cementing expectations for robust growth in the first quarter.

The brightening economic prospects were underscored by other data on Thursday showing first-time claims for unemployment benefits tumbled last week to the lowest level since March 2020, when mandatory closures of non-essential businesses were enforced to slow the spread of the first COVID-19 wave.

The rapidly improving public health environment and the White House's $1.9 trillion rescue package are positioning the economy for the fastest growth in nearly four decades this year.

"Consumer spending is leading a strong economic recovery in early 2021," said Gus Faucher, chief economist at PNC Financial in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Retail sales increased 9.8 percent last month, the Commerce Department said. Data for February was revised higher to show sales dropping 2.7 percent instead of 3.0 percent as previously reported.

The broad-based rebound was led by motor vehicles, with receipts at auto dealerships surging 15.1 percent after falling 3.5 percent in February. Sales at clothing stores soared 18.3 percent.

Consumers also boosted spending at restaurants and bars, leading to a 13.4 percent jump in receipts. Still, sales at restaurants and bars are 1.8 percent lower compared to March 2020.

Receipts at electronics and appliance stores increased 10.5 percent and sales at furniture stores rose 5.9 percent. There were also hefty gains in sales at sporting goods, hobby, musical instrument and book stores. Receipts at food and beverage stores gained 0.7 percent.

Sales at building material stores vaulted 12.1 percent. Online retail sales increased 6.0 percent.



A file photo of people wearing protective masks shop at Macy's Herald Square in the Manhattan borough of New York City, New York, US.

Economists polled by *Reuters* had forecast retail sales would increase 5.9% in March. Many qualified households have received additional $1,400 checks, which were part of the massive stimulus package approved in early March. The package also extended a government-funded $300 weekly unemployment supplement through September 6.

At the same time, temperatures have warmed up and the public health situation has been rapidly improving, allowing more restaurants to offer dining services.

US stocks opened higher on the data. The dollar was steady against a basket of currencies. US Treasury prices rose.

Excluding automobiles, gasoline, building materials and food services, retail sales rose 6.9 percent last month after a revised 3.4 percent decrease in February. These so-called core retail sales correspond most closely with the consumer spending component of gross domestic product. They were previously estimated to have declined 3.5 percent in February.

Strengthening domestic demand was underscored by the release of the Federal Reserve's "Beige Book" report on Wednesday, which described economic activity as having "accelerated to a moderate pace from late February to early April," and also noted that "consumer spending strengthened."

