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# 23 new coronavirus cases in Kuwait; 82-year-old recovers

Mahboula building cordoned off • Global lockdown tightens as deaths mount

By B Izzak and Agencies

**KUWAIT:** The ministry of health announced yesterday that 23 people were infected by the novel coronavirus in the past 24 hours. This brings the country's tally of confirmed virus cases up to 289, the ministry's spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said in the daily briefing. Of the new cases, 11 are Kuwaitis, 10 Indians and two Bangladeshis.

Earlier in the day, Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah announced the recovery of an 82-year-old woman from COVID-19, raising the country's total recoveries to 73. In addition, 216 virus patients are still receiving treatment, while 13 others are in intensive care units, including three in critical condition. The minister told KUNA that necessary lab tests and analyses had shown the recovery of the senior citizen, who will be admitted to a rehabilitation ward before being discharged from hospital in a couple of days.

Meanwhile, authorities cordoned off a building in Mahboula housing

some 500 Asian workers after reports said at least three of them tested positive for the coronavirus. Images posted on social media showed police officers guarding the building with a large group of medical staff, who began testing the workers one by one. A police officer described the situation as serious and advised the laborers not to venture out of their homes, saying between 12 and 14 workers were living in a single room in the building.

The problem of expat workers contracting the coronavirus has caused serious alarm among health and security authorities and prompted lawmakers to demand a complete lockdown on some expat-dominated areas like Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Shuwaikh Industrial Area. Health authorities were alarmed when the source of the disease could not be established in a number of expat cases, which raises the possibility that there are undetected coronavirus cases among expat workers living under inhuman conditions.

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**KUWAIT:** A building in Mahboula is under lockdown after the discovery of three cases of coronavirus among Asian workers residing there. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

## Updates on COVID 19

Tuesday 31/03/2020



**Eight cases related to travel:**  
Three cases of Kuwaiti nationals related to travel to United Kingdom.  
Two cases of Kuwaiti nationals related to travel to Islamic Republic of Iran.  
Three cases of Kuwaiti nationals related to travel to France.  
- 14 cases who were in contact with confirmed cases:  
Three cases of Kuwaiti nationals in contact with confirmed case travelled to K.S.A and France.  
Three cases of Indian residents in contact with confirmed case travelled to azerbaijan ( all are in institutional quarantine).  
Three cases of Indian residents in contact with confirmed case travelled to Jordan.  
Four cases of Indian residents in contact with confirmed case Under investigation.  
One Bangladeshi resident in contact with confirmed case under investigation.  
- One case under investigation:  
One Bangladeshi resident under investigation



## News in brief

### Moody's maintains Kuwait rating

**KUWAIT:** Moody's credit rating maintained Kuwait sovereign rating at Aa2, but said it would assess the country's ability to change the way it is addressing budget deficits amidst a failure to issue a new public debt law and the continuation of withdrawal from the General Reserve Fund (GRF). Moody's said it would also evaluate Kuwait government's attempts this year to prevent expansion of deficit to be 30 percent of GDP. Moody's said credit strength was supported by the huge assets of the Future Generations Fund, which make up almost all assets of the GRF. — KUNA

### US deploys Patriots to Iraq

**BAGHDAD:** The US has deployed Patriot air defense batteries to Iraqi bases to protect American troops recently targeted by Iranian missiles, US and Iraqi military sources told AFP Monday. Washington and Baghdad had been negotiating the placement of the defense system since January, when Tehran fired ballistic missiles at the Ain al-Asad base. One of the Patriot batteries was deployed to Ain al-Asad last week and was being assembled. Another battery was deployed to a base in Arbil, the capital of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region. Two further batteries destined for Iraq are still in Kuwait. — AFP

### UAE loosens VoIP restrictions

**DUBAI:** The UAE on Monday loosened restrictions on a number of messaging applications as residents work and study from home during a coronavirus lockdown, but it maintained the bar on WhatsApp and FaceTime. Google Hangouts Meet, Cisco Webex, Avaya Spaces, BlueJeans and Slack are all available "on an exceptional basis and until further notice", the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority said in a statement. Several other applications - Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, Zoom and Blackboard were made accessible earlier in March when the crisis hit. — AFP

## Amnesty begins today with Filipino residency violators

By Ben Garcia & Meshal Al-Enezi

**KUWAIT:** Residency violators in Kuwait have been granted a 30-day period starting today to leave without paying fines or airfare, with the possibility of returning to the country later. Violators have been instructed to come directly to the designated

processing venues in Farwaniya on specific dates depending on their nationality.

Illegal Filipino residents are the first on the list of expats to be given a chance to leave. The Philippine Embassy in Kuwait has published an advisory with regards to the procedures to be followed. "Undocumented Filipinos and those with absconding cases are encouraged to go to the following processing centers of the ministry of interior from April 1-5 from 8 am to 2 pm," the advisory reads. Males should proceed to Al-Muthanna Primary School for Boys (Block 1, Street 122) and females to Farwaniya Primary School for Girls (Block 1, Street 76) in Farwaniya.

"Amnesty applicants must bring their valid pass-

## Expo 2020 Dubai supports 1-year postponement

**DUBAI/RIYADH:** Organizers of Expo 2020, a multi-billion-dollar world trade fair originally scheduled to open in Dubai in October, on Monday recommended a one-year postponement due to the coronavirus pandemic. Dubai, the glitzy city-state

which is part of the United Arab Emirates, had hoped to attract some 25 million visits to the six-month event and many of its economic forecasts are pinned to the mammoth gathering.

"Many countries have been significantly impacted by COVID-19 and they have therefore expressed a need to postpone the opening of Expo 2020 Dubai by one year," Expo 2020 Dubai director general Reem Al-Hashimi said. "The UAE and Expo 2020 Dubai have listened. And in the spirit of solidarity and unity, we supported the proposal to explore a one year postponement."

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**SHARJAH:** An elderly man wearing a protective mask lifts his hands in prayer outside a mosque which has been closed to worshippers amid the coronavirus pandemic on Monday. — AFP

ports along with two pieces of luggage (20 kg each plus 7 kg hand carry bags). Those who have no valid passports should bring three passport-size photos with blue background," according to the advisory. Embassy officials at the venue will process the travel documents of Filipinos who need them.

"There is no need to visit the embassy, as an embassy booth will be there to assist our nationals," Charge d'Affaires Charleson Hermosura told Kuwait Times yesterday. "Once the applications are approved, amnesty grantees will not be allowed to leave the processing centers. They will be sent to the interior ministry's designated holding areas until their flight back to the Philippines," the advisory added.

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## Hard times shape Saudi, Kuwaiti virus response

**RIYADH/KUWAIT:** The world's last major coronavirus outbreak, in 2012, began in Saudi Arabia, where a faltering response allowed the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) to kill several hundred people and spread across the region. This time around, the kingdom was better prepared, public health officials say. Their experience of MERS meant hospitals had already established separate triage units for respiratory illnesses, with specialized ventilation to protect medics from infection.

At least two hospitals also had drive-thru testing in place, which the United States is scrambling to implement, and seven weeks before the first domestic case, authorities developed guidelines to deal with the new virus. "Their experience with MERS uniquely positioned them because they learned a lot from that," said Joanna Gaines from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which for years has supplied the Saudi health ministry with its only full-time foreign disease expert. "They know it's MERS season and they're already cued up for that. The preparation and processes ... really cuts down on your exposure right away."

Saudi Arabia and neighboring Kuwait took drastic measures early on to contain the new pandemic, halting air travel, imposing curfews, and quarantining and testing thousands of people. Saudi Arabia has reported 1,453 infections and eight deaths while

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# Co-op delivery services available during curfew hours in Kuwait

## Payment on delivery by cash, K-Net or credit card

By Nawara Fattahova

**KUWAIT:** As part of the government's directives to people to stay at home and relieve the pressure on co-ops, the union of cooperatives under the ministry of social affairs announced launching delivery services at most co-ops. As mentioned in Kuwait Times previously, this service is available for both citizens and expats living in the area of each co-operative store. This service is available during the curfew hours.

Different co-ops have different rules in terms of payment methods and so on. Although the head of the cooperative societies' union announced that the minimum purchase limit for deliveries is KD 10, some co-ops have lower limits. For instance, Khaitan Co-op is delivering for purchases above KD 3. The customer can send a list of the items they want to buy on the WhatsApp number 67779745, and the co-op will respond with the numbers of deliverymen. The customer can choose any item available at the co-op, even nonfood items. This service is available from 5:00 pm to 12:00 am, and buyers can pay by cash, K-Net or credit card.

At Shamiya and Shuwaikh Co-op, the purchase order has to be for at least KD 10. Shuwaikh Industrial Area is not included. Buyers should order by calling 1877788 or Whatsapp (96699500). A link for online payment will be sent to them, and they will receive their order on their doorsteps. The service is available between 5:00 pm and 12:00 am.

Adailiya Co-op delivers in the same hours. Also, the order has to be not less than KD 10, with payment on delivery. People can order on mobile number 65523400 or through the Milesfood app. Salwa Co-op provides this service from 6:00 pm to midnight. The minimum order should be KD 10, and payment can only be done by K-Net. The co-op has published



**KUWAIT:** Shoppers waiting in line outside the Abdullah Al-Salem Co-operative Society yesterday. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

mobile numbers for ordering depending on the block, advising consumers to only order important items and in reasonable quantities. The order can either be accepted completely or rejected completely. Certain items cannot be returned. The consumer should send a WhatsApp message including the items, name and address on the following numbers: 50881977/50881990/50881991/50881993.

Al-Rawda and Hawally Co-op have various options for ordering. According to their call center, they are ready even for a total curfew. It is the only co-op that has no minimum limit on orders. Payment is on delivery with either K-Net or credit card. The delivery service is available for Rawda from 10:00 am to 10:00 pm, and for Hawally from

10:00 am to 2:00 pm, as it doesn't have the permits for delivery in Hawally during the curfew yet.

The co-op also provides the option of ordering on its website, which has almost all items, delivered by a different team. Furthermore, it provides a service for Hawally of ordering online and picking it up from the co-op. For information, customers should call 50881334 or 96622883. Most co-ops have accounts on social media, especially Instagram, with their phone numbers and more information. Kuwait enforced a country-wide curfew from 5:00 pm to 4:00 am until further notice as part of efforts to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

## Fake news virus

Curfew Diaries

By Jamie Etheridge

etheridge@kuwaittimes.com

Since we started seeing the first coronavirus cases in late February, a parallel phenomenon of fake news has been thriving alongside. As the government battled to organize a response and communicate the necessary news and information to the public, fake news rose in tandem, spreading fear and panic faster than the virus itself. Fake news may seem harmless, but in some instances it can be fatal. For example, in India, people have been beaten and killed as a result of fake news spread via messaging apps.

At the newspaper, we see dozens of fake news stories, fake announcements and other fake information on a daily basis. Sometimes it's a video sent via WhatsApp that is days, weeks or months old. Sometimes it's based on a rumor or a government announcement that hasn't happened yet (and may not happen or may change in content or timing), and sometimes it's simply people sharing voice notes from a 'doctor within the ministry of health' but never named, or a friend, cousin or classmate (also never named) who saw this with their own eyes and now this person is sharing it.

Yesterday, several people sent the newspaper notices they had received via WhatsApp supposedly from the government. The notice claimed to be from the ministry of health and offered guidance on what to do if you suspect that you have the coronavirus. It then exhorted people to republish this notice and said that if you "did not publish it, I know that you are a partner in killing your own people...greetings from the Ministry of Health."

Aside from the terrible grammar, the message highlights the vast amounts of fake news pretending to be official notices that people are bombarded with daily. Social media and messaging apps like WhatsApp have helped in myriad ways to keep us all connected. They provide a wide range of social benefits and have made the isolation of 'staying at home' more bearable.

But they also serve as a conduit for the worst of human impulses. Rather like a virus themselves, fake news items spread among the population, and the more sensational, the more outrageous, the more racist or hate mongering, the more likely they are to spread. It's almost impossible to resist the urge to pass these videos, texts and messages on to others - even if you can't confirm their legitimacy.

Just like social distancing, there are measures we can take to stop fake news in its track. Instead of forwarding or sharing immediately when you receive something shocking or sensational, pause. Then ask yourself a few questions: Is this true? What is the source? What is the information saying or requesting that you do? Can I confirm this information with official channels or publications?

Each person that pauses reduces the spread of the infection, and together we can conquer this harmful virus.

## MoI details amnesty procedures

**KUWAIT:** The interior ministry's relations and security media department announced that Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh has issued an amnesty decision allowing residency violators to leave the country without paying any fines or airfare with a chance to return to Kuwait later. The ministry added that this amnesty was issued in view of the circumstances the country is currently going through and as part of the precautionary measures taken to fight COVID-19, especially since fines had been accumulating against violators.

The decision explained that individuals desiring to procure valid residencies in Kuwait and are willing to pay the fines without being subjected to investigations will be allowed to pay the fines and legalize their status if they meet the required conditions. The decision explained that this exemption includes Kuwaiti citizens' spouses, parents and children, widowed or divorced women who were married to Kuwaiti citizens with custody of children and domestic helpers who have been in Kuwait since March 1, 2020.

In addition, the decision explained that special sites have been allocated to accommodate violators who finalize their papers pending departure, and these sites will be provided with all living comforts and free means of sustenance. The decision notes that violators desiring to leave during the amnesty will be received in special centers in Farwaniya to file and register their applications in the period of April 1 to 30 as follows:

Male violators will be received at Al-Muthanna primary school for boys, Farwaniya, block 1, street 122; female violators will be received at Farwaniya primary school for girls in Farwaniya, block 1, street 76. Violators will be received from 8 am till 2 pm according to the following dates and nationalities: Philippines (April 1-5, 2020), Egypt (April 6-10), India (April 11-15), Bangladesh (April 16-20), Sri Lanka (April 21-25), other nationalities (April 26-30, 2020).



**KUWAIT:** Authorities have quarantined an entire complex of buildings in Mahboula after three residents tested positive for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and were moved to hospital for further observation. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh



## Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait has so far recorded 289 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). With the exception of thirteen cases in intensive care, all cases are in stable condition and are recovering in quarantined locations designated by the government for this purpose, while 911 have been discharged from quarantine after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, 73 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, the ministry said. There are 216 people receiving treatment and 2,464 quarantined as of yesterday. Kuwait is taking measures to test Kuwaitis coming from infected areas for potential infection, as it has already tested thousands of people. Meanwhile, Kuwait requires all expatriates who arrived from travel on March 1 and beyond to visit Kuwait International Fairground where the Ministry of Health has set up a center at Hall 6 to test people for possible infection.

### Curfew

Kuwait enforced a country-wide curfew from 5:00 pm to 4:00 am until further notice. Earlier, the government decided to close all shopping malls, beauty salons and barber shops as part of its measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The government also allowed restaurants to host a maximum of five people at a time and in case there are lines, the distance must be at least one meter between people.

### Operating businesses

The following activities are allowed to operate outside of the curfew period between 5:00 am and 4:00 pm:

- 1- Various types of foodstuff and supplies stores and markets.
- 2- Laundromats.
- 3- Various type of repair shops.
- 4- Automobile repair, maintenance and spare parts.
- 5- Money exchangers.
- 6- Pharmacies.
- 7- Various types of restaurants.
- 8- Optical shops.

- 9- Administrative offices.
- 10- Cooking gas branches.
- 11- Co-ops' family needs branches.
- 12- Feed shops.

Meanwhile, the following industrial and craft activities, which are licensed by the Public Authority for Industry (PAI), are allowed to open:

- 1- Food.
- 2- Petrochemicals.
- 3- Gases.
- 4- Plastic.
- 5- Cardboard and paper.

### Precautions

All arrivals to Kuwait from all countries are to be placed under compulsory institutional quarantine for 14 days, during which the person is monitored, and prescribed health procedures are applied, the health ministry said. Kuwait halted all commercial flights until further notice. Authorities also announced a public holiday in the country from March 12 to April 9, with work resuming on April 12, while entities providing vital services will remain open.

State departments have been on high alert to take precautions against the potential spread of the virus. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has taken measures to make sure that facial masks, hand sanitizers and other goods remain accessible to the public. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has suspended classes for March at all public and private schools (for both students and teaching staffs); first from March 1 to March 12, and later extended it until March 29, before eventually suspending schools until August for grade 12 and October for other stages. Kuwait suspended issuing entry permits and visas unless those issued through diplomatic missions.

### Hotlines

- The Ministry of Health has set the following hotlines to receive inquiries about the coronavirus 24/7: 24970967 - 96049698 - 99048619.
- The Education Ministry set the following hotlines to receive inquiries on school closures related to the anti-coronavirus measures: 24970967 (24/7 hotline)

- 51575591 (Capital Educational Zone)
- 51576117 (Hawally Educational Zone)
- 51576576 (Farwaniya Educational Zone)
- 51577055 (Jahra Educational Zone)
- 51577655 (Ahmadi Educational Zone)
- 51577951 (Mubarak Al-Kabeer Educational Zone)
- 51578171 (Religious Studies Department)
- 51588599 (Private Education Department)
- 51592515 (Services Department)
- 51594544 (Public Relations Department)

### Medicine delivery

Kuwait's Ministry of Health (MOH) launched a new medicine delivery service for people in Kuwait, which they can use to order medications to be delivered during curfew hours. The medications will be delivered within 72 hours after the order is submitted. To place an order, patients should send a WhatsApp to the numbers for the hospitals and medical centers as listed below. The patient should include their name, Civil ID number, hospital or clinic file number, mobile phone number and the medicine needed to the following numbers:

- Amiri Hospital: 50880699
- Mubarak Al-Kabeer Hospital: 50880755
- Farwaniya Hospital: 50880852
- Adan Hospital: 50880908
- Jahra Hospital: 50881066
- Sabah Hospital: 97632660
- Jaber Hospital: 96992079
- Ibn Sina Hospital: 99613948
- Chest Hospital: 99258749
- Razi Hospital: 97633487
- Kuwait Cancer Control Center: 96735242
- Psychiatric Hospital: 97350113
- Physiotherapy Hospital: 99824037
- Maternity Hospital: 98559531
- As'ad Al-Hamad Dermatology Center: 98514508
- Zain Hospital: 97552031
- NBK Hospital: 96931761
- Al-Rashed Allergy Hospital: 94162470
- Infectious Diseases Hospital: 96989164
- Palliative Care Hospital: 94024786
- Sabah Al-Ahmad Urology Center: 90952469
- KFH Addiction Treatment Center: 94169363

Local

# Global economy may bounce back in six months: Kuwaiti experts

## Concrete decisions needed to restore market equilibrium

**KUWAIT:** The world economy is likely to recover within six months' time, with oil prices bouncing back to \$40 a barrel by the end of the second quarter of this year, two Kuwaiti experts suggest. The fact that oil prices still stand at \$25 a barrel in spite of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic gives some hope that the global economy could recover within six months' time, opined Hajaj Bukhdour. He underlined that the 18-year low of oil prices on Monday is unquestionably due to the fallout



### Historic drop in oil demand

of the globally spreading virus and relevant global measures to curb it. However, he pointed out growing concerns that the anti-virus measures could last several months and, thence, the low oil demand would continue unabated. The world oil markets have been particularly hit hard by massive movement restrictions and closure of plants worldwide, thus lowering both price and demand, Bukhdour lamented.

#### Concrete decisions

Ahmad Karam, also a Kuwaiti oil expert, said OPEC and non-OPEC producers need to come up with concrete decisions that could put things straight and restore market equilibrium. Echo-

ing Bukhdour's views, Karam said that the ongoing slump in oil prices was mainly attributed to world governments' strict measures and precautions in a bid to mitigate the ramifications of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). He hoped that coronavirus treatments or vaccines could be developed in the near future in order to rebalance the world oil market.

Global oil prices slumped to fresh 18-year lows Monday, pulling US crude under \$20 a barrel in early European trading amid growing production rates and a coronavirus-led collapse in world demand. The pandemic has halted economic activity and global travel, resulting in a historic drop in oil demand. The International Energy Agency (IEA) said in a recent report that the global demand for oil was set to decline significantly in the current year due to the impact of COVID-19 on the travel and world economic activity.

