

GO GREEN!

The environmental objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and its ambitious goals are at par with the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015, the most important of which is the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions

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One of the many resolutions that one can make during the post-COVID era is to go green and let others go green, thanks to the retrospective effect that the pandemic can have on our lives.

At a time when the world is going gaga over environment-friendly initiatives, it's time to know that taking a set of simple steps, following some precautions when dealing with environment and careful use of resources can take us miles forward in going green.

Among the various methods of going green, according to experts, promoting the utilisation of various renewable energy sources such as solar and wind energy in the country, as well as rationalising the consumption of other energies to reduce the levels of thermal emissions resulting from the use of fossil fuels and their derivatives are said to be easily doable.

“Adoption of various recycling processes in day-to-day life, making efforts to utilise the resources to the maximum, reducing waste and pushing towards recycling in a manner that ensures less reliance on raw materials are other seemingly easy ways of going green,” said Dr Abdullah bin Ali

al Omari, President of the Environment Agency.

Promoting the utilisation of various renewable energy sources in the Sultanate, such as solar and wind energy, as well as rationalising the consumption of other energies to reduce the levels of thermal emissions resulting from the use of fossil fuels and their derivatives would be a milestone in the national efforts of going green.

Oman has already announced its move to go green without any plastic bags which are hard to biodegrade and ensure environment protection in accordance with the desired levels from January 2021.

“Oman Vision 2040 reflects Oman's great ambition to support the environment in a national work methodology, the strategic objectives, and its performance indicators and elaborate measurements aim to set the people of Oman and its youth towards a new national entitlement, that is, ‘going green,” adds Al Omari.

The environmental objectives of the Oman Vision 2040 and the ambitious goals are at par with the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015, the most important of which is the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, which would only be achieved

through taking measures to reduce energy consumption, investing in alternative energy sources and expanding the green spaces.

Towards a national initiative of Going Green, Environmental Forum 2020 — under the title “The future of the environment in light of the priorities of Oman Vision 2040” — was conducted amid COVID-19 fears recently, which was an eye-opener for many and underlined the fact that Oman gave priority to environment protection.

A national development plan that meets the needs of the present without sacrificing the requirements of the future, a balancing act between development and the environment, between production and consumption, and between the environment's ability to give and its ability to endure can only support the ambitious plans associated with the Vision 2040, according to environmentalists.

Further, environmentalists call for each and every individual, both citizens and expatriates, to look at ways of making use of the various renewable energy sources in the Sultanate and encouraging recycling operations, and the importance of achieving a balance between development and the environment, and between the environment's ability to give and still bear resources for man to go green, in order to adopt the green economy.

ART



DRAWING AND PAINTING IS MY FAVOURITE PASTIME. MY DREAM IS TO BECOME A FAMOUS ARTIST AND I WANT TO DO MORE EXPENSIVE PAINTINGS AND MAKE A NAME FOR MYSELF, SAYS SHAREEF SHAN

SEE P2

TOKYO:

The discovery of a creature described as resembling a “buck-toothed toucan” that lived some 68 million years ago has upended assumptions about diversity in the birds that lived alongside dinosaurs.

At less than nine centimetres long, the delicate skull of the bird scientists have dubbed *Falcatakely forsterae* might be easily overlooked.

In fact, it almost was, sitting in a backlog of excavated fossils for years before CT scanning suggested the specimen deserved more attention.

It turns out that its tall, scythe-like beak, while resembling the toucan, is something never before seen in the fossil record.

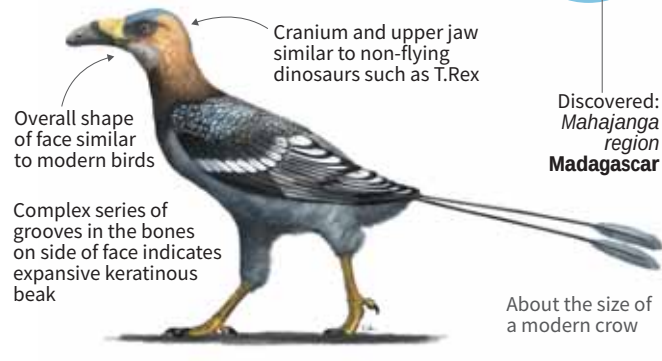
Birds in the Mesozoic

Ancient Mesozoic bird

Offers vital clues to bird evolution

Falcatakely forsterae

Member of an extinct group called *Enantiornithines* -- the first group to resemble modern birds



Overall shape of face similar to modern birds

Cranium and upper jaw similar to non-flying dinosaurs such as T.Rex

Complex series of grooves in the bones on side of face indicates expansive keratinous beak

Discovered: Mahajanga region Madagascar

About the size of a modern crow

Artist's impression based on skull find

Credit: Mark Witton

Source : Nature

AFP

era — between 250 million and 65 million years ago — had “relatively unspecialised snouts”, Patrick O'Connor, lead author of a study on the new creature, said.

“Falcatakely just changed the game completely, documenting

INSIDESTORIES

Iran says top nuclear scientist assassinated



TEHRAN: Iran said one of its most prominent nuclear scientists was assassinated on Friday in an attack on his car outside Tehran. The scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was “seriously wounded” when assailants targeted his car before being engaged in a gunfight with his security team, Iran's defence ministry said in a statement. It added that Fakhrizadeh, who headed the ministry's research and innovation organisation, was later “martyred” after medics failed to revive him. Fakhrizadeh was travelling in a car near Absard city in Tehran province's eastern Damavand county. A state television report on the assassination described him as one “of our country's nuclear scientists” and said that Israel “had an old and deep enmity towards him”. — AFP

India GDP slumps 7.5 per cent



MUMBAI: India's economy contracted 7.5 per cent between July and September, putting it among the worst-performing major advanced and emerging economies as it entered a technical recession for the first time since independence, official data showed on Friday. Although the figures were an improvement on the record 23.9-per cent contraction recorded last quarter, they indicate that Asia's third-largest economy is in for a tough fight as it attempts to revive demand and create jobs even as coronavirus infections climb. The two successive quarters of contraction mean the country has now entered a “technical recession” for the first time since 1947. — AFP

BP sees potential to boost gas output



MUSCAT: Energy major BP says its mega tight-gas project in Block 61 in central Oman has the potential to yield an additional 400 million cubic feet per day of natural gas on top of the 1.5 billion cubic feet (bcf) per day that the block's Khazzan and Ghazeer fields are poised to deliver. The revelation came in report published by Bloomberg News over the weekend. The international news service quoted Stephen Willis, BP's Senior Vice-President for the Middle East, as saying that with further investment, output from the giant development could be ramped up by around 26 per cent.

SEE P7

WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT

SALALAH

NIZWA

MAX: 27°C

MAX: 30°C

MAX: 28°C

MIN: 17°C

MIN: 22°C

MIN: 14°C

SUNRISE 06.30 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 05:11

DHUHR: 12:00

ASR: 15:04

MAGHRIB: 17:24

ISHA: 18:39





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OMAN HOME AWAY FROM HOME

SONIA KUMAR

*The land of the sun, the sand and the sea,
The land of the desert plains and the palm trees,
So untouched a beauty to behold,
Like a hidden treasure to unfold.*

*Its rocky mountains standing tall and high,
Its pristine beaches you never
want to say goodbye,
The oasis and the wadis we love to discover,
They are a part of Oman's treasure.*

*The beautiful sunrise and sunsets
Leave a photographer in awe and wonder,
The starlit sky in the night
Is any day a stargazer's delight.*

*The souq is so alluring and inviting,
With all its bright colours and lighting,
You cannot miss the frankincense
and the bakhoor,
Which tingle your senses with
their unique aromas.*

*The people are so warm and nice,
They welcome you with a beautiful smile,
They make you feel safe and at home,
They welcome you as one of their own.*

*The land which gave us new thoughts,
new ideas and a new way of life,
The land which nurtured us
and made us its own,
Away from our country we still feel at home,
We feel safe and protected like
in a mother's womb.*

*Every time when I wander out,
The warmth and the beauty tug at my heart,
Its people so courteous and warm,
Every time I feel blessed to be
living in a place like Oman.*



A Passion for Painting

LIJU CHERIAN

@cherianmathiker

"My dream is to become a famous artist and sketch expensive paintings like Pablo Picasso, one of the greatest artists of the 20th century."

This may seem slightly far-fetched but Shareef Shan, a budding artist from India, is not the guy who will shy away from his tasks at hand.

An artist of perseverance best describes his works as he uses social media to learn and promote his works.

He did not learn drawing from any art institutes or from any individual but his sheer passion to observe and learn made him an artist.

Thus drawing and painting continues to be a challenge and a passion for him.

Shareef is especially adept in the technique of negative drawing. Here the artist uses white space of the drawing paper (negative space) surrounding it with positive marks (positive space) to build up the darkest values with layers of graphite.

Negative drawing, he explains, is exactly like a photo film when one can convert a picture into real ones with the help of a mobile application.

Invert or negative sketching as the name suggests draws from a reference using colours that are the exact opposite or complementary of the colours that are present in the reference photo. These opposite colours are called complementary colours.

For the 50th National Day, it was his idea to draw Oman's tri-colour which was a big draw at LuLu Hypermarket.

This he did with the help of dry coconut mix and coloured them.

What began as a time pass during his free hours later turned into a serious hobby and passion.

Shareef says he began drawing during his free time after work but began to sketch just as a relief from boredom.

"Soon I became fond of drawing. When I first drew pictures, I used to be mocked and received very negative comments," says Shareef with regret.

Later, in order to promote and educate himself about his art and its intricacies, he joined two mobile applications and various art groups on WhatsApp.

Joining the group called 'Kerala Artists' and 'Peaceful Space' particularly inspired him and opened up his mind for more ideas.

From here he learnt to draw with the help of a lot of friends and colleagues.

He was able to meet a number of peer group artists from these groups and by noticing their works of art he became

inspired.

His favourite medium is acrylic painting and graphite pencil drawing.

He also does his works on pencil, colour pencils and watercolour medium.

Despite his present work in the sales at Lulu Hypermarket near Seeb, he does not waste his spare time and involves himself in drawing.

"Drawing and painting is my favourite. I started drawing in my free time after work. My dream is to become a famous artist and I want to do more expensive paintings and make a name for myself in the art field," confesses Shareef.

Positive comments and appreciation have come his way.

A group of foreign visitors from the UK saw his caricature of Mickey Mouse, the famous cartoon character.

"I just sat and completed the drawing. I never thought that it would change my life," he says.

Shareef casually drew the picture which was noticed by few foreigners. They loved and appreciated it very much and the travellers advised him to draw more and improve his skills. He presented his drawing to a little girl in the group.

After he moved to the Sultanate from UAE, he was able to meet and network among his peers and artists in the field. "Their attitude



Shareef
Shan
displays
his work

was very supportive and my new friends began to appreciate my drawing. They gave me advice and motivation to continue my practice," he says.

It was at this time he began to move to draw realistic drawing. Some of them took a month for him to complete for which he earned a good response and he was content.

Shareef admits his dreams are big and he still has promises to keep.

It was not only his friends circle but also his family friends who backed him. His wife Aneena and son Aydhin Zaman also lend him their encouragement.

His Instagram handle is @shareefshan790 and YouTube as Shan Art.

