

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Igor Dodon of the Republic of Moldova on the occasion of his country's Independence Anniversary.

In his cable, His Majesty expressed his best wishes of good health and happiness to President Dodon and the friendly people of Moldova further progress and prosperity. — ONA

P4

PARIS MAKES
FACE MASKS
COMPULSORY



P8

OMAN JOINS
GLOBAL
TRANSIT SYSTEM



P10

NBA WALKOUT
SPARKS US
SPORT BOYCOTT



HM GIVES AUDIENCE TO US SECRETARY OF STATE



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik gave an audience at Al Barakah Palace to Michael Pompeo, Secretary of State of the United States of America (USA), who paid a short visit to the Sultanate on Thursday.

The audience reviewed aspects of the existing bilateral cooperation between the Sultanate and the USA within the framework of the strong relations binding the two countries, in addition to reviewing matters of mutual interest between the two sides.

The audience was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamoud al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Leslie M Tsou, Ambassador of USA to the Sultanate, and the delegation accompanying the guest. — ONA

INSIDE



DUTCH AUTHOR MARIEKE LUCAS
RUNEVELD WINS BOOKER PRIZE

P5



PENCE PLEDGES 'LAW AND ORDER'
AS COUNTRY ROCKED BY PROTESTS

P6

His Majesty has empowered governorates to foster growth

MUSCAT: Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior and Chairman of the Governorates Affairs Council (GAC), chaired the first meeting of the GAC at the Interior Ministry on Thursday.

At the outset of the meeting, Sayyid Hamoud valued the issuance of the Royal Decree promulgating the System of Governorates and Municipalities Affairs.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, who presided over the Council of Ministers' meeting on Wednesday, has said that "The State is embarking on empowering

governors, according them full attention to foster growth and development, while at the same time granting them discretions to shoulder the responsibility of activating the economy, investments and business away from centralisation."

The meeting touched on the roles to be undertaken by the GAC in accordance with specialisations assigned to it, which are:

Studying issues forwarded by His Majesty the Sultan or the Council of Ministers;

Studying topics of common nature among governorates; Co-

ordinating between governorates as they exercise their prerogatives; Unifying mechanisms of work of governorates;

Following up the progress of work in ongoing developmental projects in governorates;

Removing obstacles;

Submitting an annual report to the Council of Ministers;

Giving proposals and necessary recommendations on all that relates to governorates' development.

The GAC also discussed other topics and took appropriate decisions in their regard. — ONA

SEE ALSO P3

Over 79,600 COVID-19 patients recovered

MUSCAT: The total number of positive COVID-19 cases in the Sultanate reached 85,005, while the number of recoveries stood at 79,608, comprising 93.6 per cent, the Ministry of Health said. The total number of COVID-19 related death cases stood at 650.

SEE ALSO P2



Third of world's children lack remote learning

NAIROBI: One in three schoolchildren across the world have been unable to access remote learning during coronavirus school closures, the UN children's agency said on Thursday, warning of a "global education emergency".

Nearly 1.5 billion children were affected by school closures as countries locked down to prevent the disease from spreading, UNICEF said in a report. Yet, at least one in three students have had no way of continuing their education at home.

"For at least 463 million children whose schools closed

due to COVID-19, there was no such a thing as remote learning," said UNICEF's Executive Director Henrietta Fore in a statement.

"The sheer number of children whose education was completely disrupted for months on end is a global education emergency. The repercussions could be felt in economies and societies for decades to come."

The report examined 100 countries, looking at children's ability to access remote learning through television and radio broadcasts or online classes and the availability of the correct educational materials on



Students try to reach Internet signal from a treetop to attend a virtual class in El Tigre, El Salvador. — AFP

these platforms. It found students in Africa were the most impacted, with almost half unable to access remote education, compared to 38 per cent in South Asia and 34 per cent in eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Latin America and the Caribbean had the lowest number of children affected, with 9 per cent of students unable to access learning at home, said the report.

Most children lived in rural areas, in poor households with no access to the Internet, to electricity or to the educational television and radio broadcasts that many nations ran. — Reuters

WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT
MAX: 35°C
MIN: 29°C

SALALAH
MAX: 27°C
MIN: 25°C

NIZWA
MAX: 41°C
MIN: 28°C

SUNRISE 05.47 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

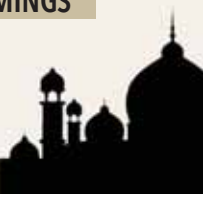
FAJR: 04:30

DHUHR: 12:13

ASR: 15:40

MAGHRIB: 18:34

ISHA: 19:46





HM GIVES AUDIENCE TO US SECRETARY OF STATE

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik gave an audience at Al Barakah Palace to Michael Pompeo, US Secretary of State, who paid a short visit to the Sultanate on Thursday morning. The audience was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamoud al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Leslie M Tsou, US Ambassador to the Sultanate, and the delegation accompanying the guest.

187 new COVID-19 cases, 4 deaths

MUSCAT: The total number of positive COVID-19 cases in the Sultanate has reached 85,005, while the number of recoveries stood at 79,608, which is 93.6 per cent of new cases reported. The Ministry of Health reported 187 new cases and four deaths due to COVID-19 on Thursday.

The total number of

COVID-19 related deaths stood at 650, the ministry said. The ministry also pointed out that 64 cases were hospitalised over the past 24 hours, adding that the total number of COVID-19 patients admitted to hospital stands at 425, of whom 153 are in intensive care units (ICU).

— ONA

GCC seminar debates future response to epidemics

MUSCAT: The GCC Statistical Center on Wednesday organised a virtual seminar to enable official GCC statistics entities to improve response to future epidemics and disasters. The seminar involved the participation of the statistical agencies in GCC countries, the economic and development affairs sector in

the GCC Secretariat General, the UN Statistical Commission and EU Statistics Office (Eurostat). The national statistical agencies in the GCC countries showed presentations in which they reviewed their experiences in producing statistics in light of the difficult circumstances of the outbreak of COVID-19 around the world. They

made a number of proposals to statistically deal with similar crises and disasters. The seminar aimed to enhance the capabilities of employees in the national statistical agencies of the GCC countries, in order to produce reliable official statistics that support decision-makers in their countries to face epidemics

and future disasters by improving response, in addition to exchanging experiences among the participating parties, identifying the challenges facing the Gulf statistical system and the most prominent features to the future of official statistics after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the areas of innovation and smart statistics.

— ONA



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Governorates Affairs Council discusses key issues

MUSCAT: Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior and Chairman of the Governorates Affairs Council (GAC), chaired the first meeting of the GAC at the Interior Ministry on Thursday. — ONA

Syrian talks resume despite virus cases: UN



UN Special Envoy to Syria Geir Pedersen (C) wearing a face mask, arrives for a press conference shortly prior to the resumption of UN-backed talks on a new constitution for Syria after Swiss health authorities gave the green light despite four delegates testing positive for COVID-19, at the United Nations Office in Geneva, on Thursday. — AFP

GENEVA: UN-backed talks on a new constitution for Syria resumed in Geneva on Thursday after Swiss health authorities gave the green light despite four delegates testing positive for COVID-19.

The discussions, aimed at rewriting the war-torn country's constitution, were put on hold almost as soon as they started on Monday when the test results came through.

UN envoy Geir Pedersen, who is moderating the tentative talks between representatives of President Bashar al Assad's government, the opposition and civil society, has voiced hope they could pave the way towards a broader political process.

His office said in a statement that "following additional testing and further medical and expert advice regarding four earlier positive tests for COVID-19", Swiss authorities had determined the meeting could go ahead at the UN Palais des Nations. They resumed at 2:00 pm (1200 GMT).

The committee members — 15 each from the government, the opposition and from civil society — were tested for the new coronavirus

The discussions, aimed at rewriting the war-torn country's constitution, were put on hold almost as soon as they started on Monday when the test results came through

before they travelled to Geneva, and were tested again on arrival in the Swiss city.

The positive second tests were found among delegates who arrived from Damascus, opposition negotiations leader Hadi al Bahra told a virtual press briefing on Tuesday. One opposition delegate, one from civil society and two representing the government, tested positive, he said.

Pedersen said further testing in recent days "indicates that the earlier positive cases do not pose any risk," adding though that "out of an abundance of caution", the talks

would proceed at the UN "only with those who have tested negative."

He stressed strict precautions would be followed during the talks. The discussions had been scheduled to wrap up on Friday, but Pedersen said the plan now was to extend the talks into Saturday.

He said committee delegates seemed eager to resume dialogue as "a signal of the importance of this process."