#### 90,000 bpd drop

The IEA evaluated the drop in demand at 90,000 barrels per day (bpd) compared with 2019 levels and this would put global demand just below 100 mbpd, reaching an average of 99.9



**YORK:** An electronic display board shows the price in pence per litre for petrol and diesel fuels, in York, northern England on March 30, 2020, as life in Britain continues during the nationwide lockdown to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

mbpd this year. It is the first time in 11 years: including the financial crisis in 2008 that such a demand drop is occurring. But, the IEA report warned that the situation is still evolving and the full impact on markets will not be known for some time. The IEA said it had developed two scenarios to try to forecast the impact of coronavirus on oil demand. In the case the virus is contained

quickly, demand could resume and reach 480,000 bpd, but still down on 2019 overall levels. In a more pessimistic scenario, the Agency said that failure to contain the virus rapidly could lead to a decline in demand of 730,000 bpd. OPEC and non-OPEC had failed to extend a previously agreed production cut, causing oversupply at the global oil market. — KUNA

## Kuwait able to defeat COVID-19: China envoy

**KUWAIT:** Chinese Ambassador to Kuwait Li Minggang said on Monday that Kuwait is able to conquer the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in the near future. Li appreciated Kuwait's backing to, and cooperation with, his country since the outbreak of the virus in China's central city of Wuhan, adding that Kuwait had provided China with \$3 million worth of medical supplies. He noted that his country had shared its expertise with Kuwait in order to help it contain the epidemics by sending it diagnosis and treatment devices. The Chinese ambassador added that Chinese companies, which have building and equipping capabilities, were exerting efforts to back Kuwait's fight against the COVID-19. Li pointed out China's willingness to aid Kuwait if the latter wants to build field hospitals, echoing confidence that Kuwait would defeat the virus at an early stage. — KUNA



Chinese Ambassador to Kuwait Li Minggang

## Kuwait's crude oil exports to Japan down



**TOKYO:** Kuwait's crude oil exports to Japan in February fell 8.0 percent from a year earlier to 7.50 million barrels, or 259,000 barrels per day (bpd), for the first decline in three months, government data showed yesterday. As Japan's fourth-biggest oil provider, Kuwait supplied 9.0 percent of the Asian nation's total crude imports, the Japanese Natural Resources and Energy Agency said in a preliminary report. Japan's overall imports of crude oil slid 3.8 percent year-on-year to 2.87 million bpd, shrinking for the second straight month. Shipments from the Middle East accounted for 89.3 percent of the total, down 0.8 percentage points from the year before. The United Arab Emirates came back to Japan's No.1 oil supplier, with imports from the country surging 33.3 percent from a year earlier to 1.02 million bpd, followed by Saudi Arabia with 962,000

bpd, down 13.4 percent. Qatar ranked third with 292,000 bpd and Russia fifth with 87,000 bpd, respectively. Resource-poor Japan is the world's-third biggest oil consumer after China and the US, relying on imports for virtually all of its oil, gas and coal.

#### Oil price down

Kuwaiti oil price went down \$1.93 to settle at \$24.33 a barrel on Monday, compared with \$26.26 last Friday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation said yesterday. In global markets, crude oil prices plunged at least 20 percent after major drop in demand due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. The West Texas Intermediate was down \$1.42, settling at \$22.09 pb; the lowest since February 2002, while the Brent contracts were down \$2.17 to settle at \$33.76 pb; the lowest since November 2002. — KUNA

## Kuwait fast-tracks med students' finals

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education Dr Saud Al-Harbi approved a proposal to allow fast-tracking of exams of final-year medical students, enabling them to register as doctors to join medical staff fighting the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The pro-

posal, tabled by Kuwait University's vice-president for Medical Sciences Dr Adel Al-Hunayyan, enables the final-year medical students do their final exams, KU said in a statement Monday. Approving the proposal, it added, will enable the students immediately join the workforce. —KUNA

## Amir offers condolences over statesman's demise

**KUWAIT:** His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent on Monday a cable to the family of late statesman Youssef Al-Hijji, expressing utmost sorrow over his demise. His Highness the Crown Prince

Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables and expressed similar sentiments on the occasion. — KUNA

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## Local



KUWAIT: Kuwait enforced a country-wide curfew from 5:00 pm to 4:00 am until further notice, and this period presents a perfect opportunity for authorities to carry out much needed road maintenance works around the country. These pictures show workers contracted by the Ministry of Public Works conducting maintenance at the Fifth Ring Road on Sunday night. —Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

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## Kuwait's Foreign Minister meets team tasked with repatriation of citizens

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah met Monday with a team tasked with arranging repatriation of Kuwaiti citizens back home, to discuss means of guaranteeing safety of nationals until their return, a foreign ministry statement said. The meeting, attended by President of Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) Dr Helal Al-Sayer and Chairman of Kuwait Airways, touched upon completion of urgent measures to deal with latest developments related to the coronavirus, added the

statement. They also discussed coordination among relevant state bodies for the repatriation of Kuwaiti citizens. The meeting grouped representatives of the foreign, finance, interior, health and defense ministries, as well as Directorate General of Civil Aviation, KRCS, information technology agency and Kuwait Airways.

In other news, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Sabah reaffirmed solidarity with Tunisia in efforts to curb spread of coronavirus. Sheikh Dr Ahmad, in a phone call he received from his Tunisian counterpart Nouruddine Erray, commended efforts and measures carried out by Tunis to containing the virus, a foreign ministry statement said. Sheikh Dr Ahmad called on importance of international cooperation to confront this cross-border pandemic which was posing a common threat to mankind. Erray, said the statement, thanked the State of Kuwait for its support for the Tunisian efforts. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah chairs a meeting with a team tasked with arranging repatriation of Kuwaiti citizens back home. —KUNA

## Kuwait Municipality measures to guarantee public wellbeing

KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality adopted measures since outset of coronavirus crisis to minimize impacts on public wellbeing calling for provision of sanitizers, masks and gloves, and closing restaurants, coffee shops and any place that see gathering of people. Municipality

spokesman Mohammad Al-Mutairi, in a statement to the press Monday, said the body acted upon instructions of Government and Ministry of Health and closed cinema theaters, wedding halls, hotel ballrooms, gyms, arcades and exhibitions. The Municipality also closed shopping malls and barber shops, he said. "All this aim at preventing gathering of people in one place" in order to reduce risks of contracting the virus, he said. Mutairi said Municipality teams were making sure streets were clean and garbage cans were sanitized, while workers who lift the garbage cans were isolated to guarantee their safety. —KUNA

Local

# 'Helping hands' spirit among Filipinos very much alive

## Groups help most vulnerable families in Kuwait and abroad

By Ben Garcia

**KUWAIT:** In the time of the coronavirus pandemic, the spirit of 'bayanihan' (helping hands) is alive among Filipinos all over the world, not to mention in Kuwait, where some groups are exerting extra efforts to help Filipinos in dire need of assistance. Because of the lockdown, some Filipinos have not received their salaries, while others have run out of money and need support for their daily survival needs.

Kuwait Filipino Mother's Organization Chairperson Violeta Sarah Yousef Malana said the group is helping the most vulnerable Filipino families, both in the Philippines and Kuwait. They provide baskets of groceries that can last for days. "The very reason our group was formed was because we want to help Filipinos in

need. We share whatever blessings we have," she said, adding Filipino mothers collect whatever extra they have in their kitchens to share with less-fortunate fellow Filipinos.

"We have Filipinos in dire need of food, so we are supporting them. If we wait until our government's support comes, they'll be in a worse situation. So at least before help arrives, we do our part," said Malana. The Philippine government through its agencies - the Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO) and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) - promised to provide at least \$200 to those who have no salaries overseas to spend in times of crisis, but for some bureaucratic reasons, the aid isn't ready yet.

"We heard about the situation of some Filipinos not just in Kuwait but throughout

the region. Help is underway, but while the assistance is yet to come, I call upon Filipinos in Kuwait and other areas and those who have extra means to share something with their fellow Filipinos who are in need of food. We will be coming up with clear guidelines on how and who are allowed to receive assistance from the Philippine government, but while we are still processing the fund, we urge individuals to support each other for now," OWWA board member Dr Chic Umandap told Kuwait Times from his Manila-based office by phone.

### No salaries

Since March 1, 2020, some Filipinos have stopped working upon the directive of the Cabinet, thereby receiving no salaries for the month of March and probably the coming months too. "Our battle is just beginning - we don't know what will happen in the month of April and May. As much as we want to work or get extra income, these options are not possible at all. We pray we can all return back to nor-



malcy soon," said Mira, a salon worker.

Another group of Filipinos helping fellow kabayans is the Ilocana Women's Organization in Kuwait (IWOK), headed by president and coordinator Mariam Al-Zankawi. "Just like other groups, we get donations from our members, gather and repackage them to be distributed to the needy. We deliver to Filipinos from Jahra to Fahaaheel but there are still many who need our help," Zankawi said.

"We may be poor and lack money and

resources, but the spirit of helping hands among us Filipinos cannot be discounted. This makes us all proud, because whatever calamities we face, we always rise up from where we stumbled and try again - that's what we call the Filipino spirit. We will overcome and we pray for Kuwait for continuously sheltering us and keeping us safe. We pray for the safety of citizens and expatriates alike. Let's help each other in this time of crisis, follow government instructions and be safe all the time," she said.

“Our battle is just beginning”

## KRCS distributes thousands of meals to people in need



**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) is exerting huge efforts in delivering aid to people in need inside Kuwait in light of the exceptional situation which forced many people out of job following a lockdown, and to encourage people to stay indoors after the government imposed to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

As part of these efforts, KRCS has distributed over 1,900 food baskets to school janitors, as well as 3,000 to Kuwait University and Public Authority for Applied Education and Training workers after the government shut down schools until the fall. KRCS also distributed 22,000 meals to laborers in Sabhan, Amghara, Sharq, Bnaid Al-Gar and Mahboula, the non-profit organization said in a statement.

Furthermore, more than 1,500 volunteers have registered with KRCS to provide aid to citizens and expatriates, KRCS said, adding that they are working hand-in-hand with Ministry of Health workers at the four government-designated quarantine sites: Khairan Resort, Khalifa Resort, Wataniya Resort and Aquamarine Resort. — KUNA



local spotlight

## Another day of COVID-19



By Abdellatif Sharaa

Every evening I go to my private corner in my apartment to go through the news and review certain topics on social media, and of course to follow the latest on the coronavirus epidemic around the world. Unfortunately, the issue has become a matter of numbers, as numbers have become the gauge of whether the situation is getting under control or not (x number of cases discovered, x number of cases died, x number of cases recovered, x number of persons quarantined...), and these numbers are alarming all over the globe without exception.

The latest information is that more than 190 countries are hit with COVID-19, so why don't we take the example of - although in its infancy - and follow suit, of China? It may sound very strange to mention the country where the virus started. Thousands of people there were infected and thousands died, and there were horrifying images shown on TV of some affected people, yet within a relatively short period of nearly three months, the country has begun returning to normalcy, although gradually. Officials there slapped a total lockdown on Wuhan, which was hit hard, then decisions followed, and soon enough the place became relatively clean and already residents are being allowed out!

We can do the same; we must listen to instructions word by word. We were told to maintain social distancing, we were told to keep a distance between each other in line, we were told to frequently wash our hands with water and soap, we were told to use sanitizers and we were told to stay home and not leave unless absolutely necessary, which is the most important factor to stop the spread of the virus. But we did not listen until the government took strict measures related to activities during the day and a curfew from sunset to sunrise.

Though the curfew proved effective, there is something that takes place just before the curfew goes into effect - laborers rushing out of their workplaces at around 4:00 pm to get to their transport vehicles and return home before 5:00 pm. The crowds are very close to each other without any caution.

So please, let there be more awareness campaigns about what should be done in these vulnerable areas, because it seems that efforts by many government departments in various languages did not reach the target audience. Many voluntary teams can take over this duty, as we see them doing organizational work in co-ops and other places, so we can have more control over the situation and minimize the chance of contracting the highly contagious virus.

Authorities in Kuwait took and are taking admirable action to keep the virus in check locally, so let us help each other by following instructions and heed warnings. "Look for something positive in each day, even if some days you have to look a little harder." (Anon)



Australian govt enacts sweeping lockdown powers

## Portugal grants migrants residency during pandemic

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LONDON: In this file photo, Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex arrive to attend the annual Commonwealth Service at Westminster Abbey in London. President Donald Trump said that the United States would not pay security costs for Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, appearing to confirm that the royal couple have moved to live in California. —AFP

# 'Megxit': Harry, Meghan quit royal life

## Harry and Meghan sign off royal Instagram account

LONDON: Prince Harry and his wife Meghan formally step down as senior members of the British royal family yesterday, as they start a controversial new life in the United States. The couple has already relocated to California, according to reports, after announcing in January that they intended to quit royal life and "work to become financially independent".

The decision means they will no longer carry out duties on behalf of Queen Elizabeth II and are giving up their office within the monarchy in Britain. It follows reports Meghan was deeply unhappy with life inside the centuries-old institution and increasing complaints from the couple about media intrusion. Their shock announcement rocked the royal family, appearing to blindsides the queen and other senior family members. It led the 93-year-old monarch to call an emergency summit with her eldest son and heir Prince Charles, and his two sons Princes William and Harry, to thrash out the terms of their departure.

The family eventually agreed the couple, who have an 11-month-old son Archie, will relinquish their His or Her Royal Highness titles, and no longer use the "Sussex Royal" label. They currently use the name for their popular Instagram account and website, and had also made dozens of trademark applications with it for various products. However, they will continue to be known as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, their official titles, and Harry remains sixth in line to the throne, with no change in the line of succession.

**Dream soured**  
Harry and Meghan's departure-dubbed "Megxit" by the British press-is a far cry from 2018, when they married in a fairytale wedding at Windsor Castle watched around the world. Meghan, 38, a former TV actress who is of mixed race, was seen as a breath of fresh air for the royal family, which is often character-



### Prince Harry and his wife relocate to California

ized as overly stuffy. But relations with the media soon soured, with some newspapers accused of peddling offensive racial stereotypes and dishing out unfair criticism.

There were also reports of splits within the family, and a growing rift between Harry and William. Since revealing their plans, the couple had been living in a luxury mansion on Canada's Pacific west coast, visiting Britain only briefly this month. It had been thought

they would continue to base themselves in Canada. But the pair are said to have relocated to California by private jet earlier this month before the United States closed its northern border because of the coronavirus outbreak. Meghan grew up in Los Angeles and her mother, Doria Ragland, still lives there. She also has a network of friends and work contacts in the city.

### Security bill

The couple's initial announcement to quit Britain divided opinion and their move to California comes after Harry's father was last week diagnosed as having COVID-19. He has now left self-isolation, Clarence House said on Monday. British royals have been showing solidarity with health workers fighting the outbreak, while the queen released a message saying her family stood ready to play its part in the national effort.

"Harry and Meghan have chosen celebrity over duty," The Times said in an opinion piece on Monday. "Making the move to California, and making it now, only inflames the irritation many feel over the couple's actions in recent months," it added. Meanwhile, the couple failed to get a warm welcome from US President Donald Trump, whom Harry recently criticized for his stance on climate change in a hoax phone call.

Trump said he was "a great friend and admirer of the Queen and the United Kingdom" but insisted US taxpayers would not pick up their security bill. "They

must pay!" he wrote on Twitter on Sunday. The president's warning prompted a rare public response from the couple's spokeswoman, who said they had "no plans to ask the US government for security resources". "Privately-funded security arrangements have been made."

### Royal Instagram account

Meanwhile, Prince Harry and wife are to take a break from their royal Instagram account, they announced Monday as they prepare for life outside the royal inner circle. "While you may not see us here, the work continues... We look forward to reconnecting with you soon. You've been great!" the couple wrote on their "sussexroyal" Instagram account, signing off informally as Harry and Meghan. The couple are due to leave the royal frontline on Tuesday, having told Queen Elizabeth II they wanted to pursue more independent lives.

"What's most important right now is the health and wellbeing of everyone," they wrote, referring to the COVID-19 pandemic. "As we can all feel, the world at this moment seems extraordinarily fragile." Harry and Meghan rocked the royal family when they announced in January they will no longer represent the monarchy. They will no longer use the titles His and Her Royal Highness, while the queen and senior officials were said to have ordered them to stop using the word "royal" in their branding. — Agencies

## Thai elephants face virus crisis

BANGKOK: Underfed and chained up for endless hours, many elephants working in Thailand's tourism sector may starve, be sold to zoos or be shifted into the illegal logging trade, campaigners warn, as the coronavirus decimates visitor numbers. Before the virus, life for the kingdom's estimated 2,000 elephants working in tourism was already stressful, with abusive methods often used to "break them" into giving rides and performing tricks at money-spinning animal shows.

With global travel paralyzed the animals are unable to pay their way, including the 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of food a day a captive elephant needs to survive. Elephant camps and conservationists warn hunger and the threat of renewed exploitation lie ahead, without an urgent bailout. "My boss is doing what he can but we have no money," Kosin, a mahout - or elephant handler - says of the Chiang Mai camp where his elephant Ekkasit is living on a restricted diet.

Chiang Mai is Thailand's northern tourist hub, an area of rolling hills dotted by elephant camps and sanctuaries ranging from the exploitative to the humane. Footage sent to AFP from another camp in the area shows lines of elephants tethered by a foot to wooden poles, some visibly distressed, rocking their heads back and forth. Around 2,000 elephants are currently "unemployed" as the virus eviscerates Thailand's tourist industry, says Theerapat Trungprakan, president of the Thai Elephant Alliance Association.

The lack of cash is limiting the fibrous food available to the elephants "which will have a physical effect", he added. Wages for the mahouts who look after them have dropped by 70 percent. Theerapat



CHIANG MAI, Thailand: This handout photo taken on March 28, 2020 shows an elephant foraging for food next to the Patara Elephant Farm in an area affected by drought. — AFP

fears the creatures could soon be used in illegal logging activities along the Thai-Myanmar border - in breach of a 30-year-old law banning the use of elephants to transport wood. Others "could be forced (to beg) on the streets," he said. It is yet another twist in the saga of the exploitation of elephants, which animal rights campaigners have long been fighting to protect from the abusive tourism industry.

### Crisis point

For those hawking a once-in-a-lifetime experience with the giant creatures - whether from afar or up close - the slump began in late January. Chinese visitors, who make up the majority of Thailand's 40 million tourists, plunged by more than 80 percent in

February as China locked down cities hard-hit by the virus and banned external travel. By March, the travel restrictions into Thailand - which has 1,388 confirmed cases of the virus - had extended to Western countries. With elephants increasingly malnourished due to the loss of income, the situation is "at a crisis point," says Saengduan Chailert, owner of Elephant Nature Park. Her sanctuary for around 80 rescued pachyderms only allows visitors to observe the creatures, a philosophy at odds with venues that have them performing tricks and offering rides. She has organized a fund to feed elephants and help mahouts in almost 50 camps nationwide, fearing the only options will soon be limited to zoos, starvation or logging work. — AFP

## Albania flies 30 doctors to Italy amid virus crisis

TIRANA: Albania, one of the poorest countries in Europe, flew a team of doctors and nurses to neighboring Italy on Saturday to help it deal with the coronavirus pandemic as its own cases have yet to strain the health sector. Prime Minister Edi Rama's government assigned 11 million leke (\$95,000) to pay the team of 30 medical staff, who volunteered, to work for a month in the area of Bergamo, the official gazette said.

The Italian Embassy in Tirana confirmed the plane had left in mid-afternoon carrying the medical team, adding in a Twitter message: "Thanks to the Albanian government for this act of solidarity and affection! #forever united". Albania has 197 cases of the illness, with 10 deaths. Italy has more than 86,000 cases, and its death toll of more than 9,000 is the highest in the world. Bergamo is the worst hit area.

Italy has helped Albania since it faced a number of crisis after toppling communism in the late 1980s, including risk of famine in the early 1990s and anarchy in 1997. Tirana sees the medical aid as a chance to repay the favors, however small its contribution. Some 400,000 Albanians live and work in Italy, sending money home to their families as well as investing savings and expertise gained there to build businesses back home. Albania has seen the strain on Italy's more advanced health system as a stark warning, and has imposed increasingly strict restrictions on social contact on its citizens. — Reuters

## International

# India reels from migrant worker exodus amid coronavirus crisis

## Exodus raises worries on spreading the virus into rural areas

**NEW DELHI:** Indian authorities struggled Monday to help millions left jobless by a crippling coronavirus lockdown, potentially undermining efforts to stop the virus ravaging the world's second most-populous nation. Since the lockdown began on Wednesday, hundreds of thousands of laborers have been heading back from cities where they worked to their home villages, some walking hundreds of miles and with little money or food.

The exodus has raised worries that those returning may spread coronavirus into rural areas, particularly with authorities resorting to cramming people onto buses and into relief camps and homeless shelters. At the weekend in Delhi, migrant workers and their families fought and shoved their way onto buses organized by India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh.

"I couldn't afford the room we had so there was no choice, we had to leave," said Ranjit Kumar, who walked with his wife and two-year-old son for two days to get from Haryana state to the bus terminal. Around 90,000 people were transported in buses on Sunday from Ghaziabad outside Delhi, the Times of India reported. Late on Sunday the federal government ordered all district and state borders closed in a bid to stop the exodus, and directed local authorities to organize temporary shelters.

On Monday the crowds had disappeared on the outskirts of Delhi. The city government said it was now feeding 400,000 people, with more than 550 schools providing shelter. The central state of Maharashtra, home to Mumbai, and another big magnet for migrant laborers, has set up 262 relief camps and was providing shelter to 70,399 people,

the chief minister tweeted. Authorities ordered a racetrack outside Delhi that hosted a Formula One race in 2011 be used to house 5,000 migrant workers, the Times of India reported.

Uttar Pradesh has announced aid and set up 600 shelter homes that will act as quarantine centers, local official Alok Kumar told AFP. He was unable to say how many people were still on the road. Former national health secretary Sujatha Rao said it was not known if the virus had spread from the urban travelling middle class to rural migrants, but if it had, such large congregations of people would be a worry. "If any one of them has indeed got the infection, it certainly can spread very rapidly as the poor in urban metros live in very crowded accommodation. Social distancing is not an option for them," Rao said.



