



# 27 expats among 28 new virus cases; Cabinet OKs stimulus

Saudi urges Muslims to defer hajj plans • Europe toll hits grim milestone

## Hundreds apply to leave on first day of amnesty

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Hundreds of undocumented Filipinos in Kuwait flocked to interior ministry centers in Farwaniya yesterday to avail of an amnesty offered to residency violators. Illegal residents have been granted a 30-day period to leave Kuwait without paying fines with free air tickets courtesy of the Kuwaiti government. Residents of certain nationalities have been given a specific period to process their documents - Filipinos from April 1-5, Egyptians from April 6-10, Indians from April 11-15, Bangladeshis from April 16-20, Sri Lankans from April 21-25 and the rest of the nationalities from April 26-30.

Embassy personnel are posted at the venue to oversee the proceedings. Male applicants should visit Al-Muthanna Primary School for Boys (block 1, street 122), while females should visit Farwaniya Primary School for Girls (block 1, street 76).

Asked about flights scheduled for Filipinos, Philippine Charge d'Affaires Charleson Hermosura said this depends on availability and clearances by

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KUWAIT: Undocumented Filipinas wait in a queue outside a school in Farwaniya with their luggage to apply to avail of an amnesty offered to residency violators yesterday. —Photo by Ben Garcia

By B Izzak and Agencies

KUWAIT: The government yesterday approved the country's first stimulus package aimed at supporting the national economy in the face of the coronavirus impact, pledging to provide cash to companies and individuals to prevent a liquidity crisis and to enable them pay salaries to their staff.

Meanwhile, the ministry of health announced yesterday 28 new coronavirus cases, 27 of whom are expats, including 24 Indians, two Bangladeshis and one Nepali. This raises the total number of cases to 317. Spokesman of the ministry of health Abdullah Al-Sanad said 80 cases have recovered and 237 others are under treatment, including 14 in the intensive care unit. Four cases are in critical condition. As many as 911 people have been discharged from ministry quarantines.

Following an extraordinary meeting of the Cabinet that continued until the early hours of yesterday, a statement said immediate financial assistance will be provided to vital economic sectors that include individuals, small and medium enterprises and companies. The aid aims at "helping them overcome the current circumstances through providing liquidity (cash) necessary for those bodies to meet their commitments," said the statement, adding the measure aims at preventing a shortage of liquidity from becoming a crisis.

The statement said the economic study approved by the Cabinet was prepared by 82 experts and

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# V O L V O

# STAY SAFE STAY HOME





# Kuwait education vision to be sent to parliament soon

## Ministry, lawmakers discuss online learning in private, public schools

Curfew Diaries

### Duty of care



By Jamie Etheridge

etheridge@kuwaittimes.com

Yesterday, two important developments happened in Kuwait. In the first, a video circulated on social media of the senior leadership of a local company warning that layoffs were imminent. The company is a major employer, and no doubt many thousands of people, mostly expatriates, who work there are all freaking out. There are few things scarier than losing your job or your salary, especially during the middle of a global pandemic and global economic crisis. Already tens of thousands of expatriates have lost their jobs or had their salaries cut, and there are few opportunities at the moment to find new work.

The second news came late at night, from the Cabinet. In a statement published on KUNA, the state news agency, the Cabinet announced a raft of measures aimed at protecting the economy and securing the incomes of citizens who work in the private sector. In an unprecedented measure, the Cabinet also noted that it would be "establishing a mechanism to secure the minimum income that ensures facing the costs of living for workers affected by the current crisis and linked to contracts." It's not fully clear but it seems like the government might be saying that it will provide some basic unemployment support for expatriates.

The reality is that tens of thousands of expatriates in Kuwait may soon find themselves unemployed or at most partially employed, with little hope of finding new jobs. Though there is no legal obligation on the part of employers, there is still a moral obligation, a 'duty of care' to their employees.

We are grateful to the government for stepping up and helping all those who will be in need, but it is also time to ask why companies and corporations - especially multimillion-dollar corporations - have no duty of care for their employees? Why corporations work so well for the shareholders but never for the thousands of people who grow the business, who commit their time, energy, creativity, ideas, hard work and lifetimes to helping build a business?

In the United States, Macy just announced a massive layoff of 125,000 people due to the pandemic's explosion in the US and the shutdown of the economy. These people may receive a onetime stimulus cheque from the government, possibly a few weeks of unemployment, and then they are on their own to survive or not. Meanwhile, major corporations and banks will receive yet another massive stimulus package because unlike individual Americans who can die homeless and starving on the streets, major corporations are 'too big to fail'.

As this pandemic is showing us, we are all connected and interdependent, and that means we all share a 'duty of care' to each other. That means employers also have a moral obligation to their workers during times of crisis to ensure that they also are not allowed to 'fail'.



KUWAIT: Education Minister Dr Saud Al-Harbi attends a meeting for the National Assembly's educational committee, in the presence of Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem — National Assembly photo

By A Saleh

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Education will forward its vision regarding public and private education to the parliamentary educational and cultural committee in 10 days from Tuesday, Minister Dr Saud Al-Harbi said. Harbi, also Minister of Higher Education, said Education progress would not stop in the State of Kuwait. He was speaking in a press statement after a meeting with the parliamentary committee, attended by Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, during which the two sides discussed online education as an optional choice. Harbi said the parliament and government were coordinating progress of education. "Time is crucial now and the right decisions are needed without delay," he added.

#### Online learning

Meanwhile, committee member MP Mohammed Al-Dallal said the meeting saw agreement to adopt online learning in private schools but confirmed that it would be optional, noting that the education ministry would hold a press conference to explain online education regulations, duration, marking and methodology, how to assess tuition fees, the reasons for not cancelling them during the suspension and why online learning was approved for kindergarten.

As far as applying online learning in public schools if the crisis goes on for the unforeseeable future, Dallal said that ministry officials reviewed various ideas, noting that they would be prepared for such possibility and would come up with full views in this regard. "We also discussed the legality of online learning, the government's capability to provide it for all Kuwaiti students as well as whether parents are ready to implement it in terms of having enough laptops and valid internet," Dallal noted.

Moreover, Dallal said that the Ministry of Higher Education is about to get the finance ministry's approval to pay students abroad an extra monthly salary, as instructed by the cabinet, within ten days. Dallal added that the committee meeting also discussed the role of the education and higher education ministries' in fighting COVID-19, its plans to provide learners in public and private schools with learning as well as its plans concerning scholarship students and those studying at their own expenses.

"Today's meeting was dedicated to discussing what is expected to happen after next August, assuming that the crisis might continue, the ministry's plan to handle the issue and how to deal with the possible shortage of expat teachers in both public and private schools," Dallal explained, noting that the committee urged the education ministry to set a long term clear plan in this regard.

Concerning Kuwaiti students abroad, Dallal said

that minister Harbi stressed that the cabinet's decision to pay them an extra month's salary would be put into practice for all students, including those dispatched by the government, Kuwait University or the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training.