QATAR STOCK EXCHANGE

Name	Prev Close	Open Price	Low	High	Offer Volume	Offer Price	Bid Price	Bid Volume	Last Price	IMP / INAV	Change	Change %	Trades	Volume	Value (QAR)
QNBK - QNB	17.99	17.73	17.73	18.09	42,252	18.09	17.91	3,000	18.09	18.09	+0.10	+0.56	476	2,079,166	37,450,125.59
QIBK - Qatar Islamic Bank	16.36	16.37	16.34	16.80	62,860	16.8	16.5	1,500	16.80	16.80	+0.44	+2.69	211	499,847	8,288,750.40
CBQK - Comm. Bank of Qatar	4.80	4.80	4.76	4.94	42,839	4.94	4.8	105,470	4.94	4.940	+0.14	+2.92	66	535,236	2,626,909.36
DHBK - Doha Bank	2.335	2.311	2.31	2.34	4,700	2.339	2.335	12,000	2.34	0.000	0.00	+0.21	7	49,873	115,552.12
ABQK - Ahli Bank	3.611	3.749	3.70	3.79	1,656	3.7	3.611	5,000	3.70	0.000	+0.09	+2.46	5	21,823	81,239.17
QIIK - Intl. Islamic Bank	8.526	8.53	8.51	8.73	5,908	8.74	8.73	688	8.73	8.73	+0.20	+2.39	136	757,383	6,556,771.22
MARK - Rayan	4.25	4.250	4.250	4.295	239,158	4.295	4.28	226,478	4.295	4.295	+0.045	+1.06	328	2,739,627	11,756,912.822
NCBK - Al Khalij Commercial Bank	2.11	2.11	2.10	2.11	50,000	2.1	2.055	50,000	2.10	2.10	-0.01	-0.47	29	903,877	1,899,948.18
QFBQ - Qatar First Bank (QFC)	1.967	1.967	1.935	1.990	10,000	1.945	1.944	16,557	1.944	1.944	-0.023	-1.17	211	6,220,802	12,116,669.212
QETF - QE Index ETF	10.55	10.58	10.580	10.599	8,991	11.121	10.571	25,000	10.599	10.68	+0.049	+0.46	8	150,000	1,587,950.000
QATR - Al Rayan Qatar ETF	2.493	2.506	2.499	2.522	17,245	2.522	2.382	5,000	2.522	2.521	+0.029	+1.16	8	38,374	96,099.747
QATI - Qatar Insurance	2.499	2.510	2.480	2.516	53,197	2.515	2.496	20,000	2.515	2.515	+0.016	+0.64	77	991,932	2,487,155.711
DOHI - Doha Insurance	1.899	1.900	1.881	1.900	5,000	1.896	1.88	230,582	1.881	1.881	-0.018	-0.95	9	75,236	142,055.328
QLMI - QLM	5.07	5.051	5.037	5.150	5,432	5.147	5.05	27,103	5.147	5.147	+0.077	+1.52	48	292,437	1,486,738.303
QGRI - General Insurance	2.444	2.445	2.44	2.45	7,192	2.445	2.374	3,450	2.45	0.000	+0.01	+0.25	4	39,566	96,912.59
AKHI - Alkhaleej Takaful	3.63	3.692	3.692	3.993	114,640	3.993	3.982	247	3.993	3.993	+0.363	+10.00	398	6,151,282	24,293,851.090
QISI - Islamic Insurance	7.605	7.79	7.54	7.79	480	76	7.555	1,890	7.60	0.000	-0.00	-0.04	28	99,028	752,940.88
QAMC - QAMCO	1.40	1.420	1.400	1.436	17,600	1.439	1.436	678,732	1.436	1.436	+0.036	+2.57	416	12,484,163	17,708,549.401
QIMD - Ind. Manf. Co.	3.00	3.00	2.960	3.079	22,300	3.079	3.0	1,061	3.079	0.00	+0.079	+2.63	6	14,016	42,019.260
QNCD - National Cement Co.	5.052	5.06	5.05	5.17	10,000	5.1	5.071	2,425	5.10	5.10	+0.05	+0.95	138	709,312	3,612,825.98
ZHCD - Zad Holding Company	14.96	14.96	14.91	15.25	601	15.14	14.94	5,000	15.14	15.14	+0.18	+1.20	36	61,516	925,071.95
QCD - Industries Qatar	12.53	12.51	12.50	12.64	37,321	12.6	12.56	20,000	12.60	12.60	+0.07	+0.56	106	769,117	9,669,439.34
UDCD - United Dev. Company	1.63	1.60	1.60	1.64	9,957	1.631	1.63	135,146	1.63	1.63	0.00	0.00	80	1,072,272	1,742,831.42
QGMD - Qatar German Co. Med	2.799	2.799	2.771	2.870	19,414	2.84	2.839	29,660	2.839	2.839	+0.040	+1.43	284	2,717,495	7,697,245.499