He hailed a "constructive" first meeting on Monday, and said delegates appeared keen to have "substantive discussions" for the remainder of the week.

The Constitutional Committee was created in September last year and first convened a month later.

Disagreement on the agenda prevented a second round of planned talks from taking place in late November. The pandemic has delayed them ever since.

The United Nations has been striving for more than nine years to nurture a political resolution to Syria's civil war, which has killed more than 380,000 people and displaced more than 11 million.

— AFP

Sultanate's Ambassador to Kuwait presents copy of credentials

KUWAIT: Dr Saleh bin Amer al Kharousi, Sultanate's Ambassador appointed to the State of Kuwait, on Thursday presented a copy of his credentials to Dr Ahmed Nasser Al Mohammed al Sabah, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kuwait.

During the meeting, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kuwait wished the ambassador success in his assignments, and the fraternal, strong relations between the two brotherly countries further growth and prosperity. — ONA



Heavy rains in parts of Sultanate

MUSCAT: Moderate to heavy rains were reported from Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah, North al Sharqiyah, Al Dakhiliyah and South al Batinah, leading to wadis swelling with water on Thursday.

The authorities have urged people to exercise caution and not to risk crossing the wadis in order to avoid accidents of vehicle drifting and loss of life and property.



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New Zealand mosque shooter given life in prison

TARRANT SHOWED NO EMOTION WHEN SENTENCED * LIFE IN PRISON WILL NOT EXHAUST PUNISHMENT, JUDGE SAYS



Brenton Tarrant

WELLINGTON: A New Zealand judge sentenced white supremacist Brenton Tarrant to life in prison without parole on Thursday for killing 51 Muslim worshippers in the country’s deadliest shooting, saying the sentence was not enough punishment for the “wicked” crimes.

It was the first time a court in New Zealand had sentenced a person to prison for the rest of their life.

Christchurch High Court Judge Cameron Mander said Tarrant had shown no remorse and that no matter how long he spent in prison it would not be long enough to atone for his crimes.

“Your crimes... are so wicked that even if you are detained until you die it will not exhaust the requirements of punishment and denunciation,” said the judge in handing down the sentence.

“As far as I am able to gauge, you are empty of any empathy for your victims,” he said.

Tarrant, a 29-year-old Australian, admitted to 51 charges of murder, 40 counts of attempted murder and one charge of committing a terrorist act during the 2019 shooting rampage at two Christchurch mosques which he livestreamed on Facebook.



Survivors and members of the public react after the judgment and the last day of the sentencing hearing for Australian white supremacist Brenton Tarrant in Christchurch on Thursday. – AFP

On March 15, 2019, Tarrant stormed the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch armed with military-style semi-automatics, indiscriminately shooting at Muslims gathered for Friday prayers, while filming his massacre from a head-mounted camera and playing a Serbian anti-Muslim anthem.

He killed 44 people at Al Noor, the youngest a three-year-old boy

shot at point blank range, then attacked a second mosque in the nearby suburb of Linwood, killing another seven people.

Judge Mander asked Tarrant before handing down the sentence if he had any comment. Dressed in grey prison clothes and surrounded by guards, Tarrant nodded when asked if he was aware he had the right to make submissions, but he did not speak.

JUSTICE WELCOMED

“Today the legal procedures for this heinous crime have been done. No punishment will bring our loved ones back,” said Gamal Fouda, the imam of Al Noor mosque which was targeted.

“Extremists are all the same. Whether they use religion, nationalism or any other ideology. All extremists, they represent hate. But we are here today. We respect love, com-

passion, Muslim and non-Muslim people of faith and of no faith.”

Prosecutors said Tarrant had accumulated more than 7,000 rounds of ammunition for the attack and wanted to instil fear in those he described as invaders and that he carefully planned the attacks to cause maximum carnage.

“The hatred that lies at the heart of your hostility to particular members of the community that you

came to this country to murder has no place here — it has no place anywhere,” Mander said.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said she was relieved that “that person will never see the light of day”.

“The trauma of March 15 is not easily healed but today I hope is the last where we have any cause to hear or utter the name of the terrorist behind it. His deserves to be a lifetime of complete and utter silence,” she said.

The attack led to a ban on fire-arms in New Zealand and a campaign against hate content online led by Ardern, a response that was hailed as a model for other countries.

More than 90 survivors and families of the victims gave emotionally charged statements in court this week calling for Tarrant to be sentenced to life without parole. Many gathered in and outside the court on Thursday to hear the sentence.

“It’s a relief... We are not in a country where we can expect the death penalty. But they have served justice... giving the maximum prison time without parole,” said Hina Amir, 34, who was outside Al Noor mosque when Tarrant attacked and survived a hail of bullets in her car with her husband, Amir Daud.

The crime received wide attention around the Muslim world and on Thursday Turkey’s foreign ministry noted “with pleasure” that the heaviest available punishment had been applied for an attack which killed one and wounded two Turkish citizens.

“The verdict reminded the world once again the need for the international community to fight jointly against all acts and ideologies based on Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism and hatred.” — Reuters

Coronavirus hits isolated Indian island tribe

PORT BLAIR: Ten members of India’s dwindling Great Andamanese tribe have tested positive for the coronavirus, officials said on Thursday, fuelling concerns about the safety of the group and other indigenous people in the remote archipelago.

Out of the 10, six have recovered and have been put in home quarantine, while the rest are undergoing treatment in a local hospital, officials said.

Just over 50 Great Andamanese people survive today and live on the tiny Strait Island where the Indian government looks after their food and shelter.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a chain of islands in the Indian Ocean with a population of some 400,000, have reported 2,268 coronavirus cases so far with 37 deaths.

Indian authorities sent a team of health officials to Strait Island on Sunday after six members of the tribe tested positive in the archipelago’s capital Port Blair recently.

Some of the tribe’s members travel to Port Blair where they have government jobs.

“The team tested 37 samples and four members of the Great Andamanese tribe were found to be positive. They are admitted in hospital,” Avijit Ray, a senior health officer in charge of the disease management in the Andamans, said.

Sanjiv Mittal, a senior government officer for tribal welfare, said authorities were doing their best to keep all the members safe and healthy. — AFP

MONSOON MISERY IN KARACHI



People wade through the flooded road during monsoon rain, as the outbreak of the coronavirus disease continues, in Karachi, Pakistan, on Thursday. – Reuters

Taliban kill 4 survivors of flash floods

KABUL: Taliban militants killed four civilians on Thursday during clashes with Afghan forces in the central province of Parwan, amid rescue work after flash floods claimed more than 150 lives, officials said.

It was the latest violence amid peace talks between the warring sides that have been delayed over the issue of prisoner releases, as part of efforts to end the US-led war in Afghanistan, which has spanned nearly two decades.

“Taliban fighters opened fire on civilians fleeing areas worst hit by the flash floods,” said Abdul

Shukoor Qudoosi, a district official in Bagram, home to the country’s biggest US military base and the site of the clashes.

“Taliban were clashing with Afghan forces and they killed civilians who were in an autorickshaw near an army checkpoint,” Qudoosi said, adding that it appeared as if the militants mistook the passengers for Afghan soldiers.

One Afghan soldier was killed and two were injured.

A Taliban spokesman was not immediately available to comment.

The death toll from the floods

Masks compulsory in all Paris as virus cases mount

PARIS: France’s prime minister announced on Thursday that face masks will become compulsory throughout Paris as he detailed a national trend of expanding coronavirus infections.

Jean Castex said 19 departments have been added to a map with “red” zones of active virus circulation, meaning 21 of France’s 94 departments are now classified as such.

Official figures released on Wednesday showed more than 5,400 confirmed new cases in just 24 hours, with admissions to hospital and intensive care units on the rise.

There was an “undeniable resurgence” of the COVID-19 epidemic throughout France, Castex told a press conference, with an incidence rate of 39 positive tests per 100,000 of the population — four times the level of a month ago, and rising in all age groups.

The “positivity rate” — the percentage of tests that come back positive — was up from one per cent in May to 3.7 per cent today, and the so-called “R” rate of viral transmission is now 1.4 nationwide, meaning 10 infected people are infecting 14 others on average.

More than 800 coronavirus patients are being admitted to hospital on average each week, up from 500 six weeks ago, the prime minister said.

“The epidemic is gaining territory, and now is the time to intervene” to curb exponential



French Prime Minister Jean Castex puts his protective face mask on during a press conference on the situation of COVID-19 in France, at the Hotel de Matignon in Paris on Thursday. – AFP

infection growth, he said.