Al-Dallal added that the meeting discussed the ministry's coordination with the health ministry to evacuate students stranded in distant countries such as the United States. "We gave examples on how to communicate with those students in case cultural attaches in any of those countries fail to do so and stressed that the National Assembly fully supports our students abroad," he added.

A group of 23 Kuwaiti NGOs had earlier strongly criticized the education ministry's decision to suspend school for seven months without having an alternative educational plan, noting that this will negatively affect students' academic achievement and educational level. The group issued a statement in which it thanked HH the Amir for instructing the Cabinet to take all needed precautionary measures to fight COVID-19. The group also thanked medical staff, security bodies, Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRC) and all volunteers for their efforts in this regard. "Despite the challenges the government faced at the beginning of the crisis, it has subsequently exercised its role more effectively, making it among the best performing countries in facing this crisis. Nevertheless, we did not see this distinction in dealing with education, in spite of HH the Amir's emphasis on addressing the educational repercussions of the pandemic, and despite everything spent on student education in Kuwait, which is the highest compared to the rest of the world," the statement said.

"We unfortunately see that the ministry of education opted to suspend school completely for a period of seven months, without even benefiting from other GCC states' experiences and use all their potential to continue the education of students using modern technology," the NGOs complained, pointing out that parents have been expressing concern about keeping their children at home without access to any educational activities.

The group urged the education ministry to be transparent and shoulder its responsibilities without jeopardizing students' future as a result of some ministry officials' mistakes. It also urged the ministry to utilize all possible local and regional e-learning expertise to resolve the problem.

The statement was signed by the Women's Cultural and Social Society, Kuwait Graduates Association, Association of Social Workers, Kuwait Society for Education Quality, Abi Ataallah Society, Kuwait Transparency Society, National Association of Familial Security and many other educational, professional and literary organizations.

local spotlight

### Something positive out of coronavirus



By Abdellatif Sharaa

It was very hard at the start of the curfew in Kuwait. I was out at a co-operative society store, and had to be back with my groceries around 4:30 pm. When I arrived, I found the elevator was not working, so I had to take the bags up the stairs to the third floor. When I attempted to put the things in the kitchen, my wife asked me to please leave, so I did. I sat on the couch and picked up a paper to read, but found that I had forgotten my glasses in the car. When I headed to the door to go and get them, my wife this time wanted me to stay in because the parking yard is on the other side of the street and I may be caught by active police patrols, as the time was already past 5:00 pm. "You are not going out," she said.

That first night was really hard for me, and I could not stay put, and kept moving from the living room to the bedroom to the kitchen. Then I decided to go through some books on the shelves and discovered that there were books I hadn't even opened yet, although I had bought them a long time ago! I felt that I should refresh my cultural knowledge and grabbed a book and read for two hours, then exercised a little by going up and down the stairs because of the curfew.

Now and then I picked up my mobile phone to go through some reports and news items, particularly about the coronavirus and its effects, and my eyes fell on a headline saying "the Surprising Benefits of Coronavirus" - interesting, isn't it? The report said "just like that, the entire world has experienced a change in its daily routine due to the coronavirus pandemic and the need to reduce or stop travel for the sake of global health."

From new strict hand washing regimens to cancelled events or having to work from home, this is without a doubt affecting everything in our daily lives. In fact the environment might just be the only beneficiary of this scary social distancing scenario we are all part of.

Reports said that air quality has improved immensely in China as an example, since residents were staying home due to the pandemic. China's ministry of ecology and environment said the average numbers of good quality air days increased 21.5 percent in February compared to the same time last year. This is why we should look for something positive, even if we are in the midst of a fierce battle, with determination that the battle will be won, and we should build on the positives we have made and not drop them.

"Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence" —Helen Keller

## Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has so far recorded 317 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). With the exception of 14 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, 80 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, the ministry said. There are 237 people receiving treatment and 2,466 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 an

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

# Recommendations adopted to address coronavirus economic repercussions

## High-level team prepares 'practical scenarios' to mitigate economic effects

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Cabinet held an extraordinary meeting Tuesday at the Seif Palace headed by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Interior and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh said the following after the meeting: Within the framework of following up the effects of economic and social repercussions of the exceptional measures taken by the state in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, the cabinet reviewed a report from the joint economic team between government agencies and the private sector to provide practical scenarios to address the economic repercussions and mitigate its effects.

The cabinet discussed the results of team's work in which more than 82 persons with expertise, specialization and representatives of local associations and federations as well as specialized international institutions participated, explaining the unique and unprecedented nature of this global crisis, whose effects and repercussions included all countries of the world. It also discussed the contents of the report aimed at confirming the state's ability and keenness to preserve the fundamentals of the national economy, avoid the costs that might arise from stopping the wheel of the national economy at various levels, and avoid negative effects in some economic sectors, including maintaining the credit rating of Kuwait.

### Basic principles

The report clarified the basic principles that were based on presenting the team's perceptions, which were represented in:

1. Protecting public capital and rationalizing its use in the interest of the public, while emphasizing that these measures are to ensure the continued rotation of the economic activity, and not to compensate companies or individuals.



**KUWAIT:** Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah heads the meeting. — KUNA

2. Commitment to full transparency in the implementation and follow-up of procedures.
3. Ensuring social protection for citizens.
4. Maintaining the national employees' conditions in the private sector and increasing their numbers.
5. Investing the proposed measures in support of structural reforms of the economy.
6. Providing various ways of support and facilities subject to commitment to the requirements of national economy structural reforms.

### Social protection

In this regard, the report examined a number of measures aimed at social protection, including:

1. Ensure the safety of the citizens working in the sectors affected by the repercussions of the crisis.
2. Maintaining the necessary support to maintain stability in the levels and prices of food and medical commodities in local markets.
3. Establishing a mechanism to secure the minimum income that ensures facing the cost of living for workers affected by the current crisis and linked to contracts.
4. Support the salaries of those registered under Chapter 5 in social security in the affected sectors.

5. Assist owners of small, medium, industrial and agricultural projects by postponing the installments funded by the National Fund for Small and Medium Enterprises Development and the agricultural finance portfolio in the Industrial Bank.

6. Providing loans on concessional and long terms to small and medium enterprises, through joint financing from local banks and the National Fund for Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Development.

7. Providing soft and long-term loans on the affected companies and clients, provided by local banks.

8. Postponing the share of business owners in the private and oil sectors not fully owned by the state from the monthly contributions due to the Public Institution for Social Security for a period of six months, in addition to postponing the payment of the monthly contributions due to the insured in accordance with the provisions of Chapter Five of the Social Security Law for a period of six months, as well Postponing the deduction of the replacement part of the retirement pension according to Article 77 of the Law for a period of six months.

9. Payment of the retirement pension on the assumption that what the law permits is not disbursed in advance for cases that have benefited from the provision

of Article 112 of the Social Security Law for a period of six months, provided that the legal instrument necessary to implement this decision is specified.

