

P8
PLAN TO
DEVELOP
DOLOMITE MINE
IN QURAYAT



P12
GARCIA FLIES
PAST
TOP SEED
PLISKOVA



P6
SOCIAL MEDIA
'CHALLENGING'
ANTI-TRAFFICKING
EFFORTS



OMAN

Oman chairs Arab League meeting

MUSCAT: The Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Economy, chaired the meeting of the Arab League Economic and Social Council's 106th meeting held via videoconferencing. Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, represented the Sultanate at the meeting, which reviewed the Arab League's Secretary-General's report on common economic and social action and the socio-economic file for Arab League Council's forthcoming 31st session.

SEE PAGE 2

Oman's envoy to UN presents credentials

GENEVA: Tatiana Valovaya, Director-General of the United Nations Office in Geneva, received Ambassador Idris bin Abdurrahman al Khanjari, who presented his credentials as the Sultanate's Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva. During the meeting, the ambassador stressed the importance of continuing and enhancing the joint cooperation between the Sultanate, the United Nations Office and international organisations in various fields. On her turn, Director-General of the United Nations Office expressed the UN appreciation for the important role played by the Sultanate.

SEE PAGE 3

INSIDE



INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS TO BEIJING
RESUME AFTER FIVE MONTHS

P4



PANDEMIC THREATENS REFUGEE
CHILDREN'S SCHOOLING: UN

P5

WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT
MAX: 35°C
MIN: 25°C

SALALAH
MAX: 28°C
MIN: 25°C

NIZWA
MAX: 40°C
MIN: 24°C

SUNRISE 05.50 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 04:33

DHUHR: 12:11

ASR: 15:38

MAGHRIB: 18:27

ISHA: 19:39



Royal directives of His Majesty and 'economic packages' achieved desired objectives

Reopening of mosques, airports, borders to be considered soon

- First part of field hospital to open this month; Basic health services not disrupted
- Establishments urged to follow precautionary health measures, avoid facing fines
- Adults over the age of 60 allowed to enter shopping malls and other public places
- 70% of government employees can return to offices; Focus on work from home to continue



MUSCAT: Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, Member of the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, has said that the Sultanate's health sector is still intact, "which asserts that, in dealing with the pandemic, success will be realised when we reach zero cases in the Sultanate." Thanks to the support of the government of His Majesty Sultan

Haitham bin Tarik to the health sector, we have not reached a stage when anyone would be deprived of healthcare, said the minister, who reaffirmed that basic health services in the Sultanate, like vaccinations, childhood and motherhood programmes have not been disrupted. He pointed out that if the crisis persists, compelling the health sector to focus on COVID-19 patients, the performance of the health workforce will be impacted negatively.

The minister made the statement during the Supreme Committee's 14th press conference, which also saw the participation of Dr Saif bin Salim al Abri, Director-General of Disease Surveillance and Control at the Health Ministry, and Dr Hamad bin Mohammed al Harthi, Director of Al Nahda Hospital.

Dr Al Saeedi added that, thanks to the Royal directives of His Majesty the Sultan, 'economic packages' achieved their desired objectives.

TURN TO P2

- RO 32.67 million donations received to combat COVID-19; Cost of tests reaches RO 29 million
- August saw 50% decline in number of hospitalised people, compared to May, June and July
- Team to meet on weekly basis to review reopening of activities, including mosques
- Public urged to avoid gatherings and stick to social distancing and other precautions

Global food prices rise, rice highest

ROME: World food prices rose for a third month running in August, led by coarse grains, vegetable oils and sugar, the United Nations food agency said on Thursday. The Food and Agriculture Organization's food price index, which measures monthly changes for a basket of cereals, oilseeds, dairy products, meat and sugar, averaged 96.1 points last month versus 94.3 in July.

The Rome-based FAO also said in a statement that worldwide cereal harvests remained on course to hit an annual record in 2020. The agency's cereal price index rose 1.9 per cent in August from the month before and 7 per cent above its value a year earlier. Among the major cereals, sorghum, barley and rice prices rose the most, FAO said. Maize also climbed strongly, pushed up

by concerns over US production prospects following recent crop damage in Iowa. The vegetable oil price index climbed 5.9 per cent month-on-month, returning to around the levels registered when the coronavirus crisis hit the world at the start of the year. Palm oil was buoyed by expected output slowdowns in major producing countries. — Reuters

Chemical arms watchdog voices concern over Navalny case

THE HAGUE: The head of the world chemical arms watchdog expressed "grave concern" on Thursday after Germany said Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny had been poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok. Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Director-General Fernando Arias added that the Hague-based body was ready to help any member country that asked for its assistance. "Under the Chemical Weapons Convention, any poisoning of an individual through the use of a nerve agent is considered a



use of chemical weapons. Such an allegation is a matter of grave concern," Arias said in a statement. The OPCW chief added that the "use of chemical weapons by anyone under any circumstances" was "reprehensible and wholly contrary to the legal norms established by the international community." "The OPCW continues to monitor the situation and stands ready to engage with and to assist any states parties that may request its assistance," Arias added. Germany said it was going to contact the chemical weapons watchdog about the case. — AFP

State Council submits VAT draft law to HM



MUSCAT: The State Council on Thursday submitted to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik the draft law on Value Added Tax (VAT), along with the views of the Council and Majlis Ashshura. The action took place during the State Council's 11th regular session of the 7th Term's First Annual Convening, following the Council's endorsement of the report of the State Council-Majlis Ashshura-Joint Committee citing its opinion on issues of discrepancy (between the Council and the Majlis) about the VAT draft law. The session was headed by Dr Badriya bint Ibrahim al Shihhiya, Deputy to the Chairman of the State Council, and attended by Khalid bin Ahmed al Sa'adi, Secretary-General of the

Council and Council members, some of whom participated via videoconferencing. The Joint Committee's report was earlier forwarded to the State Council by the Council of Ministers for review. Dr Badriya valued the recent Royal decrees, which were issued by His Majesty the Sultan and which included the restructuring of the State's Administrative Apparatus, enhancing it with more officials of various competencies and expertise. In this context, she said, "This comes as part of efforts to promote the domestic development march and consolidate the concept of 'State of Institutions' in a manner that contributes to the realisation of Oman Vision 2040."

TURN TO P2



State Council submits VAT draft law to HM



FROM PAGE 1
Speaking about the agenda of the Council's session, Dr Badriya said that it was dedicated to discussing the Joint Committee's recommendations on issues of divergence (between the Council and the Majlis) on the VAT draft law. "The Majlis Ash'hura had already discussed and approved the joint panel's recommendations (during its 13th regular session),"

she added. Dr Badriya referred to the Royal orders of His Majesty the Sultan to defer adjourning the current convening until such a time that the Council of Oman takes a decision on the VAT draft law. She proclaimed the State Council's approval of the recommendations of the Joint Committee, hence terminating the tasks of its First Annual Convening, 7th Term.

— ONA

Reopening of mosques, airports and borders to be considered soon

FROM PAGE 1
He reaffirmed that the Sultanate did not rush in its drive to re-open (business) activities, but the reopening was made gradually and after studies informed by the findings of technical parties that accorded attention to citizens and residents alike. The Minister of Health commended the Minister of Interior and the members of the Supreme Committee whose decisions, he observed, were mindful and gradual. He called upon all establishments to stick to precautionary health measures and avoid facing fines or closure. The Minister of Health said that a specialised team will meet on a weekly basis to review applications for reopening of activities, including mosques and prayer areas. He explained that the ministry will work towards the opening of health activities gradually so that they could operate at the pre-corona rate. This includes delayed surgical operations, said the minister, who noted that the ministry observed the emergence of a group of diabetic people from among COVID-19 patients who had no diabetes history. He also said that 30 per cent of patients admitted to intensive care units are afflicted with kidney failure. The minister affirmed the decline in number of cases since July and he urged all members of the public to avoid gatherings and stick to social distancing, cleaning of hands and other precautions. He added that the main cause behind the increase in infection and death cases is laxity in apply health measures. The Ministry of Health posted orders for vaccines at all manufacturing firms. He stressed that the Sultanate booked a suitable volume of vaccines, and will procure them pending the recommendations of specialist teams from the Ministry of Health. "The Sultanate made a proposal for collective purchase of the vaccine at the GCC level," the minister said. Dr Al Saeedi added that donations amounting to RO 32.67 million were made and will be added to the generous Royal contribution of RO 10 million. So far, a sum RO 28.6 million has been used from the total donations. The cost of tests has so far reached RO 29 million, he explained.

In other comments, the minister said that the main objective behind the Field Hospital under construction is to ease pressure on government hospitals. The first part of the Field Hospital will be opened before the end of this month, said Dr Al Saeedi, who explained that a meeting was held with parties related to airports in the Sultanate with a view to submitting their study to the Supreme Committee for review during its next meeting. In his turn, Dr Saif bin Salim al Abri, Director-General of Disease Surveillance and Control at the Health Ministry, said that the Ministry of Health will make a daily report on COVID-19 cases, noting that more than 1,200 people have been diagnosed, but the number of those who tested positive dropped from 50 per cent in early July to 17 per cent recently. Dr Al Abri pointed out that the cases of people being hospitalised dropped by 33 per cent, while ICU cases declined by 40 per cent and morality cases were down by 23 per cent. He credited the overall decline in all cases to the commitment of citizens and residents to precautionary measures undertaken by the Supreme Committee. The Ministry of Health will monitor the pandemic's level in the Sultanate through three indicators, which are the number of hospitalised people, the number of ICU patients and the number of deaths in 100,000 segments of the population — which generally the norm in many countries, said Dr Al Abri. He explained that the Sultanate's non-espousal of clinical operations does not mean that it would be deprived of procuring the vaccines of COVID-19. He reaffirmed that contacts are under way with the Global Vaccine Alliance (GAVI) and, at least, one of the producing companies. Meanwhile, Dr Ahmed al Harthi, Director of Al Nahda Hospital, said that some departments and wards of the hospital have been allocated to COVID-19 patients and that available beds are now more than they used to be. "The month of August saw a 50-per cent decline in number of hospitalised people, compared to the three months of May, June and July," said Dr Ahmed al Harthi. — ONA

IN BRIEF

Oman chairs Arab League Economic Council meeting

MUSCAT: The Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Economy, on Thursday chaired the meeting of the Arab League Economic and Social Council's 106th meeting held via videoconferencing. Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, represented the Sultanate at the meeting, which reviewed the Arab League's Secretary-General's report on common economic and social action and the socio-economic file for Arab League Council's forthcoming 31st session. The meeting also discussed means of tackling socio-economic repercussions of coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, support for the Republic of Lebanon to help overcome fallout of Beirut seaport explosion, the unified Arab Economic Report and a uniform Arab stance towards the joint IMF-World Bank Meeting 2020. — ONA

60-70pc of govt staff can return to offices

MUSCAT: The percentage of government employees who can report to work in government offices has been raised from the current 30 per cent, while the focus on work from home will continue. "There is a decision that around 60 to 70 per cent of government employees can return to their offices. The department in-charge has been given the flexibility to decide on the percentages and ensure that services offered to citizens and residents are not affected," said the Minister of Health on Thursday. The government institutions must follow the precautionary measures to ensure that the virus is not transmitted. When the 50 per cent return to work was applied, some institutions became hotspots of the virus transmission as a result of non-compliance with the precautionary measures. Some employees had a wrong idea about the distance work as they spend the working time in shopping and relaxing rather than doing the required tasks.