QIGD - The Investors	2.074	2.077	2.077	2.220	50,000	2.19	2.189	43,965	2.189	2.189	+0.115	+5.54	364	5,637,347	12,246,237.000
ORDS - Ooredoo	7.122	7.061	7.061	7.131	6,970	7.128	7.126	2,222	7.128	7.128	+0.006	+0.08	296	671,646	4,776,685.207
QEWS - Electricity & Water	16.75	16.87	16.87	17.00	1,209	17.0	16.79	4,000	17.00	17.00	+0.25	+1.49	203	374,356	6,346,761.66
SIIS - Salam International	0.726	0.734	0.721	0.750	320,760	0.747	0.745	235,306	0.745	0.745	+0.019	+2.62	523	32,308,489	23,999,803.606
BLDN - Baladna	1.665	1.667	1.655	1.674	11,000	1.666	1.665	50,000	1.666	1.666	+0.001	+0.06	196	7,601,568	12,659,344.216
NLCS - National Leasing	1.24	1.242	1.238	1.250	77,500	1.244	1.242	110,609	1.242	1.242	+0.002	+0.16	53	1,382,548	1,718,757.459
QNNS - Qatar Navigation	7.599	7.60	7.49	7.70	21,485	77	7.595	3,370	7.70	7.700	+0.10	+1.33	27	50,453	386,085.21
MCGS - Medicare	9.35	9.35	9.31	9.42	27,827	9.42	9.304	5,769	9.42	9.420	+0.07	+0.75	28	104,460	975,962.57
QCFS - Cinema	3.81	3.81	3.81	3.81	5,315	3.81	3.689	50,000	3.81	0.00	0.00	0.00	1	500	1,905.00
QFLS - Qatar Fuel	17.26	17.35	17.25	17.45	5,043	17.45	17.21	5,000	17.45	17.45	+0.19	+1.10	67	156,225	2,721,046.77
MEAH - Meeah	5.665	5.65	5.65	5.70	12,351	5.734	5.662	58,178	5.70	5.70	+0.03	+0.62	13	56,631	320,561.89
GWCS - Gulf warehousing Co	5.072	5.072	5.070	5.098	2,567	5.097	5.072	6,499	5.097	5.097	+0.025	+0.49	20	108,012	548,341.577
QATS - Nakilat	3.208	3.210	3.210	3.225	5,943	3.223	3.22	2,000	3.223	3.223	+0.015	+0.47	116	2,237,618	7,197,173.553
DBIS - Dlala	1.768	1.755	1.750	1.787	204,460	1.783	1.77	30,000	1.783	1.783	+0.015	+0.85	138	2,956,269	5,229,878.430
BRES - Barwa	3.18	3.175	3.175	3.197	20,513	3.197	3.19	7,417	3.197	3.20	+0.017	+0.53	136	996,471	3,179,613.346
MCCS - Mannai Corp.	3.99	4.000	3.918	4.040	2,720	4.039	4.001	15,683	4.001	4.00	+0.011	+0.28	40	274,137	1,096,846.860
AHCS - Aamal	0.957	0.960	0.953	0.963	110,000	0.958	0.955	106,368	0.955	0.955	-0.002	-0.21	84	2,441,161	2,336,336.517
QOIS - Qatar Oman	0.864	0.864	0.864	0.888	31,257	0.875	0.873	194,552	0.873	0.873	+0.009	+1.04	92	3,778,148	3,310,766.683
ERES - Ezdan Holding	1.771	1.776	1.750	1.802	71,507	1.768	1.76	976,523	1.768	1.768	-0.003	-0.17	552	18,634,312	33,219,819.561
IHGS - Inma	5.146	5.170	5.110	5.170	21,000	5.147	5.114	40,069	5.114	5.114	-0.032	-0.62	52	252,218	1,292,003.411
GISS - Gulf International	1.50	1.504	1.500	1.532	61,500	1.521	1.517	76,358	1.517	1.517	+0.017	+1.13	322	8,591,110	12,453,053.458
MPHC - Mesaieed	1.85	1.860	1.844	1.860	140,521	1.859	1.857	50,000	1.859	1.859	+0.009	+0.49	261	2,581,435	4,791,563.525
IGRD - Investment Holding	1.018	1.010	1.010	1.084	693,355	1.07	1.069	34,862	1.069	1.07	+0.051	+5.01	472	25,657,075	27,242,997.220
VFQS - Vodafone Qatar	1.78	1.781	1.781	1.800	18,177	1.793	1.788	38,913	1.793	1.793	+0.013	+0.73	78	972,345	1,742,395.729
MERS - Al Meera	19.44	19.27	19.27	19.88	10,500	19.7	19.66	1,018	19.70	19.70	+0.26	+1.34	97	288,837	5,646,863.42
MRDS - Mazaya	1.221	1.222	1.215	1.231	459,525	1.23	1.227	2,065,701	1.227	1.227	+0.006	+0.49	164	7,396,717	9,069,475.703