10. Provide government exemptions to the affected economic institutions in the productive sectors and the cooperative societies from some government fees and dues if these exemptions are reflected on their clients with the same value.

11. Instruct government bodies to expedite routine work cycle to pay the obligations due to the private sector as quickly as possible.

The report also included the legislative requirements necessary to implement its recommendations related to the governance and follow-up of the implementation of the proposed procedures, and ended with the formation of a higher steering committee to follow up, evaluate and implement the procedures and a strategic and technical support team in order to ensure the implementation of these procedures. The cabinet has set up a committee headed by the Governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait and the membership of Undersecretary of the Ministry of Finance, and the managing director of the General Investment Authority to put the incentive pillars of the local economy. —KUNA

## Kuwait FM, WHO chief discuss COVID-19 spread



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

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah and Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus discussed Tuesday global conditions amidst spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). Sheikh Ahmad, in his phone call with Ghebreyesus, called anew for collaboration of international efforts to fighting COVID-19 and WHO's vital role in this regard.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Sabah met Tuesday 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 Dr Helal Al-Sayer and Chairman of Kuwait Airways Yusuf Al-Jassem, 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 Public Authority for Civil Information, Directorate General of Civil Aviation, KRCS, information technology agency and Kuwait Airways.

In other news, Kuwait Embassy in Washington called on Kuwaiti students who finished their university studies or due to graduate this semester to contact immigration authorities to extend their residency permits. The embassy, in a statement Tuesday, said those students should ask their universities to maintain their residency permit or reactivating it through the 'SEVIS' platform, in order to give the student more time to correct his legal residency status.

Those students, it added, should request an extension or change status of their residencies through: [www.uscis.gov/i-539](http://www.uscis.gov/i-539). If a request is submitted, said the embassy, his residency would not be considered expired until a decision adopted regarding his request. The embassy said the cultural offices would reach out to all students for clarifications. —KUNA



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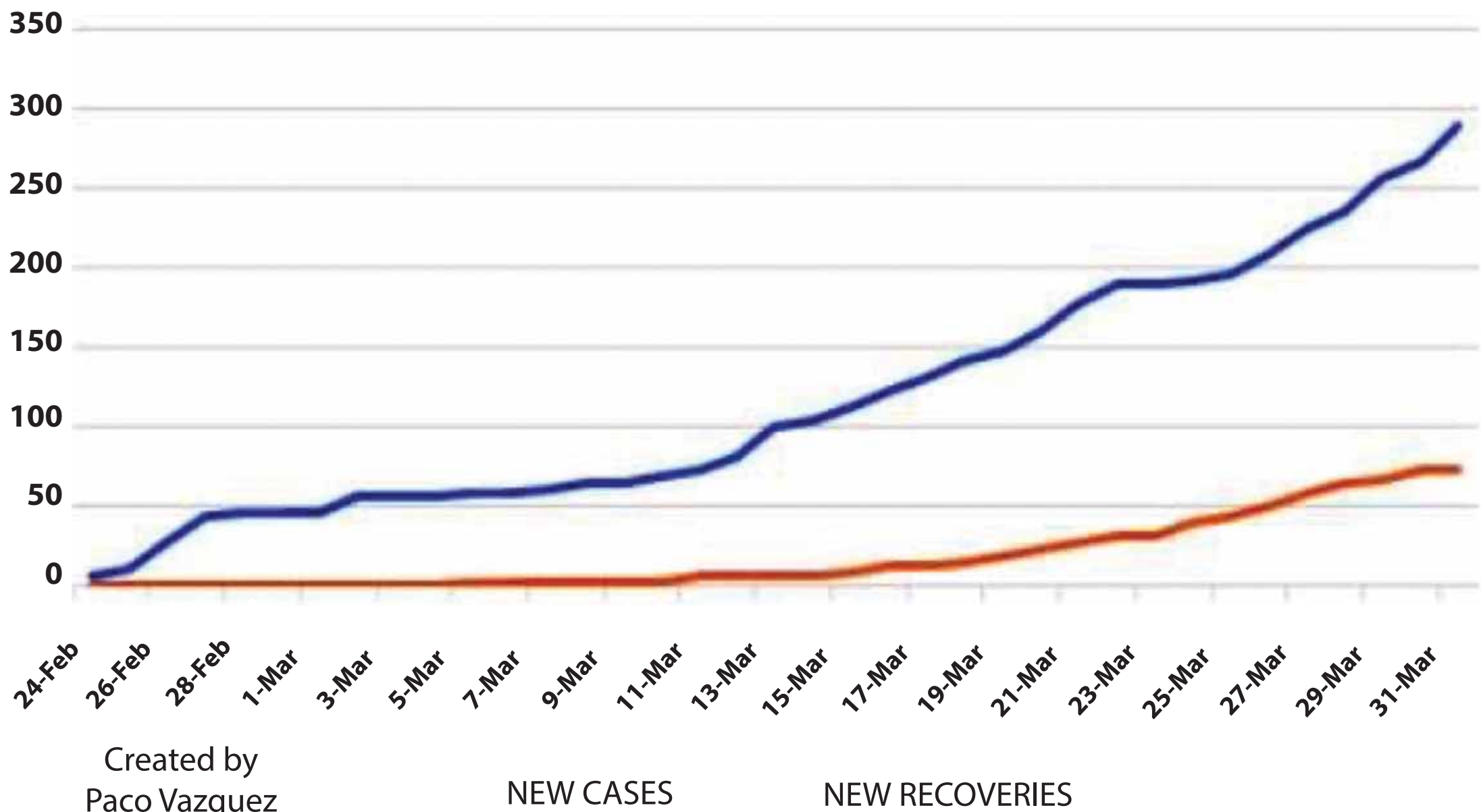
**KUWAIT:** A car rental office in Salmiya caught fire yesterday morning, prompting Salmiya fire station men respond. The fire was put out and no injuries were reported. An investigation was opened to determine the cause of the blaze. — By Hanan Al-Saadoun



## Photo of the Day

## Accumulative number of COVID-19 cases and recoveries in Kuwait

Source: <https://corona.e.gov.kw/En>



KUWAIT: A line chart showing the increase in the number of cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Kuwait from February 24 to the end of March, compared to the number of recoveries in the same period. —Created by Paco Vazquez

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### KPI support Kuwait embassies to meet citizens' needs in Europe

KUWAIT: Kuwait Petroleum International (KPI) is supporting Kuwait embassies abroad to meet demands of Kuwaiti citizens amidst spread of coronavirus. KPI President and CEO Sheikh Nawaf Saud Al-Sabah said Tuesday. KPI Operations office in northwest Europe has purchased sanitizers and masks, and gave them to Kuwait embassies in Paris, France, and the Hague, Netherlands, to be distributed to Kuwaiti citizens, Sheikh Nawaf said in a press statement. He said this process was part of KPI's contribution to helping all government bodies whether in or outside Kuwait.