DHOFAR LOCKDOWN TO CONTINUE



MUSCAT: The Minister of Health has said that some procedures have been put in place for people to enter and exit the Dhofar Governorate. "If we open the governorate, the number of cases may increase and so the

burden on the health staff. The lockdown lift will be announced in due course," he said. The Supreme Committee lifted the nationwide lockdown on August 7, except in Dhofar Governorate, which will continue until further notice. Dhofar and Masirah Island, along with Duqm, Jabal Al Akhdhar and Jabal Shams were put under lockdown on June 13. Dhofar is now the only governorate where lockdown restrictions remain in place.

Decision on school reopening soon

MUSCAT: There will be a special press conference soon dedicated to the education sector in the presence of the Minister of Education. "The press conference will focus on the start of the school year and the procedures for the return of children to schools," said the Minister of Health and the member of the Supreme Committee on COVID-19.

National Museum organises lecture on archaeology

MUSCAT: The Learning Centre at the National Museum, in cooperation with the Geological Society of Oman, organised a YouTube lecture entitled "Geology and Archaeology of the Southern Empty Quarter: New Discoveries". The lecture was presented by Dr Mohammed al Kindi from the Earth Sciences Consultancy Centre (ESCC), and Dr Maria Pia Maiorano, University of Naples "L'Orientale". The lecture reviewed the surveys made by a team of archaeologists and geologists during the years (2019-2020) in the southeastern borders of the Omani part of the Empty Quarter. The studies revealed huge numbers of objects that helped to learn about the stratigraphic geology of the region, climate history and archaeology. The two lecturers also touched on the findings of the survey,



which revealed many stone tools that indicate settlement in different periods of the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. These tools included stone animal holdfasts, stone pestles, arrowheads and stone axes. These tools were found side by side along with the fossils of animal bones

dating back to the animals that humans hunted in those ancient times. The survey revealed the existence of sites dating back to the Paleolithic, Middle Paleolithic and Late Stone Age. Findings from this region provide valuable information on the Middle Holocene settlement of the region, of which there was little information available. The survey was conducted by a team of geologists and archaeologists with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in the area north of Mitān in the Wilayat of Al Mazayouna in the Governorate of Dhofar in January of 2019 and 2020. The team was headed by Dr Mohammed al Kindi. The mission, which was known as the Omani-French Mission, included a prominent group of geologists and archaeologists. — ONA

COVID-19 cases hit 86,380

MUSCAT: The total number of positive COVID-19 cases in the Sultanate reached 86,380, while the number of recoveries stood at 81,828, comprising 94.7 per cent. Meanwhile, the total number of COVID-19 related deaths stood at 705, the Ministry of Health said. The ministry also pointed out that 45 cases were hospitalised over the past 24 hours, adding that the total COVID-19 patients in hospitals stands at 383, of whom 144 are in intensive care units (ICU). — ONA

ROP TAKES PART IN ARAB MEET



MUSCAT: The Royal Oman Police (ROP) on Thursday participated in the second meeting of the Arab Interior Ministers Council bodies. The virtual meeting dealt with appropriate ways to implement the action programme of the General Secretariat for the current year in light of the outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). — **ONA**

Sultanate’s envoy to UN presents credentials

GENEVA: Tatiana Valovaya, Director-General of the United Nations Office in Geneva, received Ambassador Idris bin Abdurrahman al Khanjari, who presented his credentials as the Sultanate’s Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva.

During the meeting, the ambassador stressed the importance of continuing and enhancing the joint cooperation between the Sultanate, the United Nations office and international organisations in various fields.

On her turn, Director-General of the United Nations Office expressed the UN appreciation for the important role played by the Sultanate. She touched on the challenges the world is facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, stressing the need for concerted efforts and strengthening multilateral



cooperation to confront this pandemic. She wished the ambassador success in his tasks. — **ONA**

UN laments ‘blatant’ violations of Libya arms embargo

UNITED NATIONS, US: The interim UN envoy for Libya, Stephanie Williams, on Wednesday denounced what she called “blatant” ongoing violations of the arms embargo in effect on the war-racked country.

Since UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres last briefed the Security Council on July 8, “some 70 resupply flights landed in eastern airports” in support of strongman Khalifa Haftar, Williams said.

Another 30 such flights were sent to western Libya to help forces loyal to the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), she added.

Nine cargo ships docked in western Libya, while three others reportedly arrived in the east of the country. She also accused foreign powers of “fortifying their assets” on both sides.

“The arms embargo remains totally ineffective,” according to an interim report from UN experts, who added that the violations are “extensive, blatant and with complete disregard for the sanctions”.

Williams said the activity “constitutes an alarming breach of Libya’s sovereignty, a blatant violation of the UN arms embargo.”

The UN mission in Libya, whose mandate is up for renewal in mid-September, “continues to receive reports of large-scale presence of foreign mercenaries and operatives,” she said.

Williams added that their presence complicates “chances of a future settlement.”



A security forces member is seen stationed in the street in support of Libya’s Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha in Misrata, Libya on August 29. — **Reuters**

Russia’s UN envoy, Vassily Nebenzia, rejected any accusation of Russian interference.

“Not a single Russian serviceman is currently in Libya,” he said, while his US counterpart Kelly Craft slammed the presence of Russian mercenaries linked to the Kremlin.

“There is no place for foreign mercenaries or proxy forces in Libya, including the Russian Ministry of Defense proxy Wagner Group, which is fighting alongside” Haftar,

she said.

France’s UN Ambassador Nicolas de Riviere called for a reinforcement of the world body’s mission in Libya, so that it can help shepherd an eventual ceasefire and ensure that the arms embargo is respected.

Several Council members called for a quick nomination of a permanent UN special envoy for Libya.

Ghassan Salame stepped down in March for health reasons, and

bickering between the United States and its partners on how the role should be defined has stalled naming a successor.

Libya has endured almost a decade of violent chaos since the 2011 Nato-backed uprising that toppled and killed veteran dictator Muammar Gaddafi. The GNA and a Haftar-backed eastern administration are now vying for power against a backdrop of dozens of local conflicts. — **AFP**

Bulgaria ruling party defiant as protests turn violent

SOFIA: Bulgaria’s ruling party insisted on Thursday Prime Minister Boyko Borisov’s government would not resign after two months of protests against his perceived tolerance of corruption erupted into the most violent day yet.

Several thousand demonstrators gathered outside parliament on Wednesday as it began its autumn session and the rally took a violent turn.

Over the course of the day there were scores of injuries and arrests in scenes unprecedented in Bulgaria in recent years, with police using stun grenades and tear gas to disperse the crowds while some protesters threw powerful smoke bombs.

Police say 126 people were arrested, among them more than 60 football “ultras” who had previous criminal records.

“We will not resign after these excesses,” MP Toma Bikov from Borisov’s centre-right GERB party told parliament on Thursday.

“This would mean that every future government could be brought down by representatives of the criminal contingent,” Bikov said.

The wave of protests was sparked

in early July by several incidents revealing high-level corruption and perceived government protection of shadowy oligarchs.

The demonstrators want Borisov and chief prosecutor Ivan Geshev to resign.

They accuse Geshev of failing to punish real criminals and instead using his powers to attack the government’s political opponents.

ALMOST 200 HURT

On Wednesday powerful smoke bombs, firecrackers and other devices were thrown at police cordons encircling parliament prompting anti-riot forces to disperse the rally by force.

Health officials said almost 200 people had to receive medical attention over the course of the day, including 120 police officers.

Several journalists were also injured by police, including an AFP photographer.

After dispersing Wednesday night’s rally, police moved early on Thursday to lift two protest blockades of key downtown crossroads in Sofia, saying that dangerous objects, including a Molotov cocktail, were found hidden in the tent camps. — **AFP**



Protesters clash with police during an anti-government demonstration in Sofia on Wednesday. — **AFP**

Unearthed stonework reveals prosperity in ancient Jerusalem

TEL AVIV: Israeli archaeologists unveiled on Thursday unique 2,700-year-old stone carvings indicating a rebound in prosperity in the Kingdom of Judah following the near destruction of ancient Jerusalem.

The two limestone blocks, roughly 50 centimetres wide, have almost perfectly preserved proto-Aeolic carvings reminiscent of spiralling ram horns.

The items known as capitals are believed to have topped pillars in the courtyard of a building that was completely destroyed.

The Aeolic was an early form of classical architecture developed from Phoenician styles, according to the Ancient History Encyclopedia.

The find was made in November by Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) archaeologist Yaakov Billig in preliminary works for construction



A column capital, as part of a collection of several dozen adorned architectural stone artefacts estimated to date from around 701 BC, is unveiled during a press presentation in Jerusalem on Thursday. — **AFP**

of a visitor centre on the Armon Hanatziv promenade, which lies a few kilometres south of Jerusalem’s Old City.

Two blocks were uncovered, one on top of the other. A third was found a few weeks later.

Larger proto-Aeolic capitals

used on pillars in doorways have been found in areas that were part of the Kingdom of Judah.

The kingdom was centred on

Jerusalem and lasted from around 940 to 586 BC, before being destroyed by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar.

The design is typical of the First Temple era and is a symbol representing the kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

Its image is imprinted on Israel’s contemporary five-shekel coin.

The “medium-sized” models from Armon Hanatziv are the first of their size to be found, Billig said.

Smaller capitals that were part of window sills were also found at the site of what Billig said was presumably a “royalist estate”, or at the very least the palace of an extremely wealthy person.

The palace was probably built between the reigns of King Hezekiah and King Josiah, in the period when Jerusalem was recuperating after the Assyrian siege in 701 BC, said

Billig.

The IAA recently uncovered other finds from the same era in the area, such as another palace and an administrative centre, all a short distance from ancient Jerusalem and testifying to significant regal and administrative activity.

“It shows that at that certain time period, someone decided that it was possible and safe to make a wonderful palace, an estate, on the mountain region outside of the city,” Billig said.

The three capitals, defined by IAA Jerusalem district archaeologist Yuval Baruch as “extraordinarily important”, raise a new crop of questions, such as why they were preserved while nearly all other remains from the palace were plundered.

“Was it a matter of sanctity? I don’t know,” Billig said. — **AFP**



Tourists wearing face masks visit the Yellow Crane Tower in Wuhan, China's central Hubei province photographed on Thursday, during a media visit organised by local authorities. — AFP

Typhoon Maysak drenches North and South Korea

BUSAN, South Korea: A powerful typhoon drenched both Koreas on Thursday, killing at least one person in the South and inundating streets across a port in the North as it churned its way up the peninsula.

Typhoon Maysak — named after a Cambodian word for a type of tree — made landfall in Busan on the southern coast, packing gusts of up to 140 kilometres per hour, knocking down traffic lights and trees and flooding streets.

A woman was killed after a strong gust shattered her apartment window in the city, while more than 2,200 people were evacuated to temporary shelters and around 120,000 homes were left without power across southern parts of the peninsula and on Jeju Island.

Another victim of the typhoon was a statue at a park in Ulsan of a brachiosaurus — a huge plant-eating dinosaur — which was pictured with its neck broken by strong gusts of wind.

The storm later made its way northwards, passing into the Sea of Japan, known as the East Sea in Korea, before making a second landfall around 0200 GMT at Kimchaek in North Korea.

Natural disasters tend to have a greater impact in the North due to its creaking infrastructure, and the country is vulnerable to flooding as many mountains and hills have long been deforested.

The typhoon brought heavy downpours across the North, with total rainfall in the 15 hours to 0300 GMT Thursday reaching 385 millimetres in the port town of Wonsan on its east coast. — AFP

Desperate search for crew of ship sunk in typhoon off Japan

TOKYO: Japanese coast guard rescuers searched on Thursday for the remaining 42 crew of a ship believed to have sunk in a typhoon, after a lone survivor was found bobbing in a lifejacket.