### Thousands of laborers head back to villages

#### Clashes in Gujarat

Late on Sunday several hundred laborers clashed with police in Surat, in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat, after they were prevented from leaving, authorities said. "Around 30 teargas shells were fired to disperse the crowd that had damaged several police vehicles. Over 90 people have been arrested," said deputy police commissioner Vidhi Chaudhary.

State authorities laid on buses to take people home, but also asked them to stay put, saying they would be provided with food and shelter. But on Monday thousands of men, women and children still thronged Gujarat's roads. "The contractors who brought us here for work refused to help us," said Ramprasad Keval, who walked almost 30 kilometers from Ahmedabad and wanted to get back to Jhansi in Madhya Pradesh.

demological investigation" was ongoing.

#### Video surveillance

The Knesset statement said that lawmakers and parliamentary employees have already been instructed to follow the health ministry's orders and self-quarantine if they were in Paluch's vicinity. The Knesset said it was offering footage from its surveillance cameras to the health ministry for them to establish where and when Paluch had been in the building, so that health professionals could decide on appropriate measures.

Israel, which has nearly 4,700 confirmed COVID-19 cases, has imposed severe restrictions to contain the spread of the virus, including a total ban on non-essential movements. Netanyahu's office stressed that he has had limited inter-personal contact in recent weeks, conducting "most of his meetings via video conferencing from his residence."

The news comes as Netanyahu, 70, is widely expected to agree on an emergency unity government with his election rival Benny Gantz to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. The two fought three bitter but inconclusive elections over the past year, with neither securing enough support to form a viable coalition government. Gantz was given the task of forming a government following March 2 elections but there was no guarantee he would suc-

hope we don't have to see."

For Patel, the worst would be a situation similar to that in certain regions of Italy, where the health system is so overwhelmed that it can no longer take care of all patients. "You're gonna have to be a little quicker in seeing and assessing and getting the treatment plan for each patient," Patel predicted, noting they "may have to double or triple the number of patients you're seeing." But, he added worriedly, "you can't really go more than triple the number of patients you're seeing in a day and provide effective treatment."

#### 'Picking and choosing'

In addition to the limitations of healthcare personnel, Patel is worried about a potential shortage of equipment, particularly of ventilators. New York governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City mayor Bill de Blasio talk daily about the need for the machines. "If you get a surge of patients coming in, and you only have a limited number of ventilators, you can't necessarily ventilate patients," Patel said. "And then you have to start picking and choosing."

Outside of the hospital, Patel is also worried about transmitting the virus to his family. He lives with his 80-year-old father, who suffers from Parkinson's, and

One app that has stood out so far is Hamagen, Hebrew for "the shield", launched earlier this month by the health ministry. Using geolocation technology, the app informs users about any points of contact with known COVID-19 cases. Available in five languages, Hamagen has been downloaded by more than a million users. The fortunate ones receive messages saying "no points of intersection have been found with coronavirus patients". "We'll let you know if there is anything new," it adds.

Hamagen was launched amid a controversy over plans to involve Israel's Shin Bet internal security agency in the fight against the virus. Critics warned that allowing a powerful investigative body access to personal devices without a court order could mark an irrevocable setback in the effort to safeguard data protection. Israel's highest court ruled that any Shin Bet involvement required parliamentary oversight. Hamagen requires user consent and the health ministry has assured that "GPS data does not leave your mobile



**HYDERABAD:** Migrant workers and their family members walk along a deserted road as they leave the city for their village during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus in Hyderabad. —AFP

A video posted on Twitter by a Times of India journalist and by The Hindu daily appeared to show migrants being hosed down with disinfectant by men in protective suits. The local district magistrate tweeted that the fire brigade had been instructed to sanitize buses but sprayed the passengers because of "over-enthusiasm". On Sunday the official number of coronavirus cases in the nation of 1.3 billion people passed 1,000 with 29 deaths, but many experts doubt the numbers and say that India is

testing far too few people.

"This migration has taken it (the virus) to small towns and villages," virologist Shahid Jameel at the Wellcome Trust DBT India Alliance said. Former health secretary Rao said the government needs to test more widely. Testing has mostly concentrated on people with a history of overseas travel and those who had contact with them. "I think we could have scaled up testing quantitatively. It continues to be a concern and a high priority," she said. —AFP

## Israel's leader under COVID-19 quarantine

**JERUSALEM:** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu went into precautionary quarantine on Monday after one of his staff tested positive for coronavirus, as the veteran premier seeks a unity government to combat the pandemic. Netanyahu's office stressed the quarantine was strictly a precaution as the veteran right-winger had not been in recent proximity to the unwell member of staff. Late Monday, Netanyahu's office announced that the premier, his family and staff had tested negative for the virus, noting however that the premier would "remain in quarantine until receiving instructions from the health ministry."

A statement by the Knesset, Israel's parliament, identified the staffer as Rivka Paluch. Netanyahu's parliamentary aide, noting three dates she had been in the building. Netanyahu's office had said that according to "a preliminary assessment...there is no need for the prime minister to be quarantined, as he did not come into close contact with the individual and did not personally meet with that person." "Over the past two weeks the two were never in the same room at the same time," it added. The statement further noted that the "epi-



**Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu**

demological investigation" was ongoing. The news comes as Netanyahu, 70, is widely expected to agree on an emergency unity government with Netanyahu, citing the need to combat COVID-19. Negotiations on Sunday between Gantz and Netanyahu failed to yield a final agreement, with no fresh talks between the sides officially reported since. Netanyahu, in office since 2009, was in January charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust, but the start of his trial has been delayed by the pandemic. He denies the charges. —AFP



**NEW YORK:** Medical supplies and beds are seen inside a tent as volunteers from the International Christian relief organization Samaritan's Purse set up an Emergency Field Hospital for patients suffering from the coronavirus in Central Park. —AFP

his aunt, who has cancer. "I don't want to come back here and actually give it to them because I don't think they would do well at all," he said. He maintains the minimum two meter (six-foot) distance and uses antibacterial wipes generously, while ensuring his relatives have enough food. —AFP

phone, and is not sent to any third party".

#### 'Sound' of corona

The defence ministry has meanwhile offered support to an Israeli start-up called Vocalis Health, which is developing an app capable of diagnosing COVID-19 based on the sound of someone's voice. "We are working around the clock," Tal Wenderow, the start-up's co-founder, told AFP. Voice samples from virus carriers in various stages of illness and samples from non-infected people are currently being collected, with the goal of developing an AI-based algorithm to detect COVID-19's vocal "fingerprint". Health professionals will then be able to alert users in the early stages of the disease and use the app to monitor its spread across the population. The response from people willing to give voice samples has been "overwhelming", Wenderow said. In addition to helping curb new infections, the app could also allow patients to be monitored at home, he added. —AFP

## New York hospital doctor prepares for the worst

**NEW YORK:** With the rapid rise of hospitalizations and a health system nearly at capacity, New York doctor Shamit Patel is preparing for the worst over the next few days, all while hoping he won't have to start choosing which coronavirus patients to treat. Just 10 days ago, only half of the 46-year-old internist's patients at Beth Israel - one of the Mount Sinai hospitals in Manhattan - were suffering from COVID-19.

"We're not over capacity yet, but we're planning for it to go over capacity," he said, adding he thinks the hospital has "planned well." The wave of virus patients at Beth Israel corresponds to the one inundating New York City, which shot from 463 confirmed cases two weeks ago to 36,000 on Monday. "At the rate that I'm seeing, the peak could be anywhere from end of this week to sometime next week," said Patel. Under extreme pressure for the past two weeks, he is preparing for the worst, even if "it's something that we

## Sound of coronavirus: Israeli apps helping to contain pandemic

**JERUSALEM:** One app tells you if you've been in the vicinity of a coronavirus carrier and another aims to assess whether you have COVID-19 based on the sound of your voice. In Israel, sometimes dubbed the "start-up nation" with nearly 10 percent of workers employed in high-tech, the coronavirus pandemic has seen a flurry of new technologies designed to contain transmission. Start-Up Nation Central, an NGO, has compiled a directory of some 70 Israeli technology companies developing responses to the new virus, which has infected more than 4,000 people in the country.

## Young diplomat rises as aggressive policy takes root in China

**SINGAPORE:** Diplomats returning from overseas postings don't usually receive special attention at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a vast government bureaucracy with thousands of staff. But when Zhao Lijian, a diplomat known for his pugnacious social media presence, finished a posting in Pakistan in August, he received an enthusiastic welcome in Beijing. A group of young admirers at the ministry gathered at his office to cheer his return, according to two people familiar with the matter.

That admiration was fuelled in part by a Twitter spat he had engaged in a month earlier with Susan Rice, the national security adviser to former US President Barack Obama. Each accused the other of being "ignorant" and a "disgrace". Now a foreign ministry spokesman, Zhao has come to represent a new generation of diplomatic hawks in China, challenging the restraint that long characterised the country's engagement with the world, according to a dozen current and former ministry officials and government researchers who spoke with Reuters.

Their emergence has caused a rift with the old foreign policy establishment, amid worries that increasingly assertive rhetoric could put the country on a dangerous collision course with powers like the United States, they said. The shift followed instructions that President Xi Jinping issued diplomats in a memo last year, calling on them to show more "fighting spirit", said two people with direct knowledge of the matter.

"This is the first time since 1949 that the 'new hawks' have the power to reshape China's diplomatic policy," said Qin Xiaoying, who was a director of the ruling Communist Party's international propaganda department and is now a researcher with the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies in Beijing.

Driving the shift is the widespread feeling among many Chinese that the United States wants to contain China's rise. Aggressive pushback by diplomats on issues that provoke nationalist sentiment, like the protests in Hong Kong or the coronavirus outbreak, has proven popular domestically. Most people who spoke with Reuters for this article declined to be named given the sensitivity of the matter.

In response to a request for comment by Reuters, the ministry said Chinese diplomats from all age groups are determined to "resolutely safeguard" national sovereignty and security. "We will not attack unless we are attacked," the ministry said, citing a slogan from founding leader Mao Zedong. "But if we are attacked, we will certainly counterattack." Zhao, 47, did not respond to requests for comment. A spokeswoman for Rice, the former US national security adviser, said she would not be available for comment. The US State Department did not respond to a request for comment from Reuters.

Xi gave his instructions about adopting a tougher stance in the face of international challenges, like deteriorating relations with the United States, in a handwritten message to diplomats last year, two people with direct knowledge of the matter said. State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi gave the same message to officials attending the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the ministry's founding, Reuters reported in December. Over the past year, more than 60 Chinese diplomats and diplomatic missions set up Twitter or Facebook accounts, by Reuters' count, even though both platforms are banned in China, often using them to attack Beijing's critics around the world. —Reuters

## International

# China delays college entrance exam; fears grow over risk of second wave

## China reports 48 new coronavirus cases, one death for Monday

SHANGHAI: China will delay its national college entrance exam by a month as it grapples with a coronavirus pandemic as travelers returning from abroad are fuelling new cases and boosting concern over the threat of a second wave of infections. The two-day "gaokao" annual test will be pushed back to July 7 and 8, China Central Television said yesterday, with Hubei province, where the virus emerged late last year, and Beijing, the capital, being given more leeway in scheduling it.

The delay to the test, seen as opening the way to a life of opportunity and taken by more than 10 million students last year, is the latest sign of China's struggle to resume normal life after widespread lockdowns aimed at reigning in the virus. "China has slowed transmission of the virus and in so doing, has passed one peak in the outbreak," said Tarik Jasarevic, a representative of the World Health Organization. "The challenge now is to prevent a resurgence of new cases."

The epidemic in the Asia-Pacific region was "far from over", another WHO official added. Last week, a study in British medical journal the Lancet Public Health recommended that China extend school and workplace closures, since an earlier relaxation of curbs could bring a second peak in the outbreak by August. China's tax authorities

acknowledged the pandemic's impact on exporters, saying they were studying policies to reduce pressure on businesses, from tax cuts to an extension of preferential policies for foreign firms.

New data from a survey of manufacturers showed that factory activity expanded in March from February's collapse as businesses returned to work, but analysts warned that slumping external demand could prevent a durable recovery. "The situation could be very fluid as the virus outbreak remains unpredictable," analysts at ANZ bank said in a note. "Chinese policymakers will likely step up and expand the stimulus program if needed."



### China delays 'gaokao' exam by 1 month

**Rise in cases**  
Yesterday, mainland China reported an increase in new infections, reversing four days of declines, as cases rose among arrivals from overseas. Monday's 48 new cases were up from 31 the previous day, the National Health Commission said in a statement, with one death. All were imported, taking China's tally of such cases to 771, with no new local infection reported. Locally transmitted infections have mostly declined, but authorities concerned about travelers who caught the virus abroad are stepping up screening and quarantine measures, while slashing international flights and barring most foreigners.

Of Monday's new imported cases, 10 were in the northern region of Inner Mongolia, involving



SHANGHAI: People wearing face masks as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 novel coronavirus walk to a train, one of the stops being Wuhan, at a station in Shanghai. —AFP

travelers whose flights were diverted to the regional capital of Hohhot from Beijing, state media said. The commercial hub of Shanghai reported 11 new imported cases, comprising mainly returning Chinese nationals, while Beijing

reported three. Wuhan, the capital of the central Hubei province, reported no new infections for a seventh straight day. By Monday, total infections stood at 81,518 in mainland China, with 3,305 deaths. —Reuters

### News in brief

#### Mexico journalist shot dead

COATZACOALCOS: A journalist was ambushed and shot dead in Mexico's eastern Veracruz state, local officials said Monday, the latest murder of a media worker in a country notoriously dangerous for reporters. Maria Elena Ferral, a correspondent for the Diario de Xalapa daily newspaper, was getting into her car in Papanla when two men on motorbikes opened fire and mortally wounded her before fleeing the scene, a police source said. "Despite the efforts of doctors to save her life, we are terribly sorry to learn that a few minutes ago the journalist Maria Elena Ferral died," Veracruz governor Cuilahuac Garcia wrote on Twitter. Mexico is one of the world's most dangerous countries for reporters, with more than 100 murdered since 2000. "The authorities should immediately investigate these events and provide protection to her family and colleagues," Balbina Flores of media rights group Reporters Without Borders said. —AFP

#### US military servicemember dies

WASHINGTON: The first US military service member has died from the coronavirus, the Pentagon said on Monday, as it reported another sharp hike in the number of infected troops. The Pentagon said the servicemember was a New Jersey Army National Guardsman who had tested positive for COVID-19 - the disease caused by the coronavirus - and had been hospitalized since March 21. He died on Saturday, it said. "Today is a sad day for the Department of Defense as we have lost our first American service member - active, reserve or Guard - to coronavirus," Defense Secretary Mark Esper said in a statement. No further information was provided about the victim. "This is a stinging loss for our military community, and our condolences go out to his family, friends, civilian co-workers and the entire National Guard community." —Reuters

#### China forest fire kills 19

BEIJING: Eighteen firefighters and one forestry guide died while fighting a huge forest fire in southwestern China, the local government said yesterday. State television footage showed large flames shooting into the sky from the mountains above the city of Xichang in Sichuan province, turning the sky orange. Heavy clouds of smoke billowed above the buildings and roads of the city, which has a population of some 700,000 people. The blaze started near Xichang in the southwestern province's mountainous Liangshan prefecture at 3:00 pm on Monday, "directly threatening the safety of Xichang city", the city government said in a Weibo statement yesterday morning. More than 140 fire engines, four helicopters and nearly 900 firefighters have been sent to tackle the blaze, according to local officials. —AFP

#### Florida pastor arrested

MIAMI: An evangelical pastor in Florida was arrested Monday for "repeatedly" ignoring confinement orders intended to slow the spread of the coronavirus by holding services with hundreds of people, police said. Pastor Ronald Howard-Browne, 58, was arrested for unlawful assembly and violating quarantine orders while holding two services on Sunday in the eastern Florida city of Tampa, prison records show. The pastor "intentionally and repeatedly disregarded state and local public health orders, which put his congregation and our community in danger," tweeted Hillsborough County sheriff Chad Chronister. Howard-Browne, a staunch supporter of US President Donald Trump, does not believe the COVID-19 disease is serious and accused the press of "stirring up religious bigotry and hate." He considers his church, The River at Tampa Bay Church, to be an essential service that must remain open during the pandemic. —AFP

## In first, the Security Council approves UN resolutions remotely

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council on Monday for the first time approved resolutions remotely after painstaking negotiations among diplomats who are teleworking due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Security Council unanimously voted for four resolutions, including one that extended through April 2021 the expiring mandate of UN experts who are monitoring sanctions on North Korea, diplomats said. The UN mission in Somalia

## Portugal grants migrants residency during pandemic

LISBON: Undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers in Portugal have been granted the same rights as residents, including access to medical care, during a state of emergency to curb the spread of coronavirus. "This is not an automatic regularization," the border control agency SEF told AFP on Monday, indicating that immigration processing should resume at the beginning of July.

The border police did not say how many people were affected by the measure, which came into

## Algeria's Bouteflika languishes at home a year after his fall

ALGIERS: A year after the unexpected downfall of Algeria's longtime president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the ailing octogenarian remains holed up in his plush and medically adapted home, with his detractors still demanding justice. Bouteflika assumed the presidency in 1999, reigning omnipotently over Algeria's political life until a stroke rendered him largely invisible in 2013. Since he resigned under pressure from protesters and the military in April 2019, the public has heard nothing from him.

His last appearance was on April 2 last year, when he spoke on television to announce the end of his rule. His downfall had become inevitable after weeks of massive protests that followed his declaration early last year that he would run for a fifth term. Eventually the army, then led by Ahmed Gaid Salah, cut him loose. Since then the former leader, who turned 83 in March, has only rarely left his coastal home in the capital. "He lives surrounded by his sister and a medical team," a source close to his entourage said. Bouteflika continues to "enjoy all the privileges"

## Australian govt enacts sweeping lockdown powers

SYDNEY: People in Australia's most populous state of New South Wales, the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in Australia, could be heavily fined or jailed for leaving their home without a good reason under sweeping new powers designed to slow infection rates. The public health order, enacted late on Monday, comes amid warnings that it is too early to tell whether an apparent slowdown in infection

was also prolonged, until the end of June, and the mission in Darfur until the end of May-two short periods decided due to uncertainty over the spread of the pandemic.

The Council also endorsed a fourth resolution aimed at improving the protection for peacekeepers. The resolutions are the first approved by the Security Council since it began teleworking on March 12 and comes as COVID-19 rapidly spreads in New York, which has become the epicenter of the disease in the United States. Seeking to abide by quarantine and teleworking recommendations, the Security Council was obliged to create completely new rules after 75 years as the global guarantor of peace and security.

Following about a dozen days of talks, Council members agreed that they would have 24 hours following closed-door negotiations on draft resolutions to send

force on Friday to allow migrants to access public services and social aid provided by the state. Portugal's decision was welcomed on Monday by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatovic. "(It is) a good practice to protect vulnerable people and society in response to the pandemic," Mijatovic wrote on her Twitter account.

"In times of crisis, it is a duty for a secure society to ensure that migrants have access to health, stable employment and housing," Portuguese Interior Minister Eduardo Cabrita told local newspaper Publico. The state of emergency, declared on 18 March, is expected to be extended on Wednesday for two more weeks. According to an official figures on Monday, Portugal has suffered 140 deaths caused by the new coronavirus out of 6,400 officially reported cases. —AFP

befitting his rank as a former leader, according to Mohamed Hennad, a former political science professor at the University of Algiers. But virtually nothing is known about his daily life. "He receives few visits. He is confined to his wheelchair and remains virtually speechless," said Algerian journalist Farid Alilat in an interview last month with Le Point newspaper. "However he is aware of everything that is happening in Algeria," Alilat added. Bouteflika's isolation has not stopped some public figures demanding he face justice for the corruption that infected the country during his 20 years in power. Algerians can never turn the page on the Bouteflika years unless he is tried for the painful damage inflicted by his rule, said Hennad, who is now an analyst close to the "lilrak" protest movement that forced Bouteflika from power.

### 'Godfather of corruption'

Algeria's judiciary has since Bouteflika's fall prosecuted and in some cases imprisoned a slew of former politicians and influential businessmen for abusing their privileges and links to the ex-president's clan. Nacer Djabi, a prominent sociologist, argues the former head of state should appear in court - "even symbolically" - as recent cases have portrayed him as "the godfather of corruption". "He shouldn't escape punishment. That's a demand of Algerians who have discovered with horror the extent of the damage caused by this man and his

rates across the country in recent days meant the outbreak was being brought under control.

"What we need to consider is the community-to-community transmission that we might not even know about," New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian said in Sydney yesterday. "It is really important for us, at this stage of the virus, for us to maintain that level of control and contain it as much as possible." NSW has 2,032 confirmed cases of the virus, almost half the country's total, authorities said yesterday. The national death toll stands at 19. The state is among several bringing in penalties, including fines of up to A\$11,000 (\$6,779) in NSW and the potential of a six-month prison term for anybody found breaching the new rules. New orders restrict public gatherings to just two people, or a family unit, while outside gyms and

their votes electronically to the UN Secretariat, which will release the results. Several countries wanted to move sessions entirely to videoconferencing, but Russia-one of five nations wielding veto power-objected on both legal and political grounds, diplomats said. Russia instead accepted only that the Security Council hold "informal" talks by video.