Sheikh Nawaf said the world was experiencing difficult and unstable circumstances due to the spread of coronavirus. KPI, known by its Q8 logo, was established in 1983 as the international marketing arm of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC). The company owns and operates a huge network of gas stations in European countries. KPI supplies aircraft fuel, manufacture and market lubricants as well as managing refineries.

#### Italy's victims

Separately, the Kuwaiti Embassy in Rome on

Tuesday took part in a symbolic event in Italy mourning thousands of victims of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Kuwaiti Ambassador to Italy Sheikh Azzam Mubarak Al-Sabah paid tribute to the virus victims in front of the Kuwaiti Embassy at 12:00 am (local time) as part of the nationwide event called by Italian provinces.

Sheikh Azzam said the embassy's participation in the event reflects its heartfelt and human sentiments and sympathies with the families of the COVID-19 victims in Italy. The ambassador affirmed that the leadership and people of Kuwait stand side by side with the Italian government and people in this calamity, and backs ongoing great efforts exerted by Italy to curb the spread of this respiratory virus.

Italian flags were flown at half-mast over the Republican Palace and municipal buildings, with mayors observing a one-minute silence, with flags of Italy hanging from balconies and windows and churches ringing the mourning bells nationwide. Recent statistics put the number of infections with COVID-19 in Italy at over 100,000, with some 11,000 fatalities. —KUNA



ROME: Kuwaiti Ambassador to Italy Sheikh Azzam Mubarak Al-Sabah participates in a symbolic event in Italy mourning thousands of victims of the novel coronavirus. —KUNA

### KOTC takes delivery of new oil tanker

KUWAIT: Kuwait Oil Tanker Company (KOTC) on Tuesday got delivery of Al-Yamamah Oil Tanker from the South Korean Hyundai Mipo Dockyard ship builder. The new ship is one of eight tankers, of various sizes and for different purposes, ordered from the Korean company in a contract signed in April 2018. Acting CEO of the KOTC Ali Al-Shehab said. He pointed out that the building of the new ship, the 29th member of KOTC fleet, comes within the framework of the fourth phase of the fleet revamp and modernization. The new tanker is eco-friendly and fuel efficient as it was built according to highest international standards for protecting the



KUWAIT: Al-Yamamah Oil Tanker received by Kuwait Oil Tanker Company (KOTC). —KUNA

environment and reducing emission, Shehab boasted. He said that the company is keen on implementing its strategic goals to enhance its status and serve Kuwait oil sector in the world. —KUNA



Local

# Local produce available in co-ops at reasonable cost

Over 30 kinds of local vegetables produced at Wafra and Abdali farms



KUWAIT: A combination of pictures taken during a tour the team conducted at Abdullah Al-Salem Co-operative Society Tuesday. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

By Meshaal Al-Enezi

KUWAIT: Undersecretary of the Ministry of Social Affairs Abdul Aziz Shuaib stressed that Kuwait Farmers Union's board is fully capable of providing various co-ops with local agricultural products, adding that he had conducted a tour Tuesday along with union's chairman and members of various co-ops, during which he found an abundance of various Kuwaiti agricultural products. Shuaib thanked the Kuwait Farmers Union's board of directors and all farmers for their efforts in providing produce at reasonable cost.

Kuwait Farmers Union Chairman Abdullah Al-Dammak thanked the union and co-op board members for their cooperation in providing local products, expressing hope that all co-ops will one day have special outlets for local products. Dammak also thanked Minister Mariam Al-Aqel for her efforts in subsidizing local agricultural products to protect and maintain food security, especially at this time when Kuwait and entire world are going through hardships due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The union's deputy chairman Hussein bin Samel expressed gratitude to those who had contributed in implementing the ministry resolution on providing co-ops with local products directly without the need for any middlemen, noting that the decision proved fruitful for both farmers and consumers, who can now get local products at reasonable prices and with

high quality. Kuwait Farmers Union treasurer Jaber Marzouq said that thanks to Kuwaiti farmers, the union is able to provide co-ops with 30 to 35 kinds of local vegetables produced at Wafra and Abdali farms.

**Inspections**

Kuwait Municipality's Public Relations Department said Farwaniya municipal inspectors toured various shops in Riggae, Andalus and Ardiya industrial area to make sure they respect municipality regulations and apply its precautionary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Team leader Ahmad Al-Sheriekeh said inspectors filed four citations and dealt with three complaints received through the hotline.

Meanwhile, Jahra municipal manager Thamer Al-Mutairi said an inspection tour headed by the follow-up manager Mohsen Al-Thuwaikh visited 74 shops in Sulaibiya, Qairawan and Jahra co-ops and in Jahra industrial area, resulting in closing 14 shops including six mobile phone shops, four carpenteries, an automobile office, a military garment outlet, a barbershop and a tailor shop.

**Expat engineers**

As part of efforts exerted by the manpower authority to fight COVID-19, Director Ahmad Al-Moussa announced coordination with the Kuwait Society of Engineers (KSE) over the methodology of accrediting expat engineers' professional evaluation and examinations and conducting them online with the aim of saving time and avoiding the need to visit KSE headquarters and protect engineers. Moussa added that expat engineers will be able to renew their work permits online at [www.kseonline.com](http://www.kseonline.com), adding that the manpower authority spares no effort in operating automated systems to protect all beneficiaries.

**Food imports**

For the first time in Kuwait, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MOCI) issued import licenses

for 13 NGOs, allowing them to import foodstuff and other products to help maintain strategic reserves. The licenses prohibit licensees from buying products from local markets. The licensed NGOs include Mercy International, IICO, Direct Aid Organization, Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, Social Reform Society, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Nouri Charity, Al-Najat Charity, Kuwait Society for Relief, KRCS, the Global Charity Association for Development, Al-Salam Society for Charity and Humanitarian Activities, Ruhamaa Baynahum Society and Kuwait Society for Humanitarian Action.