QE INDICES SUMMARY

QE Index	10,899.06	+2.77 %
QE Total Return Index	21,566.84	+2.77 %
QE Al Rayan Islamic Index - Price	2,525.67	+2.63 %
QE Al Rayan Islamic Index	4,646.26	+2.63 %
QE All Share Index	3,435.80	+1.86 %
QE All Share Banks & Financial Services	4,536.61	+3.11 %
QE All Share Industrials	3,510.36	+0.81 %
QE All Share Transportation	3,503.94	-1.27 %
QE All Share Real Estate	1,926.75	+0.48 %
QE All Share Insurance	2,623.03	-1.21 %
QE All Share Telecoms	1,086.06	-0.67 %
QE All Share Consumer Goods & Services	8,308.42	+2.08 %

QE MARKET SUMMARY COMPARISON

15-04-2021	
Index	10,899.06
Change	+293.68
%	+2.77%
YTD%	+4.44
Volume	338,715,039
Value (QAR)	1,289,740,369.45
Trades	20,897
Up 20 | Down 26 | Unchanged 3	
14-04-2021	
Index	10,605.38
Change	+124.55
%	+1.19%
YTD%	+1.62
Volume	171,879,820
Value (QAR)	356,960,677.24
Trades	8,241

WORLD STOCK INDICES

Index	Day's Close	Pt Chg	Chg %
Dow Jones Industrial Average	33,730.89	--	--%
S&P 500	4,124.66	--	--%
Nasdaq Composite Index	13,857.84	--	--%
FTSE 100 Index	6,979.90	+40.32	+0.58%
DAX Index	15,251.21	+42.06	+0.28%
CAC 40 Index	6,237.59	+29.01	+0.47%
Nikkei Stock Average 225	29,642.69	+21.70	+0.07%
Hang Seng Index	28,793.14	-107.69	-0.37%
Shanghai Composite Index	3,398.99	-17.73	-0.52%
ASX All Ordinaries Index	7,317.50	+36.90	+0.51%

GOLD AND SILVER

GOLD QR215.00 per gramme

SILVER QR2.96 per gramme

EXCHANGE RATE

Currency		Selling (QAR)	Buying (QAR)
US$		3.6500	3.6305
Australian Dollar	AUD	2.84	2.77
Bangladeshi Taka	BDT	0.047	0.043
Canadian Dollar	CAD	2.95	2.88
Euro	EUR	4.45	4.35
Indian Rupee	INR	0.052	0.05
Japanese Yen	JPY	0.0338	0.0331
Malaysian Ringgit	MYR	0.915	----
Nepalese Rupee	NPR	0.032	0.031
Pakistani Rupee	PKR	0.02439	0.02381
Philippine Peso	PHP	0.079	0.075
Pound Sterling	GBP	5.14.98	
South African Rand	ZAR	0.25	0.235
Sri Lankan Rupee	LKR	0.0197	0.0175
Swiss Franc	CHF	43.92	
Turkish Lira	TRY	0.48	0.44

Xavi: Unhappy with result, we must improve in the next game

THE PENINSULA - DOHA

Al Sadd coach Xavi Hernandez expressed his dissatisfaction after his side's 1-1 draw with Iranian side Foolad Khouzestan, in their first round clash in Group D of the 2021 AFC Champions League.

Speaking during the post-match press conference, Xavi said on Wednesday: "I am unhappy with the result we got. Our goal was to win. We played against a difficult and effective team, and we competed strongly."

The Al Sadd coach added: "We are playing against the best teams in Asia, and today we got a point that may be useful in the future. We must improve in the next match and compete better."

Regarding the impact of Akram Afif's absence from the team, he said: "Of course we miss Akram, who is the best player in Qatar and Asia, but it will not be an excuse. We played well and got many opportunities, but Foolad defended well."

Xavi also had some words on the pitch conditions.

"The ground condition was not good and did not help us play in our usual way. We faced many difficulties because of that, and the AFC should pay attention to that."

Asked about the unavailability of the broadcast of the match for Qatari fans, Xavi said: "This is something I cannot understand. I cannot imagine that the fans in Qatar could not watch the match, this is not logical."

Al Sadd defender Khoukhi Boualem said his side put up a good performance against Foolad in the AFC Champions League 2021 opening group game, despite dropping two points in the 1-1 draw.

Speaking after the game, Khoukhi said: "It's better to draw than to lose. We played well and controlled the game against a team that defended strongly. We tried and got many chances but fortune didn't favour us in front of goal."

He added: "Every match has its own circumstances. Today we played against a team that defends well and it was our first game in the tournament. We will work on correcting our mistakes in our next game against Al Nassr."

He said: "We will prepare well for facing Al Nassr and of course, it will be tough for both teams. Our goal is to win and get the three points."



Xavi Hernandez

Rizwan named among *Wisden's* five Cricketers of the Year

AGENCIES - ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's wicketkeeper-batsman Mohammad Rizwan has been named among Wisden's Cricketers of the Year' in the 2021 edition of the *Wisden Almanack*.

The right-hander averaged more than 40 across three Tests for Pakistan during their 1-0 series defeat to England and was also lauded for his wicketkeeping skills during the series.

Mohammad Rizwan was an electric presence behind the stumps for Pakistan, pulling off arguably the take of the summer when he caught Ben Stokes high to his left during the First Test at Old Trafford.

He also averaged 40 with the bat, and was later confirmed as his country's new captain," *cricketpakistan.com.pk* quoted *Wisden's* editor, Lawrence Booth as saying.

England Test batsmen Dom Sibley and Zak Crawley, West Indies' all-rounder Jason Holder and English County Kent's all-rounder Darren Stevens were the other players in the list.

The 28-year-old Rizwan is the 18th Pakistani in history to feature among cricketers of the year by the Wisden.