Castex announced that Paris, one of the 21 zones with active virus circulation, will make face masks compulsory throughout the city, though he did not give a date.

Masks are already obligatory on public transport nationwide and in most enclosed public spaces, including the workplace.

Local authorities in some cities and towns, including Paris, have used executive powers to make face coverings compulsory outdoors as well, in busy public areas.

On Tuesday, the Mediterranean port city of Marseille — also in a red zone — made masks compulsory in public places throughout the city, also outdoors, and announced bars and restaurants would close every day at 11:00 pm. — AFP



People walk past a destroyed building after the passing of Hurricane Laura in Lake Charles, Louisiana on Friday. — AFP

'Catastrophic' Hurricane Laura batters southwest Louisiana

HOUSTON, TEXAS: Hurricane Laura made landfall early on Thursday in southwestern Louisiana as one of the most powerful storms to hit the state, with forecasters warning it could push a massive wall of water 40 miles inland from the sea. Laura made landfall just before 1 am as a Category 4 storm packing winds of 150 mph in the small town of Cameron, Louisiana, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) said. It rapidly weakened to a Category 2 storm on Thursday morning with maximum sustained winds of 105 mph as it moved north and battered southwest Louisiana, a marshy region particularly prone to storm surge and flooding. Besides threatening life, the storm was barreling towards the heart of the US oil industry, forcing oil rigs and refineries to shut down production. Laura's winds tore through Lake Charles, Louisiana all night, ripping roofs from buildings and shattering glass windows, videos posted to Twitter showed. The city of 78,000 was seeing sustained winds of 85 mph and gusts up to 128 mph, in the hour

after landfall, the NHC said. "This is one of the strongest storms to impact that section of coastline," said David Roth, a forecaster with the National Weather Service. "We worry about that storm surge going so far inland there because it's basically all marshland north to Interstate 10. There is little to stop the water." Officials across the hard-hit area said it would be several hours before they could get out to begin search and rescue missions. Downed trees blocking roadways were expected to be the biggest immediate challenge for rescuers. "Catastrophic storm surge, extreme winds and flash flooding continues in portions of Louisiana," the NHC said in an early Thursday bulletin. The oil-refining town of Port Arthur was just west of where Laura made landfall. The city of 54,000 was a ghost town late on Wednesday, with just a couple of gas stations and a liquor store open for business. "People need their vodka," said Janaka Balasooriya, a cashier, who said he lived a few blocks away and

Laura made landfall just before 1 am as a Category 4 storm packing winds of 150 mph in the small town of Cameron, Louisiana, the National Hurricane Center said

would ride out the storm at home. Just hours before Laura smashed into the coast, Port Arthur resident Eric Daw hustled to fill up his car at one of the few gas stations still open. He said he had wanted to evacuate earlier but lacked money for gas as he was waiting on a disability payment. Daw was headed to a shelter in San Antonio, a 4-1/2-hour drive, where instead of worrying about the storm he has to contend with COVID-19, echoing the concerns of many others. "They say we are all supposed to

socially distance now," he said. "But how am I supposed to socially distance in a shelter?" **WALL OF WATER** About 620,000 people were under mandatory evacuation orders in Louisiana and Texas. The storm surge could penetrate inland from Sea Rim State Park, Texas to Intracoastal City, Louisiana, and could raise water levels as high as 20 feet (6 metres) in parts of Cameron Parish, Louisiana, the NHC said. "To think that there would be a wall of water over two stories high coming on shore is very difficult for most to conceive, but that is what is going to happen," said National Weather Service meteorologist Benjamin Schott at a news conference on Tuesday. Most of Louisiana's Cameron Parish would be under water at some point, Schott added. Laura could also spawn tornadoes on Thursday over Louisiana, Arkansas and western Mississippi and was expected to drop 6 to 12 inches of rain over the region, the NHC said. — Reuters

Russian police launch initial 'check' into Navalny case



Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny delivers a speech during a rally in Moscow. — Reuters file photo

MOSCOW: Russia announced on Thursday it had launched a police "check" into opposition leader Alexei Navalny's illness and asked German medics treating him to share his medical records while the Kremlin continued to insist there were no grounds for a criminal probe. The German doctors have said tests on the 44-year-old politician and anti-corruption campaigner indicate that he was poisoned, and his allies have pointed the finger of blame at President Vladimir Putin. In an interview on state-controlled television on Thursday, Putin made no mention of the case. Prosecutors said they had "no evidence" of a deliberate crime committed against Navalny and requested that German medics hand over "the evidence for the initial diagnoses they gave" including test results. **SUSPECTED NERVE AGENT** Navalny fell ill on a plane to Moscow from the Siberian city of Tomsk. He spent two days in a Russian clinic in a coma before being transferred to Berlin's Charite hospital. Medics there said on Monday they do not know the exact substance involved but that Navalny was ap-

parently poisoned with a substance that inhibits the cholinesterase enzyme, a feature of nerve agents. Navalny's allies say he may have been poisoned by a cup of tea he drank at Tomsk airport. International calls have been mounting for an independent probe into the case, but Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Thursday dismissed the police check as routine, saying: "there is no basis for an investigation." "Nothing has changed, we still don't have any understanding of what caused the state the sick man is now in," he told journalists. Transport police in Siberia said they had started "a pre-investigation check" into what led to Navalny's hospitalisation in the Siberian city of Omsk to establish "all the circumstances" and decide whether to open a criminal probe. The police action appears to be a low-level response after Navalny's allies asked for an investigation into an attempted assassination of a public figure. Police do such checks to determine whether a crime has been committed. Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh tweeted that they had not been informed of the police check. — AFP

EU's Dombrovskis given temporary charge of trade after Hogan exit

BRUSSELS: European Commission Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis will take temporary responsibility for trade after the resignation of Ireland's Phil Hogan over allegations he broke COVID-19 guidelines, EU executive chief Ursula von der Leyen said. The former Latvian prime minister will take charge as the European Union seeks to ease trade tensions with the United States, seal a deal on future relations with Britain and unite around a new leader for the World Trade Organization. Dombrovskis previously stood in for two weeks in June when Hogan said he was considering putting himself forward to become the next WTO director-general. He finally opted not to do so. The Commission coordinates trade policy for the EU's 27 members, meaning the EU trade chief is among the most powerful of



Phil Hogan

the "college" of commissioners. Von der Leyen said on Thursday that the Irish government should propose a man and a woman as potential successors and she would later determine the final allocation of tasks. Ireland may not retain the trade portfolio. Prime Minister Micheal Martin said Ireland would look at von der Leyen's preference for two nominees and that he planned to meet his coalition partners to discuss a successor. — Reuters

Dutch author Marieke Lucas Rijneveld wins Booker Prize

LONDON: Dutch writer and poet Marieke Lucas Rijneveld won the 2020 International Booker Prize for translated fiction on Wednesday for their novel "The Discomfort of Evening." Rijneveld, 29, who uses the pronouns they/them/their, is the youngest winner of the prize. Rijneveld and their translator, Michele Hutchison, shared the award for a debut novel, published in Dutch in 2018, that follows a 10-year-old girl growing up on a Dutch dairy farm with her devout religious family. Ted Hodgkinson, the chair of the judges, praised the "novel of undeniable force," highlighting the "sheer poetry of its perceptions." "I am proud as a cow with seven udders," said Rijneveld, who still works on a dairy farm, by video link after Hodgkinson relayed the judges' decision. Hodgkinson said the judges had looked for a novel that "echoes the



Marieke Lucas Rijneveld poses during a photo session in Utrecht. — AFP

dystopian world we all now seem to inhabit." "This book astounded us all when we first encountered it," Hodgkinson said. Rijneveld is acclaimed in the Netherlands as "one of the greatest new voices in Dutch literature," according to a Booker Prize biography. Their first prize-winning poetry

collection, "Caulf's Caul," was followed by debut novel "The Discomfort of Evening," which became a national bestseller. "The Discomfort of Evening" is about a family in which the oldest child dies," said Rijneveld, whose elder brother died when they were 3 years old, before the ceremony. "The family consists of four chil-

dren. The oldest goes skating and falls through the ice," they said. "The book follows [younger sister] Jas, the main character, from the beginning and you're really inside her 'head.'" Rijneveld told *The Guardian* earlier this year that they had "dressed like a boy and behaved like a boy" as a teenager before presenting as a girl in teenage years. "Then at 20, I went back to the boy I was at primary school," they told the newspaper, which said Rijneveld's middle name, Lucas, was taken from an imaginary boyfriend during their childhood. Rijneveld said their own family was "too frightened" to read the novel. "It's difficult for my parents to understand that I'm not the girl that they raised," they said. The novel beat five other shortlisted books to take the prize, which includes an award of £50,000 (\$66,000). The prize is split equally between author and translator. — dpa



A general view of the Grand Market in Bamako. – AFP

Mali junta releases ousted president

BAMAKO: Mali’s new military rulers said on Thursday that former president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who was detained during the country’s coup on August 18, had been freed.