Spreading misinformation on social media

Last week, I was a witness to how language barrier could be used as a weapon to spread misinformation on social media. It all started when Mom showed me a video that she'd got on her WhatsApp. The video was of Fajir Al Saeed, the controversial Kuwaiti TV presenter who has a programme that could be roughly translated to: Owning it on her private channel. I'm not a fan of her, yet whenever Mom gets one of her videos, we both sit and watch in astonishment as she tears apart whoever is making the news that day — mainly public figures from the Arab world.

In this nine-minute-long video, she announces that COVID-19 pandemic is nothing but a "Chinese movie" used to fail Trump in the American presidency elections. According to her, if Trump manages to win again, then the world will be receiving a new virus from the

Chinese as we are all: "just victims caught in the middle between the two!"

Moreover, COVID-19 virus has an expiry date which is the end of the American elections. Now to the breaking news she'd like to share with the viewers: the WHO had declared that COVID-19 patients don't need isolation and we — on the other hand — don't need social distancing as the virus doesn't spread.

To confirm the aforementioned statement, she plays a video that lacks Arabic subtitles, where a group of people are sitting on a long table with a hippie-looking woman introducing herself as professor Dolores Cahal, the president of an organisation called World Doctors Alliance. Prof Cahal announces that Corona is a seasonal virus that spreads between December and April and could be treated easily, so there is no need for lockdown, social distancing, quarantining or even face masks.

Besides the presenter's pompous attitude and condescending/mocking tone, I found the video worrying for other reasons. First, we Arabs are fans of conspiracy theories and what she said is technically correct (the vaccine was discovered a week exactly after the election results)

Then she goes on about being part of Freedom of Speech movement and asks viewers to take part in democratic peaceful movements in their countries to

help remove politicians that are "causing more harm than good". She invites the viewers to a march in Berlin that makes others realise that they could remove their masks and "welcome to their side of freedom!"

Another man on the table with a German accent adds: "COVID-19 is not a pandemic but a "plandemic" and "we don't want a "new normal" but a "better normal". After this WHO claimed video, Fajir calls her friend to ask a question on air.

The conversation is comically absurd: "What did I tell you when we were last in Cairo? When you asked me when the pandemic would end? You said after the elections! You mean the American elections? Yes! Today is your lucky day as WHO had announced that we don't need any preventive measures! You predicted that before everyone else, Fajir! You're awesome! Okay switch on the TV and watch the programme! Bye!"

Besides the presenter's pompous attitude and condescending/

mocking tone, I found the video worrying for other reasons. First, we Arabs are fans of conspiracy theories and what she said is technically correct (the vaccine was discovered a week exactly after the election results).

People would easily forget the millions who died worldwide and the long months of different drug trials that lead to this breakthrough discovery. Second, although the video wasn't a WHO one at all yet it looks authentic to non-English speakers. This could cause mass confusion as many still doubt the efficiency of preventive measures followed in their countries. Not to mention its insensitivity to the families who lost loved ones in the pandemic. In my opinion, integrity is what media should be about, whether the news is sensational or not.

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Vietnamese designer reviving tradition

ALICE PHILIPSON & TRAN THI MINH HA

Made from delicate silk, intricately embroidered and with vast, flared sleeves: Vietnamese 19th-century outfits do not seem a perfect fit for life in the country's hectic modern cities.

But Nguyen Duc Loc, a 28-year-old entrepreneur, together with his 11-strong production team in Hanoi, is convinced the attire of their ancestors can make a return to modern-day living.

"My ambition is that in any Vietnamese wardrobe, as well as suits, trousers, dresses, there will be at least one outfit based on an ancient style to wear on important occasions like festivals and weddings," he said.

Based on his own research, Loc and his company Y Van Hien reproduce outfits largely from the Nguyen dynasty that spanned close to a century and a half from 1802 — a time when the ruling class wore extravagant, brightly coloured designs embellished with symbols of power, such as dragons.

He wants everyone, both men and women, to appreciate the "astounding beauty" of ancient imperial-style dress, he says, and understand the part this

Nguyen Duc Loc, a 28-year-old entrepreneur, together with his 11-strong production team in Hanoi, is convinced the attire of their ancestors can make a return to modern-day living



clothing plays in Vietnam's cultural history.

In one of their first major commissions, Y Van Hien was asked to produce costumes for Phuong Khau, an 18-episode YouTube drama about the emperor and empress of the Nguyen Dynasty. The company — which was set up in 2018 — has also designed costumes for singers, music videos and fashion shows.

PRESERVING CULTURE

Despite some criticism that the designs have strayed too far from the originals, they are also seeing a growing interest among young people.

Many choose to rent an outfit for a photoshoot, with prices starting at \$17. "I think ancient-style costumes... are part of Vietnamese culture that we need to preserve," said Pham Trang Nhung, a 22-year-old student who had come to see Loc's designs.

"I think young people today know more about Western dress."



Blossoming curiosity over outfits worn by generations past comes as officials from the sports and culture department in the central province of Thua Thien-Hue began wearing the

traditional "ao dai" — a long tunic worn over trousers — one day a month as a way to promote and preserve cultural values.

Although a far more comfortable

and modern prospect than royal 19th-century clothing, some say they are too restrictive and impractical in today's world.

Nevertheless, a simplified version

of a woman's ao dai still forms part of some school uniforms in the south and central regions, and is worn by flight attendants on flag carrier Vietnam Airlines and is embraced by many on

special occasions. Social media shows plenty of pictures of young women posing in traditional dress — and with more than a dozen Facebook groups catering to those interested in ancient designs, some aficionados have even banded together to create a rival design company to Loc's.

Nguyen Duc Binh, an editor of an arts magazine and an expert on traditional culture, said the attraction among the young stems from a desire to assert themselves, and their pride in their country, in a similar way to the youth of other Asian nations.

"In some more developed countries such as Japan and South Korea, traditional costumes can be seen as icons for the young people to look at," he said.

Young Vietnamese "admire those countries' development" and "they have tried to find some traditional things" from their own country's past to celebrate. — AFP

Indian farmers clash with police in protest over market reform



A policeman chases away a farmer during a protest against the newly passed farm bills at Singhu border near Delhi. — Reuters

NEW DELHI: Thousands of Indian farmers scuffled with police on Friday as they tried to march to the capital, Delhi, in protest against new laws liberalising procurement that they say will leave them vulnerable to big companies.

Police fired tear gas at some places on the outskirts of Delhi and used water cannons at entry points to stop people coming into the city centre from the big farming state of Punjab.

Television showed plumes of smoke and some people throwing stones at police as thousands pressed against barricades, waving flags and sticks.

Some rode tractors near the barriers.

"Although the police have tried to stop us with force, barricades and water cannons, we've decided to stay the course to make sure the government listens to the voice of millions of farmers," said protesting farmer Sukrampal Dhayana.

Under the laws enacted in September that Prime Minister Narendra Modi called a watershed for agriculture, farmers are free to sell their produce anywhere, including to big corporate buyers, instead of at government-regulated wholesale markets where farmers are assured of a minimum procurement price.

Many farmer organisations

oppose the new law, saying it would leave small growers with little bargaining power.

They also say they fear the government will eventually withdraw price support for wheat and rice. The government says there is no plan to eliminate the wholesale markets.

As tensions rose, the Delhi police said it had urged the farmers to pull back in line with coronavirus restrictions in the capital under which large gatherings are not allowed.

At the Sindhu checkpoint on the highway leading to Delhi, hundreds of farmers sat down for a long wait.

Kulwant Singh, a 70-year-old farmer from Fatehgarh Sahib in Punjab, said his group had brought rations for six months and even cooking gas cylinders and were prepared to camp there until farmers were allowed in to Delhi.

"We are not going back," he said. Farmers make up a powerful voting block across India and some leaders urged the Modi government not to crush the protests with an iron hand.

Senior cabinet ministers should talk to farmers' organisations to understand their apprehensions over the new rules passed by the government, the leaders of the United Farmers Forum said in a letter to Modi. — Reuters



A member of the medical staff wearing protective gear takes samples for the COVID-19 test from a visitor at a testing station in Seoul. — AFP

S Korea foils North's attempt to hack COVID-19 vaccine makers

SEOUL: South Korea's intelligence agency foiled North Korean attempts to hack into South Korean companies developing coronavirus vaccines, lawmakers said on Friday.

Ha Tae-keung, a member of the parliamentary intelligence committee, said after being briefed by the National Intelligence Service (NIS) that the agency did not specify how many and which drugmakers were targeted but said there was no damage from the hacking attempts.

The revelation came after Microsoft said early this month that hackers working for the Russian and North Korean governments have tried to break into the networks of seven pharmaceutical companies and vaccine researchers in Canada, France, India, South Korea and the United States.

The closed-door briefings by the NIS, which shares intelligence and analysis with counterparts among key neighbours, provide rare public

access to information about the reclusive North.

Ha and another member Kim Byung-kee said North Korean leader Kim Jong Un had taken some "unreasonable" actions due to COVID-19 "paranoia."

They said those actions included banning fishing and salt production because of fears that seawater might have been contaminated with the virus, and stranding some 110,000 tonnes of rice from China in the northeastern Chinese port of Dalian. "He has been expressing emotional excess, anger and signs of stress, and increasingly giving unreasonable orders," Ha told reporters. North Korea has not confirmed any coronavirus infection, but the NIS had said an outbreak there cannot be ruled out as the country had active trade and people-to-people exchanges with China before closing the border in late January. Pyongyang has not issued any

The revelation came after Microsoft said hackers working for the Russian and North Korean governments have tried to break into the networks of seven pharmaceutical companies

official response to the recent US presidential election, but the government has urged all its overseas diplomatic missions to exercise caution and not "provoke" the United States, lawmaker Kim said.

Meanwhile, asymptomatic COVID-19 patients are driving a surge in new cases in South Korea, frustrating efforts to control transmission by the Asian country which managed to keep infections

under control in previous outbreaks.

South Korea reported 569 new cases in the 24 hours ending Thursday midnight, a level unseen in nearly nine months, as it grapples with the third wave of the pandemic that appears to be worsening despite tough new social distancing measures.

With young people at the centre of the surge, health authorities in South Korea estimate asymptomatic patients now account for 40 per cent of total infections, up sharply from 20-30 per cent in June.

That compares with research evidence suggesting about one in five infected people in general will experience no symptoms.

The rate is much lower in China where the state disease control centre said in February that around 1 per cent of more than 70,000 cases it analysed were asymptomatic. In Tokyo, about 19 per cent of patients are asymptomatic. — Reuters

RALLY FOR REFORMS



Protesters carry inflatable ducks during a pro-democracy rally demanding the prime minister to resign and reforms on the monarchy in Bangkok. — Reuters

Malaysia secures vaccine in a first for southeast Asia

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia has agreed to buy 12.8 million doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine, becoming the first country in Southeast Asia to announce a deal with the US drugmaker after some expressed reservations over the need for ultra-cold storage.

While final trial data showed that Pfizer's vaccine is 95 per cent effective, many Asian countries are not betting on it partly due to tropical heat, remote island communities and a lack of ultra-cold freezers.

Pfizer's vaccine, jointly developed with German partner BioNTech, must be stored and transported at minus 70 degrees Celsius (-94F), although it can be kept in a fridge for up to five days, or up to 15 days in a thermal shipping box.

Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said on Friday that Malaysia would prioritise "high-risk groups... including frontliners, senior citizens, and those with non-communicable diseases, such as heart diseases and



Vials with a sticker reading, Coronavirus vaccine / Injection only and a medical syringe are seen in front of a displayed Pfizer logo in this illustration. — Reuters file photo

diabetes."

Pfizer will deliver the first one million doses in the first quarter of 2021, with 1.7 million, 5.8 million and 4.3 million doses to follow in subsequent quarters.

The deal is expected to cover 6.4 million Malaysians, or 20 per cent of the population, with another 10 per cent to be covered under Malaysia's participation in the global COVAX facility, backed by the World Health

Organization. Malaysia, which will distribute the vaccine to its people for free, reported 1,109 new COVID-19 infections on Friday.

The country is also planning to run a Phase 3 trial of an experimental vaccine developed by the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences. The trial will involve 3,000 participants.

Pfizer's vaccine still requires approvals from regulators including the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Malaysia's Health Ministry before it can be distributed, Muhyiddin said during a televised address. The FDA plans a meeting on December 10 to discuss whether to authorise the Pfizer vaccine for emergency use.

Pfizer and BioNTech have supply deals with several countries including the United States, Germany, Japan, Canada, Australia and Britain.

They expect to produce globally up to 50 million doses of vaccines in 2020 and up to 1.3 billion doses in 2021. — Reuters

Trump says to leave office if Biden win confirmed

WASHINGTON/REHOBOTH BEACH: US President Donald Trump said on Thursday he will leave the White House if the Electoral College votes for President-elect Joe Biden, the closest he has come to conceding the November 3 election, even as he repeated unfounded claims of massive voter fraud.

Speaking to reporters on the Thanksgiving holiday, Republican Trump said if Democrat Biden — who is due to be sworn in on January 20 — is formally declared the winner by the Electoral College, he will depart the White House.

Asked if he would leave the White House if the Electoral College votes for Biden, Trump said: “Certainly I will. Certainly I will. And you know that.”

But Trump said it would be hard for him to concede because “we know there was massive fraud.” “It was a rigged election... at the highest level,” Trump insisted in a sometimes rambling discourse at the White House, while continuing to offer no concrete evidence of widespread voting irregularities.

It was the first time Trump has taken questions from reporters since Election Day, and at times he turned

combative. In the United States, a candidate becomes president by securing the most “electoral” votes rather than by winning a majority of the national popular vote.

Electors, allotted to the 50 states and the District of Columbia largely based on their population, are party loyalists who pledge to support the candidate who won the popular vote in their state.

Biden won the election with 306 Electoral College votes — many more than the 270 required — to Trump’s 232, and the electors are scheduled to meet on December 14 to formalise the outcome. Biden also leads Trump by more than 6 million in the popular vote tally.

Trump has so far refused to fully acknowledge his defeat, though earlier this week — with mounting pressure from his own Republican ranks — he agreed to let Biden’s transition process officially proceed.

Frenzied efforts by Trump and his aides to overturn results in key states, either by lawsuits or by pressuring state legislators, have failed, and he is running out of options. “President-elect Biden won 306 electoral votes. States continue to certify those results, the Electoral College will soon



US President Donald Trump gestures as he participates in a Thanksgiving video teleconference with members of the military forces at the White House in Washington. — Reuters

meet to ratify that outcome,” Michael Gwin, a spokesman for the Biden campaign, said when asked about Trump’s comments.

“Biden will be sworn in as President on January 20, 2021.”

Showing that he intends to stay in the political fray until the end of his term, Trump said on Thursday he would travel on December 5 to Georgia, a once solidly Republican state he lost narrowly to Biden, to campaign for

two Republican US Senate candidates.

The two runoff elections in Georgia on January 5 will determine whether the Republicans keep their majority in the Senate. “I just want to tell my people: don’t be disappointed yet because this race is far from over,” Trump said.

Biden and Trump both stayed close to home to celebrate Thanksgiving on Thursday as the coronavirus pandemic raged across the country.

Biden spent the holiday in the small seaside town of Rehoboth, Delaware, where he and his wife Jill have a vacation home. The Bidens are hosting daughter Ashley Biden and her husband Dr Howard Krein for the holiday meal. The former vice-president, appearing with his wife in a video message posted to his Twitter account on Thanksgiving, said his family typically holds a large gathering on the island of Nantucket off Massachusetts, but would remain in Delaware this year “with just a small group around our dinner table” because of the pandemic.

In the presidential-style address to a nation that has lost more than 260,000 lives to the coronavirus, the Democratic president-elect said on Wednesday Americans were

making a “shared sacrifice for the whole country” and a “statement of common purpose” by staying at home with their immediate families.

“I know this isn’t the way many of us hoped we’d spend our holiday. We know that a small act of staying home is a gift to our fellow Americans,” said Biden.

“I know better days are coming.” Trump often likes to celebrate holidays at his Mar-a-Largo resort in Florida. But on Thursday he remained in the Washington area, spending part of the morning at his Trump National Golf Club in Virginia where he played a round of golf.

It was a far cry from last year when he made a surprise visit to Afghanistan, where he served turkey to US troops before sitting down to eat Thanksgiving dinner with them.

This time, Trump spoke by video link from the White House to members of the military at home and abroad.

In contrast to Biden, who pleaded with Americans to celebrate the holiday safely by wearing masks and socially distancing, Trump in his Thanksgiving proclamation on Wednesday urged Americans to “gather” for the holiday. — Reuters

Gaza’s toned-down COVID-era weddings



A Palestinian girl waits for a bride while wearing a protective mask due to the COVID-19 pandemic, outside a beauty salon in the northern Gaza Strip. — AFP

GAZA CITY: To the sound of drums and flutes, a freshly coiffed Palestinian groom dances with his brothers, cousins and friends, anxiously waiting for his veiled bride to arrive in her shimmering gown. It might have been a normal Gaza wedding, except for the venue — not a luxurious seaside hall, but a narrow alley in the Al Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza City.

Welcome to Gaza’s new pandemic-era weddings: they are small because of strict crowd limits, they are held outdoors, and they finish early to beat the curfews.

And they are a whole lot cheaper than usual.

“I’m not entirely happy because I would have preferred to celebrate it in a wedding hall,” said the groom, Mohammed Ahmed Ashour, wearing a blazer and burgundy tie.

But for his family, the 24-year-old merchant said between dances, the pared-down nuptials have also brought welcome savings at a time of economic hardship.

Weddings in the Palestinian coastal enclave are usually extravagant affairs, held in large halls that dot the Mediterranean coastline.

Despite staggering poverty and unemployment rates of around 50 per cent even before the pandemic, many Gazans spend several thousand dollars on weddings.

This year the virus has further impacted the economy in the strip, which has been under Israeli blockade since 2007, and is currently spreading rapidly across Gaza.

In recent weeks infections have multiplied and “the situation is getting out of control,” warned Doctor Ahmad al Jadba of Gaza City’s Shifa hospital.

On Friday, the Palestinian health ministry announced 922 new cases for the last 24 hours in Gaza, a daily record which takes the total number of people known to have been infected with the virus in the enclave to 18,333, including 86 deaths.

To contain the spread of coronavirus, Hamas that runs the strip, like authorities elsewhere, has banned large indoor gatherings.

Families have been forced to hold smaller weddings in less-than-fairytale settings — like alleys and backyards — but saved bundles in the process.

Ashour said these days many couples opt for scaled-back daytime nuptials which take “a little over an hour”.

Once the Ashours’ wedding was over, the musicians — three percussionists and a player of the traditional reed flute called a ney — headed home before the evening curfew.

They had more performances booked for the next day, as their small, travelling business is now thriving. — AFP

ENVIRONMENTALISTS PROTEST



Police officers watch activists in treetops at the Dannenrod forest, during a protest of environmentalists against the extension of the A49 motorway, near Dannenrod, Germany. — Reuters

African envoys due to meet Ethiopian prime minister as ultimatum expires

ADDIS ABABA/NAIROBI: African peace envoys were due to meet Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed on Friday, a day after he said the military was beginning the “final phase” of an offensive in the northern Tigray region that rights groups fear could bring huge civilian casualties.

The government had given the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) until Wednesday to lay down their arms or face an assault on Mekelle, the regional capital of 500,000 people.

The United Nations says 200 aid workers are also in the city. The envoys were due to meet Abiy at 11 am, Redwan Hussein, spokesman of the government’s State of Emergency Task Force for the Tigray conflict, said.

The African Union envoys were in Addis Ababa “with a view to helping to mediate between the parties to conflict” in Ethiopia, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who is



Students walk to school in the town of Felege Birhan, south of Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. — AFP

also the AU chair, said earlier this week. Abiy, who won last year’s Nobel Peace Prize for ending a two-decade standoff with Eritrea, has said he will not talk with TPLF leaders until they are defeated or give up.

Thousands of people are already believed to have died amid air strikes and ground fighting since the war began on November 4. The

United Nations estimates 1.1 million Ethiopians will need aid as a result of the conflict.

The conflict has sent shockwaves through the Horn of Africa. More than 43,000 refugees have fled to Sudan. TPLF rockets have hit the capital of neighbouring Eritrea.

Reuters was unable to reach the TPLF for comment on Friday

morning, but two diplomats said fighting raged in several areas outside Mekelle. A resident of Mekelle said the city itself was quiet on Thursday night. With phone and Internet connections shut off to the region and access to the area tightly controlled, verifying claims by all sides has been impossible.

There was no indication that the Ethiopian military had entered the city of Mekelle. The TPLF has previously said it was digging trenches around the city.

Reuters was unable to verify those claims. Finance Minister Ahmed Shide said on Thursday that the government was trying to make people in the city aware of the military operation. “We have made the people of Mekelle to be aware of the operation by deploying military helicopters and dropping pamphlets in Tigrinya and also in Amharic so that they protect themselves against this,” he said. — Reuters

UK climate leadership weakened by aid cut for world’s poor

MEGAN ROWLING

Britain’s decision to cut its aid budget will likely dent its reputation on the global diplomatic stage and may weaken a push for other wealthy governments to find more funding to help poor nations tackle climate change, aid groups and think-tanks said.

UK Finance Minister Rishi Sunak told parliament on Wednesday that during a “fiscal emergency” sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic, “sticking rigidly to spending 0.7 per cent of our national income on overseas aid is difficult to justify”.

The temporary reduction to 0.5 per cent of gross national income in 2021 will see aid spending drop about £3 billion (\$4 billion) from this year, to £10 billion.

How that money is allocated across government departments will be decided in an upcoming review, the Treasury said.

On Thursday, Foreign Minister Dominic Raab sought to assuage fears that the move could undermine Britain’s promise to double its international climate finance to £11.6 billion (\$15.5 billion) for the period 2021-2026, as it prepares to host next year’s COP26 UN climate summit.

In a speech to parliament, he said Britain would maintain its climate finance commitment, adding it was “vital to maintaining our ambitions in this area as we host COP26”.

Raab — who will undertake the foreign

BRITAIN WILL
MAINTAIN
ITS CLIMATE
FINANCE
COMMITMENT,
SAYS DOMINIC
RAAB, UK
FOREIGN
MINISTER

aid review, expected to be announced in the new year — said climate change would be a key priority in next year’s aid spending.