### Still active, but encumbered

The virtual votes temporarily end the famous spectacle of the Security Council, where diplomats theatrically raise their hands to vote or veto and can take advantage of the cameras to passionately attack other countries. Several diplomats said that the new procedure made sense for technical votes on the renewal of missions but were not ideal for more controversial matters. —AFP



LISBON: Beds are set-up at a Hospital Support Unit for coronavirus patients in Lisbon. Portugal declared a nationwide 15-day state of emergency to fight the spread of coronavirus. —AFP



In this file photo taken on April 3, 2019, Algerians walk past a newspaper at a coffee shop in the capital Algiers, reading "Bouteflika abdicates" the day after the country's veteran President Abdelaziz Bouteflika informed the Constitutional Council that he was resigning. —AFP

family," Djabi said. Abdelaziz Rahabi, a former diplomat and one-time minister in the first Bouteflika government who went on to become an opponent, also called for his prosecution. The former president "has a responsibility for the corruption. He covered it up," Rahabi said in a television interview. —AFP

parks will be shut. People will still be able to leave their homes for valid reasons such as to visit a doctor, buy food and exercise while adhering to social distancing rules. Authorities said yesterday they wanted to increase testing, especially in areas of COVID-19 clusters such as Sydney's Bondi area, which drew attention earlier this month after people ignored social distancing rules and flocked to the beach.

Kerry Chant, NSW Chief Health Officer, said that the virus may have been transmitted in the Bondi community via an infected backpacker who was not aware they were carrying the disease. Chant said yesterday that an apparent slowing infection rate in recent days may have more to do with fluctuations with testing numbers, given there is less access to doctors over the weekend. —Reuters



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## Business

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WASHINGTON, DC: An empty downtown street is seen near the World Bank in Washington, DC. The coronavirus pandemic is expected to sharply slow growth in developing economies in East Asia and the Pacific as well as China, the World Bank said in an update on Monday. — AFP

## Pandemic to hit growth in Asia, China: WB

## G20 urged to refrain from export restrictions for supplies to virus-hit countries

WASHINGTON: The coronavirus pandemic is expected to sharply slow growth in developing economies in East Asia and the Pacific as well as China, the World Bank said in an economic update on Monday.

The bank said precise growth forecasts were difficult, given the rapidly changing situation, but its baseline now called for growth in developing economies in the region to slow to 2.1 percent in 2020, and to -0.5 percent in a lower-case scenario, compared to estimated growth of 5.8 percent in 2019.

In China, where the coronavirus outbreak originated in late December, growth was projected to slow to 2.3 percent in the baseline scenario, or as low as 0.1 percent in the lower-case scenario, compared to growth of 6.1 percent in 2019. The region faced an unusual combination of "disruptive and mutually reinforcing events," the report said. "Significant economic pain seems unavoidable in all countries."

Countries in the region should invest in healthcare capacity and take targeted fiscal measures, such as

providing subsidies for sick pay and healthcare, to mitigate some of the immediate impacts of the pandemic, the World Bank said.

"Containment of the pandemic would allow for a sustained recovery in the region, although risks to the outlook from financial market stress would remain high," it said. The financial shock of the pandemic was also expected to have a serious impact on poverty, defined as income of \$5.50 a day, the bank said. The baseline scenario called for nearly 24 million fewer people to escape poverty across the region in 2020 due to the pandemic. If the economic situation deteriorated even further, poverty could increase by about 11 million people. Prior projections estimated that nearly 35 million

people would escape poverty in the region in 2020, including over 25 million in China alone, the bank said. In addition to targeted fiscal measures, countries should look to deeper international cooperation and new cross-border public-private partnerships to ramp up the production and supply of key medical supplies and services, and ensure financial stability in the aftermath of the crisis, it said.

Countries should also ease credit to help households smooth their consumption and help firms survive the immediate shock of the outbreak. "The good news is that the region has strengths it can tap, but countries will have to act fast and at a scale not previously imagined," said Victoria Kwakwa, vice president for East Asia and the Pacific at the World Bank.

The World Bank also urged the Group of 20 major economies (G20) to refrain from imposing new export restrictions on critical medical supplies, food or other key products as the world battles the devastating coronavirus pandemic. In a statement to a video conference of G20 trade ministers, a senior World Bank official said the pandemic was projected to plunge the global economy into a deep recession, disrupting supply chains and hitting critical trade nodes.

To mitigate the impact on poor countries at risk due to the limited supply of medical goods, the global lender urged G20 countries to eliminate or reduce tariffs on imports of key products needed to fight the pandemic, and lower or temporarily suspend tariffs and export taxes on food and other basic goods.

"Continued international cooperation to maintain an open and rules-based trading system will be essential for recovery and sustainable and inclusive development," Mari Pangestu, the World Bank's managing director for development policy and partnerships, told the ministers. — Reuters

## Despair and pride in China's Wuhan as lockdown eases

WUHAN, China: Residents of China's Wuhan city, ground zero for the coronavirus pandemic, have mixed emotions as containment measures are lifted and the community infection rate slows to a trickle, with some praising the government and others ruing the economic costs.

The strictest curbs on movement and business were in the Hubei provincial capital of Wuhan, where the virus is believed to have emerged from a seafood market last year. The city of 11 million people accounts for about 60 percent of China's total infections, which stood at 81,518 as of yesterday. That market is now boarded up, and an adjacent wholesale fruit centre is also closed with more than 100,000 yuan (\$14,108) worth of mangos, melons and other fruit rotting outside.

A fruit trader surnamed Fang said the lockdown of the city had ruined her livelihood. "Of course I'm scared," she told Reuters, gesturing to the two masks she wore, one on top of the other, as she packed apples which she sells to residential compounds at wholesale prices. "But I've not made any money for the last three months."

Wuhan residents' attitudes towards the curbs are far from aligned, with some expressing immense pride in their government while others say the help they have received has not offset the costs from the



WUHAN: Bicycles are seen used as a makeshift barrier along a street in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province yesterday. — AFP

lockdown. Some firms have resumed work and the city will start allowing people to leave on April 8. China has unveiled numerous measures to ease the devastating economic impact of the outbreak, and has pledged to help Wuhan get back on its feet.

Fang tore up as she described how she had planned to see her children who are back in her hometown after the Lunar New Year in January. She will be unable to return after the lockdown ends because she has to stay and sell her fruit. "At the earliest the stock might only clear by June," she said, declining to give her full name due to the sensitivity of the situation.

Hu Yanfang, who was supervising the unpacking of boxes of protective equipment and food at her

housing estate in Wuhan, had a different take. The lockdown on residential compounds like hers was recently eased and she feels optimistic that the government has the crisis in hand.

"It's much better now," said Hu, who heads the compound's residents committee.

Her voice cracked with emotion as she recounted how she had worked through the past two months to support her neighbors and sanitize the compound. She thanked the government for sending ample supplies of protective gear like masks. "It makes me feel like our country is strong - just look at countries like Europe," she said, referring to the surging infection and death numbers in countries like Italy and Spain. — Reuters



China growth projected to slow to 2.3%

## American Airlines to ask for \$12bn in govt relief

WASHINGTON: American Airlines will seek \$12 billion in government assistance to steer the carrier through the global aviation downturn sparked by the coronavirus pandemic, the Wall Street Journal has reported. The airline industry is one of the sectors hardest hit by the COVID-19 outbreak, with US airlines suspending most transatlantic flights and many domestic routes.

The US Congress has designated \$50 billion in spending for the industry in its \$2 trillion coronavirus economic rescue package. American Airlines chief executive Doug Parker and president Robert Isom said in a Monday memo to staff that it would seek nearly a quarter of the relief funds on offer.

"We intend to apply for these funds and are confident that... they will allow us to fly through even the worst of potential future scenarios," the pair wrote, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Trump administration officials have said they are examining the possibility of taking equity shares in airlines as part of the bailout plan for the industry. "I think in return for direct cash grants, which is what the airlines have asked for, I see no reason why the American taxpayer shouldn't get a piece," White House economics adviser Larry Kudlow told Fox News on Sunday. — AFP

## Business

# China's factory activity expands, but economy unable to shake off shock

## Businesses facing grim outlook on global spread of virus

**BEIJING:** Factory activity in China unexpectedly expanded in March from a collapse the month before, but analysts caution that a durable near-term recovery is far from assured as the global coronavirus crisis knocks foreign demand and threatens a steep economic slump.

China's official Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) rose to 52 in March from a plunge to a record low of 35.7 in February, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said yesterday, above the 50-point mark that separates monthly growth from contraction.

Analysts polled by Reuters had expected the March PMI to come in at 45.0.

The NBS attributed the surprise rebound in PMI to its record low base in February and cautioned that the readings do not signal a stabilization in economic activity. That view was echoed by many analysts, who warn of a further period of struggle for China's businesses and the broader economy due to the rapid spread of the virus across the world, the unprecedented lockdowns in several countries and the almost near certainty of a global recession. "This does not mean that output is now back to its pre-virus trend. Instead, it simply suggests that economic activity improved modestly relative to February's dismal showing, but remains well below pre-virus levels," said Julian Evans-Pritchard, senior China economist at Capital Economics, in a note to clients. Economists are already forecasting a steep contraction in China's first quarter gross domestic product, with some expecting a year-year slump of 9 percent or more - the first such contraction in three decades.

Nie Wen, economist at Shanghai-based Hwabao Trust, said given weak export orders, rising stockpile and soft prices, the underlying issue facing Chinese manufacturers has shifted to a lack of market demand, from production shutdowns forced by Chinese



### Durable near-term recovery still far off

authorities. The survey's sub-index of manufacturing production picked up to 54.1 in March from February's 27.8, but new export orders received by Chinese manufacturers were still mired in contraction, after ticking up to 46.4 from 28.7 in February. Manufacturers are still facing big operational pressures, the survey showed, with over half of the respondents reporting a lack of market demand and 42 percent reporting financing issues, both up from the previous month.

"The biggest problem facing China's economy in the second quarter is the slumping foreign demand," said Nie, adding that authorities may roll out more policies on top of the billions of dollars pumped into the financial system since February to boost domestic consumption and tide over the shrinking overseas demand. Markets reacted positively to the PMI survey, with Asian stock rising as investors seemed relieved by the rare good news as the pandemic showed few signs of abating.

China's yuan, however, didn't budge, reflecting analysts' broad views that a sustainable bounce in manufacturing activity looked some way off despite a slowdown in China's coronavirus infections from its peak in February. Beijing, at great costs to the economy, had imposed draconian quarantine rules and travel restrictions to curb the pandemic that has killed more than 3,000 in the country. But as locally transmitted infections dwindle, most businesses have reopened and life for millions of people has started to slowly return to normal.

### Grim outlook

Yet, the pace of business resumption has been constrained by China's efforts to guard against a second wave of infections from abroad.

The coronavirus, which originated late last year in China, has wreaked havoc along global supply chains



**HUABEI:** Employees working on a battery production line at a factory in Huabei in China's eastern Anhui province. Factory activity in China rebounded in March from a record low, according to official data released yesterday. —AFP

and severely hurt foreign demand amid tight lockdowns in Europe, the United States and a number of other key economies where daily life has ground to a halt. Already, Chinese exporters are seeing overseas orders being scrapped as the worldwide spike in coronavirus infections and deaths has forced many of the nation's trading partners to slow or suspend production. Globally the outbreak has claimed the lives of over 37,000 people with more than 770,000 infections.

China should not set an economic growth target this year given the high level of uncertainty from the coronavirus pandemic and avoid having to resort to "flood-like stimulus" to meet the goal, a central bank

adviser said. China's service sector activity also expanded, with official non-manufacturing PMI coming in at 52.3, from 29.6 in February, a separate NBS survey showed.

The service sector now makes up a larger share of China's economy than at the time of the 2002/03 SARS coronavirus epidemic, accounting for about 60 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Analysts warn the outbreak could have a lingering impact despite the government loosening restrictions in recent weeks, as many people remain worried about the possibility of new infections or fretting about job security and potential cuts to wages as the economy struggles. —Reuters

## Will coronavirus make the gender pay gap worse?

**MEXICO CITY:** Advances in closing the worldwide gender pay gap are at risk of being reversed by the coronavirus, experts and advocates warn, as women take time off work to care for others and the low-paid sectors they dominate cut back hours and staff.

Women earn about a fifth less money than men around the world, reflecting factors from motherhood and employment in lower-wage jobs to stereotypes in promotion decisions, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO).

The wage gap has been narrowing, but at the current rate it could still take 70 years to reach gender parity, according to UN Women. The gap could increase this year as women are likely to be disproportionately affected by home responsibilities in quarantine and see their lower-wage jobs disappear, said Anita Bhatia, assistant Secretary General and deputy executive director of the United Nations' women's agency. "Women will end up bearing a big brunt," she said. "We have a lot of very supportive men in society but not enough, and we really need to work on the gender biases and the stereotypes that prevent equal sharing of care." In Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) nations, which are mostly developed countries in Europe, the gender pay gap fell to almost 13 percent in 2017 from nearly 18 percent in 2000.

PayScale, a Seattle-based maker of compensation software, said the US gap has narrowed in recent years, but coronavirus could have the opposite effect as women are forced to take time off. "This has the possibility ... that we could easily reverse that trend," said Sudarshan Sampath, the company's research director. PayScale said it has found when women return to work after taking time off, they receive compensation offers that are on average 7 percent lower than other candidates for the same position. In the United States, Tuesday is Equal Pay Day, symbolizing how far into the year the average woman must work to earn what the average man earned in the previous year. The economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic could result in more than 25 million job losses, according to the ILO. Catalyst, a US nonprofit, said research shows when companies downsize, diversity becomes secondary, with women and people of color suffering the most. The group's Canada director Tanya van Biesen said she feared progress made in recent decades could be lost because hard-hit sectors like hospitality and travel have large female workforces.

"I am so afraid that this health crisis and ultimately economic crisis will cause us to lose the many gains that women at work have made," van Biesen told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. In a bid to ease paperwork for businesses at a time of economic pressure, Britain's government said they will not have to make their annual reports on their gender pay gaps this year. But Sam Smethers, head of the British nonprofit Fawcett Society, said the one positive outcome for women with family responsibilities might be the normalization of remote and flexible working. "We need to redesign the way we work," she said. —Reuters

## Amazon workers protest over virus safety

**NEW YORK:** Amazon warehouse employees and Instacart delivery workers joined protests Monday to press safety demands, highlighting the risks for workers on the front lines of supplying Americans largely sheltering at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

An estimated 50 to 60 employees joined a walkout at an Amazon worker warehouse in the New York borough of Staten Island, demanding that the facility be shut down and cleaned after a worker tested positive for the coronavirus.

"There are positive cases working in these buildings infecting thousands," warehouse worker Christian Smalls wrote on Twitter. Amazon, responding to an AFP query, said Smalls made "misleading" statements about conditions and that he was supposed to be in quarantine.

"Like all businesses grappling with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic,

we are working hard to keep employees safe while serving communities and the most vulnerable," Amazon said in a statement.

"We have taken extreme measures to keep people safe."

After the protest, Smalls was officially fired by Amazon. When contacted by AFP for comment, Amazon confirmed the decision, which it said was due to Smalls's failure to comply with the company's request that he self-isolate after he came in contact with another employee who tested positive for COVID-19.

By taking part in Monday's demonstration, he put "the teams at risk. This is unacceptable," Amazon said in a statement, noting that only 15 of the more than 5,000 employees at the site had taken part in the protest. New York state attorney general Letitia James called Smalls's dismissal "disgraceful" and pointed out that the law protects employee's right to protest.

"At a time when so many New Yorkers are struggling and are deeply concerned about their safety, this action was also immoral and inhumane," she said in a statement.

James said she was exploring options for legal recourse and had



**NEW YORK:** Amazon employees hold a protest and walkout over conditions at the company's Staten Island distribution facility on Sunday in New York City. —AFP

asked the National Labor Relations Board to investigate the incident. Meanwhile a group calling itself the Gig Workers Collective said it was maintaining its call for Instacart's independent contractors to strike despite new safety measures announced late Sunday by the company.

"Workers aren't filling orders until our full demands are met," a spokesperson told AFP. "This isn't just about us, we want to also protect our customers." It was not immediately clear how many of Instacart "shoppers" who are independent "gig" workers, were participating in the stoppage. —AFP

## Airbnb to pay out \$250m to offset losses

**NEW YORK:** US home rental firm Airbnb said on Monday it was allocating \$250 million to help offset losses by hosts around the world whose guests have canceled bookings in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. The aid, which will pay hosts 25 percent of their normal cancellation fees, is being offered globally except for China, the company said in a letter sent to hosts by Chief Executive Brian Chesky.

The payments apply to the cancellation of reservations with check-in dates between March 14 and May 31. Because hosts can choose different cancellation policies - some requiring a penalty payment, with others allowing free cancellation up to a certain date before check-in - not all canceled reservations will qualify.

Airbnb had earlier announced that guests would receive a full refund for the cancellation of reservations made on or before March 14 for check-in between March 14 and April 14, which angered many hosts. Airbnb also said that hosts could cancel reservations without a charge.

Airbnb said it is funding the program for hosts itself and will begin to issue the payments in April.

Airbnb's revenue in 2019 exceeded \$4.8 billion, up 35 percent on the year, and it has \$3 billion in cash, a source told Reuters last week. The company said in September that it planned to list its shares in 2020, and so far has not changed that position.

Airbnb also said it is creating a \$10 million relief fund for its Superhosts - so-named for meeting



**PARIS:** This file photo shows the logo of the online lodging service Airbnb displayed on a smartphone in Paris. —AFP

certain requirements including good ratings - who rent out their own home and need help paying their rent or mortgage, and some Experience hosts who charge for sharing an experience like food tours.

Hosts can apply for grants for up to \$5,000. That fund started with Airbnb employee donations of \$1 million and the company's three founders are personally contributing the rest, it said.

Airbnb also said it worked to secure support for hosts in the recent US stimulus bill that will allow some hosts to benefit from small-business grants, loans and unemployment assistance. In a video message to hosts on Monday, Chesky said he was confident Airbnb would come back strong after the coronavirus pandemic was over. He added that about half of the stays booked on Airbnb were for periods longer than a month. —Reuters

## US probes child labor in Ivory Coast cocoa supply chains

**ABIDJAN:** US customs authorities have asked cocoa traders to report where and when they encounter child labor in their supply chains in top grower Ivory Coast, three industry sources said, following calls from American lawmakers to ban some imports. Cocoa traders and chocolate companies including Mars, Hershey, Cargill and Barry Callebaut, have repeatedly missed internationally agreed targets for reducing the worst forms of child labour from supply lines in West Africa, all sides have acknowledged.

Pressure in the United States is now increasing after two senators asked the US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) last July to use its authority to block the import of Ivorian cocoa produced with forced labor. The CBP inquiry comes in the form of a 25-part questionnaire seen by Reuters and a request for various documents. It was sent this month to companies including Cargill, Barry Callebaut, Olam, Sueden and Ecom, according to the sources, who are from companies that received it. CBP has "engaged with the cocoa industry to trace cocoa supply chains and understand industry internal controls and compliance regimes," a CBP spokesperson told Reuters. The text of the questionnaire seen by Reuters did not specify a deadline for a response.

Reuters was unable to determine what CBP plans to do with the information it gathers, but the spokesperson said the agency has the authority to block imports when information indicates they have been made with forced or indentured labor. —Reuters

## Business

# Zain Kuwait offers meals to support nation's efforts to fight coronavirus

## Initiative as part of its commitment and in collaboration with Kuwait Food Bank

**KUWAIT:** Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced offering of meals that will be continuously distributed in collaboration with the Kuwait Food Bank to support the efforts of the authorities during this extraordinary time of crisis.

The company also offered smartphone charging stations at Kuwait International Airport to facilitate communication of Kuwaitis returning home with their families. The initiative has been taken to support the country's tremendous efforts in these exceptional cir-



**Company also offers smartphone charging stations at airport**

cumstances to fight the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Kuwait.

This initiative came as part of Zain's commitment towards the nation and in line with its comprehensive corporate sustainability and social responsibility strategy. This also reflects the Kuwaiti private sector's role in supporting the public sector for the nation's wellbeing. This is especially true in such times of crisis, where the Kuwaiti society's strength and unity are at their highest.

Zain offers nearly 30,000 meals in collaboration with the Kuwait Food Bank, where a large number of the meals was distributed during the week dedicated by the Ministry of Health at Kuwait International Fairgrounds in Mishref to conduct tests for residents who recently entered the country. The meals were provided as a contribution by the company to ease the hardship of long waiting in line. Many meals are also being continuously distributed at Kuwait International Airport's gates dedicated for residents who are returning to their countries because of this crisis.