**Officials tour co-ops to check supply**





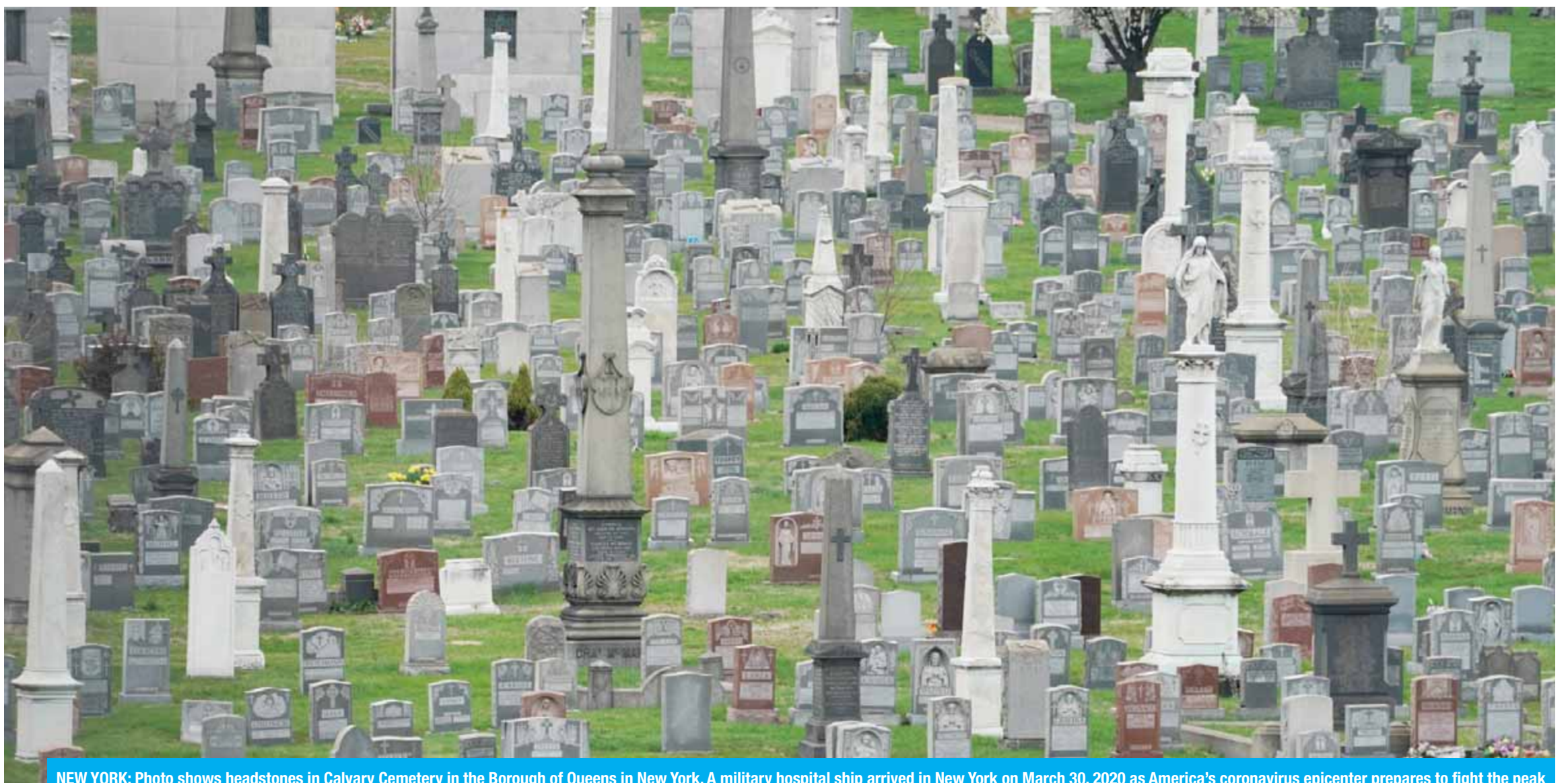


US kids stuck at home embrace online classes

## Virus: California to release 3,500 non-violent prison inmates

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NEW YORK: Photo shows headstones in Calvary Cemetery in the Borough of Queens in New York. A military hospital ship arrived in New York on March 30, 2020 as America's coronavirus epicenter prepares to fight the peak of the pandemic that has killed over 2,500 people across the US. — AFP

# US braces for staggering death toll

## Europe reels; UK's coronavirus deaths rise 27%; Minister laments 'shocking' toll

WASHINGTON: Americans were told Tuesday to brace for "very painful" weeks ahead in a worsening coronavirus pandemic projected to claim up to a quarter million US lives, as fatalities spiked in European hotspots Spain, France and Britain. With more than 42,100 already killed by the disease barreling around the globe, the United States registered a record 865 deaths in 24 hours - taking its death toll to 3,873.

As field hospitals sprouted in the US outbreak's epicenter New York City, Trump said he was extending social distancing and stay-at-home orders for another 30 days. "This is going to be a very painful - a very, very painful - two weeks," the president said at the White House as he described the pandemic as "a plague."

"I want every American to be prepared for the hard days that lie ahead." In a matter of months, the virus has infected more than 857,000 people in a crisis hammering the global economy and transforming the daily existence of some 3.6 billion people told to stay home under lockdowns. Deaths shot up again across Europe. While there are hopeful signs that the spread of infections is slowing in hardest-hit Italy and Spain, more than 800 died overnight in both countries. France recorded a one-day record of 499 dead while Britain reported 381 coronavirus deaths. But members of Trump's coronavirus task force offered a grim forecast of between 100,000 and 240,000 US deaths in coming months, taking into

account current mitigation efforts. "As sobering a number as that is, we should be prepared for it," Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, said with Trump at his side when asked about the lower figure of 100,000.

But Fauci said mitigation was "actually working" and that authorities are doing everything they can to get the death toll "significantly below that." With hospitals direly overstretched, lockdowns have been extended despite their crushing economic impact. In Belgium a 12-year-old girl died in another worrying case of a youth succumbing to the disease. France joined the US with a surge to 3,525 deaths, an official toll that includes only those who died in hospital and not those who perished at home or in seniors' homes.

### 'We need help now'

The inundation of patients has sent health facilities worldwide into overdrive. Emergency hospitals are popping up in event spaces while distressed medical staff make grim decisions about how to distribute limited protective gear, beds and life-saving respirators. In scenes previously unimaginable in peacetime, around a dozen white tents were erected to serve as a field hospital in New York's Central Park.

While many companies and schools around the globe have shifted to teleworking and teaching over video platforms, huge swaths of the world's workforce cannot perform their jobs online and are now

lacking pay and face a deeply uncertain future. Food banks in New York City have seen a huge rise in newcomers struggling to feed their families.

"It is my first time," Lina Alba, a cleaner at a Manhattan hotel that closed two weeks ago, said from a food distribution center. "We need the help now. This is crazy," said Alba, a 40-year-old single mother of five. Three quarters of Americans are now under some form of lockdown, while off the Florida coast a coronavirus-stricken cruise ship and its sister vessel are pleading for somewhere to dock after four passengers died on board.

### Virus breeds divisions

The extraordinary economic and political upheaval spurred by the virus is opening new fronts for cooperation and conflict. In virtual talks Tuesday, finance ministers and central bankers from the world's 20 major economies pledged to address the debt burden of low-income countries and deliver aid to emerging markets. Last week G20 leaders said they were injecting \$5 trillion into the global economy to head off a feared deep recession. In the European Union, however, battle lines have been drawn over the terms of a rescue plan.

Worst-hit Italy and Spain are leading a push for a shared debt instrument - dubbed "coronabonds." But talk of shared debt is a red line for Germany and other northern countries, threatening to divide the bloc. European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen also

warned against using emergency measures as a pretext for power grabs - after a new law gave Hungary's nationalist leader Viktor Orban authority to rule by decree until his government deems the crisis over.