“We will prioritise measures to tackle climate change, protect biodiversity and finance low-carbon and climate-resilient technologies such as solar and wind in poor and emerging economies,” he said.

Andrew Norton, director of the London-based International Institute for Environment and Development, welcomed the reaffirmation of Britain’s climate finance pledge and the recognition of its importance for a successful outcome at COP26.

Nonetheless, the overall aid cut sent a “terrible signal” in terms of encouraging other rich nations to give more to help poor and vulnerable countries adapt to a warmer world, he added.

Business Minister Alok Sharma, who will preside over the COP26 climate talks, told a summit of development banks this month that donors had “much further to go” to meet a goal of mobilising \$100 billion a year in climate finance for poorer nations from 2020 onwards.

“Our COP26 presidency will focus on working with others to mobilise funds and improve access for adaptation and resilience,” he added. Development experts said that even if funding earmarked for climate change projects is maintained, less spending on other things that help people beat poverty and stay healthy will make them less able to withstand worsening

weather and rising seas.

On Thursday, UK-based development NGO network Bond said the government seemed to have forgotten the “bottom billion” poorest people in the world, in a bid to redirect its aid towards “short-term, self-serving priorities”.

Some aid experts have criticised London’s efforts to realign its foreign aid spending more closely with security, defence and trade interests — areas highlighted by Raab on Thursday.

In a letter to the *Guardian* newspaper on Tuesday, the heads of 17 aid agencies, green groups and think-tanks said the planned headline aid cut would “fail” the poorest countries who are “at the frontline of a climate crisis they did not cause”.

“It has never been more important that UK aid and climate finance work together to build resilience in the face of climate change and the COVID-19 crisis,” they wrote. After the initial announcement of the aid reduction on Wednesday, which the government intends to reverse “when the fiscal situation allows”, Greenpeace UK’s head of politics, Rebecca Newsom, said the decision would “fundamentally undermine the UK’s climate leadership”.

“It will hinder poorer countries’ ability to tackle and adapt to the climate emergency, and sour the UK’s diplomatic relationships in the run-up to the crucial Glasgow climate conference next year,” she added in a statement.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation

SHUTDOWN FOR SKIERS

Swiss to keep skiing through pandemic, even as EU eyes ban

AGNES PEDRERO

As EU countries debate a bloc-wide ban on ski holidays to curb coronavirus infections, downhill enthusiasts may be tempted to head to non-member Switzerland, where the winter season is well under way.

Germany and Italy were on Thursday pushing for Europe to ban ski holidays as the number of worldwide infections reached a new peak of more than 60 million.

Paris has said the French are welcome to visit the country’s resorts, as long as they don’t ski, while Austria has warned that an EU-wide ban would be “disastrous” for the country’s tourism-reliant economy.

In Switzerland meanwhile, which has been hard-hit by the second wave of COVID-19 infections, the authorities, ski and tourism sectors have stood united behind the decision to keep the winter season going, after the spring season was cut short by the first wave.

“In Switzerland, we can go skiing, with protection plans in place,” Swiss Health Minister Alain Berset told reporters on Thursday.

He added, though, that the government would re-examine the situation before the Christmas holidays, because even though decisions on what parts of the economy should shut down are generally left to the Swiss cantons, or states, the federal government can step in if it deems the

“More than ever, people need fresh air, snow, space

CHRISTOPHE
DARBELLAY
Regional govt chief,
Canton of Wallis

RESEARCH ON VACCINE

Decades of work, and half a dose of fortune, drove Oxford vaccine success

ALISTAIR SMOUT, KATE KELLAND & LUDWIG BURGER

It took Oxford University’s brightest minds decades of work to give them the expertise to develop a COVID-19 vaccine. In the end, it was a momentary error — and a dose of good fortune — that carried them over the line.

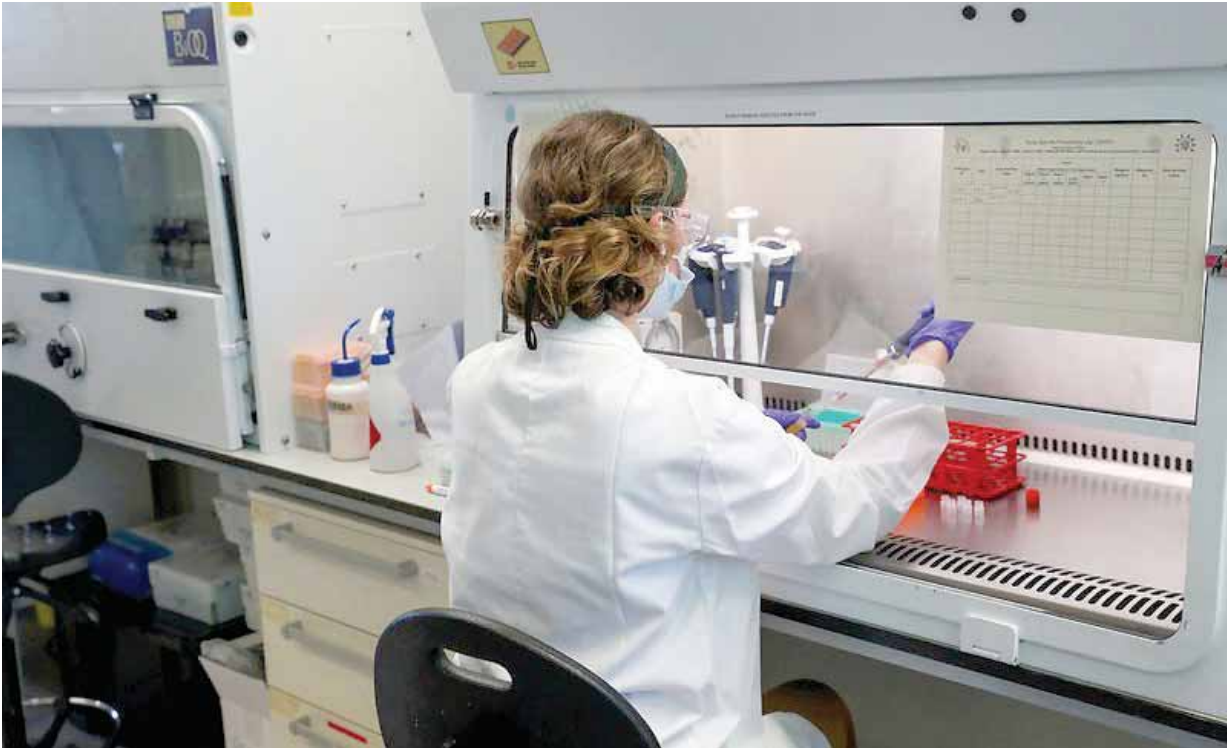
The Oxford vaccinologists were exhilarated on Monday when drugmaker AstraZeneca, with whom they developed the shot, announced that it could be around 90 per cent effective, citing data from late-stage trials.

“It can only happen if extraordinary support is provided,” Adrian Hill, director of Oxford University’s Jenner Institute which developed the shot, said. “We had pretty well the whole institute in Oxford working on this vaccine.”

While skill and hard work drove development, AstraZeneca said it was a minor mistake that made the team realise how they could significantly boost the shot’s success rate, to as much as 90 per cent from around 60 per cent: by administering a half dose, followed by a full dose a month later.

“The reason we had the half dose is serendipity,” Mene Pangalos, head of AstraZeneca’s non-oncology research and development, said. The plan was for trial participants in Britain to receive two full doses, but researchers were perplexed when they noticed that side effects, such as fatigue, headaches or arm aches were milder than expected, Pangalos said.

“So we went back and checked... and we found out that they had under predicted the dose of the vaccine by half.”



A scientist works against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) that has been produced at the Oxford Vaccine Group’s facility at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford. — Reuters file photo

PANDEMIC GAVE
OXFORD THE
CHANCE TO
SHOW VACCINE
TECHNIQUE
WORKED

He said the team nonetheless decided to press ahead with that half dose group, and to administer the second, full dose booster shot at the scheduled time. The results showed the vaccine was 90 per cent effective among this group, while a larger group who had received two full doses produced an efficacy read-out of 62 per cent, leading to an overall efficacy of 70 per cent across both dosing patterns, Pangalos said.

“That, in essence, is how we stumbled upon doing half dose-full dose (group),” he said.

“Yes, it was a mistake.” The vaccine uses a harmless adenovirus to deliver genetic material that tricks the human body to produce proteins known as antigens that are normally found on the coronavirus surface, helping the immune system develop an arsenal against infection.

Pangalos said more analysis was needed to explain why an initial lower dose bolstered protection. One possible explanation was that lower antigen levels to begin with triggered an overall better immune system build-up, he added.

— Reuters

situation unsafe.

For now, Bern is opting to trust people to respect the protection measures put in place by chairlift operators and ski schools, including facemask requirements everywhere except on the slopes.

“In Switzerland, the government, the authorities and the tourism industry are all convinced that the Swiss way is for now the right one, and that the winter season can go ahead safely,” Veronique Kanel, spokeswoman for the national tourism office, said.

Monday’s launch of the winter ski season received backing from President Simonetta Sommaruga, who said she was “counting on the population to help us ensure this is a successful winter.”

Swiss authorities have hailed stringent measures put in place by the operators of Switzerland’s more than 2,400 ski-lift installations, which include button lifts, t-bars, chairlifts, and cable cars.

Implementation has meanwhile not always been smooth.

A picture of skiers packed together as they queued for a lift in Zermatt earlier this month sparked outrage, and police have been asked to intervene on several occasions.

For weeks now, the Swiss have been invited to hit the slopes at resorts like Verbier, Gstaad and Saas-Fee.

“We’ll ski at Christmas,” Christophe Darbellay, the regional government chief in the southwestern canton of Wallis, insisted.

The region, which counts some of Switzerland’s biggest ski resorts, has already opened its hotels back up after a brief shutdown and restaurants are due to be back in business in mid-December.

“More than ever, people need fresh air, snow, space,” Darbellay said, voicing disbelief at the decision in neighbouring France to shut ski lifts, but not the metros in Paris.

In Wallis, shutting down the resorts “is not an option,” he said.

If Switzerland does become the only country with open slopes in the Alps, its resorts could see some ardent ski enthusiasts from across Europe show up, but they are not bracing for a massive influx of foreign tourists. — AFP

BP sees potential to boost gas output from Oman Block 61

PROMISING POTENTIAL:

Option to produce 400 million cubic feet per day of new gas with additional investment, says executive

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Energy major BP says its mega tight-gas project in Block 61 in central Oman has the potential to yield an additional 400 million cubic feet per day of natural gas on top of the 1.5 billion cubic feet (bcf) per day that the block's Khazzan and Ghazeer fields are poised to deliver.

The revelation came in report published by Bloomberg News over the weekend. The international news service quoted Stephen Willis, BP's Senior Vice-President for the Middle East, as saying that with further investment, output from the giant development could be ramped up by around 26 per cent.

Last month, BP brought into production the Ghazeer field, representing Phase 2 of its multibillion dollar investment in Block 61. Phase 1, centring on the prolific Khazzan tight gas field, came online in September 2017 with an



output of 1 bcf/day of natural gas.

Ghazeer, originally due to come into production in early 2021, began producing in October this year, at least three month before schedule. At full capacity, it will generate a further 0.5 bcf/day of gas, boosting the block's total output to 1.5 bcf/day, representing as much as 35 per cent of the Sultanate's total gas demand.