The announcement came on the eve of a summit by Mali’s neighbours, who are to decide whether to ratchet up pressure on the fledgling junta.

Keita’s ouster by rebel troops sent shockwaves through the region and in France, which sees Mali as a linchpin in its campaign against extremist in the Sahel, where more than 5,000 French troops are based.

“President IBK is free in his movements, he’s at home,” a spokesman for the junta, Djibrila Maiga, said, referring to Keita by his initials, as many Malians do.

The junta, calling itself the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP), said on Facebook it was “informing public and international opinion that former president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita has been released and is currently in his residence”.

A Keita relative, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the 75-year-old former leader had returned overnight to his house in the Sebenikoro district of the capital Bamako.

The source did not say whether he was still subject to any restrictions.

Keita, prime minister Boubou Cisse and other senior officials



Ibrahim Boubacar Keita – AFP

were seized by young officers who mutinied at a base near Bamako.

In the early hours of August 19, Keita appeared on national TV to announce his resignation, saying he had had no other choice, and wanted to avoid “bloodshed”.

His release — and other leaders — is a key demand of Mali’s neighbours, its ally France and international organisations, including the African Union and European Union.

Former Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan, heading a team from the regional bloc ECOWAS, was given access to Keita on last Saturday, and said he seemed “very fine.” The announcement on Thursday came on the eve of a virtual summit by the 15-nation ECOWAS — the Economic Community of West African States — which has imposed sanctions against Mali for the coup. — AFP

Pence pledges ‘law and order’ as country rocked by protests

BALTIMORE: US vice president Mike Pence took centre stage at the Republican convention Wednesday to warn voters they “won’t be safe in Joe Biden’s America” — casting Donald Trump as their protector against the “radical” left.

Pence was the keynote speaker in a parade of Trump acolytes who sought to uplift the president as an economic virtuoso and champion of conservative and pro-life values, law enforcement and civil rights.

They also spoke of dark forces intent on ending the American dream, and said losing to their Democratic rivals is not an option.

“Law and order is on the ballot,” Pence stressed on the third night of a convention overshadowed by violent unrest in Wisconsin and the approach of Hurricane Laura to the southern US coast.

He addressed the event from Fort McHenry in Baltimore, the site of an 1814 British bombardment that inspired the poem later turned into the US national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner.” With that backdrop, Pence made the patriotic case for Trump getting a second term instead of allowing the nation to be “fundamentally transformed” by a Biden administration he warned would take an uncharted path towards socialism and mob rule.

“The hard truth is, you won’t be safe in Joe Biden’s America,” said the 61-year-old Pence.

Pence’s address came amid a new flare-up of racial tensions in the United States, with protests spreading over the latest police shooting of an African-American man, Jacob Blake, in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Trump announced he is sending in additional federal forces to quell unrest in the Midwestern city, where two people were shot dead during anti-police protests Tuesday. A 17-year-old has been arrested on murder charges.

Addressing the latest unrest, Pence struck a tough tone.

“Let me be clear. The violence



US President Donald Trump, first lady Melania Trump, US Vice President Mike Pence and his wife Karen Pence at the Republican National Convention in Baltimore. – Reuters

must stop whether in Minneapolis, Portland or Kenosha,” he said.

“We will have law and order on the streets of this country for every American.” Touting Trump’s strong economic record before the COVID-19 epidemic struck and his ongoing efforts to revive it — Pence urged voters to ask themselves “who do you trust to rebuild this economy?” A former governor of Indiana, the evangelical Christian Pence has taken on the role of calm counterweight to Trump’s constant drama.

As a traditional conservative Pence seeks to reassure old-school Republicans, while also praising the new generation of Trump loyalists — a balancing act that will likely play out within the party ahead of the presidential election in 2024.

PANDEMIC POINTMAN

Pence is playing an important part in Trump’s re-election, crisscrossing the country — with an emphasis on swing states including Wisconsin — to rally support.

He has similarly served as the White House’s sober pointman on coronavirus, which has killed nearly 180,000 Americans since Trump’s

“
Tonight, our hearts are with all the families who have lost loved ones. We mourn with those who mourn, and we grieve with those who grieve

MIKE PENCE
US Vice President

initial, erroneous prediction that it would disappear without trouble.

Where Trump has veered radically between dismissing the crisis and grimly embracing a self-declared role as a “wartime president,” Pence has shouldered the unglamorous role of White House coronavirus task force coordinator.

He reached out to the millions of Americans upended by the crisis in a way Trump has appeared unable to do.

“Tonight, our hearts are with all the families who have lost loved

ones. We mourn with those who mourn, and we grieve with those who grieve,” Pence said.

But in comments sure to draw criticism from opponents, Pence saluted Trump’s handling of the pandemic.

“We are slowing the spread, we are protecting the vulnerable, we are saving lives, and we are opening up America again,” he said.

Polls show almost two-thirds of Americans are unhappy with Trump’s coronavirus response, and Biden’s camp said Pence’s speech offered “no real discussion of the crushing financial hardship countless families are facing as a result.” His communications director Kate Bedingfield said: “Instead of a roadmap to defeat this virus and rebuild our economy so that it works for the middle class, Vice President Pence only offered up debunked scare tactics and gaslighting in an attempt to further divide us.” Trump’s Democratic rival holds a lead nationally, but a CNBC-Change Research poll released on Wednesday showed the race tightening across six swing states including Florida, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. — AFP



People protest in southern Johannesburg demanding the police account for the death of the teenage boy who was allegedly shot by the police. – Reuters

Protests rock S Africa after police ‘shot’ teen

JOHANNESBURG: Violent protests broke out in a Johannesburg suburb on Thursday following the gunning down of a disabled teenage boy killed the allegedly by South African police on patrol.

Police fired teargas, stun grenades and rubber bullets to repel hundreds of angry protesters in Eldorado Park, southern Johannesburg, a photographer at the scene said.

Residents burnt tyres and hurled rocks at the police, setting

up barricades along the streets and damaging a local police station.

The protests were sparked by the death of a 16-year-old boy killed the previous night.

Petunia Julius, sister to the slain teen named as Nathaniel Julius, told local television Newzroom Afrika that police opened fire after her brother failed to respond to questions due to his disability.

“Last night at 8:30 (1830 GMT) my brother was shot,” she said

adding he went to buy biscuits and then proceeded to play with other children. Police on patrol approached the group of children.

“They called my brother outside and they asked my brother questions but he could not answer because he is disabled and they knocked him down with one shot,” the sister said. “They never gave a warning shot.” She said her brother died later in hospital.

“My family is very hurt and

broken just because my brother could not speak a word because he is disabled.” Police spokeswoman Brigadier Mathapelo Peters said in a brief statement that officers had been deployed to Eldorado Park “following violent attacks by residents who are allegedly accusing police of having shot and killed a 16-year-old boy on Wednesday evening”.

The national police watchdog is investigating the killing. — AFP

Extinction Rebellion plans to blockade UK parliament

LONDON: Climate protest group Extinction Rebellion will target Britain’s parliament as part of “mass rebellions” planned for the coming weeks, the group said on Thursday.

The protests will begin this weekend with “regional rebellions” for those worried about attending the main events due to coronavirus.

“September 1 is when the real action starts, we are holding mass rebellions in London, Cardiff and Manchester,” spokeswoman Alan-na Byrne said.

“In London, we are going to parliament. We are going to try and hold that space,” she said.

They have also organised mass

banner drops, many from motorway bridges, along with protests against the aviation and finance sectors.

But London’s Parliament Square will be the main focus.

“Everyone is just fed up with what a massive failure this government has been and their lack of recognition of the climate emergency is really worrying, so people feel compelled to go out,” said Byrne.