The *Gulf Livestock 1*, which was carrying a cargo of nearly 6,000 cows, issued a distress call in the early hours of Wednesday from a position 185 kilometres west of Japan's Amami Oshima island.

Japan's coast guard dispatched planes and rescue boats to hunt for the ship and late on Wednesday found a sole survivor — the ship's 45-year-old Filipino chief officer.

Dramatic photos and video released by the coast guard showed the man floating in the darkness in an orange life jacket and being pulled onto a boat with a rope as rescuers battled violent, rolling waves.

He was quickly brought to a large vessel, where coast guard personnel with surgical masks and gloves wrapped him with blankets.

"Water," said the man, who identified himself as a Filipino in the video. "Thank you, thank you very much." "I am the only one? No other one?" he asked.

Japanese officials said he was the first crew member to be rescued from the ship.

The man told rescuers that he had put on a life jacket and dived into the sea after a warning announcement on board on Wednesday, when powerful Typhoon Maysak was passing through the area.

Japan ship sinking

Freighter with 43 people aboard sank on Sept 2

On board:
39 Filipinos
2 New Zealanders
2 Australians

One survivor rescued, identified as 45-year-old Filipino chief officer

5,800 cows were on the ship

Source: Kyodo

Source: Kyodo

He said one of the boat's engines had stalled and a wave then overturned the ship, which later sank, the coast guard said in a statement.

There were no details on when and where the ship sank, but the man said he had not seen other crew members while waiting to be rescued.

SECOND STORM EXPECTED
A rubber boat was spotted late on Wednesday in the area being searched for survivors, but the coast

International flights to Beijing resume after five months

BEIJING: The first international flight in more than five months landed in China's capital on Thursday with passengers greeted by airport staff in full hazmat suits as a ban on foreign arrivals in Beijing eased.

Chinese aviation authorities are allowing arrivals in Beijing under intense COVID-19 safety rules from Thailand, Cambodia, Pakistan, Greece, Denmark, Austria, Sweden and Canada — countries deemed low-risk for cross-border infections.

Footage from state broadcaster CCTV showed an Air China plane taxiing at the Beijing Capital International Airport after landing from the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh.

Passengers disembarked wearing masks and dragging luggage — some appeared to be in full protective suits — before going past customs officials and police wearing visors and protective gear.

Travellers arriving in China need to show a negative coronavirus test before boarding, and are subject to centralised quarantine on arrival for 14 days, along with two more tests, officials said this week.

The number of passengers on direct international flights to Beijing is capped at 500 per day during a trial period, CCTV said.

Since late March, Beijing-bound international flights have been diverted to other Chinese cities, where passengers are screened for the coronavirus and quarantine.

Eleven cases were reported on Thursday in China, where the coronavirus first emerged late last year. Health officials said they were all imported.

China remains wary of the risk of an influx of cases from other countries now that its local outbreaks have been largely brought under control.

Most foreigners are still forbidden entry into the country. — AFP

Indian PM Modi's Twitter account hacked

NEW DELHI: The Twitter account of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been hacked, the social media giant confirmed on Thursday.

Tweets were sent from the prime minister's feed asking for charitable donations using a cryptocurrency, but have since been taken down.

"We're aware of this activity and have taken steps to secure the compromised account. We are actively investigating the situation," a spokesman for Twitter said.

The tech firm said it was not aware of any additional accounts being impacted.

In July former US president Barack Obama and tech bosses Bill Gates and Elon Musk were among dozens of high-profile figures to have their Twitter accounts breached in a massive hack by scammers trying to dupe people into sending bitcoin.

Faked tweets were sent from 45 accounts and the hackers accessed private messages in 36 and downloaded Twitter data from seven, the company said.

The hackers gained access to the system by tricking a handful of employees into giving up their credentials, according to Twitter.

Twitter said it had not found any link between the Modi hack and the July breach. — AFP

Record surge of virus cases in India

NEW DELHI: A record surge of 83,883 new coronavirus cases in the last 24 hours has taken India's COVID-19 tally past the 3.8-million mark, government data showed on Thursday. It is the highest single-day jump reported by any country since the beginning of the pandemic and brings India close to surpassing Brazil as the second-most-affected country in the world.

The total number of infections in the country now stands at 3,853,406 and the death toll had risen to 67,376, with 1,043 additional fatalities since Wednesday, the Health Ministry said. Health officials say that India, the world's second-most-populous country, has "one of the lowest COVID-19 fatality rates in the world," with the proportion declining to 1.76 per cent against a global average of 3.3 per cent. — dpa

Malaysia bans arrivals from some countries

BANGKOK: Malaysia will deny entry to people from countries that have reported more than 150,000 cases of the novel coronavirus, Defence Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob said on Thursday. "We will add more countries deemed high-risk," the minister said during a press conference. "Their citizens will be barred." The ban will cover countries such as the United States and Malaysia's former coloniser Britain and will come into effect on Monday. According to official statistics collated by Johns Hopkins University, 23 countries have recorded over 150,000 cases of the virus. Some above the threshold, such as Germany and Italy, recorded the bulk of their cases several months ago, while many smaller countries with lower cumulative case numbers have higher incidences of active or new cases per capita. — dpa

Punishment for mask rule violators

JAKARTA: People who refuse to wear face coverings to curb the spread of the coronavirus in the Indonesian capital Jakarta can choose to lie in a coffin for over a minute instead of doing community service or paying a fine. Authorities in East Jakarta introduced the unusual measure to make those who refuse to wear a mask think about the deadly consequences of their actions, after daily cases surpassed 1,000 in recent days, officials said on Wednesday. — dpa

Facebook bans India ruling party politician over hate speech

NEW DELHI: Facebook has banned an outspoken right-wing Indian politician for spreading hate speech about Muslims as the social media giant battles accusations of bias over its handling of rival parties in the key market.

T Raja Singh, a regional lawmaker for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling party, was blocked "for violating our policy prohibiting those that promote or engage in violence and hate from having a presence on our platform," a Facebook spokesman said.

An "extensive" process was followed in making the decision to block Raja Singh, the spokesman added.

Raja, who made headlines for

reportedly saying that Muslim Rohingya refugees from Myanmar should be shot, will now be put on a Facebook list of "dangerous individuals".

He said he would fight the ban and that Facebook's action was an attack on Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

"They (Facebook) are targeting the BJP through me," Raja Singh said, calling the ban "absolutely wrong".

"It's an intentional move against the BJP," he said.

Facebook has been caught in the middle of accusations of bias from rival sides in India's feverish political battlefield. India is the American firm's biggest market in terms of



number of users.

Opposition parties said it favours the BJP after the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Facebook public policy Ankhil Das refused to take down anti-Muslim comments by Raja Singh because it could damage the company's business interests.

The Congress party said there was a "blasphemous nexus between the BJP and Facebook".

India's Communications

Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad wrote to Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg this week however saying the company was against Modi and his party.

Prasad accused Facebook of trying to influence Indian politics through "gossip, whispers and innuendo" against the ruling party.

According to Raja Singh, his account was hacked when he was quoted as saying that Rohingya Muslims should be shot. But he said that he stood by comments calling for all Rohingya to be expelled from his home state of Telengana.

The fiery politician said he would demand that Facebook let him use an official account. — AFP

Shock as Slovak court acquits businessman of journalist murder

PEZINOK: A Slovak court triggered shock on Thursday when it acquitted a well-connected businessman of ordering the murder of an investigative journalist in a case that has rocked the EU nation, exposing high-level political corruption and ultimately toppling the governing party.

Multi-millionaire Marian Kocner and two suspected accomplices had faced up to 25 years in prison for the double murder of Jan Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kusnirova in February 2018.

“The crime was committed but it has not been proved that Marian Kocner and Alena Zsuzsova ordered the murder,” Judge Ruzena Sabova said in her verdict.

“The court therefore acquits the defendants,” she said, only sentencing Kocner to a 5,000-euro (\$5,900) fine for illegal weapons possession as 60 bullets were found in his house.

State prosecutor Vladimir Turan said he sent an appeal of the acquittal to the Supreme Court shortly after it was handed down, while a lawyer for Kuciak’s family said the verdict was “factually incorrect”.

‘MAJOR SETBACK’

The victims, both 27, were gunned down at home gangland-style after Kuciak wrote several stories on graft and the shady dealings of high-powered entrepreneur Kocner, who had ties to then senior government politicians.

Prosecutors demanded 25 years behind bars for the businessman, alleging he ordered Kuciak’s murder



In this file photo taken on February 27, 2018 a woman places a candle in front of a portrait of Slovak investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his girlfriend Martina Kusnirova in the centre of Bratislava. — AFP

in revenge for articles detailing his various property crimes.

They wanted similar sentences for alleged accomplices Zsuzsova and Tomas Szabo.

While Zsuzsova was acquitted, Justice Sabova sentenced Szabo, the getaway driver, to 25 years in prison and to pay 70,000 euros (\$83,000) each to the Kuciak and the Kusnirova families.

Kuciak’s father Jozef said he was “left paralysed” by the verdict, adding that “we can only hope that

justice will eventually prevail”.

“They’re guilty, I’m convinced about that. We’ll keep fighting,” Kusnirova’s mother Zlatica told reporters before leaving the courtroom in tears.

President Zuzana Caputova, a liberal elected on the back of an unprecedented wave of protests in the wake of the murders, said she was “shocked” by the verdict.

For her part, Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Dunja Mijatovic said on Twitter the verdict

“shows that there is still work to do to ensure justice & prevent impunity.” The Vienna-based International Press Institute dubbed Kocner’s acquittal “a major setback for justice and the fight against impunity”.

‘I AM NOT A MURDERER’ In his closing speech in July, Kocner denied murder.

“I am not a saint, but I am not a murderer either. I’m certainly not a fool who wouldn’t realise what a journalist’s murder would lead to,” he told the jury. — AFP

Pandemic response probe says has full access to WHO files

GENEVA: The group tasked with raking over the heavily criticised World Health Organization-led global response to the coronavirus pandemic revealed on Thursday they would have full access to the WHO’s records.

The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response (IPPR) vowed to ask tough questions of the WHO, which was accused of being slow off the mark to react to the initial COVID-19 outbreak in China.

The WHO “made it clear that their files are an open book. Anything we want to see, we see”, said former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark, co-chair of the 13-strong IPPR group along with former Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

“We can’t count on it being another century until a pandemic like this comes around,” Clark told an online press conference.

“If another took off like this in short order, how devastating that would be, now that we know the extent of damage that can be done.” The WHO has come under fierce attack from US President Donald Trump, who is withdrawing his country from the UN agency.

He accuses the organisation of botching its handling of the pandemic and of being a “puppet of China”.

Against that backdrop, WHO member states in May agreed a resolution calling for

an “impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation... to review experience gained and lessons learned from the WHO-coordinated international health response” to the pandemic.

It said the probe should review WHO’s “actions... and their timelines”.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced the launch of the panel and its co-chairs on July 10.

“We will review a series of broad themes, including the early phase of the pandemic, its emergence and its global spread,” Clark said.

“Despite many warnings for years now that such a pandemic was a significant global risk, why was the world caught off-guard?” she asked.

Clark and Sirleaf announced Thursday their choice of 11 panellists.

They include former Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo, former British foreign minister David Miliband and Joanne Liu, who savaged the WHO’s response to Ebola in Africa when she led the medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF).

“This is a strong panel poised to ask the hard questions,” Sirleaf said.

The group intends to produce interim findings in November and a full report in May 2021.