For the second year in a row, England's all-rounder Ben Stokes, has been named *Wisden's* leading male cricketer. Stokes notched up 767 runs at an average of 51.13 in 13 matches across all formats, while also bagging 25 wickets at 18.84.

Meanwhile, Beth Mooney, who was the player of the tournament as Australia retained their Women's T20 World Cup title 13 months ago, was crowned as the female cricketer of the year.

Wisden explained the induction of a Pakistani wicket-keeper as his reward for both his splendid work behind the stumps and his batting.

Late Pakistani test cricketer Fazal Mehmood became the first ever Pakistani to be named by *Wisden* among cricketers of the year in 1955, according to *dailypakistan.com.pk*.

Pakistani legend player and current head coach Misbah ul Haq and Younis Khan were also featured in the *Wisden* list of 2018.

The *Wisden* Cricketers of the Year were players selected for the honour by the annual publication ***Wisden Cricketers' Almanack***, based on their influence on the previous English season.

Some of the other distinguished Pakistani cricketers who marked this achievement include Asif Iqbal, Hanif Mohammad, Majid Khan, Zaheer Abbas, Javed Miandad, Imran Khan, Saleem Malik, Waqar Younis, Wasim Akram, Mushtaq Ahmed, Saeed Anwar, Saqlain Mushtaq and Mohammad Yousaf.


Mohammad Rizwan

IPL: Maxwell lives up to big Bangalore price tag

REUTERS - CHENNAI

Glenn Maxwell proved Royal Challengers Bangalore made no mistake in splashing out $1.89 million for his signature after the explosive all-rounder inspired them to a second successive victory in the Indian Premier League (IPL) on Wednesday.

Maxwell's batting inconsistency had prompted Punjab Kings to release the Australian in January ahead of the 2021 players auction, clearing a path for Bangalore to scoop him up and bolster their bid for a maiden IPL title.

The 32-year-old began repaying his huge price tag with a breezy 39 in their tournament opening win against defending champions Mumbai Indians and he followed that up against Sunrisers Hyderabad with 59 off 41 balls.

Bangalore top the points table with two wins from two, and Maxwell, who has also played for Mumbai and Delhi, was delighted to have made an immediate impact.

"To start like this with a new franchise has been really nice, but to contribute to two wins has probably been the most satisfying thing," he said after being named man of the match.

It was his first IPL fifty in five years and Maxwell said batting at number four, ahead of versatile South African AB de Villiers, allowed him to play freely.

"Having AB behind you in the order gives you a bit more freedom to play your shots, gives me time to get myself in and that's a very similar role I play for the Australian team -- so that's been great," Maxwell said.

"It's my fourth IPL team and there's obviously a bit of pressure on me for me, so to turn up and make my impact straight away was really key," he added.

Hyderabad, led by fellow Australian David Warner, restricted Bangalore to 149-8 and looked on course to chase down the total before eventually finishing on 143-9.

Warner tipped his hat to Maxwell but said Hyderabad's batsmen had let the side down as they slumped to a second successive defeat.

"Obviously Maxi batted well, but our bowlers did well to restrict them ... It hurts."


Glenn Maxwell

Morris sparkles as Royals beat Capitals in tense clash

AGENCIES - DELHI

Star South African all-rounder Chris Morris produced a timely 36-run unbeaten knock as Rajasthan Royals defeated Delhi Capitals by three wickets in their Indian Premier League (IPL) match here yesterday.

Pacer Jaydev Unadkat took three wickets upfront to rattle DC after RR elected to bowl.

DC skipper Rishabh Pant scored a stylish 51.

South African batsman David Miller produced a combative knock of 62 runs in Royals' chase while Chris Morris scored 36 to take the side over the line.


Rajasthan Royals players celebrate the fall of a Delhi Capitals wicket during an IPL match yesterday. Royals won by 3 wickets. PIC: @RAJASTHANROYALS

Morris said after the match: "That happens every now and then in the game of cricket, I thought Delhi played really well. Dave played a great hand and it went out way. (On that refused single last match) I was gonna run back no matter what because Sanju was hitting it so sweetly. People underestimate how fast I run. Sanju was hitting it like a dream that night. I think the dew plays a part here. I think they hit the length a lot better than we did and they got a lot of guys skying with the extra bounce."

Brief Scores: Delhi Capitals: 147 for 8 in 20 overs (Rishabh Pant 51; Jaydev Unadkat 3/15). **Rajasthan Royals**: 150 for 7 in 19.4 overs. (D Miller 62, C Morris 36 not out, R Tewatia 19; A Khan 3/32).