“This could be the last best chance we have of turning it around and the actions the government are taking are going to make it worse.” The group is advising protestors to socially distance, wherever possible, and wear gloves and masks. — AFP



Climate protest group Extinction Rebellion will target Britain’s parliament as part of ‘mass rebellions’ planned for the coming weeks, the group said on Thursday. – AFP

Trump says saved 51m jobs, economists differ

Lawrence Delevingne, Chris Prentice, Michelle Price and Jeff Mason

Standing before half a dozen American flags during a press conference at his country club in Bedminster, New Jersey, President Donald Trump heralded what has become a central plank of his argument for re-election in November: his administration's handling of the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Through the historic relief package that I signed into law, we saved over 50 million American jobs," he said in the August 15 remarks. Referring to his Democratic opponents, he said, "They don't like these kind of numbers because they think it'll hurt them in the election." The estimate that the \$660 billion taxpayer-funded Paycheck

Protection Program (PPP) saved some 51 million jobs has been trumpeted by the Republican Party, its Congressional leadership and the president's reelection campaign. On Monday, Trump touted it again at a rally west of Charlotte, North Carolina, site of the Republican National Convention.

However, the PPP likely did not save 51 million jobs, or anywhere close to it, according to Reuters interviews with economists and an analysis of the program's data. Half a dozen economists put the number of jobs saved by the initiative at only a fraction of 51 million — ranging between one million and 14 million.

"I don't think there is an economist who would say that the program has saved 50 million jobs," said Richard Prisinzano, who was a financial economist at the US Department of the Treasury for 13 years before leaving in 2017. His rough estimate, Prisinzano said, is between five and seven million jobs saved, based on his own adjustments to other researchers' work at MIT and elsewhere.

Officials in Trump's own administration give varying explanations for the 51 million figure. In interviews with Reuters, officials from the Treasury Department and the Small Business Administration (SBA), which oversee the PPP program, said the 51 million refers to the total number of workers reported by businesses approved for a loan — not the number of jobs that were saved.

White House chief economic adviser Larry Kudlow gave some support to that assessment in an

interview with Reuters, saying he surmised the jobs figure was the sum of all jobs at businesses that received PPP loans.

"We saved a lot of jobs, there's no question about that," he said.

The PPP was part of some \$3 trillion of bailout measures passed in the spring. At the time, there was little debate that funding was needed for small businesses as the economic blows from COVID-19 hit the United States.

Since then, congressional Democrats have challenged the data on the program, released by the administration in July. "We've seen some inaccuracies with the data in terms of how they calculate how many jobs were protected and saved," said New Jersey Democratic representative Andy Kim in August, who sits on the Small Business Committee.

An economist with the conservative Heritage Foundation also questioned the figures. "This data does not tell us how many of those jobs may have existed without the PPP loans. Additionally, everyone involved has an incentive to use inflated estimates," said Adam Michel, senior policy analyst for fiscal policy at the foundation.

Michel, who has not analysed the data himself, cited the same research that former Treasury official Prisinzano did — a paper co-authored by economists at the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, MIT and ADP Research Institute. That study concluded that about 2.3 million jobs had been saved through early June.

— Reuters



Shinzo Abe became Japan's longest-serving Prime Minister on Monday, marking 2,799 consecutive days in office. — AFP

Abe's legacy as longest-serving PM

TAKEHIKO KAMBAYASHI

The timing of the milestone couldn't have been worse.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe became Japan's longest-serving prime minister on Monday, in the midst of his government's struggles to contain another wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A few days earlier, Abe saw Japan's economy in the second quarter shrink a record annualized 27.8 per cent, marking the third straight quarterly contraction, due both to the pandemic and a consumption tax hike last year.

In addition, Abe had to return to a hospital "for additional tests" on Monday, a week after a "regular checkup," he said, sparking concerns about his health.

"I believe his health conditions are serious as he repeatedly visited the hospital," Tokyo-based independent political analyst Minoru Morita said.

"Abe did not look well" when the 87-year-old veteran political analyst dined with him and others in late July, he recalled.

In July 2007, an intestinal disease called ulcerative colitis forced Abe to abruptly step down as prime minister, only one year into the job.

Abe, who returned to power in December 2012, marked 2,799 consecutive days in office as prime minister on Monday.

He exceeded the previous record, set by his great-uncle Eisaku Sato, who served from November 1964 to July 1972 — a period of high economic

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government has had few significant accomplishments since he took office in late 2012. So, what's allowed him to become Japan's longest-serving prime minister?

growth in Japan.

In late May, Abe lauded Japan's "strength" when he ended a coronavirus state of emergency in the country.

Without compulsory restrictions seen in other countries, "we have succeeded in bringing the current wave of infections almost to an end in as little as a month and a half. I believe this has truly demonstrated the strength of the Japan model," Abe told a news conference on May 25.

Two months later, Japan's new daily caseload broke the previous record of 714 cases marked in April during the state of emergency.

Instead of tightening social distancing measures, Abe's government launched a controversial travel promotion campaign to reinvigorate the tourism industry and local economies hit hard by the pandemic, although Tokyo was excluded from the

programme due to a spike in infections there.

Frustrated at the campaign, Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike said it was like Abe's government "is turning on an air-conditioner and a heater at the same time."

In August, Japan witnessed a massive spike in the coronavirus as the number of daily new coronavirus infections exceeded 1,000 cases 15 times, including a record 1,601 on August 7, according to the Health Ministry.

Experts and opposition lawmakers urged Abe to convene an extraordinary parliamentary session to discuss measures to deal with the resurgence of the coronavirus. But the prime minister has refused to do so.

The approval rating for Abe's Cabinet stood at 36 per cent, down from 38.8 per cent a month ago, according to a weekend survey conducted by Kyodo News.

Under Abe, whose government doubled the country's consumption tax to 10 per cent, his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has continued to win elections thanks to "the hopelessly fragmented opposition," Akikazu Hashimoto, former political science professor at JF Oberlin University in Tokyo, said.

"Voter turnout has been so low as many people are disenchanted with the opposition camp and a lack of new leaders in the LDP," he said.

In the 2019 upper house elections, voter turnout stood at 48.8 per cent, the lowest in 24 years.

— dpa

Selfies in cells? Thailand bets on prison tourism

RINA CHANDRAN

Thailand plans to turn about half its prisons into tourist attractions to boost visitor numbers as the Southeast Asian nation struggles to recover from an economic slump caused by the coronavirus outbreak.

Sporting events, art exhibitions, cooking contests and souvenirs made by inmates will be rolled out in 72 of the country's 143 prisons, Justice Minister Somsak Thepsuthin said this week.

A pilot scheme is being tested in five prisons, including those in the cities of Trat, Rayong and Ratchaburi, he said.

This would not only bring much-needed visitors, but also prepare inmates for a "normal life in society" and change the image of prisons from being "a twilight world to a world of opportunities", he added.

The concept of prison tourism is not new. From tours of Alcatraz in San Francisco to the notorious Hoa Lo prison in Hanoi that is now a museum, prisons are major attractions worldwide.

Some defunct prisons have even been converted into luxury hotels, while a women's jail in Colombia has a restaurant run by inmates, and a Singapore prison hosts an annual charitable run.

But luring tourists without addressing fundamental concerns about Thailand's prison system, including overcrowding and the large number of women inmates, is "not acceptable", said Debbie Stothard, founder of Altsean, a human rights network.

"It's a good idea if it's meant to give prisoners more skills and help them integrate into society," said Stothard.

"But it has to be part of a broader rights-based approach to reform the system," she said on Thursday.

Thailand has the largest prison population in Southeast Asia, and inmates have limited access to medical facilities, food, water and sanitation, according to a 2017 report by the International Federation for Human Rights.

A 2017 law was aimed at improving prison conditions, and Thailand's Justice Ministry has vowed to ease overcrowding, as well as provide vocational training for prisoners.

The tourism project is a part of this plan, Somsak said.

Thailand's tourism-dependent economy has taken a hit from the coronavirus, with only about 8 million visitors expected this year, a fifth of last year's total.

But driving visitors to correctional facilities is not the answer, even though Thailand has successfully turned the islands of Koh Tao and Koh Tarutao — which were once prisons — into popular tourist spots, said Stuart McDonald, co-founder of website Travelfish.

— Reuters

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Oman joins club of TIR operational countries

SECURE TRANSIT: The Sultanate has shown a strong interest in introducing eTIR as soon as possible. The paperless solution will further speed up customs procedures and reduce the need for human contact at borders, enabling operators to comply with COVID-19 containment measures

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 27

Oman's recent operationalisation of its membership of TIR — the global transit system — has been lauded by IRU, the world's road transport organisation representing bus, coach, truck and taxi operators globally.

TIR — a global treaty — enables goods to be shipped from a country of origin, through transit countries, to a country of destination in sealed load compartments that are controlled by customs via a multilateral, mutually recognised system. It is the easiest, safest and most reliable way to move goods across multiple international borders, saving time and money for transport operators and customs authorities.