— AFP

CLIMATE PROTEST



Activists from the climate protest group Extinction Rebellion, dressed as clowns, light flares as they walk past Her Majesty’s Treasury building in central London on Thursday on the third day of their new series of ‘mass rebellions’. Climate change protesters converged on the British parliament on September 1, kicking off 10 days of demonstrations to be held across the country by activist group Extinction Rebellion. — AFP

US prepares for pre-election COVID-19 vaccine rollout

WASHINGTON: The US has urged states to get ready for a potential COVID-19 vaccine rollout two days before the presidential election, it emerged on Wednesday, as France prepared to present a mammoth spending plan for its virus-hit economy. Across the world, governments are hoping to announce a vaccine as soon as possible to reopen economies shuttered to contain an illness that has killed more than 850,000 people and infected over 25 million.

In a widely circulated letter, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention asked states to sweep away red tape that could prevent a network of vaccine distribution centres being “fully operational by November 1, 2020.” That is two days before voters head to the polls in an election clouded by the virus and the economic crisis it

provoked, sparking concerns President Donald Trump’s administration is rushing to have a vaccine before November 3.

“The normal time required to obtain... permits presents a significant barrier to the success of this urgent public health program,” CDC head Robert Redfield told states in the August 27 letter.

“CDC urgently requests your assistance in expediting applications for these distribution facilities.” Priority will be given to essential workers, national security officials, seniors and members of vulnerable racial and ethnic groups, according to *The New York Times*.

Three Western drug makers are progressing with their Phase 3 clinical trials, involving tens of thousands of participants.

AstraZeneca is partnering with

Oxford University in England while Moderna is collaborating with the US National Institutes of Health. Pfizer and BioNTech are partnering on the third candidate.

‘DANGEROUS’

Under normal procedures, test administrators must wait -- probably for months -- to verify that vaccine candidates work and are safe.

The US Food and Drug Administration however has raised the possibility that a vaccine might be given emergency authorization before the end of trials.

The FDA has faced mounting criticism from the medical community that it is bowing to political pressure from Trump, who is behind Democratic challenger Joe Biden in the polls and has said one might be ready before the election. — AFP

Pandemic threatens refugee children’s limited schooling: UN

GENEVA: Half of all refugee children were already out of school before the coronavirus hit, and the UN cautioned on Thursday the pandemic risked deepening a crisis robbing millions of future prospects.

A new report from the UNHCR refugee agency warned that many refugee children, especially girls, who had attended school before the novel coronavirus swept the world would not be able to return.

“After everything they have endured, we cannot rob them of their futures by denying them an education today,” UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi said in a statement, calling for action to support refugees’ right to an education.

The report, using data from 12

countries that host more than half of the world’s refugee children, found that more than 1.8 million of them -- or a full 48 per cent of all refugee children of school age -- are out of school. Attendance is particularly lacklustre in secondary school and higher. Around 77 per cent of the refugee children were enrolled in primary school, but only 31 per cent attended secondary school and three per cent were in higher education, the report showed.

While the UNHCR said a shift in methodology made it difficult to compare with data from previous years, it noted the statistics, dire as they look, actually represent a small improvement.

A 2019 report indicated that only



A child sits in a tent as migrants are evacuated by police after a hundred of migrant families settled in the night in front of the town hall of Paris, on September 1, during an operation launched by Utopia 56 charity to demand their accommodation. — AFP

one per cent of refugees worldwide were in higher education.

But the pandemic is now threatening to undo even the small advances made, it said.

The report found that while children in every country have been hit by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and measures put in place to rein in the virus, refugee children have been especially disadvantaged.

Refugee children are far more likely than others to face difficulty returning to their studies, with many refugee families no longer able to afford school fees, uniforms and books as income sources dry up.

They are also less likely to have access to the technologies needed for remote learning and could be required

to work to help keep their struggling families afloat.

This is particularly true for refugee girls, who already had less access to education than boys.

By the time they reach secondary level, refugee girls are half as likely as their male peers to be enrolled in school, according to UNHCR, warning the coronavirus crisis risked making the gender disparities worse.

Using UNHCR data, the Malala Fund, which works towards removing barriers preventing girls from going to school, estimated that a full half of all refugee girls who were attending secondary school when the pandemic hit will not return when classrooms reopen this month.

— AFP

Social media ‘challenging’ anti-trafficking efforts

LONDON: A British law enforcement agency tackling organised crime on Thursday said social media companies were hindering efforts to combat people traffickers.

Rob Jones, director of threat leadership at the National Crime Agency, said police had asked for the closure of 1,200 accounts linked to “immigration crime” in the first five months of the year, but only 578 had been blocked.

“We were very certain when we made those referrals that there was a problem with those accounts,” Jones told a parliamentary committee, a day after the government said more than 400 migrants crossed the Channel from France in small boats — a record for a single day.

“To see that level of attrition... is challenging for us,” he added. “They are applying their own decision-making and we have no traction over that.” A surge in numbers attempting the hazardous crossing

of the world’s busiest shipping lane is a key political issue in Britain, and the right-wing government has vowed to stop the practice.

Jones said traffickers were using encrypted communications via social media accounts to organise crossings of small boats laden with migrants from northern France.

More than 5,600 migrants and asylum seekers have crossed the Channel in small vessels this year, according to Home Office figures.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has vowed to “address the rigidities in our laws that make this country... a target and a magnet for those who would exploit vulnerable people in this way”.

The government has appointed a former Royal Marine, Dan O’Mahoney, to reduce the number of crossings.

Also speaking on Thursday, he said border authorities had been “exploring various different tactics”, including efforts to counter



Rescued migrants watch as the *Sea-Watch 4* civil sea rescue ship approaches a ferry at sea off the coast of Palermo, Italy. More than 350 migrants including those rescued by a vessel sponsored by British street artist Banksy were being transferred onto a quarantine vessel off Sicily. — AFP

“misinformation”.

“There is a huge misinformation campaign going on with the facilitators, who tell them (migrants) the streets are paved with gold in the UK,” he told MPs.

“As anyone knows who’s travelled to France, it’s a perfectly civilised country.” About half of those arriving on small boats in recent months have had their asylum requests assessed, according to the government.

Twenty per cent of those have been granted, 10 per cent rejected, and the rest have been judged ineligible, it added.

The arrivals have caused political tensions between London and Paris.

Britain’s Conservative government has publicly pressured France to do more to stem the crossings.

But French authorities insist they are doing all they can, and last month the mayor of the port city of Calais told Johnson he should “calm down”. — AFP

BORIS MEETS TRUMP TEAM



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson met US President Donald Trump’s senior adviser Jared Kushner in London on Thursday and discussed the Middle East peace process after dropping in on Kushner’s meeting with Foreign Minister Dominic Raab. — AFP

Pupils return to London school

LONDON: Primary school-children returning to the Harris Academy in London on Thursday will find themselves sitting in rows, regularly washing their hands and supported by teachers who have been trained to provide emotional support after lockdown.

Children started to return to schools this week — for many the first time they have been back in full-time education since the spread of COVID-19 forced classes to shut in March.

To prevent large gatherings, schools are staggering arrivals, keeping pupils in smaller groups, controlling where they walk in communal areas and requiring the provision of water bottles and pencil cases to prevent sharing. Desks are



likely to be placed in rows so pupils do not sit in groups on a table.

French, executive principal at Harris Academy, said the staff were delighted to be back and while there have been many challenges, they wanted the school to look as normal as before.

“We’ve done our very best to keep (the challenges) at our level so

when the children came back today, as far as possible they were coming back to the school that they left in March,” she said, over the sound of pupils in the playground.

Children were greeted by a teacher providing hand sanitiser when they arrived to an archway of balloons on Thursday.

— Reuters

Pelosi says visit to hair salon was a ‘setup’

LOS ANGELES: House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Wednesday she was set up by a San Francisco salon where she was videotaped not wearing a face mask after getting her hair washed, in violation of the city’s coronavirus restrictions.

“This salon owes me an apology,” Pelosi said in response to questions from reporters at the end of a news conference on the Democrats’ proposed coronavirus relief act that is

stalled in the Senate. “... It was clearly a set-up. I take responsibility for falling for a set-up by a neighbourhood salon I’ve gone to for many years.” Security camera footage from the eSalon showed Pelosi inside, passing by with wet hair and a mask wrapped around her neck and being trailed by a hair stylist who was wearing a mask. The footage from Monday was provided by the owner of the salon to Fox News, which first reported the

story on Tuesday.

The images prompted a torrent of criticism on Wednesday that Pelosi and other Democrats were hypocritical for placing restrictions on Americans that they themselves are unwilling to follow.

President Donald Trump was among the Republicans who weighed in. “Crazy Nancy Pelosi is being decimated for having a beauty parlor opened, when all others are

closed, and for not wearing a Mask — despite constantly lecturing everyone else,” Trump tweeted on Wednesday morning. “We will almost certainly take back the House, and send Nancy packing!” Businesses such as hair salons are subject to a patchwork of regulations in California, based in part on how severe the coronavirus crisis is in the counties and cities where they are based. — dpa



AMAZON RAILROAD PLAN UNITES UNLIKELY ALLIES

NOVO PROGRESSO: With his feather headdress and body paint, chief Beppronti Mekragnotire doesn’t seem to have much in common with trucker Sergio Sorresino, but they share a cause: neither wants a railroad built across the Amazon rainforest.

Biding his time inside his big rig as he sat at a roadblock outside the town of Novo Progresso, in northern Brazil, Sorresino appeared to have every reason to resent Mekragnotire.

Because of the Kayapo indigenous chief and his warriors, Sorresino and thousands of other truckers were stuck on this stretch of highway BR-163, the road linking Brazil’s central-western agricultural heartland to the river ports of the Amazon and its tributaries.

Clutching bows, arrows and spears, dozens of Kayapo blocked the road in protest on August 17, demanding the government

abandon its plans to build the “Ferrograo,” or Grain Railway, across the world’s biggest rainforest — one on a long list of grievances against far-right President Jair Bolsonaro’s administration.

The protest — since suspended pending a court ruling on their demands — obstructed truckers like Sorresino on and off for days, but he didn’t seem to mind: he also dislikes the railroad project, which threatens his livelihood.

“It’s their right. The Ferrograo would hurt us, too,” said the 48-year-old trucker, who has been driving corn and soybeans across the country in big rigs for most of his adult life.

The Kayapo have their own reasons for disliking the railroad plan.

They have experienced first-hand how building infrastructure across the rainforest accelerates its



A vast soy bean field in Campo Novo do Parecis, in Mato Grosso state, Brazil. The ‘Ferrograo’ is a controversial project of construction of a trans-Amazonian train in Brazil to speed up its huge grain exports. — AFP

destruction, giving illegal miners, farmers, ranchers and loggers access to once-isolated regions of the jungle.

Mekragnotire points to the

highway he is blocking, built in the 1970s by Brazil’s military government, as an example.

“Just look at how much deforestation has increased since the

highway was built. Imagine how it will be if they build the Ferrograo,” he said.

“See that smoke over there?” he asked, by way of illustration, pointing to the thick columns of smoke rising from the forest, set by farmers and ranchers clearing new land.

The practice is common in Brazil, the world’s biggest soybean producer and second-biggest beef producer. But it is devastating for a forest whose preservation is vital to curbing climate change.

Spanning nearly 1,000 kilometres, the railroad is planned to run from the city of Sinop, in Mato Grosso state — the heart of farm country — to the port of Miritituba on the Tapajos river, an Amazon tributary.

From there, Brazil’s key agricultural exports will make their way to the Atlantic and myriad destinations around the world,

above all China.

The railroad will largely follow the path of the existing highway.