Marquez nervous about return to action after crash

REUTERS - MADRID

Marc Marquez is a six-times MotoGP world champion but he admitted he had butterflies in his stomach ahead of this weekend's Portuguese Grand Prix when he returns to the track for the first time since last year's season-ending crash.

Marquez fractured his upper arm in the season-opening Spanish Grand Prix in July and did not race again all year.

The 28-year-old Repsol Honda rider also missed the opening two races of this season in Qatar.

"My confidence is not high, I have to start step by step. This is my pre-season," Marquez told reporters yesterday.

"It's true I'm nervous, I have butterflies in my stomach which is not normal... But the Japanese staff really motivated me and told me, 'Don't worry, there's no target'.

"It was a difficult decision not to race in Qatar because I was feeling ready but not 100%."

Marquez may not have ideal conditions on his return, however, with rain expected this weekend.

"I won't want to ride the first time in a long time in rainy conditions. But if it rains, we will ride," Marquez added. Marquez is officially confirmed fit for this weekend's Grande Prémio 888 de Portugal after passing yesterday's medical exam at the Algarve International Circuit.

Yamaha's Maverick Vinales, who is third in the standings, welcomed back his Spanish compatriot after nine months on the sidelines.

"As a rider, staying away for a year is very difficult. Our way of enjoying life is riding the bike," said Vinales, who won the season opener in Qatar.

"On the track we're rivals but off the track we have a good laugh and it's good to have all the riders here."

Qatar, Russia mark International Day of Sport for Development and Peace

THE PENINSULA - MOSCOW

On the occasion of the UN's International Day Of Sport For Development And Peace, which was recently celebrated globally during the first week of April, Qatar and Russia affirm their commitment to bilateral sports engagements between the two countries.

In 2013, the United Nations chose this particular date because the first modern Summer Olympic Games were opened in Athens on 6 April 1896.

The day is designed to raise awareness of the importance of sport and physical activity for education, human development, health and peace.

The Embassy for The State of Qatar to the Russian Federation with the support of QR Sports, a subsidiary of the Qatari-Russian Centre for Cooperation (QRCC), celebrated Qatar's National Sport Day (QNSD) in Russia in February 2021.

The initiative was hosted under the theme Team in Motion, which calls for the community to unite through sports despite challenges that humankind faces. With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, accessing and enjoying sport has become difficult for most around the world.

However, QR Sports' event for QNSD allowed the participants to overcome these challenges as there is no doubt that sport has always played an important role in every society, whether in the form of competition, physical activity or play.

Renowned athletes like Olympic gold medal winners Nikita Nagorniy and Beslan Mudranov alongside with other prominent athletes from across the world participated in the event.

The event was designed to help the community grow in four main areas: mindfulness, motion, inspiration and nutrition.

The five-day event saw more than 12,000 total participants, that could attend offline sports such as yoga, trampolining and ice-skating as well follow online training and educational programs all through the website.

QR Sports also collaborated with the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy alongside football stars Tim Cahill and Roman Pavlyuchenko who discussed playing in the Premier League, football knowledge, and the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.

They also discussed the importance of sport to the Qatari and Russian populations and the positive impact of the Qatar National Sports Day celebrations in Russia.

Those attending had access to online classes such as Yoga with Olympic silver medallist and three-time world champion Nikita Nagorniy or practice their ice skating skills at the Taganskiy Park ice rink.

All online classes are currently available to the public via @qnsd.ru on ***Instagram***, where people from around the world can learn the tools to practice physical and mental well-being.

"Sport has the power to change the world. It is a fundamental right, a powerful tool to strengthen social ties and promote sustainable development and peace as well as solidarity, and respect. That was the aim of the QNSD event in Russia and we are incredibly proud of the outcome," Kirill Lata, Head of QR Sports, said in a statement.

As consecutive host nations of the FIFA World Cup, Qatar and Russia have been a part of one of the biggest sporting events in the world, using their platforms to spread the message about the importance of sport in today's world in arenas of global harmony and sustainable development.

As the host nation of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, Qatar gave fans a taste of things to come in 2022 during the 2018 FIFA World Cup held in Russia. With exhibits like Qatar Elements, the world's first floating multimedia museum and Qatar-Russia portals, fans experienced Qatari culture and life first-hand.

Since 2019, some of the biggest Russian football teams have also played the Match Premier Cup tournament in Qatar. Zenit St. Petersburg's U-17 team also participated in the Al Kass International Cup in 2020.