"Oman is the latest country in the Gulf region to become TIR operational, unlocking its regional and international trade potential," said IRU in a statement applauding the Sultanate's landmark decision to operationalise its commitments under the TIR convention.

The timely activation of the convention, coming against the backdrop of a 19 per cent decline in turnover for operators across the Middle East — stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic — is opportune for Omani road freight operators, it said.

"TIR answers this need by

eliminating any additional customs guarantees in transit countries, speeding up border crossing procedures and reducing operating costs for businesses," the global body noted.

The Sultanate had committed to becoming TIR operational at the 2018 IRU World Congress held in Muscat. Since then, IRU, Oman Customs and IRU members Asyad and Sinyar have collaborated closely to successfully implement TIR in Oman, according to IRU.

"With dedicated TIR lanes in place between Oman and the UAE and existing trade links with other TIR operational countries including India, Pakistan and China, Oman can take advantage of faster and more secure transit in the region and beyond," it said.

According to IRU, the first TIR transport between Saudi Arabia and the UAE crossed the border in just four hours instead of the usual two days, which exemplifies the kind of benefits TIR can bring to the region.

"As the next step, Oman has shown a strong interest in introducing eTIR as soon as possible. The paperless solution will further speed up customs procedures and reduce the need for human contact at borders, enabling operators to comply with COVID-19 containment measures," it added.

(Picture for illustration only)



Switzerland plunges into recession with historic slump

ZURICH: Switzerland has plunged into recession after the coronavirus pandemic caused a "historic" 8.2-per cent slump in economic activity in the second quarter, official figures showed on Thursday.

"In the second quarter, Switzerland's GDP (gross domestic product) suffered the biggest decline since records of quarterly data began in 1980," the Economic Affairs Ministry (SECO) said in a statement.

During the first quarter, the wealthy Alpine nation's economy shrank 2.5 per cent compared to the previous quarter, it said, revising the figure slightly from the 2.6 per cent announced in June.

Recession is defined as two consecutive quarters of



People line outside a supermarket during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in Geneva. — Reuters

contraction.

SECO pointed out that Switzerland was by no way unique, with the global economy also in sharp recession as the pandemic rages worldwide.

To date, more than 820,000

people have died out of the some 24 million infected globally by the novel coronavirus.

SECO stressed that in Switzerland, which has seen over 1,700 deaths and more than 40,000 cases, the "GDP decline remained

During the first quarter, the wealthy Alpine nation's economy shrank 2.5 per cent compared to the previous quarter, it said, revising the figure slightly from the 2.6 per cent announced in June.

limited in an international comparison."

During the second quarter, Switzerland saw manufacturing slump nine per cent, with growth in the country's sizeable

pharmaceutical industry preventing a steeper decline.

Exports of goods, excluding precious metals and other valuables, plunged 9.4 per cent.

Switzerland's service sector was meanwhile hit hardest by the measures taken to contain the pandemic, it said, with accommodation and food services for example plummeting over 54 per cent.

SECO pointed out that tourism-related services had a smaller share of GDP than in most neighbouring nations.

But internally, the measures, which shuttered shops and restaurants, hit private consumption hard, pushing it down 8.6 per cent.

— AFP

US resumes oil, gas lease auctions



NEW MEXICO: The US government's first oil and gas lease sale in five months kicked off on Wednesday, attracting weaker bidding in New Mexico than auctions that occurred before oil prices crashed during the pandemic, according to results posted on an online auction site.

The 2,800-acre sale was the Trump administration's first since March, when lockdowns to fight the spread of the coronavirus crippled crude oil demand and prices tanked. It will be followed on Thursday with a far larger sale of more than 45,000 acres in New Mexico and Texas.

The sales are a test of industry appetite for investment as crude oil prices remain below levels at which many companies can drill profitably and bankruptcies in the sector are mounting.

The average bid per acre of \$466 for nine parcels in New Mexico fell far short of recent sales in the state from before the pandemic, when average bids routinely were in the thousands of dollars per acre. The New Mexico parcels overlay parts of the sprawling Permian Basin, the world's biggest oil field.

— Reuters

Japan upgrades views on exports and output

TOKYO: Japan's government upgraded its view on exports and output in August for the second straight month as global demand slowly improves, but authorities cautioned conditions were still severe due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The government left unchanged its overall assessment that the world's third-largest economy is "showing signs of picking up" after falling into a deep recession due to the health crisis.

"The Japanese economy remains in a severe situation due to the novel coronavirus, but it is showing signs of picking up recently," the government said in its economic report for August.

Authorities said the impact from policy steps at home and improvements in economic activity overseas led to hopes that the pickup



A worker is seen among newly manufactured cars awaiting export at port in Yokohama, Japan. — Reuters

in the economy will continue.

But they also cautioned that attention should be given to the risk that coronavirus infections would continue to weigh on domestic and

overseas economies.

Data earlier this month showed Japan suffered its biggest economic slump on record in the second quarter as the coronavirus crisis hit

corporate and household activity hard, knocking the size of real gross domestic product to decade-low levels. While the economy is seen rebounding after lockdowns were

lifted in late May, many analysts expect a recovery to pre-coronavirus levels will take time as a renewed rise in infections makes consumers cautious.

The more optimistic view on exports was underpinned by better economic activity among major trading partners, which especially helped boost US-bound shipments of cars and car-related goods, the government said.

According to the CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, world trade rose by 7.6 per cent in June from May, but volumes were still well below pre-virus levels.

The improvement in exports also helped lead to a pickup in output among Japanese manufacturers and service-sector firms in June.

— Reuters



S Korea central bank cuts 2020 GDP outlook

The central bank was open to increasing bond purchases and carrying out open market operations but was, for now, not considering yield curve controls — a policy adopted by some central banks to hold down long-term interest rates

SEOUL: South Korea's central bank kept interest rates steady on Thursday, but sharply downgraded its 2020 growth outlook and kept the door open for more monetary stimulus to support an economy hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

The Bank of Korea kept the seven-day repurchase rate at a record low of 0.5 per cent, in a unanimous and widely expected decision, after 75 basis points of rate cuts this year.

It said gross domestic product would likely shrink 1.3 per cent in 2020 — the biggest contraction in more than two decades — from a previous forecast for a 0.2 per cent decline.

Governor Lee Ju-yeol said monetary policy needed to be “actively” used if the downturn worsened, reiterating the central bank was open to more rate cuts and was willing to expand the use of other monetary tools.

“There is room to respond with



Giant cranes of Hyundai Heavy Industries are seen in Ulsan, South Korea. — Reuters

rate cuts,” Lee told a press conference livestreamed via Youtube.

“That said, as base rate is at a considerably low level we will need to be cautious on that by reviewing the expected impact as well as adverse effects.”

He said the central bank was open to increasing bond purchases and carrying out open market operations but was, for now, not considering yield curve controls — a policy adopted by some central banks to hold down long-term interest rates.

“The negative growth of 1.3 per cent outlook was somewhat shocking. (I) didn't think (the BOK) would be this drastic,” said Yoon Yeo-sam, an economist at Meritz Securities.

September futures on three-year treasury bonds KTBC1 initially rose, but later retreated as Lee sounded cautious about the possibility of more rate cuts.

The BOK is walking a tight rope as it tries to balance the need for more stimulus with the risk that further rate reductions may encourage more

cheap borrowing and worsen a home buying frenzy. Property prices have risen rapidly, particularly in Seoul, despite several cooling measures.

The pandemic pushed South Korea's export-led economy into its worst recession in over 20 years and analysts worry this could drag into the third quarter as the government considers imposing the highest level of physical distancing.

Lee expected exports to rebound in the second half of the year but only gradually as global demand still

recovers from the coronavirus fallout.

South Korea had been more successful than others in containing the virus, managing to avoid a full-blown lockdown, but suffered a setback this month with a church outbreak which spread to a political rally.

The policy review comes as the government and opposition are debating a fourth extra budget to bolster the 277 trillion won (\$233.82 billion) worth fiscal stimulus pledged this year. — Reuters

India's banking sector needs more reforms, RBI governor says

MUMBAI: India's banking sector needs reforms in terms of governance culture and risk management practices, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Shaktikanta Das warned on Thursday.

Even though the financial sector continues to be sound and stable, more needs to be done to bring about more reforms, Das said at an event at *Business Standard* newspaper.

Das also raised concerns about the rising fraud cases in the banks and expressed concerns around managing such incidents.

Frauds of 100,000 Indian rupees (\$1,345) and above at banks increased by 159 per cent in terms of value in 2019/20, the RBI said in its annual report released earlier this week.