Planners say it will not go through indigenous lands. It will cross the Jamanxim National Park, but only along a strip already approved by Congress for passage of the BR-163.

The \$1.5-billion project is backed by multi-national distributors such as Cargill and Bunge, which say shipping their product by road is too slow and expensive, hurting Brazil’s competitiveness.

The government plans to hold a tender for the project in the first half of 2021, with a target launch date of 2030. “It’s a highly viable project that will reduce shipping costs by between 30 and 35 per cent and halve transport time,” said Edeon Vaz Ferreira, executive director of the Mato Grosso Pro Logistics Movement and a lobbyist for the project. — AFP

In-person learning creates dilemma for parents

LAURA BONILLA

A

s the first day of school approaches, New York's families — often uninsured — face a risky choice: send kids to school where they could contract coronavirus, or keep them home for online classes, potentially compromising their academic progress and preventing parents from working.

New York, the largest school district in the United States with 1.1 million students, is the only major city nationwide to offer in-person classes.

Face-to-face learning will be available one to three times a week starting September 21, a risky bet considered key to rebooting the embattled city's economy.

Maria — a Mexican domestic worker who lives in Queens, who asked for her last name not be used as she is undocumented — decided to send her children aged seven and 14 to class, despite much uncertainty over protocol.

"Are schools equipped to safely

welcome children? What days will they go? They talk about classes outdoors — what happens when it rains?" asked the 35-year-old mother during a weekly free food distribution in the borough's Corona neighbourhood.

THE EDUCATION GAP

The city's poorest families, generally black or of immigrant origin, cannot afford to hire tutors to support their online learning, as many children of wealthier families are doing.

And, like Maria, most parents of modest means must leave the home to work — if they did not lose their jobs to the pandemic, that is.

Often these families deal with poor internet access, and sometimes parents cannot help their children with academic work because they lack the necessary technology, do not speak English or have not finished school themselves.

Maria's eldest child took on the

responsibility of helping the younger sibling when schools shut down in March and held online classes until June.

Without that help, Maria says, it would have been impossible to get through.

In the US — the country worst hit by the pandemic in absolute terms, with more than 183,000 deaths and more than six million documented infections — the issue of reopening schools was politicised ahead of the November elections.

President Donald Trump, a Republican, emphatically insisted schools reopen, regardless of infection rates.

Many states governed by Republicans, including Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee and Indiana, took that direction in August — but virus outbreaks meant many schools had to impose quarantines or shut back down.

Many cities, such as Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Miami, opted instead for the virtual model.

New York is the only major city to offer a hybrid option, as long as the infection rate stays below three per cent. Currently it is hovering at 0.9 per cent, far lower than the national average.

But after a dispute with a prominent teachers' union — which called for more safety measures and threatened a strike — in-person classes were delayed from September 10 to September 21.

'D RATHER THEY LOSE A YEAR'

Many low-income New York parents — who were disproportionately hard-hit by coronavirus, suffer more from chronic diseases and often lack health insurance — do not want to send their children to school.

More than 365,000 public school students, or 37 per cent, opted to take classes solely online, according to the city's government.

"I know that at home they won't learn the same, but I'd rather they lose a year

and stay healthy," said Marisa Machado, a 40-year-old cook who is currently unemployed, raising her three school-age children as a single mother.

Both the mayor and education experts have urged children from low-income families to attend school in person, to avoid falling behind their wealthier peers.

"One year of educational loss translates directly into less income," said Naomi Bardach, a professor of paediatrics and policy at the University of California, San Francisco.

"It's well documented that it gives you a clear financial hit and a clear health outcome hit." But in communities hardest hit by the virus, fear still reigns.

Miguel Hernandez, an unemployed New Yorker from Mexico who is married to a Polish prison guard, does not want to send his three kids to school.

"The children are afraid too. We have to survive," he said. — AFP



Biden garnering Republican endorsements

TIM REID

N

early 100 Republican and independent leaders was set to endorse Democrat Joe Biden for president yesterday, including one-time 2020 Republican presidential candidate Bill Weld and the former Republican governors of Michigan and New Jersey, people involved in the effort told Reuters.

The latest Republican-led effort to oppose the re-election of President Donald Trump also includes current and former Republicans in the key battleground state of Michigan that will help decide the outcome of the November 3 election, the group's members said.

Called 'Republicans and Independents for Biden', the group is headed by Christine Todd Whitman, a former Republican governor of New Jersey who has become one of Trump's fiercest critics and who spoke at the recent Democratic National Convention in support of Biden.

"Biden is a decent man, he's a steady man," Whitman said. "Trump is trying to paint the world of Joe Biden as horrific - but that's Trump's America now."

She accused Trump of betraying conservative values by undermining the rule of law and national security, lying, dividing Americans along racial lines, and failing the country in his response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Weld, a former governor of Massachusetts, briefly and unsuccessfully challenged Trump in the 2020 Republican nominating contest. Another leading member of the group is Rick Snyder, a two-term governor of Michigan who left office in 2019.

Snyder decried what he called

The latest Republican-led effort to oppose the re-election of President Donald Trump also includes current and former Republicans in the key battleground state of Michigan that will help decide the outcome of the November 3 election

Trump's divisive and bullying tactics, adding: "Having worked with Joe Biden and Donald Trump when I was Governor, I believe Biden is the clear choice to put our country back on a positive path."

Whitman, who headed the Environmental Protection Agency under Republican President George W Bush, said the group will target voters in a handful of battleground states, particularly suburban women and voters who do not like Trump but still hesitate to back Biden.

The group plans to launch a website to campaign, buy advertisements and place opinion pieces in state and national media in support of Biden.

"Donald Trump's daily assaults on our nation's founding principles pose an existential threat to the future of the Republic," the group will declare.

The impact of this unprecedented campaign by members of a political party to oppose one of their own running for re-election as president

remains to be seen. Polls show that Trump still enjoys nearly 90 per cent approval among the Republican rank and file.

Other anti-Trump groups include 43 Alumni for Biden, comprised of hundreds of officials who worked for Bush, the 43rd president; Former Republican National Security Officials for Biden; and The Lincoln Project, founded by Republican political operatives.

Tim Murtaugh, communications director for Trump's campaign, said the president has unprecedented support among "real Republican voters."

"Joe Biden has been a failure in the Washington Swamp for a half century, so no one should be surprised when Swamp creatures gather to protect one of their own," he added.

Biden's campaign has been trying to build a broad coalition of liberals, moderate Republicans and independents. When he accepted the Democratic nomination at the convention in August, Biden said if elected he would be a president for all Americans, not just for the Democratic base.

Whitman's group is affiliated with and will be funded by The Lincoln Project, which by the end of June had raised nearly \$20 million, according to filings with the Federal Election Commission.

Its members come from around the country but about a fifth are from Michigan, which Trump won by less than a percentage point in 2016. They include former US Republican congressmen Joe Schwarz and Dave Trott, and former Republican state representatives Doug Hart and David Maturen. — Reuters

North Korean media tests new formats

JOSH SMITH

A

s two typhoons hammered North Korea within a week of each other, state media broadcasts looked unusually reminiscent of international TV coverage, with correspondents standing knee-deep in floodwaters to provide rare, nearly real-time reports.

Thursday's broadcasts were the latest example of a national media that is slowly evolving in the face of more competition from international media that seep into the isolated country, analysts said.

In unprecedented overnight broadcasts, correspondents and anchors were shown at locations around the country, shouting the latest developments while being lashed with wind and rain.

The format offered seemingly unscripted moments rarely seen on the Korean Central Television, including one rain-drenched reporter brushing off attempts by a man trying to hand him an umbrella in the middle of a report.

"It's surprisingly fast and honest public service reporting from KCTV unlike anything we've seen before," said Martyn Williams, a researcher at 38 North, a US-based think-tank that monitors North Korea.

The coverage is almost certainly part of a top-down response to leader Kim Jong Un's recent call last week for more efforts to prevent damage from the typhoons, Williams added.

"The layers of censorship and approval needed are too complex to do this without pretty high-up approval," he said.

EVOLVING MEDIA

The coverage reflects Kim's policy of greater transparency and resolving issues head-on, rather than trying to hide them, said Rachel Minyoung Lee, a former North Korea open source intelligence analyst in the US government.

"Damage from natural disasters has always been a highly sensitive topic for North Korean state media, and showing near-real-time news reports from flood sites on state TV was unthinkable," she said.

Since the early days of Kim's rule, North Korean TV has experimented with various stylistic and formatting changes, ranging from bringing in a younger generation of TV news anchors, to showing more graphics during newscasts, to emulating South Korean entertainment shows, Lee said.

"Kim Jong Un seems to have realised early on that KCTV needed to keep up with the times to compete with the influx of South Korean and foreign media and entertainment content, and that explains KCTV modernisation efforts," she said. — Reuters

OMAN DAILY

Observer

ESTABLISHED 15 NOVEMBER 1981

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili

HEAD OFFICE

Tel: 24649444, 24649450,
24649451, 24604563, 24699437
Fax: 24699643

SALALAH OFFICE

Tel: 23292633
Fax: 23293909

NIZWA OFFICE

Tel: 25411099
P.O. Box 955, P.C. 611

ADVERTISING

AL OMANEYA ADVERTISING & PUBLIC RELATIONS, P.O. Box 3303,
P.C. 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: SWITCHBOARD: 24649444
DIRECT: 24649430/24649437/24649401
Fax: 24649434

DISTRIBUTION AGENT

AL OMANEYA for Distribution & Marketing, P.O. Box 974,
P.C. 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 24649351/24649360
Fax: 24649379

Website: omanobserver.om

e-mail: editor@omanobserver.om

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY: Ministry of Information
P.O. Box 974, Postal Code 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
subscribe@oeppa.om

Plan to develop dolomite mine in Qurayat

PROMISING POTENTIAL: A scoping study has estimated the potential of the mine’s dolomite resource at over 250 million tonnes

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, SEP 3

Plans for the commercial exploitation of a potentially prodigious dolomite mine in Qurayat in Muscat Governorate are making headway with efforts focused on securing a mining license from the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

The principal investor behind the initiative is Kunooz Oman Holding, one of the largest private-led mining and mineral processing companies in the Sultanate. Twenty per cent of the group’s equity is held by a sovereign wealth fund currently incorporated within the recently restructured Oman Investment Authority (OIA).

Kunooz Holding, which already has sizable investments in the mining and development of Oman’s gypsum, gabbro, limestone and marble resources, in addition to the manufacture of construction materials and lime, has its sights on, among other mineral prospects, a promising dolomite deposit in Qurayat. A scoping study has estimated the potential of the mine’s dolomite resource at over 250 million tonnes.

Once given the green-light for



mining and development, Kunooz plans to produce up to three million tonnes per annum of raw dolomite. Based on the magnesium oxide content of the ore, it is proposed to be delineated into either high grade dolomite for the production of magnesium metal or low grade dolomite with less than one per cent silica, which will then be

earmarked for export to overseas steel producers.

But given the challenges of securing the necessary approvals from a host of a government agencies whose nod is a prerequisite for any mining project, the erstwhile Implementation Support & Follow-up Unit (ISFU) – then operating under the auspices of the Diwan

of Royal Court – had stepped in to assist with the approvals processes. It has been collaborating with key stakeholders notably the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, and the Royal Oman



Police.

Meanwhile, an access road to the site has been readied, while a topographical survey of the site has been completed as well. Based on the results of the resource studies, a decision will be taken as to whether the dolomite can be processed within Oman or earmarked for export.

Oil prices at one-month low on demand worries

LONDON: Oil prices extended losses on Thursday, falling by more than 2 per cent to their lowest point since early August, as worries about weaker US gasoline demand and a sluggish economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic dented sentiment.