Zain has also installed many smartphone charging stations at Kuwait International Airport to serve Kuwaiti citizens who are returning home as part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' evacuation plan to bring Kuwaitis back home from all over the world during this crisis. This contribution aimed at facilitating communication between returning Kuwaitis and their families as soon as they arrive in Kuwait. Zain is also continuously distributing a large number of meals to them in collaboration with the Kuwait Food Bank and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA).

As part of its national commitment during this crisis, Zain recently announced offering free Internet caps and local voice calls for a period of one month in collaboration with the Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority (CITRA). The initiative came as part of the company's commitment towards its customers during these exceptional circumstances. Zain also changed its network's name to STAY HOME in line with the directives of the Council of Ministers to remind its valued customers to commit to staying at home as much as possible and collectively contribute to ending this pandemic at the earliest.

The company also launched a social media campaign entitled "This is Your Time" to send positive messages to the public about the importance of being a responsible citizen in this time of crisis, not listen to rumors nor spread them, take part in volunteer efforts, commit to staying at home, as well as abiding by the directives of the authorities.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Zain collaborated with the Ministry of Health to offer its customers FREE calls to any of MOH's three hotlines: 24970967, 96049698, and 99048619 in order to enable them to inquire about any health or medical information related to coronavirus disease (COVID-19) directly from the ministry's specialized team and ensure taking the correct information from the official and certified sources.

As part of its continuous collaboration with the various ministries, Zain also provided the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Interior with FREE bulk SMS messages to send medical and awareness content to the community during this period. In addition,

tional branches - Shuwaikh, Shaab, Sharq, Farwaniya, Fahaheel, Salmiya and Jahra 2.

ABK's first priority is the safety and wellbeing of its customers and employees. The bank will continue to monitor the situation and implement practical precautions in line with guidance from Central Bank of Kuwait.

## ABK offers loan, financial relief to customers

**KUWAIT:** As part of the dedicated effort to relieve the stress on customers due to the current circumstances in Kuwait and globally, Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) has announced a six-month repayment grace period for all Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti customers on their credit cards, consumer and instalment loans from April until September inclusive.

There will also be no interest charged during this payment grace period and customers will recommence repayment from October 2020 onwards. The announcement is in line with Kuwait's national strategy, to ease financial impact, following a number of fiscal and monetary support schemes launched to support individuals and businesses experiencing hardship stemming from the impact of COVID-19.

As part of its dedication to supporting its customers and partners: the Bank's financial relief initiative is the latest in a series of strategic and critical actions to safeguard the customer's financial interests during the COVID-19 outbreak. The bank contributed KD 680,000 to the Central Bank of Kuwait's fund to mitigate the impact of the novel Coronavirus crisis on individuals, businesses and the economy. Furthermore, ABK customers can contribute to the 'National Fund for Combating the Spread of the Coronavirus' using the bank's online banking and mobile banking application.

In addition, ABK continues to implement a series of precautionary measures to protect its stakeholders, including issuing advice encouraging customers to use online or mobile banking services instead of visiting their operational branches. ABK is supporting customer efforts in practicing social distancing and bank safely via its digital banking platforms. Customers can connect with ABK employees for enquiries and can access banking services using ATMs, the online chat via the website and the 24x7 Call Centre. They can have updated information through social platforms: Twitter, Instagram and Facebook and WhatsApp.

The bank has undertaken preventative measures across their branch network, ATM and cash deposit machine locations, including additional deep cleaning and sterilization protocols in their seven opera-

## CBK bonds and related Tawarruq

**KUWAIT:** The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) announced the most recent issues of CBK Bonds and related Tawarruq at a total value of KD 240 million for 6 months with a rate of return at 1.375 percent.

## CBK offers loan repayment relief

**KUWAIT:** The Commercial Bank of Kuwait has decided to offer a relief in payments of consumer loans and credit card payments for all its customers. The decision has been taken as it is the wish of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah under the extraordinary circumstances in the country in the wake of the coronavirus situation. The bank has taken the decision also in response to the measures being taken by the authorities to tackle the spread of coronavirus which affected all CBK customers. The bank also deferred loan payments for small and medium sized companies while waiving all interests and fees that may occur due to this postponement.

The bank's decision comes as a support to its customers both citizens and expats as well as small and medium sized companies under the current extraordinary circumstances, and the negative fallout resulting from the spread of coronavirus. The bank takes this opportunity to thank all state institutions and the Kuwait wise government for the continued efforts and precautionary measures to halt the spread of this epidemic.

finish transforming the scrappy frontier town into a gleaming metropolis.

In a sign of his confidence, Kang's casino has installed gold urinals. "This city is just starting, there is a lot of potential," says Kang, 60. "I love it. Sihanoukville gives you a feeling of freedom and no control."

For Kang and others, the city is like the China of several decades ago - with all of the promise and none of the competition. The current idle is only a blip.

"China is huge, there will always be people interested in Sihanoukville," says Yin Hongsi, a 30-year-old from Chengdu who hires workers for one of the casinos. "You don't need to worry if the Chinese will come back." The boom town on the Cambodian coast has a deep water port and is part of China's Belt and Road initiative. In the next three years, Sihanoukville will also host both the Southeast Asian Games and a meeting of regional leaders.—Reuters



the company sent a number of awareness messages in collaboration with MOH's team through its official social media channels. Zain also broadcast official MOH awareness videos on coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in seven languages: Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Farsi, Filipino, Bengali, and Santhali.

Zain affirmed its utmost commitment in all the instructions and precautionary measures outlined by the Ministry of Health to contribute to fighting the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Kuwait. Zain supplied all its branches that are operational during the official break, as well as all its kiosks and self-service machines in all of Kuwait's areas with sanitizers, and the company's team continuously and periodically sanitizes all operational branches and all machines and products to ensure the safety of customers and staff. Zain also notified all sales staff to wear medical gloves, stop the use of biometric devices, and more.

Zain also launched an internal awareness campaign for the safety of its employees, through which the company distributed precautionary items and sanitizers to all the staff and sent periodic awareness content.

Zain spares no efforts to achieve its comprehensive Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility Strategy that closely focuses on supporting the public sector and shouldering public health initiatives. The company strongly believes that launching and supporting such initiatives helps infuse a sense of responsibility into members of the society, and help support those who are in need of help.

Zain is proud of its long list of programs and contributions that serve noble causes through strategic partnering with all entities, including non-profit organizations, governmental institutions, and international bodies.

### IMF Board Consultation Report

## Kuwait's non-oil growth spikes to 3% in 2019: IMF

**WASHINGTON, DC:** The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) concluded the Article IV consultation with Kuwait and considered and supported the staff appraisal without a meeting.

Nonoil growth strengthened to estimated 3 percent in 2019, propelled by government and consumer spending. With oil output contracting by 1 percent, broadly in line with the OPEC+ agreement, overall growth slowed to estimated 0.7 percent in 2019 from 1.2 percent in 2018. Fiscal and current account surpluses narrowed on account of lower oil prices and output. Inflation rebounded to 1.1 percent as food and transport prices recovered. Credit growth accelerated to 4.4 percent in 2019, spurred by relaxation of macroprudential ceilings on personal loans and supportive monetary conditions. The underlying fiscal stance loosened in FY2018/19. The nonoil balance excluding investment income in percent of nonoil GDP deteriorated as government spending continued to rise. Fiscal financing needs—the overall balance after compulsory transfers to the Future Generations Fund (FGF) and excluding investment income—remained large at 7.7 percent of GDP. Lacking borrowing authorization since October 2017, the government had to continue drawing solely on General Reserve Fund (GRF) assets for financing, which brought its total and liquid balances down to 56 and 24 percent of GDP by June 2019. Combined FGF and GRF assets continued to grow however, as the FGF generated strong returns and received mandatory transfers from the government.

The banking system remains sound. The systemwide capital adequacy ratio reached 17.6 percent in September 2019, and banks have plentiful short-term liquidity. Nonperforming loans net of specific provisions remain low, while loan-loss provisioning is high. Net interest income declined due to a narrowing spread between bank lending rates and cost of funds.

The real estate market has stabilized, and equity markets outperformed in 2019, in part thanks to the inclusion in emerging market indices.

### Oil dependence

The challenge to reduce dependence on oil and boost savings has become more urgent. The subdued forecast for oil revenues is weighing on near-term growth and fiscal and external balances. This has heightened the need for reforms to create a vibrant private sector and ensure adequate savings of the exhaustible oil wealth for future generations. Kuwait has large financial buffers and low debt, but the window of opportunity to tackle its challenges from the position of strength is narrowing. Without a course correction, fiscal and financing challenges will intensify. The recent runup in hard-to-reverse spending weakened the underlying fiscal position. At current policies, the overall fiscal balance would turn into a growing deficit, which, after mandatory savings in the FGF, would give rise to large financing needs over the medium term. Borrowing should be viewed as a temporary solution—while slowing the depletion of liquid financial assets, it would lead to a rapid debt buildup.

### Fiscal adjustment

Kuwait needs ambitious, growth-friendly, and socially equitable fiscal adjustment. Staff's proposed

adjustment would cut current expenditure, by tackling spending rigidities, boost nonoil revenue, and create space for growth-enhancing investment. The large public wage bill should be reformed, and generalized subsidies and transfers phased out in favor of targeted compensation schemes. As for revenue, the government should initiate broad consultations, redouble efforts to engage parliament, and continue the technical work on the GCC-wide excises and VAT. Taxes on corporate income, luxury items, and personal income of the wealthy could be also considered for a more socially-balanced adjustment mix. Embedding fiscal measures in a comprehensive reform package that promotes private sector growth, strengthens governance and accountability, and improves public services would help build broad support for reforms. A rules-based fiscal framework would improve management of oil revenues. A rules-based framework would help anchor fiscal policy on a long-term objective of intergenerational equity. It should include a well-calibrated operational rule that helps reconcile long-term savings and near-term economic stabilization objectives. Such a rule would help establish policy predictability, prevent procyclicality, and ensure durable gains from adjustment. To be effective, a fiscal rule would need to be enshrined in a sound institutional framework. Until a properly calibrated fiscal rule is in place, the current arrangement with respect to the FGF should be maintained.

Fiscal governance reforms should be an integral part of the overall fiscal strategy. Reforms should aim to enhance fiscal transparency, modernize public procurement, and boost spending efficiency. These steps would reduce vulnerabilities to corruption and strengthen support for fiscal adjustment.

The exchange rate regime remains appropriate. The peg has provided an effective nominal anchor. The proposed fiscal adjustment would close the current account gap over the medium term. As the economy becomes diversified, the arrangement should be periodically reviewed to ensure that it continues to serve Kuwait well.

Financial sector reforms should focus on bolstering resilience and deepening inclusion. To reduce moral hazard, the authorities should enhance the corrective action framework, establish a special resolution regime for banks, and unwind the blanket deposit guarantee. CBK's continued efforts to recalibrate macroprudential tools to balance stability and growth considerations are welcome. Gradually relaxing the interest rate ceiling on commercial loans would expand lending to new market segments, including SMEs. Market forces should be allowed to play a greater role in the allocation and pricing of liquidity to promote interbank market development.

Sustaining reforms to foster private sector-led and diversified growth will be critical. With limited scope for public employment going forward, a vibrant private sector must emerge to absorb the large number of Kuwaitis entering the labor market in coming years. Enabling the private sector to thrive requires reducing the economic footprint of the state, promoting market competition, and improving the business environment. To that end, further efforts are needed to revamp insolvency framework, reduce excessive regulations, and ease trading across borders. To incentivize Kuwaitis to seek private sector opportunities, public sector wages should be aligned with those in the private sector, accompanied with improvements in education and training programs to nurture entrepreneurship and equip graduates with skills for in-demand jobs.

## In Cambodian town, Chinese plan beyond virus

**SIHANOUKVILLE, Cambodia:** When casino owner Kang Qiang looks out the window of his 20th floor office in this city on the remote Cambodian coast, he sees construction cranes sitting idle.

The Chinese-funded gambling enclave of Sihanoukville has suffered a double blow. Travel restrictions imposed in recent weeks to slow the global coronavirus pandemic have deepened the effects of a ban last year on lucrative online gambling.

But Kang is betting on a future beyond the pandemic, banking on the return of money from China to

# 'When I wake I cry': Hell of nurses on France's COVID-19 front line

PARIS: Every evening at the stroke of eight, millions of people across France take to their balconies to bang pots, beat drums, blow trumpets and to whistle and clap as loudly as they can. The wave of sound from the nightly ritual in support of the country's health workers has become a morale-boosting moment of communion for a population confined to their homes for nearly three weeks.

But with the hundreds dying every day, the stoicism of the everyday heroes it celebrates is being sorely tested. "Waking up this morning I cried. I cried eating breakfast. I cried getting

ready," nurse Elise Cordier confessed on Facebook, in a post which revealed the fear and anguish of those on the front line.

But, she said, once at "the hospital locker room, I dried my tears. I breathed in. I breathed out. The people in the hospital beds are crying too, and it is I who am there to dry their tears." With the peak of the new coronavirus still to hit France, medical staff are girding themselves for a situation they never imagined they would face. "Our teams are afraid of the uncertainty awaiting us this week and the whole month of April," said Professor Elie Azoulay, who leads the intensive care unit of a Paris hospital which has tripled its capacity with 50 new beds. All are now full.

"They are afraid for themselves and their loved ones, afraid of not making it, of being overwhelmed," Azoulay said, knowing that nurses and doctors have lost their lives elsewhere. "But they are stoical too, dignified and frankly they inspire respect," he added. "The nurses have amazed me."

Not only do staff have to contend with the death and suffering of patients gasping for air as COVID-19 weakens their lungs, but also the fear that they themselves will fall ill and infect their families at home. "They talk of a wave, of a tsunami, which by definition means

that we will be submerged," said Benjamin Davido, medical crisis director at the Raymond-Poincare hospital west of Paris. "The fear is that we are going to have say to sick people on stretchers: 'Sorry, we have no more beds,'" he said.

The other great worry, Davido said, was having to tend to their own colleagues. Emotions aside, "it is not exactly what you would want ethically. Everybody knows this and has started talking about it," he said. Anxiety has not been helped by the chronic shortage of masks and protective gear in French hospitals, with anger peaking after the death of the first French doctor 10 days ago, a man who had returned from holiday in his birthplace of Madagascar to help with



PARIS: A nurse washes her hands at a COVID-19 screening station outside the district hall of the 17th arrondissement in Paris on the fourteenth day of a lockdown aimed at curbing the spread of the COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) in France. — AFP

the first major outbreak. Hospital psychologists who in the past were there to look after patients are now turning their attention to their colleagues. At Clermont-Ferrand in the centre of France, psychiatrist Dr Julie Geneste said that beyond the fear of "not being able to cope", most of the calls they have received to their support unit have been about "dealing with the anxiety of relatives and friends and the

fear of infecting them." "This is something new, that our generation has never known at this level," she added. "We were not prepared for this," said Etienne, a young doctor in the Paris region, who has been shaken by seeing one of his patients turned away from intensive care. "We are all in agony... Some of my colleagues are in a state of shock, people are going off sick fearing for their families." Psychologist Nicolas Dupuis said he has

seen calls rocket to 200 a day to the Proconsult service he works for that supports medical staff. Carers are often caught in a double bind, he said, between their loyalty to their family and to their patients. Dupuis said one nurse was being nagged by her partner to undress as soon as she arrived home and "bugged her all weekend when she touched her face—even when she had clean hands." — AFP



Everybody knows this and has started talking about it

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## Kylie donates \$1 million to coronavirus relief efforts

**K**ylie Jenner has donated \$1 million to coronavirus relief efforts. The 'Keeping Up with the Kardashians' star has made a sizeable donation to help hospitals pay for protective gear that will allow doctors and nurses to properly treat patients infected with the respiratory illness - which is also known as COVID-19 - without putting themselves at risk of catching the virus. Physician and OB-GYN Dr. Thais Aliabadi confirmed the news in an Instagram post, when she wrote: "I am speechless, my eyes are filled with tears of joy and my heart is overwhelmed with gratitude. I made a wish to the Universe to gather protective masks for our brave healthcare workers and today my dream came true. "One of my patients, a beautiful Living Angel just

donated \$1,000,000 to help us buy hundreds of thousands of masks, face shields, and other protective gear which we will have delivered directly to our first responders, as too many masks at hospitals are disappearing before making their way onto the faces of our front line heroes. I have never felt more blessed to be a doctor, as helping our brave ER and ICU workers feels just as gratifying as helping my own patients. "From the bottom of our hearts, THANK YOU @kyliejenner. You are my hero. This generous donation will help save many precious lives. Our world is a better place with you in it. I love you so much. Thank you X a million.... (sic)" Kylie, 22, then confirmed the news herself when she saw the message and responded by thanking Thais for the work

she is doing in fighting the virus. She wrote in the comments: "I love you! And thank YOU for all the love and care you put into everything that you do! You're an angel on Earth. (sic)" The charitable deed comes after Kylie's father Caitlyn Jenner - who was formerly known as Bruce Jenner - said the Kylie Cosmetics founder "loves" being at home amid the coronavirus pandemic, because it means she can date on her two-year-old daughter Stormi. Caitlyn said: "I think Kylie's happy because she's at home and spending a lot of time with Stormi and she loves that."

## Mark Wahlberg

reflects on troubled past

**M**ark Wahlberg's life got "10 times more difficult" when he left gang life. The 48-year-old actor got into a lot of trouble as a teenager, including being jailed for felony assault after attacking a man while high on drugs in



1988 and though he's not proud of his actions, he's happy he worked hard to turn his life around, though it wasn't easy. Asked if he thought he'd be "cancelled" if he was an up-and-coming actor now and details of his past emerged, he said: "Well... I don't know. I think it would be easy to look at it and say that, but having been through it and experienced it, I think it's a dif-

ferent thing. You see the gentleman who just came in here? "He just did 16 years in prison. OK? He got out and I put him in [Spenser Confidential]. That could have easily been my life. "Being in a situation like that and having nothing else - certainly I made a lot of terrible mistakes and I paid for those mistakes dearly." Mark explained people often think of time behind bars as a badge of honor but insisted "having been in that situation, it's not". The 'Departed' star recalled how he could only get out of the situation was to "actually change" his circumstances. He added: "I did the work. I took it upon myself to own up to my mistakes and go against the grain and not be a part of the gang any more - to say that I was going to go and do my own thing. Which made it 10 times more difficult to walk from my home to the train station, to go to school, to go to work." And Mark hopes others in his position can get a "second chance" if they want to change. He told Observer magazine: "I prided myself on doing the right thing and turning my life around. Whether I found myself venturing off into Hollywood and a music career, or working a 9-to-5 job as a construction worker, whatever path I was going to take, I was going to do the right thing. "So I think no, judging a person on what he's doing and where he's coming from and all those things, no, I would hope that people would be able to get a second chance in life. But the 'Fighter' star - who has four children with wife Rhea Durham - thinks his experiences have made his work more "authentic". He said: "I do think the one thing I have to my advantage is that I have all this real life experience that I can apply to my work." I think audiences can definitely sense authenticity. But that came with a real price."

## Perrie Edwards

is missing her mum amid self-isolation

**P**errie Edwards is missing her mother amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The 26-year-old singer has been self-isolating away from her mother Debbie during the ongoing spread of the respiratory illness - which is also known as COVID-19 - because she suffers from "slow pneumonia" and Perrie could put her at risk if she goes to visit. During an appearance on Capital Breakfast with Roman Kemp, show host Roman asked Perrie what she misses most about being away from her family and friends, to which the Little Mix singer said: "Oh I miss my mam a lot, I'm a mummy's girl. Like whenever I'm away or if I'm tired or if I don't feel well, I'm like 'I just want my mum'. "I'm 26 but I'm like a six year old so it's really hard not being able to see her because she's high risk, because she's got slow pneumonia, so she's got water on the lungs so she has to be extra careful so I'm trying to stay away from her. I do miss like seeing everyone, it feels a bit bizarre." Perrie does have company whilst she stays indoors though, as she is self-isolating with her boyfriend Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, as well as her cousin Ellie who also works as her assistant and is her "best friend". She added: "But luckily I'm isolating with Alex and with Ellie, Ellie is my best friend, cousin, PA, everything wrapped into one so we've got each other so that's good. I just keep FaceTiming everyone, 'What are you up to?' and they're like 'It's been 5 minutes, not a lot!'"



## Cyrus is missing 'human connection' following self-isolation

**M**iley Cyrus is missing "human connection" as she self-isolates herself amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The 'Malibu' hitmaker is joining millions of people around the world in staying at home and practicing social distancing as a way of trying to limit the spread of the respiratory illness - which is also known as COVID-19 - but has said she's finding it difficult being locked away from the world. She said: "We get so numb to people opening the door for us and saying, 'Good morning. How are you?' What would we give right now for it to be safe to open the door for somebody, but right now when we open the door, we think, oh, where's my glove, let me get my hoodie, I'm not allowed to look at you. Get six feet away from me. And so I miss that human connection. I miss opening the door for somewhere and having the door open for me." There's two girls that work at the cafe near my house that I get cappuccino from them every day, and I love them. They make my day. They always draw little smiling faces or put my initials in my cappuccino. I miss that. I miss that connection with my daily routine." But the 26-year-old singer says she's actually become "more connected" through self-isolation, as she never realized how important "communication" was until she had to stay at home. She added:

"But when it comes to communication and connection, I've been more connected from the social distancing perspective in isolation quarantine than I have actually outside in the world, and I want to take all of these philosophies that I'm learning inside my house outside of my house when it's safe to do so." Instead of going out to meet her friends, Miley has been speaking to people through FaceTime, and is encouraging people to write down the things they want to say to those who can't use FaceTime, such as elderly relatives. Speaking to Zane Lowe on Apple Music, she said: "We've been doing a lot of FaceTimes, and for people that can't do FaceTime, I think maybe take this time to write what you would want to say if you get on FaceTime, and then when it's safe for us all to be together again, telling our grandparents things that we haven't, because I can't really remember the last time I felt the way that I feel about my grandparents now and to protect them. But also now that we're getting more information that it's also time for me to protect my 20, 30 year old brothers and sisters, because apparently this isn't something that just attacks the elderly or the immune compromised. This is something that's jeopardizing young people's health also."