Total fraud stood at 1.86 trillion rupees in fiscal 2020 versus 715.43 billion rupees in fiscal 2019, data showed.

The RBI has also asked banks to build strong buffers at a time when bad loans are expected to rise.

— Reuters

Oil treads water as huge Gulf of Mexico storm shuts output

MELBOURNE: Oil prices were in a holding pattern on Thursday as a massive storm in the Gulf of Mexico raced towards the heart of the US oil industry, forcing oil rigs and refineries to shut, with little impact expected on supply as oil stockpiles remain high.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures fell 4 cents, or 0.1 per cent, to \$43.35 a barrel by 0148 GMT, erasing Wednesday's slight rise.

Brent crude futures for October, which expire on Friday, inched up 5 cents to \$45.69 a barrel after falling 22 cents, or 0.5 per cent, on Wednesday. The more active November Brent contract rose 2 cents to \$46.18.

The threat from Hurricane Laura pushed the market higher earlier



in the week, but the storm is not expected to affect supplies much because oil and product inventories remain high due to the coronavirus pandemic's hit to fuel demand.

“It really depends on the damage

sustained. But there's a huge mitigation in that (crude) stockpile levels are at their highest in decades,” said Vivek Dhar, a commodities analyst at Commonwealth Bank.

US crude inventories stood at 507.8 million barrels at the end of the week to August 21, even after a larger-than-expected drop of 4.7 million barrels.

Laura intensified on Wednesday and is now forecast to bring heavy rains and catastrophic, 150 mile-per-hour (240 kph) winds that will drive ocean waters up to 40 miles (64 km) inland, the US National Hurricane Center said.

“It's certainly packing a punch,” said National Australia Bank's head of commodity research, Lachlan Shaw. — Reuters

TikTok CEO Kevin Mayer quits

LOS ANGELES: TikTok CEO Kevin Mayer (pictured) said he has quit the company as tensions soar between Washington and Beijing over the Chinese-owned video platform.

Mayer's resignation comes days after TikTok filed a lawsuit challenging a crackdown by the US government over claims the wildly popular social media app can be used to spy on Americans.

TikTok has been at the centre of a diplomatic storm between the US and China, and President Donald Trump signed an executive order on August 6 giving Americans 45 days to stop doing business with TikTok's Chinese parent company ByteDance — effectively setting a deadline for a sale of the app to a US company.

TikTok, which has been downloaded 175 million times in the US and more than a billion



times around the world, argued in the suit that Trump's order was a misuse of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act because the platform — on which users share often playful short-form videos — is not “an unusual and extraordinary threat.”

Former Disney executive Mayer, who has only been in

the post since May, said in a letter to staff that the “political environment has sharply changed” in recent weeks.

“Against this backdrop, and as we expect to reach a resolution very soon, it is with a heavy heart that I wanted to let you all know that I have decided to leave the company,” he wrote.

“I understand that the role that I signed up for — including running TikTok globally — will look very different as a result of the US administration's action to push for a sell-off of the US business.”

TikTok said in a statement: “We appreciate that the political dynamics of the last few months have significantly changed what the scope of Kevin's role would be going forward, and fully respect his decision. We thank him for his time at the company and wish him well.” — AFP

Argentine barley rushes to China as Australia spat reshuffles trade

BUENOS AIRES: Argentine barley shipments have started streaming toward China after a three-year lull as a trade conflict between Asia's top buyer and main supplier Australia changes global supply flows of the grain used for livestock feed and beer.

Argentina is on track to send at least 250,000 tonnes this year and a record 380,000 tonnes in 2021, according to export licenses and private company declarations. That is up from virtually nothing in 2019.

“We loaded a ship on Sunday with 65,000 tonnes headed for China. And we have three or four shipments scheduled for January,” said an Argentina-based trader with an international grains company who asked not to be named.

“China turned toward us this year because of its conflict with Australia,” the trader said, referring

to a political spat that saw China slap steep anti-dumping and anti-subsidy duties on Australian barley imports in May.

Eugenia Rul, head analyst at the Bahia Blanca Grains Exchange, said that prior to the Sunday shipment Argentina had sent 160,000 tonnes of barley to China in the last two months.

Argentine feed barley is shipped to Saudi Arabia, where it is used to feed camels, while its beer barley has gone mostly to South American brewers. Australia was China's main supplier.

“It's clear that China is choosing Argentina, very aggressively, as a new provider of barley,” said Agustin Baque, a farm consultant and commodities trader specialising in barley, based in the Atlantic port city of Necochea.

Baque said the China-Australia



Imported barley is transported from a cargo ship at the port of Nantong, Jiangsu province, China. — Reuters

conflict was pushing up demand for both beer and feed barley. “For 2021 we have business confirmed for 380,000 tonnes of Argentine barley to be exported to China, 180,000

of which will be malting barley,” he said.

He said Argentine barley exports to China next year could reach as much as 800,000 tonnes depending

Argentina is on track to send at least 250,000 tonnes this year and a record 380,000 tonnes in 2021, according to export licenses and private company declarations. That is up from virtually nothing in 2019

on prices and the Australia-China trade relationship.

China is the top global importer of malt barley for brewing beer. It also uses the grain to feed livestock.

“We are going to play (in) Australia's market basically because Australia is now looking to sell its barley someplace other than China,” said Robbie Cameron, a grower in the southern Buenos Aires agricultural area of Loberia.

“Australia is going to compete for our usual feed barley market, which is Saudi Arabia, and our malting barley markets in South America, so we are going to have to look at different places as well, like China,” he added.

According to Argentina's INDEC statistics agency, a small, undisclosed amount of feed barley was shipped to China last year and the last time the country exported beer barley to China was in 2016, when 31,500 tonnes were shipped.

Argentine barley is sown in June and harvested in December.

— Reuters



An empty court and bench is shown following the scheduled start time in Game Five of the Eastern Conference First Round between the Milwaukee Bucks and the Orlando Magic during the 2020 NBA Playoffs at AdventHealth Arena.

– USA Today Sports

NBA WALKOUT SPARKS HISTORIC US SPORT BOYCOTT OVER POLICE SHOOTING

ORLANDO: The Milwaukee Bucks led a historic sporting boycott on Wednesday over the US police shooting of a black man, forcing the NBA to halt its playoff schedule and prompting a wave of walkouts across multiple sports.

The NBA postponed its entire slate of Wednesday fixtures after the Bucks refused to play game five of their Eastern Conference first-round series against the Orlando Magic in protest over the shooting of African-American man Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin on Sunday.

Blake was seriously injured after being shot point blank in the back seven times by police officers in a confrontation captured on video.

“Over the last few days in our home state of Wisconsin, we’ve seen the horrendous video of Jacob Blake being shot in the back seven times by a police officer in Kenosha, and the additional shooting of protestors,” the Bucks players said in a statement explaining their boycott.

“Despite the overwhelming plea for change, there has been no action, so our focus today cannot be on basketball.”

The Bucks’ no-show prompted the NBA to scrap two other games scheduled for Wednesday:

Houston’s clash with Oklahoma City Thunder and the Los Angeles Lakers’ matchup with the Portland Trail Blazers.

At an emergency meeting of NBA teams in Florida on Wednesday, the crisis threatened to put the entire season in jeopardy, with LeBron James’ Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Clippers both voting to abandon the season. All other teams voted to continue.

It was not immediately clear whether the Lakers and Clippers would continue the season as scheduled.

A walkout by two of the NBA’s strongest teams and title contenders — as well as its biggest star — would deal a devastating blow to the credibility of the season. The NBA’s Board of Governors is meeting on Thursday to address player concerns.

BOYCOTTS SPREAD

The boycotts spread to other sports, with the Milwaukee Brewers’ game against the Cincinnati Reds becoming one of several Major League Baseball games to be postponed.

In tennis, two-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka abruptly announced her withdrawal from the



WTA Western & Southern Open semi-finals, where she was due to play on Thursday.

“As a black woman I feel as though there are much more important matters at hand that need immediate attention, rather than watching me play tennis,” Osaka said.

In a statement released late Wednesday, ATP/WTA organisers said all play scheduled for Thursday had been postponed in recognition of the fight against racial inequality.

Elsewhere, the Women’s NBA postponed its scheduled fixtures for Wednesday, while Major League Soccer also called off five of six games.

DRAMATIC ESCALATION

The NBA postponements marked a dramatic escalation in the league’s calls for social justice, which have reverberated across the sport in the months since the killing of unarmed black man George Floyd by Minneapolis police in May.