Brent crude fell \$1, or 2.25 per cent, to \$43.43 a barrel by 1118 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures were down \$1.02, or 2.5 per cent, at \$40.49 a barrel.

Both benchmarks fell more than 2 per cent on Wednesday. US gasoline demand last week fell to 8.78 million barrels per day (bpd) from 9.16 million bpd a week earlier, Energy Information Administration (EIA) data showed on Wednesday, with consumption of other oil products also falling.

“It is the latest data set that possibly caught the eye of those who ran long positions, and not even another record close in the US stock market was able to change the direction of the herd,” Tamas Varga of oil brokerage PVM said.

Other data, such as US private employers hiring fewer workers than expected for a second straight month in August, also fed fears that economic recovery was lagging.

Oil markets, however, drew some support from Iraq’s denial it was seeking exemption from OPEC+ oil cuts during the first quarter of next year.

OPEC’s second largest producer also said it may seek to extend by two months until the end of November the period for making additional compensation cuts under the OPEC+ deal.

Analysts warn that the upcoming refinery maintenance and the end of the summer driving season would also limit crude demand.

— Reuters

China’s state energy producers tiptoe into renewables

BEIJING: China’s state energy producers outlined initiatives to develop hydrogen and wind power after their earnings slumped along with the oil price in the first half but their renewables projects could take years to materialise.

The tentative plans laid out by PetroChina, Sinopec and CNOOC Ltd come as global energy majors like BP prepare to spend billions on renewable energy assets to stay relevant in a low-carbon future.

The world’s largest oil refiner, Sinopec wants to lead China’s hydrogen push, with plans for hydrogen refuelling stations alongside its petrol stations on the east coast, its top executive said this week, but will tread cautiously.

“It’s a strategic move,” Sinopec chairman Zhang Yuzhuo, previously a coal industry veteran told an earnings briefing on Monday. “But as it’s not going to bring immediate return for shareholders, we’ll proceed with caution.”

Last week, larger rival PetroChina became the first Asian state-owned firm to set a target for near-zero emissions by 2050, while offshore oil explorer CNOOC will start its first offshore wind farm by the end of 2020.



The tentative plans laid out by PetroChina, Sinopec and CNOOC Ltd come as global energy majors like BP prepare to spend billions on renewable energy assets to stay relevant in a low-carbon future. — Reuters

The green targets lag those set by European energy majors, as Beijing’s energy policy still views natural gas and low-emission coal as transitional fuels ahead of a more comprehensive renewables push.

Sinopec said only that it planned to build a “certain scale” of high-purity hydrogen supply by 2025.

“It’s a small step in the right direction... Question is how quickly they can make that change,” said Neil Beveridge of Bernstein Research.

Lin Boqiang, Dean of China Institute for Studies in Energy Policy, said the promise of a hydrogen economy risks being over-hyped as provinces jostle for investment from Beijing.

“As China’s renewable resources concentrate in the north and northwestern parts, transporting green energy-based hydrogen to the consuming hubs in the east and south will be a tremendous challenge,” Lin said.

China’s demand for natural gas, which emits half the carbon dioxide of coal, is set to rise to 15 per cent of total primary energy consumption by 2030, spurred by power generation and residential sectors.

PetroChina lumps gas power generation into its green investments, while CNOOC vows to raise its natural gas share in total output to 30 per cent by 2025 from 19 per cent currently. Sinopec plans to double its shale gas output during the same period.

China’s rapidly growing solar and wind market, bolstered by government subsidies and plunging costs, is already crowded with private manufacturers and state-owned power generators, leaving limited space for the oil giants to realise their green ambitions. — Reuters

US job cuts skyrocketed 231 per cent in 2020

WASHINGTON: US job cuts so far this year surged 231 per cent compared to the same period of 2019 as the coronavirus wreaked havoc on the once-healthy economy, according to a new report on Thursday.

Though the pace of announced layoffs is slowing, the number of job cuts announced by US-based employers through August already surpassed the previous full-year record set in 2001, according to outplacement and coaching firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

The data are the latest indication of the awful employment situation facing many American workers as the country weathers the world’s worst coronavirus outbreak.

All told, employers have announced nearly two million cuts this year, and COVID-19 was cited as the reason for more than half.

“The leading sector for job cuts last month was transportation, as airlines begin to make staffing decisions in

The leading sector for job cuts last month was transportation, as airlines begin to make staffing decisions in the wake of decreased travel and uncertain federal intervention

the wake of decreased travel and uncertain federal intervention,” said Andrew Challenger, the firm’s senior vice president.

“An increasing number of companies that initially had temporary job cuts or furloughs are now making them permanent.”

Airlines have been badly hit by a



A 'Now Hiring' sign advertising jobs at Lowe's is seen as the spread of COVID-19 continues, in Homestead, Florida. — Reuters

slump in passenger demand caused by the pandemic, and transportation has cut 131,571 jobs this year, nearly 500 per cent higher than 2019, the report said. And that was before United Airlines on Wednesday announced another 16,000 layoffs in October.

The Labor Department later Thursday is set to announce the tally of new claims for unemployment benefits filed last week, a metric that

saw an unprecedented spike starting in March when business shutdowns to stop the virus’s spread began.

Around 27 million people continue to receive some form of government unemployment assistance, according to the latest Labor Department data, and the Challenger reports sheds further lights on the grim hiring situation in the world’s largest economy.

Entertainment and leisure companies — like the bars and restaurants forced to close by social distancing orders — recorded the second-highest number of announced layoffs in August, and a stomach-churning 8,128 per cent increase in cuts compared to the first eight months of 2019.

States have started lifting lockdown restrictions in a bid to revitalise the economy, and the report indicated the pace of layoffs seemed to be slowing, with the August total of 115,762 down 56 per cent from July. — AFP

French government puts jobs at heart of economy rescue plan

PARIS: The French government said on Thursday employment was paramount as it unleashed a mammoth spending plan for the virus-hit economy that has been hemorrhaging jobs.

Prime Minister Jean Castex promised 160,000 new jobs in 2021 as part of a recovery plan worth 100 billion euros (\$120 billion), designed to help growth and employment at a time when daily virus numbers in France are on the rise again.

“The ambition and size of this plan are historic,” he told reporters after a cabinet meeting backing the stimulus package which he said would help return the French economy to its pre-pandemic level by 2022.

The economy has experienced its worst downward spiral since 1945, with gross domestic product plunging 13.8 per cent in the second quarter, after a drop of more than five per cent in the first.

French companies will have shed an estimated 800,000 positions this year.

“Our absolute priority is jobs,” Castex said.

The budget boost, a combination of new spending and tax breaks, is four times the amount France spent over a decade ago to deal with the global financial crisis, and comes on top of hundreds of billions already spent in an early pandemic response.

“The time for a relaunch has come,” tweeted President Emmanuel Macron.



The sun sets behind loading cranes in the old harbour of Marseille, France. — Reuters

Prime Minister Jean Castex promised 160,000 new jobs in 2021 as part of a recovery plan worth 100 billion euros (\$120 billion), designed to help growth and employment at a time when daily virus numbers in France are on the rise again.

Some 40 billion euros of the plan will be covered by funds from a 750-billion-euro EU-wide plan agreed after much acrimony in July, and the rest by government debt,

Castex said.

There will be no tax hikes to pay for the measures, he vowed.

Kathrin Muehlbronner, a vice president at rating agency Moody's,

said the “reasonably large” package at around 4.5 per cent of GDP would not change Moody's view on France's fiscal strength or credit profile.

The new stimulus is to go beyond the short term.

“This plan is not just designed to dress the wounds from the crisis,” Castex told Le Figaro daily.

“It lays the ground for the future,” he said, echoing Macron's assertion that its emphasis on decarbonising the economy, improving corporate competitiveness and creating jobs would lay the ground for “the France of 2030”. — AFP

Amazon creates 7,000 UK jobs as virus fuels demand



worker in a face mask walks by trucks parked at an Amazon facility as the global coronavirus outbreak continued in Bethpage on Long Island in New York. — Reuters

LONDON: Amazon will create 7,000 permanent jobs in the UK by the end of the year, the American e-commerce giant announced on Thursday in a boost to Britain's virus-hit economy.

“The company will add a further 7,000 new permanent roles by the end of 2020 across more than 50 sites, including corporate offices and two new fulfilment centres,” Amazon said in a statement.

Its total permanent UK workforce will number more than 40,000, up by a third in just one year as the pandemic triggers a surge in online shopping.

While several British retailers have together axed thousands of jobs following the country's virus lockdown, others including supermarket giant Tesco are creating vast amounts of roles to cope with booming online

demand.

Stefano Perego, Amazon's vice president of European customer fulfilment, said his company is “employing thousands of talented individuals in a diverse range of good jobs from operations managers and tech professionals through to people to handle customer orders” across the UK.

“Our people have played a critical role in serving customers in these unprecedented times and the new roles will help us continue to meet customer demand and support small and medium sized businesses selling on Amazon,” he added.

The company, which has already created 3,000 new permanent UK roles this year, added on Thursday that it will offer more than 20,000 seasonal positions across the country ahead of the festive period. — AFP

US INVESTORS SNAP UP CORPORATE DEBT

NEW YORK: More US corporate bonds are paying negative inflation-adjusted yields, as expectations that interest rates will stay near historic lows send investors seeking higher payouts in riskier assets.

The ICE BofA US corporate index for bonds maturing within five to seven years, for example, is paying negative real yields for the first time since 2013.

And bonds issued by Apple Inc in August, maturing in 10 years yielded only 1.16 per cent as of Wednesday, compared with expected inflation of 1.72 per cent per year over that time period.

Driving the moves are investors shifting into lower-rated debt expecting that the Federal Reserve will keep yields on short- and intermediate-term Treasuries at rock-bottom levels for years as it grapples with the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. Bond yields



An electronic screen displays the Apple Inc. stock price at the Nasdaq Market Site in New York City. — Reuters

move inversely to price.

That outlook was reinforced last week, when Chair Jerome Powell said the Fed would allow periods of higher inflation before raising rates.

While the returns on shorter-dated corporate debt are at all-time lows - as

measured by the ICE BofA one-three year US corporate index - they still beat what investors can expect on Treasuries with similar maturities.

“When the Fed lowers its interest rates it really just kind of forces investors to take on risk,” said Eric

Souza, senior portfolio manager at SVB Asset Management. “Investment grade credit and asset-backed securities is where you may start to pick up that positive net yield.”

Fed programmes, including unprecedented Treasury and corporate bond purchases, and its commitment to holding rates near zero is seen as effectively providing a backstop for shorter-dated debt. But the low yields are also making it harder for investors to generate income.

The move into corporate debt is “exactly what the Fed had planned when they were pushing investors out the maturity and credit spectrum,” said Vishal Khanduja, director of investment grade fixed-income portfolio management and trading at Eaton Vance in Boston. “Go on, take more risk, because we are going to control the yield curve and the credit curve from here.” — Reuters

Greek economy contracts 15.2% in Q2

ATHENS: Greece's economy contracted by 15.2 per cent in the second quarter year-on-year, official statistics showed Thursday, with data measured just before coronavirus restrictions were lifted for the tourism season.

The state statistics agency said the drop “reflects the impact on GDP of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restriction measures that were put into place.”

Measured on a quarter-by-quarter basis, the contraction was 14 per cent, the agency said.

The data was collected between April and June — before Greece officially launched a coronavirus-shortened tourism season on July 1.

In comparison, the economy had contracted by 7.1 per cent in 2011, the biggest annual loss of output during the decade-long Greek debt crisis.