Meanwhile, the number of deaths from coronavirus in the United Kingdom rose by 27% in the space of a day, according to new figures on Tuesday that a senior cabinet minister described as shocking and disturbing. The government said 1,789 people have died in hospitals from coronavirus as of 1600 GMT on Monday, an increase of 381 from Sunday, the largest rise in absolute terms yet. "The increase in the number of deaths is deeply shocking, disturbing (and) moving," Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove said at a news conference, adding that it was not possible to predict when fatalities would peak.

"It depends on the actions of all of us," he added. "We can delay that peak, we can flatten the curve through our own particular actions." Later on Tuesday, a London hospital announced that a 13-year-old boy had died after contracting coronavirus. Britain's youngest fatality from the pandemic. Britain initially took a gradual approach to containing the virus compared with European countries such as Italy. But Prime Minister Boris Johnson imposed stringent controls after projections showed a quarter of a million people could die. Johnson has since become the first leader of a major power to announce a positive test result for coronavirus. — Agencies

## Batons, bullying and handcuffs mar Africa virus shutdowns

JOHANNESBURG: Soldiers tower over youngsters in South Africa's Soweto township, forcing them to do push-ups and roll on the floor as punishment for not adhering to a lockdown meant to halt the spread of coronavirus. Caught on camera and circulated on social media, they added to a string of videos purporting to show violence by security forces deployed to enforce curfew and confinement across Africa. Rubber bullets, tear gas and whips have been used to maintain social distancing in shopping queues and to discipline citizens caught outside their homes without valid reason.

"It seems to be the only way in which authorities know how to deal with the populace, through violence and humiliation," said Amnesty International's Shenilla Mohamed, executive director for South Africa, adding that abuse had also been reported from Zimbabwe, Kenya and Nigeria. South African police are investigating the deaths of three citizens allegedly killed by patrols for defying the lockdown, which came into force last Friday.

"That's almost the same amount of people that have died from coronavirus," noted Mohamed, referring to the nation's latest death toll of five. One person was allegedly shot by police on his way home from a bar - a direct breach of regulations prohibiting the sale of alcohol during the 21-day shutdown. Defense Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula has condemned the reported heavy-handedness and vowed to withdraw soldiers caught abusing their powers.



ALEXANDRA: A Gauteng Traffic Police officer fires rubber bullets to urge residents to get inside during a mixed patrol of South African National Defense Force (SANDF) and Gauteng Traffic Police in Alexandra, Johannesburg. — AFP

### Intimidation tactics

To date coronavirus has infected more than 5,690 people in Africa and killed at least 195, according to an AFP tally. The pandemic has been slow to reach the continent, despite an acceleration in recent weeks, and numbers remain relatively low compared to other parts of the world. Dozens of African governments have made use of the extra time to roll out curfews and shutdowns earlier than their worse-hit counterparts in the West.

But such measures are difficult to enact in countries where most people live in poverty and work informally, often in packed urban slums with little access to sanitation. "If we take measures which

starve everybody, they will quickly end up being defied," said Benin's President Patrice Talon on Sunday, adding that his country lacked the means to enforce public confinement.

As governments have struggled to keep citizens indoors, their security forces have been quick to fall back on intimidation tactics, raising widespread concern. "It is unacceptable to see such inhuman and degrading treatment against the population," tweeted Nicolas Simard, Canada's ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Congo, in response to a video of masked policemen beating a young man to the ground in the capital Kinshasa, which went into lockdown last week. — AFP

## Coronavirus: Pet cat tests positive

HONG KONG: A pet cat has tested positive for the coronavirus in Hong Kong after its owner was confirmed with having the virus, the city's Agricultural and Fisheries department said, cautioning that the animal has not shown any signs of the disease. In a notice late on Tuesday, the department said there is currently no evidence that pet animals can be a source of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, and owners should not abandon their pets.

The World Health Organization also states on their website that there is no evidence that a dog, cat or any pet can transmit COVID-19. The cat is the third animal to test positive in Hong Kong, following earlier cases in which two dogs tested weak positive or positive during repeated tests for the virus. Authorities said the cat will continue to be monitored and examined.

Samples collected from the cat's mouth, nose and rectum tested positive for the virus after it was sent to quarantine on March 30. There has only been one other reported case of coronavirus in a cat, in Belgium, which is believed to have become infected from its owner, according to a statement from the Hong Kong Veterinary Association. The Veterinary Association said the most likely way pets would be exposed to the virus is from their owners or other people they come into contact with, and the cases were no cause for alarm. — Reuters



## International

# India and Pakistan crack down on Muslim group as COVID-19 cluster

## Tablighi centers closed in Delhi and across Pakistan

**NEW DELHI:** India and Pakistan sealed off centers belonging to a Muslim missionary group on Tuesday and began investigating how many coronavirus cases were linked to its activities. Tablighi Jamaat is a Deobandi Sunni Muslim missionary movement that preaches worldwide. Every year, tens of thousands attend its congregations in the Pakistani city of Lahore and other parts of South Asia.

India has so far registered 32 deaths from 1,251 confirmed infections, and Pakistan 20 from 1,914. The numbers are small compared with the United States, Italy or China but health officials say both countries have weak public health systems that could be overwhelmed by a surge in cases. New Delhi's city administration has flagged a Muslim quarter where the 100-year-old group has a branch as a coronavirus hotspot after dozens of people tested positive for the virus there and at least seven died.

Authorities said people kept visiting the centre, in a five-storey building in a neighborhood of narrow, winding lanes, from other parts of the country and abroad, and that it had preached sermons to large groups despite government orders on social distancing. Hundreds of people were crammed into the building until the weekend, when authorities began taking them out for testing.

More buses arrived on Tuesday to take them away to quarantine centers in another part of the city. "It looks like social distancing and quarantine protocols were not practiced here," the city administration said in a statement. "The administrators

violated these conditions and several cases of corona-positive patients have been found ... By this gross act of negligence, many lives have been endangered ... This is nothing but a criminal act."

### Tracing movements

Authorities are trying to trace the movements of people who had gathered at the Tablighi centres in Delhi and Lahore and the people who were exposed to them. In Pakistan, the Lahore Tablighi centre was sealed off and dozens of other preaching centers across the country were placed in quarantine after 143 Tablighi members tested positive and three died, officials said.

Media said the cases included Tablighi members from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal, Myanmar, Kyrgyzstan and Saudi Arabia. Malaysia's health ministry had told a news conference in Kuala Lumpur that it was investigating the presence of Malaysians at the Delhi centre. India, with a population of more than 1.3 billion, is under lockdown until mid-April to try to stem the spread of the coronavirus, but tens of

thousands of out-of-work migrants are fleeing to the countryside, undermining the restrictions.