The executive made the comments in the context of BP's commitment to sustain investments in its oil and natural-gas assets in the Middle East notwithstanding its ambitions to transition to renewable energy and

reduce its carbon footprint.

Besides Oman, the energy giant is a major producer in Iraq, where it operates the world's third-largest oil field of Rumaila. In the United Arab Emirates, BP is working with government-owned producer Adnoc to boost the capacity of onshore oil fields in Abu Dhabi.

The company also aims to extract gas from the Bad field in the emirate, Willis was quoted as stating.

The news report noted that gas output from Oman's Block 61, in which BP has a majority interest, could be raised quickly depending

upon market demand.

BP has plans to develop about 10.5 trillion cubic feet (TCF) of gas reserves from the Block. As many as 300 wells are planned for drilling over the 15-year life Khazzan and Ghazeer developments.

As of June 2030, investments made by BP Oman in the block aggregated \$9.3 billion out of a total commitment of \$16 billion planned during the life of the project.

BP is the operator of Block 61 with a 60-per cent stake, while the remainder is held by OQ (30 per cent) and Petronas (10 per cent).



A worker welds a bicycle steel rim at a factory in Zhejiang province, China. – Reuters

China's industrial profits grow at quickest monthly pace since 2017

BEIJING: Profits at China's industrial firms grew in October for a sixth consecutive month and at their quickest pace since early 2017, pointing to a steady recovery in the manufacturing sector after it was hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Profits at Chinese industrial firms surged 28.2 per cent year-on-year in October to 642.91 billion yuan (\$97.79 billion), National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) data showed on Friday, after rising 10.1 per cent in September versus the previous year. That was the biggest monthly profit growth since January-February 2017. The NBS combines the results for January and February to exclude distortions caused by the week-long Lunar New Year.

Zhu Hong, a senior statistician at the NBS, said the sharp jump

was helped by rising investment income. It also came from a low base in October 2019, Zhu said.

China's industrial sector has seen an impressive recovery from the coronavirus fallout, helped by resilient demand for the country's exports. Premier Li Keqiang said on Tuesday he expects Chinese economic activity to return to a reasonable range next year.

For the January-October period, industrial firms' profits rose 0.7 per cent on an annual basis, after falling 2.4 per cent in the first nine months of 2020 compared with the same period last year. That growth was driven by the equipment manufacturing and the electronic sectors, while the auto manufacturing sector also saw a steady recovery in profits, Zhu said in a statement. — Reuters

UK to impose tougher rules on Google, Facebook

LONDON: Britain announced on Friday it will set up a watchdog to regulate tech giants such as Facebook and Google and improve their transparency on using people's data and personalised advertising.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport said in a statement that the new regulator, the Digital Markets Unit, will "govern the behaviour of platforms that currently dominate the market, such as Google and Facebook".

The aim is "to ensure consumers and small businesses aren't disadvantaged", it said.

The unit is being created after the UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) said in July that existing laws were not effective and a new regulatory regime was needed to control Internet giants



Silhouettes of mobile users are seen next to a screen projection of Google logo in this picture illustration. – Reuters

that earn from digital advertising.

The CMA has backed the new rules while it has not taken direct action against Facebook and Google.

"Our new, pro-competition regime for digital markets will ensure consumers have choice, and mean smaller firms aren't pushed out," said business Secretary Alok

Sharma.

Britain acknowledged the online platforms bring "huge benefits for businesses and society" but said the "concentration of power amongst a small number of tech companies" was curbing growth and innovation in the industry, which could have "negative impacts" for the public.

A new statutory code will aim to make the tech giants "more transparent about the services they provide and how they are using consumers' data", it said.

Consumers will be able to choose whether to see personalised advertising, the government said.

The new regulator will be launched in April and could have powers to "suspend, block and reverse decisions of tech giants", order them to take actions and impose fines. — AFP

Aviation bodies seek airport slots relief for much of 2021

PARIS: Global aviation heavyweights led by airline body IATA are pushing to suspend airport slot access rules until October 2021, they said on Thursday, but will give some ground to budget carriers angered by measures they deem anti-competitive.

The draft proposal was issued jointly by IATA, airports body ACI and slot coordinator association WWACG. It would prolong the current suspension of rules requiring airlines to use 80 per cent of their take-off and landing windows or else cede some to rivals.

Rules on the allocation of airport slots have big ramifications for airline competition and market access for low-cost carriers, which were making ever deeper inroads before the pandemic. The current waiver expires on March 31.

"We oppose the extension of slot waivers into summer 2021 because this will lead to fewer flights and higher fares for consumers," a Ryanair



Wizzair's aircraft with shipment arrives at Budapest airport. – Reuters

spokeswoman said.

"Legacy airlines at hub airports will have no incentives to operate flights," she added. "Slot waivers distort competition by preventing low-fare airlines from expanding while legacy carriers are able to reduce capacity and raise prices." The issue is increasingly divisive among airlines and airports,

pitting budget carriers largely absent from IATA against the organisation's more traditional membership.

In a bid to address concerns, the proposal would restore the "use-it-or-lose-it" principle during the northern summer but reduce the utilisation rate required to keep slots to 50 per cent. — Reuters

Germany smashes debt rule with 180 bn euros in borrowing

FRANKFURT: Germany, traditionally hostile to government borrowing, will take on 180 billion euros in new debt in 2021 as it grapples with the economic fallout from the coronavirus crisis, according to a draft budget agreed on Friday.

After 17 hours of discussion, the parliamentary finance committee approved a total of 179.8 billion euros (\$214.4 billion) of new debt for next year.

The agreement further shatters Germany's constitutionally enshrined debt brake rule, with public spending now nearly 500 billion euros, as the government continues to support the economy through the health crisis.

Borrowing in Europe's largest economy will be nearly 84 billion euros more than the finance ministry forecast in September, before the arrival of a damaging second wave of COVID-19.

Chancellor Angela Merkel announced tough new measures for November that closed restaurants, bars, as well as the tourism, leisure and cultural industries.

Earlier this week, Merkel announced the extension of these measures through January unless coronavirus case numbers come down dramatically.

On Friday, Germany passed the milestone of one million cases since



A worker assembles engines at Daimler Powertrain plant in Bad Cannstatt, Germany. – Reuters

the start of the pandemic.

The government has promised 10 billion euros in support of sectors specifically hit by the November measures, dubbed "lockdown light" in the media.

Berlin said it would extend for a month emergency aid to support business most affected by the restrictions.

The impact of the pandemic has forced Merkel's government to temporarily abandon its years-long dogma of a running a balanced budget.

This year, Germany will borrow 218 billion euros, after the government pledged more than a trillion euros to

shield German workers and companies from the virus fallout.

The new debt is "necessary to get our country safely through the once-in-a-century pandemic", said the spokeswoman for Merkel's CDU party on the budget committee, Eckhardt Rehberg.

The government expects to return to net-zero new borrowing in 2022, in the hope that by then the economy will have returned to pre-crisis levels.

Berlin expects the economy to shrink 5.5 per cent this year, before rebounding 4.4 per cent next year.

Parliament will reconvene from December 7 to approve the budget.

— AFP

Tesla recalls 870 cars in China over defective roofs



Tesla China-made Model 3 vehicles are seen at its factory in Shanghai. — Reuters

BEIJING: US electric car maker Tesla is recalling 870 vehicles in China over defective roofs, part of which could fall off, China's market regulator said on Friday.

The announcement comes just a month after another recall of almost 30,000 cars imported into China — the world's biggest auto market — due to suspension defects. On Friday China's State Administration for Market Regulation said the latest recall affects Model X cars produced between March 16 and July 31 in 2016. Parts of the roof trim may have insufficient primer, which is used to improve adhesion, meaning it could fall off, the regulator said in a statement.

"If the trim falls off the vehicle during driving, it will increase the risk of collision or injury for vehicles behind, especially motorcycles, posing a safety hazard," the statement added.

Tesla will inspect the recalled cars for free and perform a test on the roof trim to check if the primer is sufficient.

China is the main growth driver for many carmakers, in particular Tesla, which intends to benefit from the country's ambitious targets for reducing CO2 emissions. — **AFP**

Spanish banks Sabadell, BBVA scrap merger plan

MADRID: Spain's second-largest bank BBVA and smaller rival Banco Sabadell scrapped plans on Friday for a tie-up that would have created a top player as the industry struggles in the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. The two banks announced on November 16 that they were in talks about a possible merger although they stressed there was no certainty that it would be implemented.



People line up at a Sabadell Bank ATM machine to withdraw money in Barcelona. — Reuters

The talks were announced at the same time as BBVA said it had agreed to sell its US unit to PNC Financial Services for \$11.6 billion, a deal which would mean the lender would not need a capital increase to carry out an operation involving Sabadell.

"Banco Sabadell informs that the board of directors has decided to terminate the... discussions because the parties have not achieved an agreement on the exchange ratio of both entities," Sabadell said in a statement. BBVA's offer did not reflect the real value of its business, it added, without giving further details.

For its part, BBVA said in a separate, brief statement that "discussions about a merger with Banco Sabadell concluding without reaching an accord." The end of talks is a setback to the bank consolidation under way in Spain, which has been encouraged by the country's central bank. — **AFP**

Swedish economic recovery stronger in Q3



A man wearing a protective mask walks past the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm. — Reuters

STOCKHOLM: Sweden's economy recovered faster than previously reported in the third quarter, as manufacturing led the bounce back from a record dip due to the coronavirus pandemic and measures to halt its spread, data from the Statistics Office showed on Friday.

Gross domestic product was upwardly revised to growth of 4.9 per cent in the third quarter from the previous three month period and revised up to 2.5 per cent contraction from a year earlier. A preliminary reading had shown the economy grew 4.3 per cent in the quarter and contracted 3.5 per cent on an annual basis.

Growth was driven by household consumption and export of manufactured goods, the statistics office said. Sweden's economy has fared better than many in Europe with the country opting against the kind of strict lockdown adopted across much of Europe in the spring.

Nevertheless, the dip in GDP in the April-June period was a record, even though those figures were also revised on Friday to show a milder contraction. — **AFP**

Brexit goes down to the line: EU and UK say big differences remain

LONDON: The European Union and Britain said on Friday there were still substantial differences over a Brexit trade deal as the EU chief negotiator prepared to travel to London in a last-ditch attempt to avoid a tumultuous finale to the five-year Brexit crisis.

With just five weeks left until the United Kingdom finally exits the EU's orbit on December 31, both sides are calling on the other to compromise over fishing, state aid and how to resolve any future disputes. The two sides will shortly resume face-to-face negotiations after they had to be suspended last week when one of EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier's team tested positive for the coronavirus.

"Clearly there are substantial and important differences still to be bridged but we're getting on with it," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson told reporters.

"The likelihood of a deal is very much determined by our friends and partners in the EU — there's a deal there to be done if they want to do it," Barnier said on Twitter he would travel to London on Friday evening for talks with Britain's chief negotiator David Frost.

"Same significant divergences persist," Barnier said. The talks are still snagged on three main issues — fishing, state aid and dispute resolution — but neither side has so far shown a willingness to shift enough on them to allow a breakthrough.