## Jennifer Aniston reveals 'cleaning out her closet'

**J**ennifer Aniston is "cleaning out her closet" whilst she is in self-isolation. The 'Friends' star is thinning out the clothes she has at her home to pass the time as she stays in the house due to coronavirus. During a phone call with Ellen DeGeneres, and broadcasted as part of her Instagram show, she said: "I'm actually still cleaning out my closet. That's still happening ... Well, I do suggest a good spring clean right now while we're at it. That can't hurt. Books are great, obviously." Meanwhile, Jennifer raided her own closet for

her Screen Actors Guild (SAG) Awards dress earlier this year. The 'Morning Show' actress walked the red carpet at Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium in a white form-fitting Christian Dior gown and she revealed she'd opted for one of the "oldies but goodies" she'd collected over the years, rather than relying on a stylist to find her a new outfit. She said at the time: "This is a vintage John Galiano for Christian Dior, that is mine. I have a little collection of you know, the oldies but goodies." The 50-year-old actress - who won Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Drama Series award for her work on 'The Morning Show' at the ceremony - accessorized her outfit with vintage jewelry from Fred Leighton, which seemingly included the same ring she wore to the Golden Globe Awards earlier that month. A spokesperson for the jewellers told E! News: "Jennifer Aniston's jewelry includes Edwardian diamond pendant earrings in platinum, an Art Deco pear-shaped ring, in platinum by Cartier, a 1920's Marquise diamond ring, in platinum. All pieces are Fred Leighton." —BangShowbiz



## January Jones tries light therapy mask

**J**anuary Jones has taken to wearing a light therapy mask amidst the coronavirus pandemic. The 'Mad Men' star took to social media to reveal how she is keeping her skin fresh during the virus outbreak. Sharing a video of her in the mask, as she sipped on a Coors Light through a straw, she captioned it: "Skin: 5 Marbles: - 167 (sic)" January was asked by fans what mask it was, and she revealed it was made by Deesse Pro. The Déesse Pro LED Mask retails for £1680 and is described as an "LED phototherapy mask". A post on their website reads: "Déesse, the market leaders in LED technology have pioneered a new enhanced LED phototherapy mask for the professional market. Designed to provide superior performance, flexibility and prolonged usage within the professional spa, medspa or clinical environment the Déesse PRO uses low-level light therapy (LLLT) to expose the skin to four wavelengths of light, delivered at a safe therapeutic dose, to stimulate a natural cellular response across six Treatment modes." It features 770 Bulbs, which help with anti-ageing, purifying, brightening and calming. Déesse also shared her post to their social media, writing: "On a day where we could all do with something to make us smile, @januaryjones shows us how she does

#facemaskfriday! ... We all need to find ways to enjoy staying at home right now ... a face mask and a dance sounds pretty good. "Boost your collagen, and your mood. January Jones picked up her mask from @shandigarden and you can get yours online today! Click the link in our bio to purchase, and have your own solo dance party!" they concluded. (sic)"



## Thandie Newton was ready to quit acting

**T**handie Newton was ready to quit acting before landing her role in 'Westworld'. The 47-year-old actress - who has children Ripley, 19, Nico, 15, and Booker, five, with husband Ol Parker - had grown tired of "fighting" for her characters to be made more interesting and was frustrated by the sexist and racist attitudes she'd faced until she was offered the part of Maeve Millay in the dystopian drama. She said: "I'd gotten to a point where I'd go to work on projects and would spend the whole time fighting to make the women more multidimensional. I was so exhausted with it. "I'd just come off a show that was sexist and racist. When I said I don't think I should take my top off for a scene as it didn't make any sense, the producer literally said to me, 'Listen, kid, Thandie Newton, top off, ratings.' " Thandie thinks android Maeve is the best role she's ever had. She told the Sunday Times magazine: "Playing Maeve meant I wasn't separating myself into actress and activist. I was both on set every day. That's what it felt like." And even though nudity was a big part of the initial pitch for the role, the actress understood why it was appropriate for the character. She said: "It was a madam in a Wild West saloon, and 75% nudity." I love the showrunners [husband-and-wife Jonathan Nolan and Lisa



Joy], they're both powerful feminists and they explained that the nudity was there to show how Maeve is dehumanised by her situation. She's basically treated like a piece of meat." The 'Crash' actress thinks the film and TV industry has changed and grown more diverse since she began her career. She said: "When I started out there were very few movies that were interesting. Because the industry was run by wealthy white people. But it's changing. Supply and demand. People want to turn on the TV and see people who look like them."

Lifestyle | Features

# Van Gogh painting stolen from Dutch museum during virus shutdown

Thieves stole a painting by Dutch master Vincent van Gogh early Monday in a daring heist from a museum that was closed to the public because of the coronavirus pandemic. The 1884 painting, titled the "Parsonage Garden at Neunen in Spring", was taken during a pre-dawn break-in at the Singer Laren Museum near Amsterdam. The criminals smashed through a glass door and then took the painting, which is valued at up to six million euros (\$6.6 million).

"I am shocked and unbelievably annoyed this theft has happened," Jan Rudolph de Lorm, one of the museum's directors, told a press conference. "Art is there to be seen, to be enjoyed, to inspire and to bring solace, particularly in these troubled times in which we find ourselves," De Lorm said. The theft happened on what would have been the 167th birthday of the brilliant yet troubled artist. "Parsonage Garden at Neunen in Spring" comes from relatively early on in Van Gogh's career, before the prolific artist embarked on his trademark post-impressionist paintings

such as "Sunflowers" and his vivid self-portraits.

The painting was on loan from its owners, the Groninger Museum in the north of the Netherlands, as part of an exhibition. The Singer Laren museum closed two weeks ago in compliance with Dutch government measures aimed at tackling the spread of COVID-19. Dutch police said the criminals had broken in at around 3:15 am (0115 GMT). "Police officers immediately rushed to the scene but the perpetrators had escaped," Dutch police said in a statement, appealing for witnesses.

**'Hunt is on'**

The painting has an estimated value of between one million and six million euros, Dutch art detective Arthur Brand said. "The hunt is on," said Brand, who is known for recovering stolen Nazi art including "Hitler's Horses". It was the third time the famous Dutch master's works have been targeted in the Netherlands since the 1990s, Brand said. "To me this looks like the work of a copycat," Brand told AFP,



This handout picture released on March 30, 2020 by the Groninger Museum shows Vincent van Gogh's 1884 painting "Parsonage Garden at Neunen in Spring" which was stolen from the Singer Laren Museum in Laren.—AFP

adding the modus operandi was similar to the other two cases. "The thieves only went for a Van Gogh, while there are other works too in the museum," he said. Asked whether he thought there was enough security at the museum Brand said "it is very difficult to say." "Securing a painting

is very difficult. It is something that has to be displayed for people to see," he said.

The museum's 3,000 pieces also include works by Dutch abstract master Piet Mondrian and Dutch-Indonesian painter Jan Toorop, as well as a casting of "The Thinker" by Auguste Rodin.

Singer Laren was targeted in 2007 when thieves stole a number of castings from its gardens including "The Thinker," Dutch media reports said. The castings were recovered two days later. Two Van Gogh masterpieces went back on display at Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum last year after they were stolen from the museum in 2002.

The paintings — the 1882 "View of the Sea at Scheveningen" and the 1884/5 "Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church at Nuenen" — were recovered by Italian investigators in September 2016 when they raided a home belonging to an infamous mafia drug baron near Naples. Previously three Van Goghs that were stolen from the Noordbrabant Museum in 1990 later resurfaced when a notorious Dutch criminal made a deal with prosecutors.—AFP



People take pictures in front of the Great pyramid of Kheops where a laser projection writes "Stay at home, stay safe.—AFP photos

## GREAT PYRAMID IN EGYPT LIGHTS UP IN SOLIDARITY AGAINST VIRUS

Egypt's famed Great Pyramid was emblazoned Monday evening with messages of unity and solidarity with those battling the novel coronavirus the world over. "Stay safe", "Stay at home" and "Thank you to those keeping us safe," flashed in blue and green lights across the towering structure at the Giza plateau, southwest of the capital Cairo. Egypt has so far registered 656 COVID-19 cases, including 41 deaths. Of the total infected, 150 reportedly recovered. "The tourism sector is one of the most affected industry but our priority is health," said tourism and antiquities minister Khaled al-Anani, speaking at the site.

Senior antiquities ministry official

Mostafa Al-Waziri thanked "all the medical staff who help to keep us safe." Egypt has carried out sweeping disinfection operations at archaeological sites, museums and other sites across the country. In tandem, strict social distancing measures were imposed to reduce the risk of contagion among the country's 100 million inhabitants. Tourist and religious sites are shuttered, schools are closed and air traffic halted. Authorities have also declared a night-time curfew and threatened penalties including fines and even prison.

On Monday, the interior ministry said hundreds were arrested for violating curfew orders. It was not immediately clear if they were later released. The World Health

Organization has commended Egypt's response to the pandemic as "strong and adapted to the situation". But it called on the Arab world's most populous country to boost hospital resources to better prepare for potential wider transmission. The novel coronavirus was declared a pandemic on March 11. It originated in the Chinese city of Wuhan and has so far spread in 183 countries. Over 727,000 people have been infected and more than 34,000 have died worldwide, according to a tally compiled by AFP.—AFP

## Placido Domingo leaves hospital after COVID-19 treatment

Spanish tenor Placido Domingo said Monday he is recovering from COVID-19 at home after being released from hospital in Mexico. The 79-year-old opera star said on March 22 he had tested positive for the coronavirus. He was later admitted to hospital. On Sunday he wrote on his Facebook page that he was back at his Apaculco home and credited the early treatment he had received with easing his recovery. "I am at home and I feel good. Fortunately from the first symptom I was, as always, under medical supervision, given my age and my comorbidities, so COVID-19 was immediately suspected and this helped me a lot," he wrote.

The Spanish icon, who won worldwide acclaim in the 1990s as one of the Three Tenors alongside Jose Carreras and Luciano Pavarotti, has since August been engulfed in a sexual harassment scandal. He is accused of forcibly kissing, grabbing and fondling women over a period of more than 30 years. "At this time, my thoughts are with those who suffer and with all those who are fighting generously to save lives. I thank everyone for your love and once again I recommend everyone stays at home."—AFP



In this file photo Spanish tenor Placido Domingo performs during his concert in the newly inaugurated sports and culture centre 'St Gellert Forum' in Szeged, southern Hungary.—AFP



Jodie Turner-Smith

**Jodie Turner-Smith** is around '10ish days away' from giving birth

The 'Queen & Slim' star is expecting her first child, a baby girl, with her husband Joshua Jackson, and the 41-year-old actor has revealed they won't have to wait much longer until their tot's arrival, as she's expected in early April. Speaking during an appearance on 'Live with Kelly and Ryan' on Wednesday, Joshua said: "We are in the very, very home stretch. Everybody tells us that the first baby's late so we're probably 10ish days away. [Jodie is] physically fine and the baby is physically fine so the important things are all good. We're just figuring out how to deal with interacting with doctors and hospitals right now."

The 'Little Fires Everywhere' actor appeared on the show via video link as he is currently self-isolating at home amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, and explained he and Jodie, 33, are keeping themselves occupied by playing board games. He added: "We're just trying to figure out on a moment to moment basis how to get through this with our sanity. We're in the board game stage now. We did a lot, a lot, a lot of binge watching last week, so now ... we've moved our way through Monopoly. Now it's actually Jenga. Jenga's the thing! Jenga's great. It really brings out some ugliness in people."

Meanwhile, Jodie recently gushed over her romance with 'Dawson's Creek' alum Joshua, as she said she felt "ready" for a baby after realizing she'd found "the right person" for her to spend the rest of her life with. Responding to a fan on Twitter who asked her how she knew she was ready for a child, the pregnant actress wrote: "I don't think you're ever 'ready' ... but there were definitely certain boxes I wanted to tick before committing to it, the most important for me: being w/ sum1 i knew would be a great life partner. life has many variables, but once i knew i'd met the right person, i felt unafraid (sic).—BangShowbiz

## Manga Productions partners with Sumitomo Group to air Saudi-anime series 'Future's Folktales' in Japan



Manga Productions, a subsidiary of the Mohammed bin Salman "Misk" Foundation, announced today its partnership with Sumitomo Group to air the Saudi-anime series Future's Folktales in Japan starting Saturday April 4th, 2020. The partnership was signed by Dr Essam Bukhary CEO of Manga Productions and Ishihara Junya, General Manager of Sumitomo Group via video conference. Under the agreement, the series will be aired across "J-com" channels, while, Asmik Ace, a subsidiary under Sumitomo Group will distribute the series from Japan to the world.

Commenting on the partnership, Dr Essam Bukhary, CEO of Manga Productions, said: "We are excited to be joining forces with Sumitomo Group to introduce the rich heritage of Saudi and the Arabian Peninsula to Japan and the world. Through this partnership, we are able to showcase Saudi talents and creativity behind this production while leveraging Japan's team of experts in the animation industry." Ishihara Junya, General Manager of Sumitomo Group said, "Sumitomo Corporation Saudi Arabia is delighted to venture and collaborate expertise in realizing and achieving Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and recreate an iconic hallmark of Japanese culture together with local minds. The distance between Saudi Arabia and Japan shall be shortened with Manga Productions."

Future's Folktales is the very first Saudi anime



Essam Bukhary and Ishihara Junya signing via video conference.

show that has been produced in partnership with TOEI Animation, the leading and most prevalent Japanese animation studio. The 13-episode series tells the fascinating tales of heritage in the Arabian Peninsula that has been passed down from generation to generation. Narrated by Asmaa, the grandmother, and a robotic car named Anis, Asmaa's grandchildren are told stories with morals and lessons inspired by events from the past. The series celebrates Arab values and customs as well as teaching children about their history and future technologies. Future's Folktales first aired this January across MBC Group in the Middle East as well as the USA.



# Extreme isolation: World's last virus-free corners holding tight

**KOROR, Palau:** A coronavirus-free tropical island nestled in the northern Pacific may seem the perfect place to ride out a pandemic - but residents on Palau say life right now is far from idyllic. The microstate of 18,000 people is among a dwindling number of places on Earth that still report zero cases of COVID-19 as figures mount daily elsewhere. The disparate group also includes Samoa, Turkmenistan, North Korea and bases on the frozen continent of Antarctica.

A dot in the ocean hundreds of kilometers from its nearest neighbors, Palau is surrounded by the vast Pacific, which has acted as a buffer against the virus. Along with strict travel restrictions, this seems to have kept infections at bay for a number of nations including Tonga, the Solomons Islands, the Marshall Islands and Micronesia. But remoteness is not certain to stop the relentless march of the new disease. The Northern Mariana Islands confirmed its first cases over the weekend, followed by a suspected death on Monday.

Klamiokl Tulop, a 28-year-old artist and single mum, is hopeful Palau can avoid the fate of Wuhan, New York or Madrid - where better-resourced health services were overrun. But she describes a growing sense of dread, a fear that the virus is coming or could already be on the island undetected. "You can feel a rising tension and anxiety just shopping," she told AFP. "Stores are crowded even more during non-payday weeks." There have been several scares on Palau, including a potential case that saw one person placed into quarantine this week as authorities await test results.

## Antarctic seclusion

Inside Australia's four remote Antarctic research bases, around 90 people have found themselves ensconced on the only virus-free continent as they watch their old home transform beyond recognition. There is no need for social distancing in the tundra. "They're probably the only Australians at the moment that can have a large dinner together or have the bar still open or the gym still open," Antarctic Division Operations manager Robb Clifton told AFP. The bases are now isolated until November, so the group is safe, but Clifton admits "the main thing that's on the mind of expeditioners is how their loved ones are going back home".

In some places, reporting no cases does not always mean there are no cases to report. North Korea has portrayed emergency measures as an unqualified success in keeping COVID-19 out, despite sustained epidemics in neighboring China and South Korea. But state media also appears to have doctored images to give ordinary North Koreans face masks - handing sceptics reason to believe the world's most secretive government may not be telling the whole truth.

## 'Waiting for the inevitable?'

While Palau has no confirmed cases, it has still been gripped by the society-altering fears and economic paralysis that have affected the rest of the world. Supermarket aisles in the country's largest town Koror have seen panic buying and there are shortages of hand sanitizers, masks and alcohol. The islands depend heavily on goods being shipped or flown in, meaning supplies can quickly



**MAWSON STATION, Antarctica:** This handout photo taken on Feb 6, 2020 and released yesterday by the Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) shows expeditioners cruising past icebergs in an inflatable boat near the ADD's station. — AFP

run low.

United Airlines used to fly six times a week from nearby Guam - which has seen more than 50 cases - but now there is just one flight a week. "Look at how bad we coped when shipments were late before this pandemic happened," Tulop said. "Everyone was practically in uproar." Residents have been practising social distancing. Doctors are waiting for test kits to arrive from Taiwan. The gov-

ernment is building five isolation rooms that will be able to hold up to 14 patients.

It all feels like waiting for the inevitable. "I would like to be optimistic we won't get the virus," Tulop said. "But Palau would most definitely get it. We rely heavily on tourism and most of us even need to travel for work." Rondy Ronny's job is to host big tourist events, but work has already dried up, and he

admits to being "very anxious". "I have loans and bills and payments due," he said. "This will definitely put me back, I hope the government will do something about our economy too, to help it recover." Palau's biggest test may yet come with the first positive case. But even in the most remote corners of the world, the impact of this truly global pandemic is already being felt. Nowhere, it seems, is truly virus-free. — AFP

## Hard times shape Saudi, Kuwaiti...

Continued from Page 1

Kuwait recorded no fatalities among 266 cases. Initial outbreaks in both countries were linked to foreign travel. It's still too early to tell whether those efforts have contained the disease, but the health officials said authorities are doing the best they can by severing the transmission chain.

The World Health Organization said Saudi Arabia's "whole of government" approach had benefited from the MERS experience and "unique expertise" in emergency preparedness from managing the haj pilgrimage, the world's largest annual gathering of Muslims. Riyadh is trying to replicate the kingdom's haj inter-ministerial coordination in its fight against the coronavirus through the Saudi Center for Disease Prevention and Control, conceived in 2013 but not fully operational until 2018.

## 23 new coronavirus cases in Kuwait...

Continued from Page 1

Lockdowns aimed at halting the march of the coronavirus pandemic have extended worldwide as the global death toll mounts and the US outbreak continues to accelerate. Despite slivers of hope in stricken Italy, tough measures that have confined two-fifths of the globe's population to their homes are being broadened. Moscow and Lagos joined the roll call of cities around the world with empty streets, while Virginia and Maryland became the latest US states to announce stay-at-home orders, followed quickly by Washington DC, leaving three-quarters of Americans under some form of lockdown.

A US military medical ship steamed into New York, where it will relieve pressure on the city's badly stretched health system. A field hospital set up in Central Park was due to go online later yesterday. The scale and speed of the US pandemic continued to expand, with the death toll topping 3,000 out of 163,000 known infections - the highest case count for any country.

US President Donald Trump sought to reassure Americans that authorities were ramping up distribution of desperately needed equipment such as ventilators and personal protective gear. But he also offered a stark warning, saying "challenging times are ahead for the next 30 days" as he acknowledged a potential nationwide stay-at-home order. "We're sort of putting it all on the line," Trump said, likening the efforts against coronavirus to a "war."

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases around the world is now above three-quarters of a million, with around 37,000 deaths. The toll on health systems is staggering, with medical professionals under enormous strain. "Waking up this morning I cried. I cried eating breakfast. I cried getting ready," French nurse Elise Cordier confessed on Facebook in a post that revealed the fear and anguish of those on the front line.

But, she said, once in "the hospital locker room, I dried my tears. I breathed in. I breathed out. The people in the hospital beds are crying too, and it is I who am there to dry their tears." World leaders - several of whom have been stricken or forced into isolation - are still grappling for ways to deal with a crisis that is generating economic and social shockwaves unseen since World War II.

"It is a coordination oversight center...that gave more maturity to public health services in the country," senior Saudi epidemiologist Sami Al mudarra told Reuters.

Kuwait also has experience with national health emergencies, from the oil well fires after the 1990 Iraqi invasion to fears of biological and chemical warfare during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. It took precautionary measures soon after reporting its first case on Feb 24, a week before Saudi Arabia. The luxury Khiran resort and five-star Al-Kout Beach Hotel have become quarantine centers and the international fairgrounds are being used for testing and as a field hospital.