The Peninsula Local focus, Global vision
Sport
FRIDAY 16 APRIL 2021





Unhappy with result, we must improve in the next game, says Al Sadd coach Xavi

We are playing against the best teams in Asia, and today we got a point that may be useful in the future. We must improve in the next match and compete better.

Xavi Hernandez

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NBA: Clippers 100, Pistons 98; Warriors 147, Thunder 109; Bucks 130, Timberwolves 105; Wizards 123, Kings 111; Cavs 103, Hornets 90

ACL: Al Duhail beat Al Shorta in opener

AFC – JEDDAH

Al Duhail made a successful start to their 2021 AFC Champions League (ACL) group stage campaign, easing to a 2-0 win over Al Shorta of Iraq at King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah yesterday.

In control for much of the match, the Qatari club went ahead through a Hassam Kadhim own goal nine minutes before half-time before a picturesque Edmilson Junior volley made the points all but safe in the 53rd minute.

The result installs Al Duhail as the early leader in Group C, with only the group winners and three best runners-up to advance to the knockout stage from the West Zone.

Al Duhail began in the ascendancy, although it didn't immediately translate into goal-mouth action in a cagey opening period.

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It took until the 17th minute for the game's first shot to materialise; a scuffed effort from Al Duhail's Michael Olunga, but they went much closer to breaking the deadlock through Ali Karimi five minutes later, with the Iranian's instinctive header fizzing wide from close range after he latched on Ismail Mohammad's cross.

While those chances didn't bear fruit, they did usher in a period of greater control for Al Duhail, whose pressure eventually produced the opening goal in the 36th minute, when Olunga and Karimi played a neat one-two, with Olunga's shot ending up in the back of the net via the foot of Kadhim, who was credited with an own goal.

Unable to create a single chance of their own in the opening 45 minutes, Al Shorta now had to chase the game, and that task became considerably more difficult when Sabri Lamouchi's men went further ahead eight minutes into the second half.

There were similarities with the first goal, with Al Duhail's passing and movement stretching the Al Shorta defence, and Almoez Ali having a shot blocked before Edmilson Junior showed excellent technique to lash home a volley from just short of 15 yards.

Aleksandar Ilic's side began to look more directly for a way back into the match, and they nearly found a breakthrough of their own through Ali Husni, only for the substitute's rasping 20-yard effort to rattle the woodwork in the 73rd minute.


Al Duhail's players celebrate their goal against Al Shorta, yesterday. PIC: AFC.COM

That proved to be Al Shorta's clearest chance at reducing the deficit, with their attention now turning to Sunday's clash with Esteghlal FC, while Al Duhail will face group hosts Al Ahli Saudi FC in their second match.

Olympic cancellation 'of course' an option, says senior lawmaker

REUTERS – TOKYO

A senior Japanese ruling party official said yesterday that cancelling this year's Olympics in Tokyo remains an option if the coronavirus crisis becomes too dire.

The Tokyo Olympics Organising Committee responded with a statement saying all those involved in preparing for the Games remained fully focused on hosting them in the summer.

"If it seems impossible (to host the Olympics) any more, then we have to stop it, decisively," Toshihiro Nikai, secretary general of the Liberal Democratic Party, said in comments to broadcaster TBS.

Cancellation is 'of course' an option, he said, adding: "If the Olympics were to spread infection, then what are the Olympics for?"

With Japan in the midst of a fourth wave of coronavirus infections, doubts over whether Tokyo would be able to host the Summer Games - already an unpopular idea with the public - have resurfaced in recent weeks.

Government and organising officials have consistently said the Games would go ahead.

"We do not speculate," an International Olympic Committee spokesperson said yesterday.

"We are fully concentrated and committed to the successful delivery of the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 this year, and working at full speed towards the opening ceremony on July 23."

Nikai later issued a written statement to explain his stance. "I want the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics to succeed. At the same time, to the question of whether we would host the (Games) no matter what, that is not the case. That's what I meant by my comments."

But the fact that a ruling party heavyweight made the remark was enough to give his comments top billing on domestic news.

NIKAI EXPLANATION

"Olympics Cancelled" was trending on Twitter in Japan with nearly 50,000 tweets from users as of yesterday afternoon.

"If this person says it, Olympics cancellation looks like a reality," tweeted @marumaru_clm in reference to Nikai, who is a key backer of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and is known for his frank comments.

"Yay! This is great! Finally, it's cancelled, cancelled, cancelled!" tweeted another user, @haruha3156.

Nikai later issued a written statement to explain his stance.

"I want the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics to succeed," the statement said.