The Bank of Greece forecasts the economy in 2020 will contract by 5.8 per cent of output.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has warned that it will fall into a “deep recession” this year before rebounding in 2021.

But a recent IMF forecast indicated the virus will see the country's GDP take

a 10-per cent hit this year before a 5.5 per cent recovery in 2021.

The government has earmarked 24 billion euros (\$28.4 billion) in national and EU funds to support the economy this year due to the shutdown.

The country's cash reserves stand at nearly 35 million euros according to the finance ministry.

Athens raised another 2.5 billion euros on Wednesday after reopening a 10-year bond originally made available in June.

Greece's economy contracted in the first quarter by 0.9 per cent from the same period a year earlier.

Between 2009 and 2018, Greece suffered its worst economic crisis in modern times, and had begun to slowly regain some of the lost ground before it was hit by the impact of coronavirus restrictions.

The government has ruled out a general lockdown after gradually reopening the economy in May and starting to accept foreign arrivals in June to salvage part of the tourism season which is vital to the economy.

But travel demand has not lived up to expectations. — AFP

UK and US trade talks to restart on September 8

LONDON: The next round of British — US trade talks will begin on September 8, London said on Thursday as it scrambles for a deal before a year-end Brexit deadline.

Greg Hands, a trade department minister, said the two sides would meet next week and Britain has been talking to representatives from both main US political parties before November's presidential election.

“I can announce today that the next round (of talks) will start next Tuesday, 8th September,” Hands told MPs during questions on international trade policy.

He added: “We talk with all parts of the US political system.

“We make sure that senators, members of Congress, governors from both parties right the way across the United States... buy into a future UK/US free trade agreement.”

Britain has made a US trade deal a major target to coincide with

its exit from the EU on December 31, but hopes of concluding a deal before then appear increasingly unlikely.

The US Congress is required to approve any comprehensive trade agreement but presidential and congressional elections take place on November 3, restricting hopes of a quick deal.

The UK voted in a landmark referendum in June 2016 to leave the EU, and finally quit on January 31 this year.

The country is currently in a standstill transition period until the end of the year as it tries to negotiate the terms of its future relationship with Brussels.

Its formal departure from the now 27-member bloc nonetheless allowed London to start trade talks with other countries.

Talks have been complicated by several issues, including US



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson welcomes US President Donald Trump at the NATO leaders summit in Watford, Britain, in this file photo. — Reuters

agricultural exports.

But trade secretary Liz Truss also told MPs on Thursday that

American chlorinated chicken — a totem for opponents fearing weaker food import standards — would

Britain has made a US trade deal a major target to coincide with its exit from the EU on December 31, but hopes of concluding a deal before then appear increasingly unlikely

remain banned under any deal.

Bilateral trade between the two countries was worth £221 billion (\$293 billion, 248 billion euros) last year, and a free trade deal could increase this by £15.3 billion over 2018 levels in the long run, according to the British government.

At the same time as the Commons

met, a political row rumbled on over the UK government's possible appointment of Australia's former prime minister Tony Abbott as a trade envoy to help with post-Brexit deals.

London-born Abbott has been criticised for being a climate change sceptic, and for positions considered misogynist and homophobic.

The main opposition Labour party has called him a “Trump-worshipping misogynist”.

Ministers were forced to back his record on Thursday. Health Secretary Matt Hancock defended Abbott's views to Sky News television, saying he was also an expert in trade.

Questioned about any appointment in the Commons, Hands told MPs that he welcomed “the fact that a former prime minister of Australia is willing to help this country out”. — AFP



MIAMI: James Harden's shooting touch deserted him, but the Houston star came up big on the defensive end in the Rockets' 104-102 series-clinching win over Oklahoma City in the NBA play-offs on Wednesday.

Harden leapt to block a potential game-winning three-point attempt by Thunder rookie Luguentz Dort with 4.8 seconds remaining as the Rockets held on through a frantic finish to win the best-of-seven Western Conference series four games to three and book a second-round showdown with LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers.

In a closely contested game, Houston took the lead for good, 103-102, on PJ Tucker's driving basket with 1:25 remaining.

The ball changed hands several times before the Thunder got it into the hands of the red-hot Dort, whose dream night was ended by Harden's big block.

Houston's Robert Covington drained a free throw with 1.4 seconds left to make it 104-102.

Then Harden was called for a foul on Danilo Gallinari before the ball was inbounded, giving the Thunder a free throw and the ball.

Gallinari missed from the foul line and the Thunder turned the ball over on the final inbound pass.

"I couldn't make a shot, turning the ball over, just everything that was not supposed to happen," said Harden, the NBA's leading scorer who had just 17 points on four-of-15 shooting.

"But I just kept sticking with it," he said. "Defensively I had to make a play."

Covington and Eric Gordon scored 21 points apiece for the Rockets. Covington also pulled down 10 rebounds and Russell Westbrook added 20 points for Houston against his former team.

Dort, a 21-year-old undrafted Canadian, scored a career-best 30 points for the Thunder and Chris Paul, who was traded for Westbrook prior to the season, added a triple-double of 19 points 12 assists and 11 rebounds for Oklahoma City.

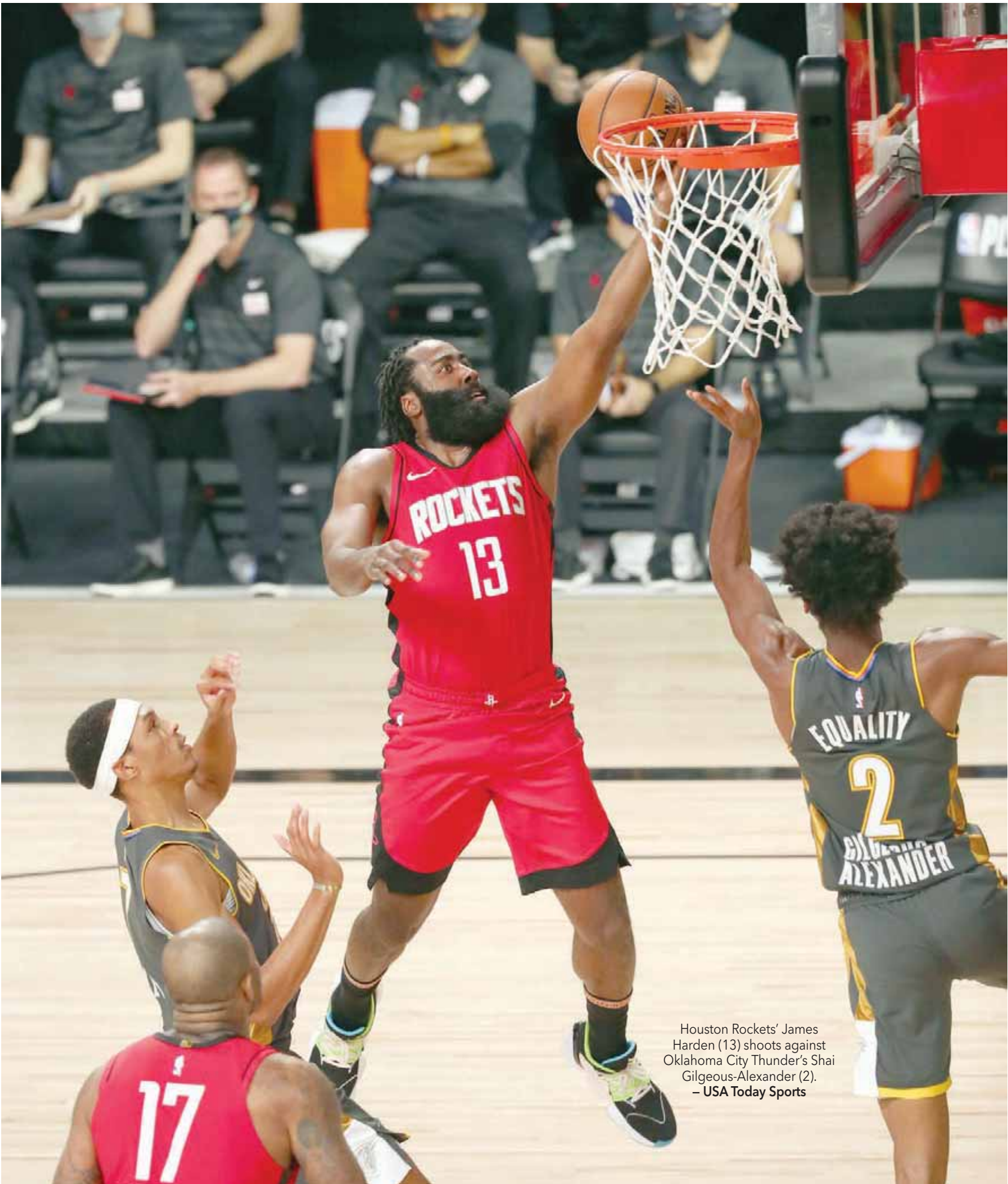
BUTLER SEALS HEAT WIN

Earlier in the NBA's coronavirus quarantine bubble in Orlando, Florida, the Miami Heat went down to the wire to take a 2-0 lead over the top-seeded Milwaukee Bucks in their Eastern Conference second-round series.

Jimmy Butler, fouled on a potential game-winner at the buzzer, calmly made two free throws to seal a 116-114 victory.

Goran Dragic scored 23 points — his sixth straight play-off game with at least 20 — to lead seven Heat players in double figures.

HARDEN BLOCK CLINCHES SERIES FOR ROCKETS



Houston Rockets' James Harden (13) shoots against Oklahoma City Thunder's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (2). — USA Today Sports

A Butler turnover resulting in a Brook Lopez layup saw Milwaukee close within 111-113 with 8.5 seconds remaining.

A Butler free throw stretched the Heat's lead to 114-111, but Dragic was judged to have fouled Milwaukee's Khris Middleton as he attempted a three-pointer and Middleton made all three free-throws to knot the score with 4.3 seconds remaining.

Butler's shot as time expired missed, but officials said he was fouled by Giannis Antetokounmpo and he had his chance to win it at the line.

"I knew I was going to make one out of two, and that's all we needed," Butler said.

Tyler Herro added 17 points, Jae Crowder scored 16, Bam Adebayo 15, Butler and Duncan Robinson contributed 13 apiece and Kelly Olynyk chipped in 11 points for a Heat team that led by as many as 13 in the first half and by nine with less than two minutes to play.

Reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Antetokounmpo scored 29 points and grabbed 14 rebounds for the Bucks and Middleton added 23.

But the Heat are two wins away from reaching the conference finals for the first time since 2014 — when James still played in Miami.

Meanwhile the Bucks, owners of the best regular-season record in the league, are in danger of a second straight play-off disappointment after their loss to the Toronto Raptors in a 2019 Eastern Conference Finals series in which Milwaukee won the first two games.

Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer acknowledged he was "disappointed" by the touch foul called on Antetokounmpo at the buzzer.

"As far as the clock was concerned the shot was released with time remaining, the foul occurred, I guess, some point when he landed," Budenholzer said.

"We're going to disagree, but we need to shift our attention to game three and get prepared for that and understand that's the most important thing right now." — AFP

NBA PLAY-OFF RESULTS

(ALL SERIES BEST-OF-SEVEN):
Eastern Conference
Semifinal
Miami bt Milwaukee 116-114
(Miami lead 2-0)
Western Conference
First round
Houston bt Oklahoma City 104-102
(Houston win 4-3)

Sri Lanka pacer Malinga pulls out of virus-hit IPL

NEW DELHI: Veteran Sri Lanka paceman Lasith Malinga has pulled out of the Indian Premier League "to be with his family", his team said on Wednesday, adding to growing list of players abandoning the coronavirus-hit Twenty20 tournament.