Kuwait's parliament, the most outspoken in a region dominated by autocratic rulers, was initially critical of the government response but has since praised the health minister and by extension HI the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah, facing his first crisis as premier. "Continuous parliamentary pressure made government institutions feel they must perform," said Nada Al-Mutawa, management professor at the Australian College of Kuwait. —Reuters

The shutdown has already put millions out of work and forced governments to rush through huge stimulus plans. Experts in Germany, Europe's economic powerhouse, said the virus would shrink output there this year by up to 5.4 percent. The World Bank warned Monday the economic fallout from the pandemic could cause Chinese growth to shudder to a halt and thrust millions of East Asians into poverty.

After weeks of a national lockdown in Italy, signs were emerging that drastic action could be slowing the spread of the disease. Even though the country's death toll grew by 812 in 24 hours to 11,591, the number of infections climbed just 4.1 percent. "The data are better but our work continues," said Giulio Gallera, the chief medical officer of Lombardy, Italy's worst-hit region. Italy was due to observe a minute's silence later Tuesday for victims of the disease.

Spain announced another 812 virus deaths in 24 hours, taking it past China, where the disease first emerged in December. Even with the US health system stretched, Trump said he was ordering some excess medical equipment be sent to Italy, France and Spain. Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed "closer cooperation" and addressed plunging oil prices in a Monday call, the Kremlin said.

Putin's government was getting to grips with its own outbreak, with the Russian strongman urging residents of Moscow to respect a lockdown that has closed all non-essential shops, and left Red Square deserted. Anna, a 36-year-old web designer, said the lockdown would be hard for her and her five-year-old daughter. "But I don't want Arina to get sick," she told AFP on her way to buy bread. "So of course we will observe the quarantine."

The lockdowns are causing hardship across the world but particularly in impoverished cities in Africa and Asia. Africa's biggest city, Lagos, joined the global stay-at-home from Monday, with Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari ordering a two-week lockdown for its 20 million people. The measures also apply to the capital Abuja. "Two weeks is too long. I don't know how we will cope," said student Abdul Rahim, 25, as he helped his sister sell food from a market stall.

Impoverished Zimbabwe also began enforcing a three-week lockdown. "They need to be fed, but there is nothing to eat," vegetable vendor Irene Ruwisi said in the township of Mbare, pointing at her four grandchildren. "How do they expect us to survive?"

## Expo 2020 Dubai supports 1-year...

Continued from Page 1

Dubai has little of the oil riches of neighboring emirates like Abu Dhabi, and its vital property, tourism and trade sectors had already been badly weakened in recent years. Expo organizers, participating countries and the Paris-based Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) - the governing body which awards the event - had agreed to investigate shifting the mega-event.

"We look forward to welcoming the world, which we are certain will only come out of this pressing challenge stronger, and more resilient than it ever was," Hashimi added. A final decision on postponement will be made by the BIE, but its Secretary General Dimitri Kerkentzes welcomed the recommendations. "The UAE's decision to support a one year postponement demonstrates pragmatism, openness, and commitment to delivering an Expo that lives up to our shared ambition," he said.

Dubai, known for hosting hundreds of conferences annually, has already scrapped a string of cultural and entertainment events in recent weeks over the spread of the deadly disease. "The decision to postpone (Expo 2020) comes at a crucial juncture when the economy is tipped to fall into a recession," said M R Raghu, head of research at Kuwait Financial Centre (Markaz). "SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises), hospitality, tourism and retail sectors that are already reeling under the twin impact of low oil prices and (the) coronavirus outbreak hoped to recoup and recover lost business during the Expo period."

The United Arab Emirates has announced 611 cases of coronavirus, and five deaths. It has enforced extensive lockdown measures to curb the spread of the disease including an ongoing nighttime curfew. The UAE recorded two deaths on Monday in Arab and Asian nationals, both in their 40s with pre-existing heart conditions. The country extended distance learning until the end of the academic year.

## Amnesty begins today with Filipino...

Continued from Page 1

Hermosura call upon all undocumented Filipinos to take advantage of the amnesty granted by the Kuwaiti government. "This is free for all illegals and the air tickets will be shouldered by the Kuwaiti government, so please take advantage of this amnesty," he said.

The ministry of interior has offered a one-month amnesty from April 1 to 30 to tens of thousands of expats living illegally in the country to leave without paying any fines and with the promise they will be allowed to return when the situation normalizes. The interior ministry has prepared 12 schools in the six governorates, six each for males and females, for such expats who prefer to go home. The ministry said that those who refuse to go will be penalized and denied reentry into the country.

Violators will be received from 8 am till 2 pm according to the following dates and nationalities: Philippines (April 1-5, 2020), Egypt (April 6-10), India (April 11-15), Bangladesh (April 16-20), Sri Lanka (April 21-25), other nationalities (April 26-30, 2020).

The manpower authority took part in a meeting the interior ministry held recently with representatives of various embassies and diplomatic missions

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia will finance treatment for anyone infected with the coronavirus in the country, the health minister said on Monday, while the agriculture ministry took steps to boost wheat and livestock supplies amid global fears of a food shortage. The kingdom has registered eight deaths among 1,453 infections, the highest among the six Gulf Arab states.

Health Minister Tawfiq Al-Rabiah said King Salman would cover treatment for citizens and residents diagnosed with the virus, urging people with symptoms to get tested. "We are all in the same boat," he told a news conference, adding that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was overseeing containment efforts "night and day".

King Salman last week chaired an extraordinary virtual summit of G20 leaders to advance a global response to the coronavirus pandemic. G20 trade ministers are holding an emergency video conference on Monday to discuss cooperation on supply chains. At a separate news conference, the agriculture ministry spokesman said Saudi Arabia would start importing at least 1.2 million tons more wheat next month, adding to strategic reserves of over 1 million tons. Abdullah Abalkhail said the kingdom had also expanded the list of countries from which it can import livestock.

Public health officials say Saudi Arabia's past experience combating the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) helped prepare it for the new coronavirus outbreak. The kingdom has taken drastic steps to contain the disease, halting international flights, closing most public places and imposing a partial curfew. Restrictions on movement have tightened, with entry and exit to Riyadh, Makkah, Madinah and Jeddah heavily restricted. The interior ministry said on Monday it was curbing access to six districts in Makkah, as it did over the weekend with several neighborhoods in Madinah.

The health ministry in Bahrain, which has recorded four deaths and 500 cases, said another plane of evacuated citizens from Iran landed in Manama, without providing details. Kuwait has repatriated hundreds of citizens from Britain, France and Iran since Saturday, the civil aviation authority said. — Agencies

designated in Kuwait to brief them on the latest developments concerning the amnesty granted to residents in violation of the residency law and accommodating them pending deportation to their home countries.

The ministry's assistant undersecretary for residency affairs Maj Gen Talal Maarafi explained how violators from over 11 expat labor centers desiring to benefit from the amnesty can apply to the temporary accommodation centers where they would be offered free meals pending deportation.

Manpower authority director Abdullah Al-Motoutah stressed that the authority works side by side with various state bodies, namely the interior ministry, to facilitate the procedures related to this decision. He urged embassy representatives to urge their nationals to seize the opportunity and benefit from the advantage of getting free tickets during the amnesty period without paying any fines, especially since the labor market is currently going through a recession due to the health situation.

"The law will be enforced and needed measures will be taken against violators remaining in the country after the amnesty concludes," Motoutah explained. The meeting was attended by diplomats from the embassies of Asian countries and of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iran and Ethiopia, who were all taken on a tour of the accommodation centers. According to several MPs, between 150,000 and 200,000 expatriates are living illegally in the country. Authorities have been trying to facilitate the departure of as many expatriates as possible in order to reduce the pressure on the health system.



Daily SuDoku								
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2			1	7	5			
	6						1	
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		3	4	5				

hard

Yesterday's Solution								
1	8	7	9	3	5	6	2	4
9	3	4	2	6	1	5	8	7
5	6	2	4	8	7	9	3	1
7	1	3	6	5	8	4	9	2
8	4	5	1	2	9	7	6	3
2	9	6	7	4	3	8	1	5
4	7	8	3	9	2	1	5	6
6	2	9	5	1	4	3	7	8
3	5	1	8	7	6	2	4	9

medium

STAR TRACK



**Aries (March 21-April 19)**

It could be difficult for you to think straight today, Aries. Your brain is probably working in short, erratic bursts that keep you guessing about which way to proceed. Avoid confusion during the day by periodically centering and separating yourself and your feelings from the drama around you. Don't pretend you understand something if you don't. If a situation doesn't make sense, go ahead and question it.



**Libra (September 23-October 22)**

Today could be filled with unexpected twists, turns, and bends in the road that you may not be prepared for, Libra. Apparently someone forgot to install the sign that warns of sharp curves ahead. Be on the lookout for unexpected forks in the road. When you get to them, take them, to coin a phrase. Your brain could receive a jolt from an outside source that reminds you to keep things real.



**Taurus (April 20-May 20)**

Freedom is a key aspect of life today, Taurus. You might find that your brain wants to break free and pursue more independent ways of thinking. Don't worry if such ways of thinking lead you into unknown territory. This is a sign that this is probably where you need to be. Your witty banter could take a sudden twist that surprises both you and the people you're talking to.



**Scorpio (October 23-November 21)**

You could be thinking some bizarre thoughts today, Scorpio. They might lead you in a direction that doesn't quite pertain to your current situation. Don't be afraid to explore these strange realms, because they could give you some important insight that you wouldn't have realized otherwise. Wisdom can be found in the unlikelyst of places, so don't discount something because it seems a bit off the wall at first.



**Gemini (May 21-June 20)**

People are apt to be as stubborn as you in their thinking today, Gemini. This could be a recipe for disaster if you aren't careful. Open the floodgates a bit wider and take in more of the opinions of others. Don't automatically assume that other people have to conform to your viewpoint to resolve an issue. More than likely, there needs to be some give and take from all involved.



**Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)**

Your thinking is solid and clear today, Sagittarius, but other people could challenge your mental power. Don't let others put seeds of doubt in your head about the way you approach a problem. Keep your mind open to alternative solutions, but don't beat yourself up for your current mental track. You might need to modify your strategy, but don't sacrifice your principles or values.



**Cancer (June 21-July 22)**

You could find yourself staring at a stranger for just one extra second as you pass on the street today, Cancer. Your tendency toward the new and bizarre is stronger than usual, and you're being pulled into different mental directions. Go ahead and introduce yourself to that stranger. Perhaps he or she will become a business partner or new best friend. You never know until you ask.



**Capricorn (December 22-January 19)**

You could get the feeling that something is wrong today when it isn't, Capricorn. It's probably just your perspective that needs some adjusting. Pull out your binoculars and focus a bit more so you can stand back yet have the power to examine the details closely. Don't automatically assume there's a clear distinction between right and wrong. There are likely a great many shades of gray, too.



**Leo (July 23-August 22)**

As you work slowly and steadily toward your goals, realize that there are apt to be unexpected obstacles along the way, Leo. You can't possibly plan for everything, so don't get discouraged today when some crazy variable pops out of nowhere. Your mental process may be thrown for a loop, and you might find that you go into a frenzy. There's a valuable lesson to be learned here - patience.



**Aquarius (January 20-February 18)**

Your sensitive nature is likely to pick up a disturbance in your thinking today, Aquarius. Suddenly, a blast of unexpected information could come your way and throw a monkey wrench in your mental process. Try not to get thrown off balance by the sudden jolt. You'll find that you can incorporate some of this new knowledge in a way that gives you a greater advantage.



**Virgo (August 23-September 22)**

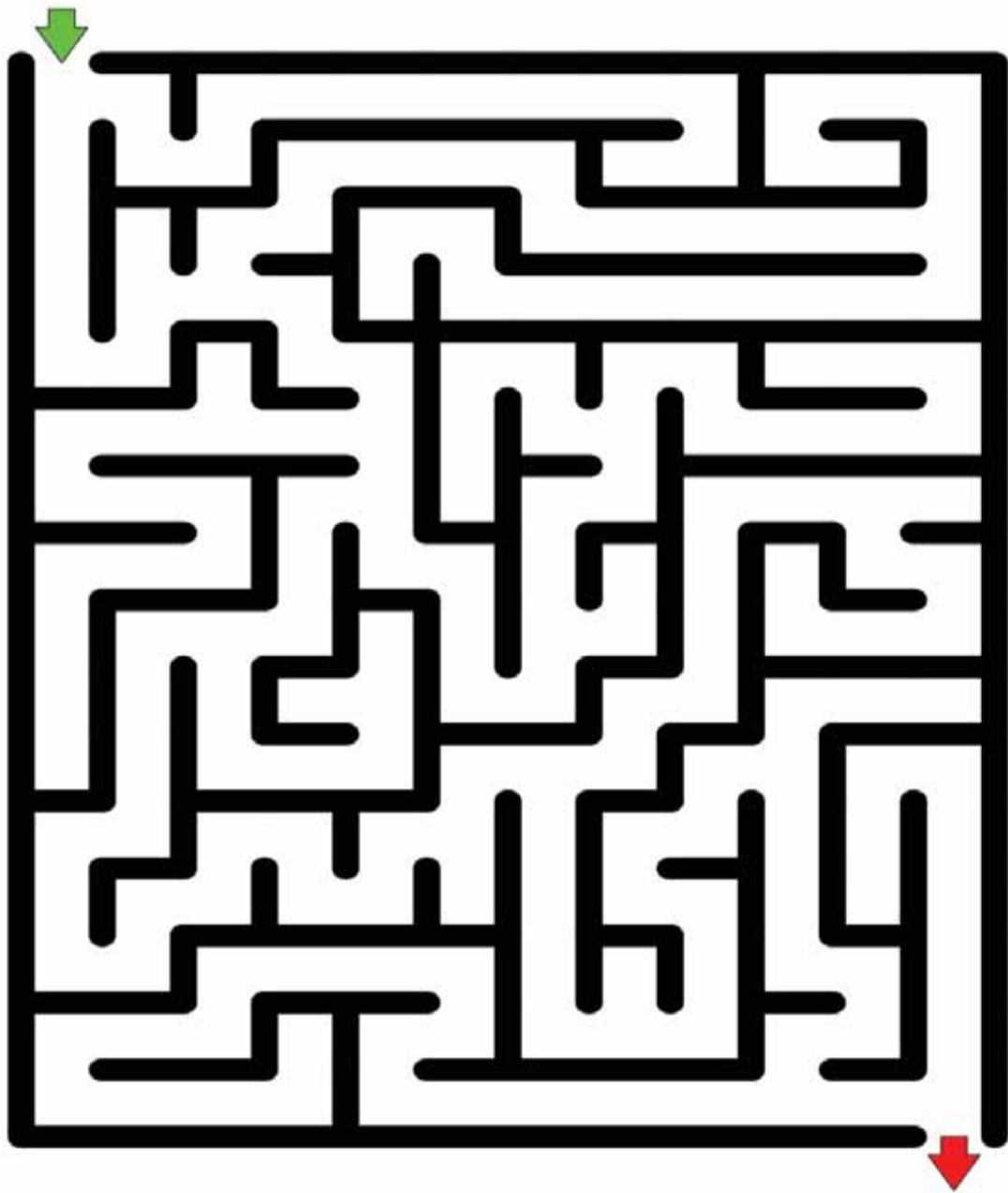
It's generally quite clear that you aren't afraid to tell people what you think, Virgo. Maybe it's time to be more expressive about how you feel. It could be that your mental process is a bit off today, jolted by an unexpected situation or person. Make sure you incorporate some of your instincts and emotions into your reaction to the situation. Don't rely on your brain alone to have all the answers.



**Pisces (February 19-March 20)**

You might experience some mental distractions that pull you in different directions today, Pisces. There could be a stubborn internal/external battle brewing. Realize that being in the middle is to your advantage. Look at the situation as a way to learn something about yourself and others. Understanding your opposition's viewpoint will help you. Incorporate the old and the new into your way of thinking.

Find the way



Color It



## Sports

## Photo of the Day



LEBANONAT: Matthias Appenzeller dives from the 27-meter platform in Lebanonat the Red Bull Cliff Diving World Series.

— Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

## Formula One simulator keeps Ocon in shape

**PARIS:** Hunkered down with his parents in Normandy, Renault driver Esteban Ocon is racking up the hours on a Formula One virtual simulator to be ready when the season finally gets underway.

The 23-year-old is preparing for his first campaign with Renault after spending last year as a Mercedes reserve driver following a successful two-season stint racing for Force India.

"My days are full and I behave as if I was going to race next week," the Frenchman told AFP. "I do a lot of racing on the simulator, and a great deal of sport."

"Nobody knows when the season will start, and as we have all the time we need now it's easy to keep in top shape." The 2020 Formula One season has been thrown into disarray by the coronavirus pandemic, which has claimed over 33,000 lives worldwide according to an AFP tally.

So far, Grand Prix races scheduled for Bahrain, Vietnam, China, the Netherlands, Spain and Azerbaijan have been postponed while the iconic Riviera showpiece in Monaco and the season-opening Australian race were cancelled. "It will restart when it restarts, once things are safe," Ocon said. "The winter break should have been over a long time ago, and with everything that's going on, we're glued to the news every evening, we see the figures rising and the tough times the world is going through."

"We just hope this will soon be over." France has been under lockdown since March 17, with Ocon spending his time on a simulator also being used by fellow F1 drivers Lando Norris and Max Verstappen.

"It keeps you up to speed facing off with good drivers. It keeps your reflexes primed," he said. "I'm hoping it will give me an edge, that when we get back I'll be more ready. A real car, and real sport is always better than a simulator, but they are getting closer to the real thing these days. — AFP"

# Japan businessman paid \$8.2m for Tokyo 2020 Olympics bid

## Takahashi acknowledged receiving payments but declined to give full accounting

**TOKYO/PARIS:** A businessman who received millions of dollars for his work on Tokyo's successful campaign to host the 2020 Olympics, which was postponed last week due to the coronavirus, said he played a key role in securing the support of a former Olympics powerbroker suspected by French prosecutors of taking bribes to help Japan's bid.

Haruyuki Takahashi, a former executive at the advertising agency Dentsu Inc, was paid \$8.2 million by the committee that spearheaded Tokyo's bid for the 2020 Games, according to financial records reviewed by Reuters. Takahashi told Reuters his work included lobbying International Olympic Committee members like Lamine Diack, the ex-Olympics powerbroker, and that he gave Diack gifts, including digital cameras and a Seiko watch.

"They're cheap," he said. The payments made Takahashi the single largest recipient of money from the Tokyo bid committee, which was mostly funded by Japanese companies. After his involvement in Tokyo's successful campaign, Takahashi was named to the board of the Tokyo 2020 organizing committee, a group tasked with running the summer Games after it was awarded to Japan.

Takahashi acknowledged receiving the payments but declined to give a full accounting of how he used the money. He said he urged Diack to support the Tokyo bid and denied any impropriety in those dealings. He said it was normal to provide gifts as a way of currying good relations with important officials like Diack. He said there was nothing improper with the payments he received or with the way he used the money.

"You don't go empty-handed. That's common sense," Takahashi told Reuters, referring to the gifts he gave Diack. Banking records from the Tokyo 2020 bid committee, which were examined by Reuters, show it paid around \$46,500 to Seiko Watch. A senior official at the bid told Reuters "good" watches were handed out at parties organized as part of Tokyo's campaign to win the Olympics, although he did not specify the brand.

International Olympic Committee (IOC) regula-

tions allowed for the giving of gifts of nominal value at the time of the 2020 bid, but didn't stipulate a specific amount.

A day before the 2013 vote on the host city, Diack informed a meeting of African Olympic representatives that he planned to support Tokyo on merit, a lawyer for the influential Senegalese sports figure told Reuters. But he didn't instruct anyone how to vote, the lawyer said.

The Tokyo bid committee also paid \$1.3 million to a little-known non-profit institute run by former Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, a powerful figure in Japanese sports and the head of the Tokyo Olympics organizing committee.

The payments to Takahashi's company and Mori's non-profit are enumerated in banking records from the Tokyo 2020 bid committee examined by Reuters. The payments were first reported by Japanese magazine Facta. French investigators have not questioned anyone about the payments to the Japanese recipients.

The banking records were provided to French prosecutors by Japan's government as part of France's investigation into whether Tokyo's bid committee paid \$2.3 million through a Singaporean consultant to win Diack's support for Japan to host the 2020 Games.

Diack, 86, has consistently denied any wrongdoing. His lawyer said Diack "denies all allegations of bribery." The French are also investigating Diack's son, Papa Massata Diack, on suspicion that he received the bulk of the money paid to the Singaporean consultant, and passed money on to his father to secure votes for Tokyo. Diack's son has also denied any wrongdoing and said via email that he would "deliver my version in courts!!!"

Mori did not respond to questions from Reuters. A representative of Mori's non-profit said the entity was paid by the bid committee to "mainly analyze international information."

Nobumoto Higuchi, the secretary general of the bid committee, said Takahashi earned commissions

on the corporate sponsorships he collected for the bid. "Takahashi has connections," Higuchi said. "We needed someone who understands the business world."