Britain formally left the EU on January 31 but has been in a transition period since then under which rules on trade, travel and business remain unchanged. From the end of the year it will be treated by Brussels as a third country. One EU diplomat said there are "only a few days left" for the talks, which have previously continued through numerous broken deadlines.

"The gaps on level playing-field, governance and fisheries remain large," the diplomat said following a closed-door briefing given by Barnier to national diplomats on the progress of the negotiations.



An anti-Brexit demonstrator waves flags outside the Houses of Parliament, in London, in this file photo. — Reuters

"Without London taking the necessary decisions quickly, reaching a deal will be all but impossible. Time is running out quickly. There are only a few days left for further negotiations."

A "no deal" exit would snarl borders, spook financial markets and sow chaos through the delicate supply chains that stretch across Europe and beyond — just as the world grapples with the vast economic cost of the COVID-19 outbreak.

EU ambassadors called on the Commission to urgently prepare contingency measures for a no-deal. But Barnier was reluctant to go down the contingency route as he still believes a deal can be struck, another EU diplomat said.

A different diplomat said it was "not a particularly bright picture".

Britain formally left the EU on January 31 but has been in a transition period since then under which rules on trade, travel and business remain unchanged. From the end of the year it will be treated by Brussels as a third country

The first sign of movement — either towards a deal or that talks are crumbling — is likely to be a call between British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and European Commission

chief Ursula von der Leyen. No such call has yet been announced.

A source close to the negotiations said it had been "tough" recently to make progress. The two sides are trying to strike a trade deal on goods that would safeguard nearly \$1 trillion in annual trade and the peace in British-ruled Northern Ireland. The latter is a priority for US President-elect Joe Biden, who has warned British Prime Minister Boris Johnson he must uphold the 1998 US-brokered Good Friday Agreement that ended three decades of sectarian conflict.

Von der Leyen said on Wednesday the EU was ready for the possibility of Britain leaving the bloc without a new trade accord despite "genuine progress" in the tortuous Brexit talks. — **Reuters**

As Russian real estate booms, central bank warns of bubble risks

MOSCOW: Russia's real estate market is booming, fuelled by record-low interest rates and a state-subsidised mortgage programme, prompting the central bank to consider ending a COVID-19 support measure to prevent a housing bubble, data show and analysts say.

Demand for different housing options surged as lockdowns were imposed during the spring, while a weak rouble has added to production costs, all combining to push prices up. And with deposit rates at record lows, Russians turned to property as an investment opportunity.

Banks issued 2.7 trillion roubles (\$35.7 billion) worth of mortgage loans in the first nine months of this year, a 37.6 per cent increase on the same period of 2019, according to the central bank. Mortgage subsidies were introduced to inject some life into Russia's struggling economy, dealt the double blow of a global pandemic and an oil price crash.

That sent the rouble to four-year lows and led the central bank to slash rates to a record low 4.25 per cent, but the country's biggest developers have found a way to turn a profit. All major housing developers — PIK, LSR and Etalon — have reported sales growth this year.

VTB Capital analysts estimate the mass market players are best placed to benefit and have already been able to increase prices 17 per cent in annual



A woman crosses a street in Tatar neighbourhood in the Siberian city of Tomsk. — AFP

terms. "Against the backdrop of falling deposit rates, investments in real estate have become attractive once again," said Moody's analyst Mikhail Shipilov. "You could say demand for real estate on the primary market is booming."

Subsidising mortgages has given more borrowers access to funds, but also pushed prices up, especially in Moscow and the surrounding region, by around 16 per cent, Olga Polyakova, a deputy chairwoman of Russia's central bank, said this week.

"This is quite significant and it almost negates the benefit we derived from subsidising mortgages." The price growth is just an adaption to cost increases in building materials caused by the weakening rouble, according to Vladislav Preobrazhensky, executive director of the Moscow investors club.

Finance Minister Anton Siluanov has said the state-backed mortgage programme could be extended beyond July 1, 2021, a move his ministry estimated would allow for an additional 354,000 loans worth 1.1 trillion roubles.

Ksenia Yudaeva, the central bank's first deputy governor, this week called for the programme to end by July 1, 2021 as planned, to prevent a bubble, as real estate price growth has far exceeded the inflation target of 4 per cent. Moody's Shipilov said there is potential for 5 per cent to 6 per cent more price growth until mid-2021 before demand is exhausted. — **Reuters**

sport



‘ETERNAL DIEGO’

Argentina bids farewell to favourite son

BUENOS AIRES: Huge crowds bade a grief-filled farewell to Argentina’s favourite son Diego Maradona before the football legend was buried on the outskirts of Buenos Aires after a chaotic public wake.

The 1986 World Cup winner, widely regarded as one of the greatest players in history, was laid to rest on Thursday after a ceremony attended by family and close friends in the Bella Vista cemetery.

Maradona, who had battled cocaine addiction for decades, died on Wednesday aged 60, sparking mourning around the world.

“I thought Diego was immortal, I thought he would never die on us. I feel a terrible sadness for a person who made us so, so happy,” said 63-year-old bus driver Antonio Avila outside the cemetery.

The peaceful farewell contrasted sharply with the raucous scenes of his send-off in the Argentine capital that seemed somehow in keeping with the player’s tumultuous life.

Riot police fired tear gas and rubber bullets in clashes with stone-throwing fans that briefly threatened to mar the day of mourning.

In Naples, where Maradona was adored for leading Napoli to two Italian titles and putting one over their richer northern rivals, fans held an all-day wake and players took to the pitch for a match wearing his number 10 shirt.

THOUSANDS BID FAREWELL

Tens of thousands of people had queued from early morning in Buenos Aires to file past Maradona’s coffin, draped in the Argentine flag, at the presidential palace.

As the day wore on, people outside the Casa Rosada grew increasingly impatient, and some took over a courtyard inside, where they chanted slogans, forcing officials to move Maradona’s coffin to another room as a security precaution.

Later, the hearse bearing Maradona’s coffin rolled through the gates of the presidency building and into the streets of Buenos Aires.

Fans crowded onto roadsides and highway bridges as the funeral cortege sped towards the western



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Tunisian referee Ali bin Nasser poses at home in the capital Tunis with the shirt given to him by Diego Maradona when he visited his home during a trip to Tunisia in 2015. The former referee had officiated the 1986 World Cup quarterfinal in which Maradona scored his famous double against England. A man waves the flag of Argentina with a photo of Diego Maradona, outside the San Paolo Stadium in Naples. Torches are lit on Piazza del Plebiscito in Naples as people gather to mourn the death of Maradona. Fans hold a poster and a doll outside the Casa Rosada government house as they wait to pay tribute to Maradona in Buenos Aires. — AFP

outskirts, surrounded by police outriders with sirens blaring and pursued by TV crews.

The outrageously skillful Maradona, widely remembered for his ‘Hand of God’ goal against

England in the 1986 World Cup quarterfinals, died of a heart attack on Wednesday while recovering from brain surgery. “He was the best in the world, we’re going to miss him and his death broke our souls,” said Diego

Armando Cabral, a 29-year-old bricklayer in Buenos Aires who was named after the footballer.

Brazilian legend Pele, 80, said he hoped they would one day “play together in the sky.”

Lionel Messi, Argentina’s modern-day superstar, described Maradona as “eternal.”

Still the tributes rolled in, with Tottenham manager Jose Mourinho — a former boss of Chelsea, Real

Madrid, Inter Milan and Manchester United — recounting how Maradona would call him to offer support after defeats. “He had a big, big, big, big heart,” Mourinho told BT Sport. “That’s the guy I miss, because his football we can find every time we miss him, if we Google we will find it. But Diego, no.”

As his playing days ended, his lifestyle began to take a toll. He was hospitalised three times in the last 20 years for serious health issues.

At the 2018 World Cup in Russia, his wild behaviour while supporting Argentina was clear to see.

A LEGEND

Maradona was born into poverty in Lanus, south of Buenos Aires, on October 30, 1960.

His extraordinary talent was evident from a young age, and after starring for Boca Juniors, he was transferred to Barcelona. There he was a target for the roughest treatment from defenders and Napoli offered the Argentine an escape route.

He immediately had the gritty city of Naples under his spell, leading the club to their only two Italian league titles in 1987 and 1990. The mafia befriended him, and supplied drugs.

In Naples, heartbroken fans gathered at the Stadio San Paolo Stadium to lay candles, scarves and shirts, creating a makeshift shrine to their hero. “Diego is a legend and will never die,” present-day Napoli coach Gennaro Gattuso said after the team dedicated their Europa League victory against Croatian club Rijeka on Thursday to Maradona.

As a coach, Maradona led Argentina to an unsuccessful 2010 World Cup finals before spells with clubs in the United Arab Emirates, Mexico and his home country again — the last at Gimnasia y Esgrima La Plata.

He had two daughters, Dalma and Gianinna, with wife Claudia Villafane but the relationship was constantly under pressure from his extra-marital affairs, and they divorced in 2004.

He also had a son, Diego Junior, born in Naples in 1986, although he only acknowledged he was the father in 2004. — AFP

Aussies crush India in opener

FINCH, SMITH HIT TONS, HAZLEWOOD STRIKES

SYDNEY: Skipper Aaron Finch and Steve Smith blazed centuries and Josh Hazlewood ripped apart the Indian top order as Australia won by 66 runs in the first one-day international at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Friday.

The Indians, coming out of coronavirus quarantine, looked rusty in their first taste of international cricket since February, as the Australians went on a run rampage to reach 374 for six after winning the toss.

Hazlewood then put the skids under the tourists, triggering a top-order wobble. Among his victims was coveted wicket of skipper Virat Kohli, as India amassed 308 for eight in reply.

Australia enjoyed perfect batting conditions. Finch belted 114 and shared an opening stand of 156 with David Warner, who made 69 off 75 balls.

Smith had some early luck early before taking charge and hitting 105 off 66 balls with four sixes.

He was saved by DRS after a confident appeal for leg before wicket on 15. Then Shikhar Dhawan badly missed Smith's miscue on 38 at long on.

"I've been searching for something for a couple of months now, but a couple of days ago I started to hit the ball where I wanted it, and everything came back, the rhythm came back," man-of-the-match Smith said.

"Finchy and Davey set an excellent platform, we could come and just take off."

After Finch raised his 17th ODI century he was out for 114 off 124 balls trying to steer a Jasprit Bumrah lifter behind the wicket in the 40th over.

Glenn Maxwell hit a rumbustious 45 off 19 balls as Australia built a massive total to defend under the evening lights.

India made a fast start, the openers flaying the Aussie attack for 53 before Mayank Agarwal fell to Hazlewood for 22. Kohli was dropped on one by Adam Zampa at fine leg after top-edging a Pat Cummins lifter.

The reprieve did not last long when the India skipper was cramped by Hazlewood and found Finch at mid-wicket, his night over at 21.

"We got enough time to prepare, I don't think there's any excuses on the field when you don't pull up as a side," Kohli said.

"It's probably the first long game we've played in a while. The body language after 25-26 overs was disappointing. 'A quality side will hurt you (if you have fielding lapses). We'll have to find out ways of getting a few overs from a few part-time (bowlers) in the side.'"

India had not played international cricket since a tour of New Zealand earlier in the year and it showed with their outfielding ragged at times.