Malinga has asked to be let go for personal reasons the Mumbai Indians said, while also announcing he would be replaced by Australian quick James Pattinson.

"James Pattinson will join MI Family currently based in Abu Dhabi this weekend," current champions Mumbai said in a statement.

The much-delayed IPL has been moved to the United Arab Emirates because of the spread of the coronavirus in India and is scheduled to start on September 19.

"There is no denying the fact that we will miss Lasith's cricketing acumen this season," Mumbai team owner Akash Ambani said.

"However, we fully understand Lasith's need to be in Sri Lanka with his family during this time."

The 37-year-old has been with

the Mumbai team — record four-time IPL winners — since the inaugural edition in 2008.

Other players who have opted out of the tournament include England's Jason Roy, of the Delhi Capitals, and Suresh Raina, who quit the Chennai Super Kings after two players tested positive for coronavirus despite teams being kept in strict "bio-bubbles".

Eleven other support staff and officials from the Chennai team also tested positive for Covid-19 antibodies.

Raina said he did not want to take any chances.

"I have a family with two little kids and elderly parents," Raina told Indian magazine *Outlook*.

"For me returning to the family was more important."

Australian Kane Richardson, who was due to play for the Royals Challengers Bangalore, has also pulled out to attend the birth of his first child.

The IPL has not yet released a fixture list for the league, which runs through to November 10. — AFP





Team Jumbo rider Belgium's Wout van Aert celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the 5th stage of the 107th edition of the Tour de France. – AFP

TOUR DE FRANCE 2020		
Stage 5 183 km		
Wednesday Sept 2		
1	W. Van Aert (BEL/Jumbo-Visma)	4h21:22
2	C. Bol (NED/Sunweb)	at 0:00
3	S. Bennett (IRE/Deceuninck)	at 0:00
4	P. Sagan (SVK/(Bora-Hansgrohe)	at 0:00
5	J. Stuyven (BEL/Trek-Segafredo)	at 0:00
GENERAL		
1	A. Yates (GBR/Mitchelton)	22h28:30
2	P. Roglic (SVK/Jumbo-Visma)	at 0:03
3	T. Pogacar (SVK/UAE Emirates)	at 0:07
4	G. Martin (FRA/Cofidis)	at 0:09
5	E. Bernal (COL/INEOS)	at 0:13
POINTS		
1	S. Bennett (IRE/Deceuninck)	123 pts
MOUNTAIN		
1	B. Cosnefroy (FRA/AG2R La Mondiale)	23 pts
Source: ASO		

Yates takes unwanted yellow

ALAPHILIPPE PAYS WATER PENALTY, VAN AERT WINS TOUR DE FRANCE FIFTH STAGE

PRIVAS (France): Britain's Adam Yates reluctantly took the Tour de France's yellow jersey on Wednesday as overnight leader Julian Alaphilippe was penalised for taking on water in the final 20km, a decision which prompted the Frenchman's boss to claim "he did nothing wrong".

Mitchelton-Scott's Yates took advantage of Alaphilippe's 20-second sanction for receiving a water bottle at the 17km mark as Belgium's Wout Van Aert won the fifth stage.

Taking on supplies from team cars is not allowed in the final 20km for safety reasons, but riders can drink or eat what they already have.

"Nobody wants to take the jersey like this. I was on the bus and we were about to leave for the hotel when I got a call," Yates said.

"I'd already had my shower and everything I asked Julian and he told me he had a time fine, but tomorrow I'll give it everything to

defend the jersey and we'll see day by day.

"It'll be a big fight tomorrow and Julian will want to show he's still here," he added.

Deceuninck-Quick Step's Alaphilippe, who wore the jersey for 14 days during last year's Tour, took the news on the chin.

"What can you do," said the former French soldier. "They decided to impose a 20 second penalty and it's their choice.

"There will be other days and other opportunities," he said.

Deceuninck-Quick Step team sporting director Tom Steels said there had been mitigating circumstances.

"It's a shame to lose the yellow jersey like this. We knew there was the 20 kilometre rule," he said.

'HE DID NOTHING WRONG'

"But today to be honest, the circumstances were special. It was the only place that we found to give



Team Mitchelton rider Great Britain's Adam Yates celebrates his overall leader yellow jersey on the podium. – AFP

him a bottle.

"Julian was very disappointed because he did nothing wrong, he did not gain any sporting advantage by drinking twice from his bottle."

In the stage itself powerful Dutch outfit Jumbo-Visma made it two stage wins in two days as Van Aert

third. Van Aert's Jumbo-Visma arrived at the Tour as the in-form team with the most powerful looking line-up in the Grand Boucle, and are the chief challengers to the dominance of Team Ineos who have won seven of the last eight Tours.

Jumbo leader Primož Roglič won Tuesday's stage testing the other overall contenders with his late kick and claiming the stage win atop the climb to an Alpine ski station.

On Wednesday, it was a hectic and windy finale as the race wound into the remote Ardeche region where some of the pure sprinters were actually dropped as the pace hit 60km an hour in the closing 10km.

Ineos, who have signed Yates for next season, were heading up the peloton as it raced past fields of wilting sunflowers but Jumbo sprung to life as the race entered Privas.

"They are here and they know how to win. They are powerful

team," Van Aert said.

"But we are just focussing on ourselves."

Van Aert won a windy stage on the 2019 Tour when many of the purist sprinters had been dropped, and was part of the team time-trial victory for his outfit.

"It was a sweet win," said Van Aert, who won both Milan-San Remo and the Strade Bianche classics in Italy ahead of the Tour.

"It was a hectic run in but I knew I was in with a chance once we were in the final kilometre," said the 25-year-old.

"Our leader showed his strong legs and today it was my turn.

Ineos leader Egan Bernal said earlier on Wednesday at the Alpine departure town of Gap he was unconcerned by Jumbo's form.

"We are concentrating on arriving in the third week good and fresh for the finale," said the 23-year-old defending champion.

— AFP

OCC LAUNCHES E-LEARNING PLATFORM FOR CLUB PLAYERS

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, SEPT 3

The Oman Chess Committee (OCC) has launched a new online initiative on e-learning platform which can provide the right technical training sessions to the domestic team players. The remotely-conducted programme which began on Tuesday aimed to provide the training sessions to more than five junior players in each club and two players from senior level.

The OCC had told all the teams to nominate their candidate for the programme which last for one full month. Coach Basheer al Qudaimi is the presenter of the programme.

The four-week programme in 'Zoom' platform will feature different technical sessions in the first week including the basic rules of chess,

technical and tactical methods during the game, opening and closing moves, regular openings and friendly tournaments between the participants. The following week will include remote sessions on games technical analysis, general chess rules and regulations, technical analysis of middle game and a team tournament. The third week will feature online courses on some practical sessions for the last two weeks of theoretical sessions, types of openings and technical strategies. The last week schedule will include mechanisms of taking part in online tournaments, technical analysis of the games of the top ranked players in the world and friendly tournament.

Since April and after the stopping of sporting activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, OCC was



one of the earliest committees and associations domestically which launched different webinars on online chess tournaments, coaching and umpiring courses besides other chess related courses. The OCC had participated along with other Arab associations and federations in the virtual friendly camps through advanced technology systems.

The national chess team players took part in the first edition of the Asian Seniors Online Chess Championships which was held in July. The eight days virtual tournament had targeted the players who are above 50 years and over 65 years. Salim Shimas and Abdul Karim al Balushi had represented the Sultanate team in the Asian event.

In August, the OCC utilised the lengthy break due to COVID-19 pandemic, by holding series

of virtual courses including 'Organisation of international chess tournaments', school chess programme, the general aspects on posting and approving the chess events in the annual calendar, the main policies and regulations for special competitions and championships, the annual awards of the Fide, methodology on submitting the bids to host international championships, the inspection process at the venue of the championships by the Fide committee, the evaluation and submitting process of the bids and invitation, technical instructions of Fide for hosting international championships, guidelines for the disabled and the rules of international classifications and rankings.

sport

DJOKOVIC SURVIVES EDMUND SCARE * OSAKA, KVITOVA SAIL TO THIRD ROUND

Garcia flies past top seed Pliskova

Caroline Garcia



NEW YORK: Novak Djokovic overcame an early scare to move into the third round of the US Open on Wednesday but top women's seed Karolina Pliskova crashed out in the tournament's first shock.

Djokovic extended an undefeated run in 2020 to 25 matches as Pliskova was stunned in straight sets by France's Caroline Garcia, the world number 50.

World number one Djokovic dropped the first against Britain's Kyle Edmund but rallied to progress 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 inside a subdued, spectator-free Arthur Ashe Stadium at Flushing Meadows.

"I'm really glad having an early kind of tough match because it kind of serves me better I think for the rest of the tournament," said Djokovic.

The Serbian superstar is looking to close the gap on Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, both absent from Flushing Meadows, in the race for the all-time men's Slam singles title record.

The 33-year-old — who won an eighth Australian Open title in February — is on 17, with Nadal on 19 and Federer on 20.

Pliskova — the 28-year-old world number three from the Czech Republic — suffered a miserable 1-6, 6-7 exit to a confident Garcia who rushed to a 5-0 lead in the first set.

Pliskova said her defeat was nothing to do with being elevated to the top of the draw after a host of high-ranking withdrawals over coronavirus fears.

"No, zero pressure from this for me. This is nothing to do with my loss today," she sniffed.

Elsewhere in the men's draw on Wednesday, fourth seed Stefanos Tsitsipas of Greece defeated American Maxime Cressy 7-6 (7/2), 6-3, 6-4 in his first runoff on the famous Ashe court.

"It would have been even better with fans but getting a first taste of what it is was great for me," he said.

Earlier fifth seed Alexander Zverev defeated American wildcard Brandon Nakashima in a far from smooth 7-5, 6-7 (8/10), 6-3, 6-1 win.

The world number seven traded 24 aces with 10 double faults against a player ranked 223 inside an empty but and humid Louis Armstrong Stadium to move into round three.

"I was sweating through my shoes, which is unusual," said Zverev, explaining a footwear change during the match. "I needed to go from the dry tires to the wet tires a little bit."

Belgian seventh seed David Goffin also progressed as the top seeds continue to dominate at the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center.

EMPTY TANK

In the women's draw, 2018 champion Naomi Osaka sailed into the third round, dismantling Italy's Camila Giorgi 6-1, 6-2 in just 1 hour 9 minutes.

Sixth seed Petra Kvitova vanquished Kateryna Kozlova of Ukraine 7-6 (7/3), 6-2 while Germany's Angelique Kerber beat compatriot Anna-Lena Friedsam in straight sets.

The 17th seed won 6-3, 7-6 (8/6) in one hour 40 minutes inside Louis Armstrong Stadium.

Also in the women's event, unseeded Russian Varvara Gracheva dumped out French 30th seed Kristina Mladenovic 1-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-0.

Mladenovic's exit came after a remarkable collapse. The Frenchwoman led 6-1, 5-1 and failed to convert four match points as Gracheva came roaring back to win "I just collapsed," a gloomy Mladenovic said afterwards. "I had nothing left in the tank." The US Open is taking place in a spectator-free bubble, resulting in a staid atmosphere in contrast with the usual frenetic energy that pervades the grounds of the tennis center during Open week.

Game-winning points are being met with the odd clap from coaches and admiring glances from rival players watching from their own personal suites in Arthur Ashes Crowd noise is piped-in between sets while images of spectators cheering from their sofas at home are shown on "fan cams" around the Arthur Ashe court. — **AFP**