Musharraf Ali, an administrator of the Tablighi centre in Delhi, said the group had been seeking help from police and the city authorities to deal with the large number who were unable to leave after the government announced a lockdown. "There was no option ... but to accommodate the stranded visitors with prescribed medical precautions until such time as the situation becomes

### New Delhi centre 'defied the social distancing order'



## Factories in Gaza pivot to masks in corona response

**GAZA:** Queen Tex factory in Gaza used to specialize in manufacturing shirts and jeans, but with the novel coronavirus epidemic sweeping the globe it has pivoted into medicalwear. Now lines of men are using old sewing machines to stitch together masks while also wearing them, as the blockaded Palestinian enclave develops a homegrown response to the crisis. "We were intending to import masks and suits from China but there were difficulties importing, so we decided to make them ourselves," manager Hassan Alwan said.

His factory says it works to international standards but only has enough material to make around 1,000 hazmat suits. The Gaza Strip has only had a handful of confirmed COVID-19 cases so far. The suits, masks and gloves are being made initially for the local market, with the potential to later export to Israel which is fighting a far larger outbreak. Gaza has been largely closed off by the Jewish state since the Islamist movement Hamas seized control of it in 2007.

Much of the world considers Hamas, with which Israel has fought three wars, a terrorist organization.

Hamas has stipulated no masks or suits can be exported until the local market's needs have been met. But Hassan Shehata, co-director of another factory, Hasanco, is optimistic he can sell to the Israeli market. "Israeli companies sent us the cloth to produce medical masks for them. They need millions of masks," he said. "We want to produce three million masks."

Dozens of employees work 10-hour days but there are not enough machines to hit their targets, he said. Many Palestinian factories used to supply the Israeli market before 2007. Now, the coronavirus crisis could allow the struggling Gaza textiles industry to make a comeback, said Maher al-Tabbaa of the local chamber of commerce. "The Gaza clothing industry is characterized by high quality that competes globally if it is given the possibility of exporting."

### Fear and beards

Gaza has so far declared only 10 cases of the new coronavirus, starting with two people who returned from Pakistan and were already in quarantine when diagnosed. Seven guards connected to them were later found to have been infected, while a 10th case was announced on Monday. Hamas authorities have closed schools and mosques and Gaza's only other border, with Egypt, has also been closed. More than 1,500 Palestinians who returned from Egypt shortly before the closure have been quarantined in the south of the strip. Yet fears remain that any outbreak in impoverished Gaza could spread rapidly.

al stage, including about health issues.

Taipei says this has confused countries and led them to impose the same restrictions on Taiwanese travelers as for Chinese, and has minimized Taiwan's own successful efforts to control the virus. Taiwan has been debating for years who it is and what exactly its relationship should be with China - including the island's name. But the pandemic has shot the issue back into the spotlight.

Lin I-chin, a legislator for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), said in parliament last month that Taiwan should change its English name to "Republic of Chungwa", an English rendering of the word Taiwan uses for China in its name. "Taiwan has been brought to grief by China," she said. On Monday, the New Power Party, one of Taiwan's smaller opposition groups, released the results of a survey in which almost three-quarters of respondents said Taiwan passports should only have the word "Taiwan" on them, removing any reference to China.

mass of cars, buses and lorries. Police dressed in protective gear stopped vehicles coming into or leaving Lagos state and refused to let any deemed non-essential pass. A hundred trucks carrying cement from the company of Africa's richest man Aliko Dangote stood motionless in a line at one checkpoint. "We received instructions not to allow any vehicle to pass except those on essential services," a masked officer told AFP.

Police backed up by personnel from the city's myriad of other security agencies checked identity cards of drivers before determining whether to let them by. The Lagos state governor has urged security forces to be "friendly and civil" but officers have also been licensed to use force on those who do not comply. Officials insist the draconian measures are needed to halt the spread of a virus after 135 cases and two deaths were confirmed across Nigeria. Lagos is the hotspot with 81 infections detected so far.

### 'We need to eat'

Along the main road through the middle class neighborhood of Lekki, betting shops, mattress stores, churches, florists and scrap metal dealers had all closed their doors. But in the alleyways of the



**ISLAMABAD:** Policemen wearing facemasks stand guard at a checkpoint beside the Grand Faisal Mosque during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus. —AFP

conducive for their movement or arrangements are made by the authorities," Ali said. In Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told government officials that she might extend a 10-day lockdown due to end on April 4 for a few more days.

Following is data on the spread of the coronavirus in South Asia's eight countries, according to government figures: Pakistan has registered

1,914 cases, including 20 deaths; India has registered 1,251 cases, including 32 deaths; Sri Lanka has registered 132 cases, including two deaths; Afghanistan has registered 183 cases, including four deaths; Bangladesh has registered 51 cases, including five deaths; Maldives has registered 28 cases and no deaths; Nepal has registered five cases and no deaths; Bhutan has registered four cases and no deaths. —Reuters



**GAZA:** Palestinian workers manufacture protective coveralls and masks at a workshop in Gaza City amid coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. —AFP

United Nations envoy Nickolay Mladenov said Monday that Gaza's health system was overstretched even before the disease emerged. "Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world - this coupled with its already fragile health care system makes it a particularly high-risk case for the COVID-19 outbreak," he told the UN Security Council. Gaza has maintained a semblance of normality, with barbers and other stores still open, though staff are required to wear protective gear. —AFP

"During this epidemic period, our people have been misunderstood by other countries, highlighting the urgency of changing the English name," it said in a statement. Taiwan's Foreign Ministry has given a cautious response to the passport idea, noting that according to the constitution, the official name is Republic of China and that the word Taiwan was already added to passport covers in 2003. "In the future, if there is consensus between the ruling and opposition parties on this new name, the Foreign Ministry shall cooperate in handling it," spokeswoman Joanne Ou said.

But the government is wary of a name change for Taiwan, saying there is no consensus for such a radical move. Although the DPP supports the island's independence - theoretically meaning the official formation of a Republic of Taiwan - President Tsai Ing-wen says there is no need to do so, as the island is already an independent country called the Republic of China. She often refers to the island as the Republic of China, Taiwan. —Reuters



**LAGOS:** An aerial view shows empty streets in Lagos. Lagos was deserted after Nigeria locked down its economic hub and shuttered its capital Abuja, in the continent's latest effort to brake the juggernaut of COVID-19 coronavirus. —AFP

poorer district of Ajah there was clear anxiety and rising anger. Most of the people here have very little savings to fall back on. They live hand-to-mouth, relying on their daily earnings to survive. Police had passed by in the early hours to disperse the few people refusing to obey the lockdown. —AFP

## From zero to hero: Italy's Chinese help beat coronavirus

**FLORENCE:** In the storm of infection and death sweeping Italy, one big community stands out to health officials as remarkably unscathed - the 50,000 ethnic Chinese who live in the town of Prato. Two months ago, the country's Chinese residents were the target of what Amnesty International described as shameful discrimination, the butt of insults and violent attack by people who feared they would spread the coronavirus through Italy.