Lakers superstar James voiced solidarity with the Bucks decision in a tweet shortly after the boycott was announced.

“WE DEMAND CHANGE. SICK OF IT,” James wrote.

The NBA’s players union also backed the protest.

“The players have, once again,

“Over the last few days in our home state of Wisconsin, we’ve seen the horrendous video of Jacob Blake being shot in the back seven times by a police officer in Kenosha, and the additional shooting of protestors. Despite the overwhelming plea for change, there has been no action, so our focus today cannot be on basketball.”

Milwaukee Bucks statement

made it clear — they will not be silent on this issue,” National Basketball Players Association executive director Michele Roberts said in a statement. Renewed anger had swept the NBA after Sunday’s shooting of Blake.

The 29-year-old was shot repeatedly in the back as he attempted to get into his car, which contained his three children.

Protests have erupted in Kenosha since the shooting, with two people killed after a teenager opened fire on demonstrators with an assault rifle on Tuesday.

‘HORRIFYING, MADDENING’

The NBA’s coronavirus-halted season resumed last month in Orlando against the backdrop of nationwide protests following Floyd’s death.

NBA teams have knelt in protest during the pre-match playing of the US national anthem, while the words “Black Lives Matter” have been painted onto each court staging games in Florida.

Players, many of whom took part in protests against Floyd’s killing, have been allowed to wear jerseys bearing social justice messages. — AFP

Djokovic cruises into semis where Bautista Agut awaits

NEW YORK: Novak Djokovic cruised past Germany's Jan-Lennard Struff 6-3 6-1 on Wednesday to reach a record-equalling eighth Western & Southern Open semifinal where he will face Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut.

The semifinals will be played on Friday, scheduled as the final day of the event, after organisers joined other sporting events in suspending play on Thursday in protest against racial injustice.

World number one Djokovic took advantage of a series of errors by Struff to grab control of the match and closed out the 62-minute encounter with a love service break to extend his unbeaten run to 24 matches.

"It was great. I started a little bit tight in my opening couple of service games... Ever since I made that break at the beginning of the first set, I never looked back," said Djokovic.

"I really played very aggressive whenever I had the chance and I was going for my shots."

With the win, Djokovic tied Jimmy Connors, Stefan Edberg, Roger Federer and Bill Talbert's semi-final totals at the ATP Masters 1000 event.

Earlier, Bautista Agut produced a stunning comeback to defeat third seed Daniil Medvedev 1-6 6-4 6-3 and reach his maiden semifinal in the event, which is being played at Flushing Meadows, New York instead of Cincinnati due to COVID-19.

Bautista Agut's chances of victory appeared distant after the 24-year-old Russian cruised through the first set and had three break point chances

early in the second.

But the 32-year-old Bautista Agut began to play freer, charging the net and serving with more confidence.

"After the first set, I was thinking a lot of bad things," he said with a laugh. "I had to fight a lot in the second set. It was a really tough match."

In other quarterfinal matches, Greek fourth seed Stefanos Tsitsipas advanced after Reilly Opelka, who was leading 6-5, retired due to a knee injury.

Tsitsipas will play Milos Raonic, a 4-6 7-6(2) 7-5 winner over Serbian Filip Krajinovic, for a spot in the final.

Raonic, a former world number three, said he considered not playing his quarterfinal in solidarity with the protests over the police shooting of Jacob Blake, a Black man, in the city of Kenosha, Wisconsin, on Sunday.

The Canadian urged players and administrators to join hands and take a unified stand following Naomi Osaka's decision to pull out of her semifinal in protest over racial injustice.

"I think a bigger demonstration needs to happen and a bigger disturbance needs to happen," said Raonic, who was speaking before the tennis governing bodies jointly announced the postponement of Thursday's fixtures.

"I think it's about everybody being on the same page. If three guys, four guys step up tomorrow, but everything continues as normal on Monday when the US Open starts, you know, have we taken that next small step after not playing the first day?" — Reuters



Novak Djokovic hits the ball against Jan-Lennard Struff during the Western & Southern Open at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center. — USA Today Sports



Roberto Bautista Agut reacts during his match against Daniil Medvedev during the Western & Southern Open at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center. — USA Today Sports

Argentines hoping for Messi-Guardiola reunion at City

BUENOS AIRES: The news that Lionel Messi wants to leave Barcelona may have shocked the football world but his fellow Argentines back his decision and they are excited by growing reports of a reunion with coach Pep Guardiola at Manchester City.

One of Argentina's top newspapers reported that Messi believes his time in Barcelona is over and has decided to move to Manchester.

La Nacion said Messi was planning to talk with Guardiola to help hasten a move to England.

However, Barcelona vowed not to let go of their prize asset for nothing and a Spanish sports lawyer warned any move could involve considerable legal wrangling over Messi's contract with the Catalan club.

The growing number of reports linking him with Manchester City sat well with fans in Messi's homeland.

"It seems to me this is the moment for him to abandon the comfort zone that he was in," Gustavo Lopez, a customs official walking in



Barcelona's Lionel Messi with his six Ballon d'Or trophies. — Reuters

central Buenos Aires, said. "This is a challenge for him.

"For me, he has to go to Manchester City with Kun (Sergio) Aguero and Pep Guardiola. I think he should do it, the time is right to try and see if he can play somewhere else because until now he has always

done well where he was, so let's now see if he can do it somewhere else."

Manchester City are favourites to sign the six-times world player of the year who has won every major title with Barcelona.

Some of his career highlights at Barca came under the guidance of

Guardiola, who is now City manager, and the prospect they might team up again is mouth-watering.

"There are always cycles (in life) and cycles come to an end and it is good that he goes down another path," said Facundo Silva, a 45-year old hairdresser.



Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola reacts. — Reuters

"As a Boca fan I'd like to see him play Boca but that's impossible. I think that wherever Guardiola is he will do much better than now because Barcelona has practically come apart. I hope he does well at another club."

Messi has long said he hopes to one day play at his boyhood club Newell's Old Boys in Rosario but that appears unlikely for now. The wise money is on the 33-year-old going

to a European club — Inter Milan and Paris St Germain are among those suitors mentioned — who can compete for the Champions League, a title Messi last won in 2015.

"He is at the age at the end of his career and he has to make a decision that is not about money, it's about looking for something new," said Horacio Uriarte. "And as he is a winner he'll look for a club that can help him win." — Reuters



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In this file photograph taken on January 31, 2009, Bob (left) and Mike Bryan of the US celebrate after victory in their men's doubles match against Mahesh Bhupathi of India and Mark Knowles of Bahamas at the Australian Open in Melbourne. – AFP

BRYAN BROTHERS BRING CURTAIN DOWN ON LEGENDARY TENNIS DOUBLE ACT

PARIS: US men's doubles duo Bob and Mike Bryan announced the end of their legendary record-shattering tennis career on Thursday, just days before the US Open where they made their Grand Slam debut in 1995.

"Our loyalty toward each other never wavered and we are leaving professional tennis with zero regrets," announced Bob, who with his twin brother Mike captured an Open era team record 119 trophies.

That haul included all four Grand Slams, all nine ATP Masters 1000s and Olympic gold at London 2012. The brothers hold the all-time team record of 16 major titles from 30 grand slam finals.

"We'll miss the competition and camaraderie amongst the players. We'll also miss the excitement of gearing up for a big match and playing for the roar of the fans," Bob added. Mike Bryan said they

“
Winning our final event in Delray Beach and clinching the Davis Cup tie in Honolulu are moments we'll forever remember and cherish

MIKE BRYAN

had felt now was "the right time to walk away".

"We've given over 20 years to the Tour, and we are now looking forward to the next chapter of our lives," he said.

"We feel very blessed to have been able to play the game of doubles for so long. We are grateful to have had the opportunities in the

beginning of the year to play and say our goodbyes to the fans.

"Winning our final event in Delray Beach and clinching the Davis Cup tie in Honolulu are moments we'll forever remember and cherish."

At their peak, the Bryans were a formidable doubles duo, rising to No 1 in the rankings for the first time in 2003.

They spent a total of 438 weeks at the top of the rankings and ended 10 seasons as the No 1 team.

ATP chairman Andrea Gaudenzi commented: "It's difficult to put into words what they have brought to the game, not only on the court but also off it.

"Hugely popular wherever they have played across the globe, they've been exemplary role models and done more for the promotion of doubles than anyone could have imagined." — AFP



Bob Bryan (left) and his brother Mike Bryan of the US kiss their trophy after they defeated Marcel Granollers and Marc Lopez of Spain in their men's doubles final match at the 2014 US Open in New York. – Reuters