— AFP



"I've been searching for something for a couple of months now, but a couple of days ago I started to hit the ball where I wanted it, and everything came back, the rhythm came back"

STEVE SMITH
Australian batsman



Australia's Josh Hazlewood celebrates with team-mates after taking the wicket of India's Shreyas Iyer at the Sydney Cricket Ground during the first ODI. — Reuters



West Indies' Andre Fletcher is bowled by New Zealand's Lockie Ferguson during the Twenty20 match at Eden Park in Auckland. — AFP

Kiwis beat Windies in 'topsy-turvy' T20 after Ferguson barrage

AUCKLAND: Paceman Lockie Ferguson unleashed a devastating five-wicket barrage as New Zealand downed the West Indies in a roller coaster Twenty20 series opener in Auckland on Friday.

The match — the first international cricket played in New Zealand for almost nine months — produced a nail-biting finale as the Black Caps reached 179-5 in the final over after being set a target of 176.

Persistent showers meant the innings were reduced to 16 and many players, particularly the tourists, were rusty after only emerging from COVID-19 quarantine on Thursday.

But there were outstanding individual performances on both sides, particularly man of the match Ferguson and West Indies captain Kieron Pollard's unbeaten 75 from 37 balls.

Ferguson claimed a career-best haul of 5-21 to put the brakes on a flying start from the West Indies, saying the short boundaries at Eden Park helped his cause.

"It's one of the craziest grounds you could ever play at, the ball flies everywhere and fortunately for me today it went to hand, which is nice," he said.

Pollard almost swung momentum back to the West Indies single-handedly, clubbing eight sixes and four fours to ensure his team set a competitive target.

"It was fantastic cricket, in terms of the ball flaying all over the boundaries," he said.

"It was a topsy-turvy sort of game, a bit of indiscipline showed with us on the bowling side."

Before play commenced, both sides took a knee in a gesture against racism, with the West Indies players each raising a black-gloved fist.

'LONG TIME COMING'

West Indies opener Andre Fletcher smashed back-to-back sixes off debutant Kyle Jamieson, who conceded 18 from his first over in international T20.

The tourists were even more brutal against Hamish Bennett, plundering 29 runs from a nightmare over for the fast bowler.

They were 58 without loss before Ferguson broke through and clean-bowled Fletcher on 34.

The West Indies then lost five wickets for a single run over the course of 11 balls, with Ferguson

It's one of the craziest grounds you could ever play at, the ball flies everywhere and fortunately for me today it went to hand, which is nice
LOCKIE FERGUSON
New Zealand bowler

SCOREBOARD

WEST INDIES	
A Fletcher b Ferguson	34
B King c Neesham b Southee	13
S Hetmyer c Siefert b Ferguson	0
N Pooran lbw Ferguson	1
R Powell c Ferguson b Southee	0
K Pollard not out	75
F Allen c Siefert b Ferguson	30
K Paul c Siefert b Ferguson	0
S Cottrell not out	1
Extras (lb6, nb4, w16)	26
Total (7 wkts, 16 overs)	180
Fall of wickets: 1-58, 2-58, 3-58, 4-58, 5-59, 6-143, 7-146	
Bowling: Southee 3-0-22-2, Jamieson 3-0-26-0, Bennett 2-3-0-50-0, Ferguson 4-0-21-5, Santner 2-0-23-0, Neesham 1-3-0-32-0	
NEW ZEALAND	
M Guptill c Pooran b Cottrell	5
T Siefert c Powell b Thomas	17
D Conway c Thomas b Pollard	41
G Phillips b Thomas	22
R Taylor run out (Allen)	0
J Neesham not out	48
M Santner not out	31
Extras (b4, lb2, nb6, w3)	15
Total (5 wkts, 15.2 overs)	179
Fall of wickets: 1-7, 2-34, 3-62, 4-63, 5-140	
Bowling: Cottrell 4-0-30-1, Allen 2-0-32-0, Thomas 3-0-23-2, Williams 2-0-33-0, Paul 3-0-39-0, Pollard 1-2-0-16-1	

claiming three scalps during the spell and captain Tim Southee two.

Pollard's contribution looked like it would prove decisive when New Zealand made a shaky start and veteran opener Martin Guptill departed for five.

They were soon 63 for four when Ross Taylor was run out.

The Black Caps' South African-born debutant Devon Conway and Jimmy Neesham were looking dangerous when Pollard broke their 77-run partnership when Conway was caught on 41.

But Neesham, who scored 48 from 24 balls, steered the New Zealanders home with Mitchell Santner, who hit a six to claim victory with four balls to spare. — AFP



New Zealand's Lockie Ferguson (C) celebrates a five wicket haul during the Twenty20 international against the West Indies at Eden Park in Auckland. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

AUSTRALIA	
D Warner c Rahul b Shami	69
A Finch c Rahul b Bumrah	114
S Smith b Shami	105
M Stoinis c Rahul b Chahal	0
G Maxwell c Jadeja b Shami	45
M Labuschagne c Dhawan b Saini	2
A Carey not out	17
P Cummins not out	1
Extras (b1 lb6 nb2 w12)	21
Total (50 overs; for six wkts)	374
Fall of wickets: 1-156, 2-264, 3-271, 4-328, 5-331, 6-372	
Bowling: Shami 10-0-59-3, Bumrah 10-0-73-1, Saini 10-0-83-1, Chahal 10-0-89-1, Jadeja 10-0-63-0	
INDIA	
S Dhawan c Starc b Zampa	74
M Agarwal c Maxwell b Hazlewood	22
V Kohli c Finch b Hazlewood	21
S Iyer c Carey b Hazlewood	2
KL Rahul c Smith b Zampa	12
H Pandya c Starc b Zampa	90
R Jadeja c Starc b Zampa	25
N Saini not out	29
M Shami b Starc	13
J Bumrah not out	0
Extras (lb2, nb3, w15)	20
Total (50 overs; for eight wickets)	308
Fall of wickets: 1-53, 2-78, 3-80, 4-101, 5-229, 6-247, 7-281, 8-308	
Bowling: Starc 9-0-65-1, Hazlewood 10-0-55-3, Cummins 8-0-52-0, Zampa 10-0-54-4, Stoinis 6-2-0-25-0, Maxwell 6-4-0-55-0	

In brief

STOCKHOLM



IBRAHIMOVIC IN TALKS ABOUT RESTARTING INTERNATIONAL CAREER

Zlatan Ibrahimovic is in talks with Sweden head coach Janne Andersson about a potential return to the national team, the Swedish Football Association said on Thursday.

The news comes only a day after the 39-year-old, who retired from international football after the 2016 World Cup, hinted that he was open to once again don his country's jersey. The Swedish FA said that Janne Andersson travelled on Wednesday evening to meet with Ibrahimovic to discuss the possibility following the striker's apparent interest and impressive recent form for AC Milan. "When Zlatan opened the door to play for the national team it felt natural and important to meet and discuss it as soon as possible," Andersson said. — AFP

NEW DELHI



KOSGEI DISMISSES FEARS OVER DELHI POLLUTION AHEAD OF MARATHON

Women's marathon world record holder Brigid Kosgei said on Thursday she was gearing up for New Delhi's half-marathon on Sunday, dismissing fears around the novel coronavirus outbreak and polluted air in the capital city. The 26-year-old, who won the London Marathon in October, will race alongside many of the world's leading long-distance runners at the Airtel Delhi Half Marathon 2020. "When I told my family that I want to go to India for a marathon even during a pandemic, they supported my decision and told me to do well and take care of myself," Kosgei told reporters. — Reuters

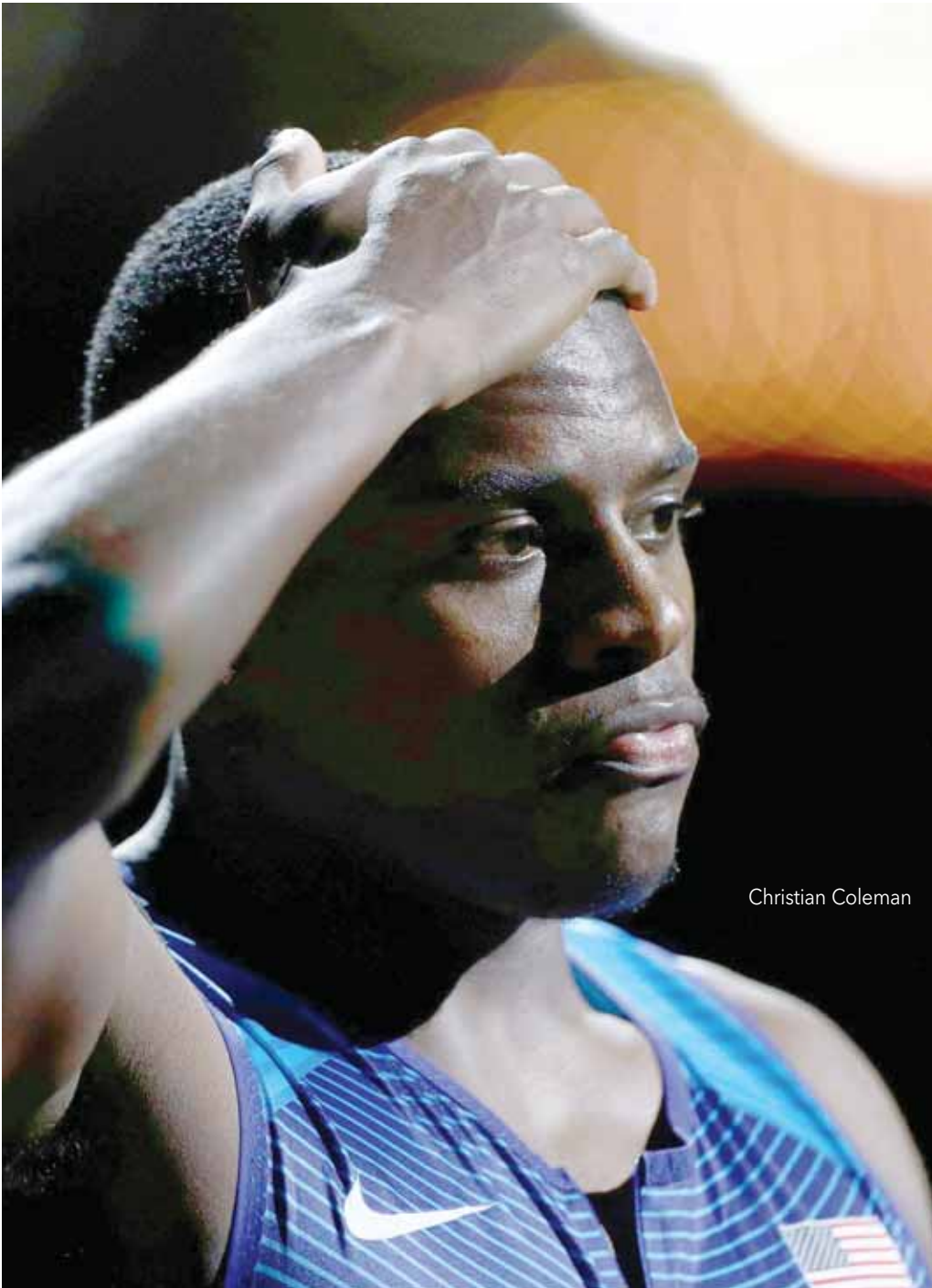
MELBOURNE



PLAYERS CAN 'TRAIN' IN AUSTRALIAN OPEN QUARANTINE

Tennis Australia (TA) has been granted permission by the Victoria state government to allow players to train during their 14-day quarantine ahead of the Australian Open, local media reported on Friday. Organisers have been in lengthy discussions with authorities over the COVID-19 protocols to be established for those arriving in Australia ahead of the first Grand Slam of the year, which is slated to be held from January 18-31. State officials had confirmed the Melbourne Park tournament would go ahead, though it would likely take place a week or two after the scheduled start date and that players would have to undergo quarantine. The Age reported that players would be allowed to train during their quarantine period. — Reuters

World Athletics goes to CAS over Naser, Coleman appeals ban



Christian Coleman



Salwa Eid Naser

LAUSANNE: World Athletics on Thursday filed an appeal with the Court of Arbitration for Sport against the clearance of Bahrain's Salwa Eid Naser to compete, while US sprinter Christian Coleman appealed his two-year ban.

The Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) disciplinary tribunal ruled in October that Naser had not committed an anti-doping rule violation (ADRV) in relation to an alleged filing failure and missed tests.

In its appeal to the CAS, World Athletics requested that the AIU decision "be set aside and that it be replaced with a new decision in which Salwa Eid Naser is found to have committed an ADRV and sanctioned

with a two-year period of ineligibility".

World 400-metre champion Naser was initially charged with breaking whereabouts rules and provisionally suspended in June, but that was dismissed on a technicality.

Nigerian-born Naser, who improved by one second a season from 2016-19, stunned athletics when she powered to the third-fastest 400m in history to take the world title in Doha last year.

Her time of 48.14 seconds was only behind runs by East German Marita Koch and former Czech runner Jarmila Kratochvilova in the 1980s.

In a separate case, Coleman filed an appeal against World Athletics over a two-year ban handed down

World Athletics requested the AIU decision 'be set aside and that it be replaced with a new decision in which Salwa Eid Naser is found to have committed an ADRV and sanctioned with a two-year period of ineligibility'

by the AIU in October for having "committed an ADRV in relation to an alleged filing failure and missed tests".

Coleman requested that the AIU decision be "set aside and that the sanction be eliminated, or in the alternative, reduced".

Coleman also struck gold in Doha, winning the men's 100m title in a world-leading time for the season of 9.76 seconds.

He was provisionally suspended for three 'whereabouts failures' in June.

World Athletics' Disciplinary Tribunal upheld the charge and banned the 24-year-old American for two years, backdated to May 14, 2020.

Should the ban remain in place, Coleman would miss next year's

Olympic Games in Japan, where he would have been among the favourites to win 100m gold.

Coleman, who is also the 60m world record holder, only ran in the 4x100m relay heats in his first Olympic appearance in Rio de Janeiro four years ago. The Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) charged Coleman for missed tests in January and December 2019, as well as for a "filing failure" last April.

To prove an anti-doping violation, an athlete has to have committed three whereabouts failures within 12 months.

Coleman previously escaped suspension on a technicality ahead of last September's World Championships. — AFP

Hamilton sets early practice pace in Bahrain

MANAMA: Seven-time Formula One champion Lewis Hamilton set the pace in Friday's opening practice for the Bahrain Grand Prix ahead of team-mate Valtteri Bottas who completed a one-two for Mercedes.

The Briton, who equalled Michael Schumacher's record haul of seven titles at the last race in Turkey, lapped the 5.4km Sakhir desert track in one minute, 29.033 seconds, 0.449 seconds clear of Bottas. Sergio Perez in the Racing Point was third, 0.967 seconds off the pace.

Hamilton heads into Sunday's race, the first of a whirlwind Middle Eastern triple-header that wraps up the season, as favourite to chalk up an 11th win of the season.

Victory a week later, also in Bahrain but around the track's shorter outer loop, and then at the season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix would see him end a record-breaking campaign with 13 wins, his most in a single year. It would also make him only the third driver after Schumacher and Sebastian Vettel to



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton during practice at Bahrain International Circuit, Sakhir. — Reuters

win 13 races in a season.

Carlos Sainz was fourth for McLaren, ahead of AlphaTauri's Pierre Gasly, with the Red Bull pair of Max Verstappen and Alexander Albon sixth and seventh respectively followed by Renault's Esteban Ocon. Lance Stroll was ninth in the other Racing Point and Daniel Ricciardo rounded out the top 10 for Renault.

Charles Leclerc, who was on course for a pole-to-flag win in Bahrain last year, was 11th in his Ferrari. His team-mate Vettel, the most successful driver in Bahrain with four wins, was 12th.

The session, which took place under overcast skies, was largely uneventful apart from occasional spins and lock-ups as drivers got to grips with the track. Alfa Romeo reserve driver Robert Kubica made his fourth practice appearance of the season, taking over Kimi Raikkonen's car for the session. At Williams, development driver Roy Nissany got some track time in Briton George Russell's car. — Reuters



Napoli's Hirving Lozano celebrates scoring their second goal against HNK Rijeka during the Europa League Group F match at Stadio San Paolo, Naples, Italy. — Reuters

LEICESTER AND ARSENAL IN EUROPA LAST 3 2

EMOTIONAL WIN FOR NAPOLI

PARIS: Napoli honoured the memory of Diego Maradona with a 2-0 win over Rijeka which allowed them to go top of Europa League Group F in the first match since the death of their Argentine icon.

Gennaro Gattuso's side entered the field all wearing the number 10 jersey of Maradona, who won Napoli's only Serie A titles in 1987 and 1990 as well as the 1989 Uefa Cup.

"Diego is a legend and will never die," Gattuso said after the match.

"Since yesterday you could see that the city breathed a different atmosphere.

"We hope to dedicate something important to him and win a trophy.

"In this city we have talked about it for too many years."

Napoli made sure the fans gathered outside to pay their respects to Maradona weren't disappointed by the current team as an Armando Anastasio own goal and a simple Hirving Lozano finish sealed the points.

Napoli are now two points ahead of AZ Alkmaar and Real Sociedad

following their goalless draw in the Netherlands.

Fellow Italian side Roma made their way into the last 32 with a 2-0 win at Romanian side Cluj, while Hoffenheim joined them after ensuring their respective passages into the next round from L.

Earlier Jame Vardy's last-gasp leveller in a thrilling 3-3 at Braga sent Leicester City through to the knockout rounds, where they were also joined by Arsenal thanks to their 3-0 win at Molde.

Leicester looked dead and buried when Fransergio put the hosts 3-2 ahead in the first minute of added time, but Vardy stole in at the back post shortly after to tap in the goal that put the Premier League side into the last 32.

Brendan Rodgers' side are top of Group G on 10 points, three ahead of Braga in second and seven in front of third-placed AEK Athens with two games to play after the Greeks' 3-0 home defeat at the hands of Zorya Luhansk.

Tottenham Hotspur are level on

nine points with Group J leaders Royal Antwerp after a 4-0 thumping of bottom side Ludogorets, who are yet to pick up a single point.

Spur's comfortable home win was the stage for an incredible long range strike from Harry Winks, whose launch from near the left wing put Jose Mourinho's side three goals ahead following an earlier Carlos Vinicius brace.

However Winks admitted to BT Sport after the match that he wasn't aiming for the goal.

"I'd love to sit here and say that I did, but I've got to be honest and say no. I saw Gaz (Gareth Bale) run in," said the England international.

Lucas Moura rounded off the scoring in the 73rd minute as the Premier League high-flyers eye an intriguing London derby with in-form Chelsea at the weekend.

Lille missed out on qualification after they could only draw 1-1 with an AC Milan side missing the injured Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

The Ligue 1 outfit are top of Group H, one point ahead of Milan and with

Gennaro Gattuso's side entered the field all wearing the number 10 jersey of Maradona, who won Napoli's only Serie A titles in 1987 and 1990 as well as the 1989 Uefa Cup

Sparta Prague lurking a further point back after dumping Celtic out of the competition with a 4-1 thrashing in the Czech Republic. — AFP

UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE RESULTS On Thursday:

Group A
CFR Cluj (ROM) 0 Roma (ITA) 2 (Debeljuh 49-og, Veretout 67-pen)
CSKA Sofia (BUL) 0 Young Boys (SUI) 1 (Nsime 34)

Group B
Molde (NOR) 0 Arsenal (ENG) 3 (Peppe 50, Nelson 55, Balogun 83)

Dundalk (IRL) 1 (Shields 63) Rapid Vienna (AUT) 3 (Knasmullner 11, Kara 37, 58)

Group C
Bayer Leverkusen (GER) 4 (Schick 29, Bailey 48, Demirbay 76, Alario 80)
Hapoel Be'er Sheva (ISR) 1 (Shviro 58)
Nice (FRA) 1 (Gouiri 61) Slavia Prague (CZE) 3 (Lingr 15, Olayinka 64, Sima 75)

Group D
Rangers (SCO) 2 (Arfield 7, Roofe 69)
Benfica (POR) 2 (Goncalo Ramos 78, Pizzi 81)
Standard Liege (BEL) 2 (Tapsoba 63, Laifis 90+3) Lech Poznan (POL) 1 (Ishak 61)

Group E
Granada (ESP) 2 (Suarez 8, Alberto Soro 73) Omonia Nicosia (CYP) 1 (Asante 60)
PSV Eindhoven (NED) 3 (Gakpo 20, Madueke 51, Malen 53) PAOK (GRE) 2 (Varela 4, Tzolis 13)

Group F
AZ Alkmaar (NED) 0 Real Sociedad (ESP) 0
Napoli (ITA) 2 (Anastasio 41-og) Lozano 75) Rijeka (CRO) 0

Group G
AEK Athens (GRE) 0 Zorya Luhansk (UKR) 3 (Gromov 61, Kabaiev 76, Yurchenko 86-pen)
Braga (POR) 3 (Al Musrati 4, Paulinho

24, Fransergio 90+1) Leicester City (ENG) 3 (Barnes 9, Thomas 79, Vardy 90+5)

Group H
Lille (FRA) 1 (Bamba 65) AC Milan (ITA) 1 (Castillejo 46)
Sparta Prague (CZE) 4 (Hancko 27, Julis 38, 80, Plavsic 90+4) Celtic (SCO) 1 (Edouard 15)

Group I
Qarabag (AZE) 2 (Zoubir 8, Matic 51)
Sivasspor (TUR) 3 (Kone 40-pen, 79, Kayode 58)
Maccabi Tel-Aviv (ISR) 1 (Pestic 47)
Villarreal (ESP) 1 (Alex Baena 45)

Group J
Tottenham Hotspur (ENG) 4 (Carlos Vinicius 16, 34, Winks 63, Moura 73)
Ludogorets (BUL) 0
LASK Linz (AUT) 0 Royal Antwerp (BEL) 2 (Refaelov 53, Gerkens 83)

Group K
Wolfsberg (AUT) 0 Dinamo Zagreb (CRO) 3 (Majer 60, Petkovic 75, Ivanusec 90+1)
CSKA Moscow (RUS) 0 Feyenoord (NED) 0

Group L
Gent (BEL) 0 Red Star Belgrade (SRB) 2 (N. Petrovic 2, Milunovic 58)
Slovan Liberec (CZE) 0 Hoffenheim (GER) 2 (Baumgartner 77, Kramaric 89-pen)