"At the same time, to the question of whether we would host the (Games) no matter what, that is not the case. That's what I meant by my comments."

Prime Minister Suga later sidestepped a reporter's question on whether cancelling was indeed an option, saying only that the government remained committed to controlling the pandemic ahead of the Olympics.

"There's no change to the government's stance, to do everything possible to prevent the spread of infections as we head towards the Olympics," he told reporters in Tokyo ahead of his trip to Washington to meet with US President Joe Biden.

INFECTIONS SURGE

Japan is grappling with rising COVID-19 infections, with new cases in Tokyo jumping to 729 yesterday, the most since early February.

Tokyo, Osaka and several other prefectures entered a quasi-state of emergency this month, asking bars and restaurants to shorten their hours, and four more prefectures were set to be added, local media reported.

Asked about Nikai's comments, the Tokyo Olympic organising committee said in a statement: "Prime Minister Suga has repeatedly expressed the government's commitment to holding the Tokyo 2020 Games.

"All our delivery partners including the national government, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee, the IOC (International Olympic Committee) and the IPC (International Paralympic Committee) are fully focused on hosting the Games this summer."

Preparations have included incorporating social distancing measures and other restrictions for the postponed Games, which are set to begin on July 23 and will be held without international spectators.

A scaled-back torch relay is already underway.

"We'll hold (the Games) in a way that's feasible," Taro Kono, a popular minister in charge of Japan's vaccination drive, said on a separate TV programme, according to Kyodo News. "That may be without spectators," he added.

Japan's top medical adviser, Shigeru Omi, acknowledged the pandemic had entered a fourth wave, driven by mutant strains, with Kyoto University professor Hiroshi Nishiura urging in a magazine commentary that the Olympics be postponed.

Akira Koike, an opposition lawmaker with the Japanese Communist Party, reacted to Nikai's comments on Twitter saying that holding the event was already "impossible" and that a swift decision on cancellation should be made.


Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games mascot Miraitowa poses with a display of the Olympic symbol.

Evans stuns World No.1 Djokovic in Monte Carlo

REUTERS – MONTE CARLO

World number one Novak Djokovic crashed out in the third round of the Monte Carlo Masters following a 6-4, 7-5 defeat by Britain's Dan Evans yesterday.

The 30-year-old Evans emerged triumphant in the pair's first meeting to end the Serb's perfect 10-0 start in 2021.

Djokovic struggled to find any kind of rhythm on a windy day at the ATP Masters 1000 event and committed 45 unforced errors during the two sets, more than double of Evans.

"It hasn't sunk in yet," Evans said in his courtside interview.

"I couldn't quite believe the last ball went over the net. It nearly didn't.

"I was pleased, regardless, with how I was playing coming into the match. I felt good. You can never be confident coming into such a big match like that against Novak. It is clearly a big win and I am delighted that I got through."

Evans, the top-ranked British player at 33rd, made a fast start in the match on a cooler day at picturesque Monte-Carlo Country Club on the French Riviera to go up 3-0 in the opening set but Djokovic rallied back and levelled the set at 4-4.

The 33-year-old, however, suffered another service break on the next game before Evans, who used his backhand slice expertly to trouble Djokovic, held his own to take the opener.

Djokovic started aggressively in the second set and opened a 3-0 lead and had a set point on Evans' serve at 5-4 but the British player kept his cool and converted his first matchpoint with a winner to complete the biggest win of his career.

"The biggest thing is, you have got to believe you can win. Of course, I doubted myself in the match. Serving it out is not easy. You have got all sorts (of things) running through your head.

"I am just happy with how it went and it will be one to savour for maybe after the tournament, to tell the kids and grand kids that you beat the World No.1. It is a nice one," he said.


Dan Evans celebrates after beating Novak Djokovic.

Djokovic counts loss among his worst performances in many years

Djokovic said he felt "awful" on court during the straight sets defeat against Evans and the performance was one of his worst in many years.

"To be honest, this has been probably one of the worst matches and performances from my side I can recall in the last years," Djokovic told reporters.

"I don't want to take anything away from his win, but from my side, I just felt awful on the court overall. Just nothing worked. It's one of those days.

"From my side, I definitely should have done better. As I said, definitely that's been one of the worst performances I can remember in many years."

Djokovic said he was exiting with a "bitter" feeling but hoped he can turn things around as he heads home to play the Serbia Open next week.

"Just was obviously very, very windy, tough to play in these kind of conditions against a guy like Evans who makes you move," he added.

"He's very unpredictable with his shots. He dismantled my game. I was just not feeling it, and playing pretty bad," said Djokovic.