The International Olympic Committee said it would not have been made aware of payments between private parties or gifts given to IOC members.

### FRENCH INVESTIGATION

Olympic preparations have cost Japanese taxpayers some \$13 billion, and the delay of the Games has rattled corporate sponsors, who had paid a record \$3 billion to be affiliated with the Olympics as of June last year.

Mori and Takahashi were central to Tokyo's bid to win the Olympics, a campaign that began in 2011 and became a national priority under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Mori has publicly recounted how he lobbied a key International Olympic Committee official ahead of the vote.

Since 2015, French prosecutors have been inves-

tigating Diack, formerly the head of the international body governing track and field. Diack has also been accused of taking a separate \$2 million bribe to corral votes for Rio de Janeiro in that city's successful bid to hold the Olympics in 2016. He has been under house arrest in France since charges of corruption linked to sports doping - when he headed the International Association of Athletics Federations - were brought against him in 2015.

Diack's lawyer said his client "did not receive any money from anyone relating to the Olympic Games in Tokyo or Rio de Janeiro." Tsunekazu Takeda, who headed Tokyo's bid committee, is also under investigation by the French on suspicion of authorizing the payments from the bid committee to the Singaporean consultant that investigators suspect acted as an intermediary to get money to Diack. Takeda resigned from both the Japanese Olympic Committee and the International Olympic Committee last year and has denied wrongdoing, saying he believed the payments were for legitimate lobbying efforts. — Reuters

"The decision to postpone the Dubai Duty Free Irish Open follows consultation with all stakeholders and was made with public health and well-being as our absolute priority," said European Tour chief executive Keith Pelley.

"We will continue to evaluate all aspects of our 2020 European Tour schedule, and discussions on the rescheduling of postponed events will remain ongoing until we have clarity on the global situation."

The US Open is due to take place at Winged Foot from June 18-21, but the course is just five miles away from the coronavirus containment zone set up in New Rochelle, New York and non-essential businesses have been closed, putting a stop to preparations.

The R&A is still proceeding as planned to stage The Open at Royal St George's from July 16-19 and the Women's British Open at Royal Troon from August 20-23, but is undertaking a "comprehensive evaluation" of its plans and considering contingency options. —AFP

## Masters hosts donate \$2m to coronavirus tests

**WASHINGTON:** Augusta National Golf Club, which in most years would be preparing to host the Masters, announced on Monday it will give \$2 million to help fight the coronavirus pandemic in its region.

This year's Masters, which was to have lured golfers and fans from around the world to the famed Georgia layout next week, was postponed indefinitely due to the global outbreak of the deadly virus.

The donation to the Community Foundation for the Central Savannah River Area features \$1 million to Augusta University for immediate expansion of coronavirus testing and \$1 million to the emergency re-

sponse fund to relief efforts to the area's most vulnerable people.

"It is our hope these gifts will help address the many challenges brought about by the coronavirus throughout the city of Augusta and the greater region," Augusta National chairman Fred Ridley said.

"We believe Augusta National has an important responsibility to support and protect the community who has so generously and consistently supported us for many years." The only prior years the Masters has not been contested in April at Augusta National since its 1934 debut were 1943-1945 due to World War II. Ridley praised the medical workers who have been treating an ever-growing number of patients.

"We are grateful to the Community Foundation for their continued partnership during this unprecedented time and especially appreciative to the dedicated healthcare providers, first responders and many others working tirelessly to fight the effects of this pandemic," Ridley said.



**TOKYO:** Haruyuki Takahashi, executive board member for the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (Tokyo 2020), wears a face mask during a Tokyo 2020 executive board meeting on the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

“You don’t go empty-handed”

## Sports

# French football stares at financial black hole, broadcasters to hold back payments

## Several French clubs place their squads on partial unemployment

PARIS: The financial crisis facing football as a result of the coronavirus pandemic has been laid bare in France, where a decision to withhold payments due as part of a broadcast deal for Ligue 1 matches is set to leave clubs reeling.

Canal Plus, the pay TV giant and long-time broadcaster of France's top flight, stated its intention to hold back a scheduled 110 million-euro (\$121 million) payment in a letter to the French league revealed by the country's leading sports daily, L'Equipe.

The money is in theory due this weekend and is the equivalent of 15 percent of the total broadcast money for the season in Ligue 1. "In case of force majeure, when matches are no longer played, then payments are suspended," a senior management figure at Canal Plus told AFP.

"This is the perfect example of force majeure. There are no more matches, so there are no more payments. We are strictly applying the terms of the contract and we don't see why we would do it any other way. Canal Plus is not a bank."

The French top flight is the fifth-richest league in Europe although its income lags some way behind those of Italy's Serie A, the German Bundesliga, Spain's La Liga and, in particular, the English Premier League.

French clubs, like their counterparts across the continent, have been hit hard by the health crisis which had already forced matches to be postponed or played behind closed doors before UEFA suspended all club competitions in Europe a fortnight ago.

Clubs will now have to absorb the shock of not receiving money for which they have budgeted, and income from broadcasters is a huge portion of their revenue. Indeed, payments from television companies amounted to 36 percent of total revenue for Ligue 1 teams last season, by far their biggest source of income, according to the DNCG, French football's financial watchdog. A further 25 percent came from player sales, which are likely to be affected this year too.

"They have their problems and we have ours. There needs to be a dialogue so we can find solutions," said a member of the board of the French league, the LFP. "I don't think the decision by Canal Plus is irreversible."

### UNCERTAINTY

L'Equipe has claimed that Paris Saint-Germain, the Qatar-owned giants who dominate the French game, stand to lose as much as 215 million euros between now and the end of June, assuming the worst-case scenario in which no more games are played and all projected gate receipts and Champions League revenues are also lost.

Several French clubs, including Lyon and Marseille, have placed their squads on partial unemployment to save money, a move that means they only pay 70 percent of salaries with the state paying the rest, albeit limited to 4,850 euros per employee.

The problems may deepen if beIN Sports, the Qatari group which also holds domestic rights to broadcast Ligue 1, chooses to hold back its own



PARIS: File photo taken on June 05, 2019 shows French Football Federation President Noel Le Graët addresses delegates at the 69th FIFA Congress at Paris Expo, Porte de Versailles in Paris. In view of the coronavirus pandemic, the president of the French Football Federation Noel Le Graët considers it is "not reasonable" to predict a date for when the competitions will resume, he said in an interview with AFP on March 27, 2020. — AFP

scheduled payment of 42 million euros.

French Football Federation president Noel Le Graët called on all parties "to respect their commitments, football first of all but the broadcasters too", in an interview with RTL radio.

However, with broadcasters also impacted by the

crisis, further payments due to clubs in June could also be in doubt. It also remains to be seen how the current situation impacts on next season with the French league having agreed their first broadcast deal worth over one billion euros a year starting in 2020/21 with Chinese-owned group Mediapro. — AFP

## Sharma polices virus curfew

NEW DELHI: Joginder Sharma bowled the key final over when India beat arch-rivals Pakistan in the first Twenty20 World Cup cricket final in 2007, but says he faces more pressure as a police officer making sure people stay home during the coronavirus crisis.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) and others have hailed the efforts of the 36-year-old as he hits the streets of India in his role as an officer of the law.

"Obviously this contribution is much bigger because people are losing their lives," Sharma told AFP from Hisar in Haryana where he is now a superintendent. "It was also a big thing, winning the World Cup for India, but here we have to save the nation. And even if I am playing a small part in this, then it is huge."

Sharma has been leading a team trying to keep people off the streets during a 21-day lockdown ordered by the government to halt the spread of the virus. India has now reported 29 deaths from more than 1,000 cases, but experts believe there are many more.

Thousands of people have been arrested across the country for flouting the curfew. The ICC said Sharma had gone from World Cup hero to "real world hero" as it released a picture of the all-rounder in India cricket colours and his khaki police uniform.

Sharma, who played just four one-day internationals and four T20 matches, said he is using cricket's spirit of teamwork to tackle the crisis. "It was the nature of my sport, which is a team game and players work together to make things happen. So now we have to help each other and the biggest help will be to stay inside our homes," said Sharma.

"This is the only way to fight coronavirus. Feed the hungry, help the poor. Say no to social gatherings, go out just for getting essentials, but maintain social distance," Sharma added that his "extreme fitness levels"



DURBAN: File photo taken on September 23, 2007, the then Indian cricket team bowler Joginder Sharma (R) celebrates with teammates during semi-final of the ICC World Twenty20 in Durban, 22 September 2007. Sharma, says he faces more pressure as a police officer making sure people stay home during the curfew — AFP

and fame also come in handy as an officer on the beat.

"People know me and recognise

me and that helps putting my point across. But now I am a police officer and this is my duty." — AFP

## Grealish apologizes, for breaking isolation rules

LONDON: Aston Villa captain Jack Grealish posted a public apology on Monday for breaking UK government guidelines on social distancing as police opened an investigation into an incident in which a Range Rover crashed into parked cars.

Villa expressed their disappointment with Grealish and said the 24-year-old will be fined with the proceeds going to a children's hospital in Birmingham. West Midlands Police said they were called on Sunday to an address in Solihull, near Birmingham, where the two parked cars suffered minor damage.

The force said the driver had left his details with a

member of the public before leaving on foot. "I just want to do a quick video message to say how deeply embarrassed I am about what has happened this weekend," Grealish said in a video posted on Twitter.

"I obviously just got a call off a friend asking to go round to his and stupidly agreed to do so. I don't want anyone to make the same mistake that I did, so I urge everyone to stay home and follow the rules and guidelines of what we are being asked to do."

The British government has introduced restrictions on citizens leaving their homes only to shop for food and medicine, essential travel for work and one form of exercise a day to help halt the spread of coronavirus.

"Aston Villa is deeply disappointed that one of our players ignored the government's guidance on staying at home during the Coronavirus crisis," Villa said in a statement.

"Club captain Jack Grealish has accepted that his decision to leave his house was wrong and en-

tirely unnecessary. It breached the government guidelines which are clear and should be adhered to by everybody.

"The player will be disciplined and fined with the proceeds donated to The University Hospitals Charity in Birmingham." Less than 24 hours before the incident, Grealish was part of a video appeal for people to stay at home during the lockdown.

"I hope everyone can accept my apology and we can move on from this," added Grealish. "Hopefully in the near future we can all be out enjoying ourselves again." In a statement about the incident, West Midlands Police added: "Officers are investigating the circumstances and anyone with information has been asked to get in touch."

Grealish has been Villa's star performer on their return to the Premier League this season and was expected to earn a first call-up by England for friendlies against Denmark and Italy this month prior to football's shutdown due to COVID-19. — AFP

## Smith faces competition for captaincy

SYDNEY: A rising crop of young talent will compete with Steve Smith to be Australia's next captain, current skipper Tim Paine said yesterday. Smith captained the side before Paine but was slapped with a two-year leadership ban over his part in the ball tampering scandal during a Test in Cape Town in 2018.

The ban expired this week, prompting renewed speculation that Smith could soon resume the leadership duties. While 35-year-old Paine has acknowledged he is in the twilight of his career, the wicketkeeper said he was not yet ready to walk away from

the game. He refused to lay out a timetable for his departure, particularly with the uncertainty created by the COVID-19 shutdown, saying only that coach Justin Langer and selectors knew of his plans.

"I know what I'm thinking, in terms of how far I can play on and we're on the same page," he told reporters via video conference. Paine said he had not spoken with Smith about the captaincy but the 30-year-old batsman would not be the only candidate for the role.

"We've got a number of guys to choose from who can put their hand up," he said. "There's Steve Smith, who's done it before, or the people who are developing underneath like a Travis Head or an Alex Carey — Marnus Labuschagne and Pat Cummins are other ones. "We're starting to build some real depth so that when my time's up we've got a number of options." — AFP

## Paine sees crowded Test calendar

SYDNEY: Australia captain Tim Paine believes Test cricketers would be prepared to play a lot of matches in a short space of time once the coronavirus crisis is over to ensure the World Test Championship can be completed as scheduled next year.

International cricket, like most other sports, has been shut down while the world battles the pandemic and Paine said it did not take "Einstein" to conclude that Australia's tour of Bangladesh would probably not go ahead in June.

With other tours also on hold, it has been suggested that the International Cricket Council might need to push

back the conclusion of the inaugural edition of the test championship.

Paine hoped it would not be pushed back too far and said he thought players would favour playing catch-up to finish it as planned with a final between the top two teams at Lord's on June 10, 2021.

"Maybe the players are going to have to go through a period where we play quite a bit of cricket if we want to complete the test championship as it is," the 35-year-old wicketkeeper said in a teleconference yesterday.

"I think the players are certainly enjoying that points system and the fact that every test match counts for something ... I think all players would be in favour of trying to finish that any way we can." Paine reiterated that winning the championship was a big goal for his team, who are currently second in the standings behind India. The Indians are scheduled to play four tests in Australia at the end of the year. — Reuters

## Documentary 'motivates' England Root for Ashes

LONDON: England Test captain Joe Root has said watching the first few episodes of a documentary about the Australian cricket team has been a "motivator" ahead of the 2021/22 Ashes Down Under.

"The Test' charts Australia's progress from the low of the 2018 ball-tampering scandal in South Africa through to the high of retaining the Ashes in a drawn series in England last year after the hosts and eventual champions beat them in the World Cup semi-finals.

The largely well-received documentary has also been accused of being a public relations exercise given Cricket Australia had editorial control. But with cricket suspended worldwide because of the coronavirus pandemic, Root decided to take a look.

"Whilst we were away (on tour) I exhausted a lot of the shows that I wanted to watch, it's come round to watching that now," he told reporters in a conference call on Monday.

"It's been a good motivator to get back and train, get back on the bike, use it as a way of incentivising myself. "I've only got to the start of the World Cup, so we'll see how the rest of it unfolds."

Root, while acknowledging the importance of the World Test Championship, made clear an Ashes series in Australia remains the acid test for an England cricketer. Under his leadership, England were beaten 4-0 in the 2017/18 Ashes.

But Root said the threat posed by the likes of fast bowler Mark Wood, man-of-the-match in the fourth Test victory against South Africa, added an "X-factor" to England's attack. "We've seen in South Africa that has played a part, it has found us a way to take 20 wickets in foreign conditions."

### 'HARDENED'

Turning to top-order rising stars Dom Sibley and Ollie Pope, Root added: "If we can keep putting experience into a number of the young batters as well, give them game time, then we're starting to build a team that has confidence, experience, is ready and hardened for the challenges Australia will throw at us."

England followed the drawn Ashes campaign with a 3-1 series win in South Africa only to see their tour of Sri Lanka abandoned before the first Test due to the coronavirus.

"There are more important things to concern ourselves with," said Root, now a patron of his local Sheffield Children's Hospital. "But from a cricketing point of view we were preparing ourselves well for the two Test matches in Sri Lanka and we made big strides in South Africa."

Root, while acknowledging there would be talks regarding leading players taking pay cuts to help English cricket balance its books at a time without fixtures, said "it's not my area of expertise". But he added the prospect of the 2020 season being abandoned completely had "definitely crossed my mind". "It might be that my wife has to start giving me some throw-downs in the back garden but until things become that drastic it will be simply sit tight and wait," said Root. — AFP

**18** Japan businessman paid \$8.2m for Tokyo 2020 Olympics bid



**19** French football stares at financial black hole with broadcasters set to hold back payments



**19** Smith faces competition for captaincy: Paine



## Isolated athletes face mental health risks



Athletes are facing extra mental health risks as they go from highly active lifestyles to isolation and boredom.

**HONG KONG:** Fear, stress and money worries: Coronavirus lockdown is hard for anyone, but athletes are facing extra mental health risks as they go from highly active lifestyles to isolation and boredom, experts warn. While some housebound athletes have posted upbeat videos of themselves training or attempting internet challenges such as juggling toilet rolls, the stress caused by the extreme adjustment and uncertain future looks likely to take its toll.

Long-term effects on athletes after the SARS and swine flu outbreaks included anxiety, obsessive hand-washing and fear of getting too close to people, Carolyn Broderick, Tennis Australia's chief medical officer, told AFP.

But the impact of the current pandemic is unprecedented, with athletes sidelined worldwide after COVID-19 forced most sports into hibernation and put billions of people in lockdown.

Those affected range from well-paid superstars such as tennis's Serena Williams, who has suffered from depression in the past, to journeyman pros and Olympic hopefuls whose lives have been thrown into turmoil. Williams, 38, who only needs one more Grand

Slam title to equal the all-time record of 24, admitted that social distancing because of coronavirus had left her feeling "a ton of stress".

"Every little thing makes me crazy. And by anxiety I mean I'm just on edge. Any time anyone sneezes around me or coughs I get crazy," she said on TikTok. Even before the virus, a steady stream of people involved in sports — often an insecure and high-stress profession — have wrestled with depression, from Williams to Olympic swimming great Michael Phelps, MMA fighter Ronda Rousey, boxer Mike Tyson and All Blacks rugby player John Kirwan.

The athletes currently out of action include thousands of would-be Olympians, many of whom have put careers on hold to chase medal dreams but now face extra disruption after the Tokyo 2020 Games were postponed for a year.

"I would be lying if I said I was all right. Just like most people I'm struggling in my own ways,"

affected while Espanyol have also confirmed pay cuts, although for sporting staff only.

"For our part, the time has come to announce that, as well as the reduction of 70 per cent of our salary during the State of Alarm, we will also make contributions so the club's employees can collect 100 per cent of their salary while this situation lasts," Messi wrote.

He added: "We want to clarify that our desire has always been to apply a drop in salary because we fully understand that this is an exceptional situation and we are the first ones who have ALWAYS helped the club when asked.

"Many times we have even done it on our own initiative when we thought it necessary or important. Therefore, it never ceases to amaze us that from within the club there were those who tried to put us under the magnifying glass and tried to add pressure to do something that we always knew we would do."

### 'MUST BE DONE'

Messi's message was soon posted on the pages of nearly all of his Barcelona teammates, including Gerard Pique, Sergio Busquets, Luis Suarez, Jordi Alba, Antoine Griezmann, Frenkie de Jong, Arturo Vidal and

Olympics-bound American weightlifter Kate Nye, who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, told America's WOODTV.com.

Concerns have also been raised about Australia's swimmers and cricketers, after athletes in both sports suffered well-documented psychological problems in the past. "The mental health thing, we talked about it in a conference call this week," said Australian men's cricket coach Justin Langer.

"Particularly for any of our staff or players who are home alone basically. We have to keep an eye on those guys and girls to make sure they're OK."

Broderick, who was deputy medical director for Australia's 2016 Olympics team, and sits on an advisory panel for the National Rugby League, said the effects of isolation can be felt more acutely by athletes. "They have all the same psychological issues that everyone does but also the stress and anxiety about their futures that they cannot easily

control," she said. "They don't know what the next stage is going to be or how long they're going to have to quarantine or isolate for."

Many sports bodies have reacted by offering support to athletes. However, some sports are making cuts to avoid going bust, reducing their ability to help.

Substance abuse, such as drinking or using drugs, is one tell-tale sign of problems, Broderick said.

"Stress and anxiety can manifest in substance abuse. That's what I'd look out for, if they're using alcohol as a support," she said.

"There has certainly been some anxiety," added Broderick, who said Australia's tennis players receive regular communications and can call on medical support. "The high-level, high-profile professional athletes can handle this loss of income but there are a lot of athletes on the fringe," she said.

"If you have a few months of loss of activity there's a significant loss of income as well." She recommended athletes stick to routines, focus on what can be controlled and use their extra time for a hobby or online training to maintain their mental health.—AFP



### From winners to worriers

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## Messi confirms pay cut for Barca players

**MADRID:** Lionel Messi confirmed on Monday that Barcelona's players will take a 70 per cent pay cut and make financial contributions to ensure the club's other employees are paid in full during the state of alarm in Spain.

In a lengthy message posted on his Instagram account, Messi also took another swipe at the Barca board, led by president Josep Maria Bartomeu, whom he accused of undermining the players during recent negotiations.

Other Spanish clubs are expected to follow suit in applying temporary pay cuts, as football's hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic leaves a number of them fighting for financial survival.

Atletico Madrid have said the club will impose salary reductions on staff whose hours have been af-

Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

The relationship between Barca's players and board has been tense for several months, with Messi's public criticism of technical secretary Eric Abidal in February just one of a number of off-field controversies. Bartomeu said later on Monday the senior players were on board with taking pay cuts right from the start. "From the first moment I wanted it to be something agreed and not imposed even if I could do it by law, but we wanted to reach an agreement because it's best for Barca and shows their commitment," Bartomeu told Catalan sports daily Mundo Deportivo.

"From the first moment, Messi said that this must be done," he added in an interview with Sport. Barcelona also released their own statement on Monday, which said members of "all professional sports teams and most of the basketball team" had agreed to reduce their salaries.

It added: "In the case of the football first team the reduction will be more than 70 per cent as agreed with the club. This additional contribution by the team, plus the contribution from the club itself, will guarantee 100 per cent of the salaries of all non-sporting staff, who will be subjected to temporary redundancy this week." — AFP



Lionel Messi