But in the Tuscan town of Prato, home to Italy's biggest single Chinese community, the opposite has been true. Once scapegoats, they are now held up by authorities as a model for early, strict adoption of infection-control measures. "We Italians feared that the Chinese of Prato were to be the problem. Instead, they did much better than us," said Renzo Berti, top state health official for the area, which includes Florence.

"Among Chinese resident in Prato there isn't even one case of COVID contagion," he said, referring to COVID-19, which has killed almost 12,000 people in Italy, more than in any other country.

Ethnic Chinese make up about a quarter of Prato's population, but Berti credits them with bringing down the entire town's infection rate to almost half the Italian average - 62 cases per 100,000 inhabitants versus 115 for the country.

Prato's Chinese community, built originally around the textile industry, went into lockdown from the end of January, three weeks before Italy's first recorded infection. Many were returning from new year holidays in China, the then epicentre. They knew what was coming and spread the word: stay home. So as Italians headed to the ski slopes and crowded into cafes and bars as normal, the Chinese inhabitants of Prato had seemingly disappeared. Its streets, still festooned with Chinese New Year decorations, were semi-deserted, shops shuttered.

There is some anecdotal evidence that Chinese people elsewhere in Italy took similar precautions, though national data on infection rates among the community is unavailable. The health ministry did not respond to an email seeking comment. Milan restaurateur Francesco Wu, a representative of Italian business lobby Confcommercio, said he urged Italian counterparts in February to shut down their businesses, as he had done. "Most of them looked at me like a Cassandra," he said. "No one could believe it was happening here ... Now Troy is burning and we are all locked inside."

### 'Italian friends looked at me oddly'

When Chinese-born businessman Luca Zhou flew home from China on Feb. 4 to rejoin his wife and 28-year-old son in Prato, he put himself straight into quarantine in his bedroom for 14 days, separated from his wife and son. "We had seen what was happening in China and we were afraid for ourselves, our families and our friends," said the 56-year-old, who has a business exporting Italian wine to China.

After emerging from his self-quarantine, he ventured outside in mask and gloves. He said the few other Chinese on the streets also wore them, anxious not to spread the virus to others. "My Italian friends looked at me oddly. I tried many times to explain to them that they should wear them ... but they didn't understand," Luca said. —Reuters

## Anger at China over virus drives identity debate in Taiwan

**TAIPEI:** Anger at being confused with China amid the coronavirus outbreak and Beijing's stepped-up efforts to assert sovereignty is stirring heated debate in Taiwan about how to further distance itself from its giant and often threatening neighbor. At its core is a debate about whether to drop "China" from the island's official name, the Republic of China. During the virus crisis, the World Health Organization (WHO), which considers the island part of China, has listed Taiwan's far lower case number under China's, and China has repeatedly insisted only it has the right to speak for Taiwan on the glob-

## Bustling Lagos turns ghost town under virus lockdown

**LAGOS:** Lagos—Nigeria's seething economic hub of 20 million that residents say never sleeps—was silenced Tuesday as Africa's largest city went into lockdown to stave off the coronavirus. Gone were the traffic jams that snarl bumper-to-bumper out to the suburbs, gone was the hustle, the noise and the sweat that usually fills the crowded streets with endless life.

After President Muhammadu Buhari ordered residents to stay indoors and all movement to cease from Monday evening, the singing of birds and the hum of generators were the only sounds to be heard on the first morning of the shutdown. The waters of the lagoon were still, bridges that are normally impassable at rush hour were empty, and the vendors that sell their wares to passing traffic had vanished.

On a key highway leading to the capital, a group of boys playing football had replaced the usual



## International

# Mother of invention: New gadgets dreamt up to fight the coronavirus

## Inventors hope to build businesses that outlast pandemic

LONDON: Driving to work at his factory to the west of London last week, designer Steve Brooks had coronavirus on his mind. What could he make that would let him open a door without touching the handle? "Everyone has to use their little finger or find the bit of the door that nobody's touched," said the designer and owner at DDB Ltd, a company which makes office furniture. So he produced a hook to do the job. The so-called hygienehook is small enough to fit in a pocket and made from a non-porous material, which makes it easy to clean. It is one of hundreds of gadgets dreamt up in recent days and weeks to help prevent people from spreading the coronavirus.

From furniture makers to AI software developers, companies around the world are adapting existing products or inventing new ones to help fight the pandemic or just make life easier for those working from home, in hospitals or stuck in quarantine. The flurry of innovation comes as companies from Ford and Airbus to luxury goods giant LVMH retool plants to make critical equipment like hand sanitizers, ventilators and masks.

In years gone by it was large companies like these, with the financial clout and factories, who typically had to be relied upon to move rapidly from designing a prototype to manufacturing the product. A crucial difference now, though, is that 3D printing and high-tech software mean devices can be produced faster than ever by companies big and small. "There is definitely a ton of people with 3D resources very willing to help," said MacKenzie Brown, founder of California-based product design company CAD Crowd.

Two weeks ago, his company launched a month-long contest for practical devices for navigating the new coronavirus world. About 65 entries have poured in, including a wrist-mounted disinfectant

sprayer, half gloves for knuckle-pushing of buttons and a device that lets you open car doors without touching the handle, aimed at cab users. As the pandemic makes people far more aware of hygiene, some new products may have a shelf life beyond the current crisis.

### 'We had the algorithm'

Startups are retooling their technology. In Seattle, brothers Joseph and Matthew Toles and their friend Justin Ith, who own a young company called Slightly Robot, had developed a wristband after college aimed at reducing compulsive skin-picking, nail-biting, and hair-pulling.

When their home city reported its first fatalities from the virus last month, they adapted the design to create a new smartband, the Immutouch, which buzzes when the wearer's hand goes near their face.

"We had the algorithm, we had the software and the hardware. We've repurposed it for face-touching," Matthew Toles said in an interview. "We made 350 devices and a website in one week and now it's how fast can we ramp up."

Romanian robotic software company UiPath has meanwhile found a way for nurses in the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital in the Irish capital Dublin to ditch time-consuming data entry and automate filing of virus test results. It hopes to replicate it in other hospitals. Scylla, a US-based AI company that makes gun detection systems for schools and casinos, turned its sights on the virus when China, the original epicentre of the outbreak, reported its first cases three months ago.

It has re-deployed its AI analytics software to measure the temperature of a person's forehead, sending out an alert if it detects a fever. Taking images from a thermal camera, the software can be used in public buildings like hospitals and airports,



BANGKOK: An engineering student configures a medical robot modified to screen and observe COVID-19 coronavirus patients at the Regional Center of Robotics Technology at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. —AFP

### Gadgets range from door hook to software temperature check



and corporate offices, chief technology officer Ara Ghazaryan said. The government of a South American nation has placed an order for 5,000 licences of Scylla's system for its public buildings and transport system, Ghazaryan said. He declined to name the country.

### World War Two innovation

Global upheaval often spawns new products and innovation. The current burst of creativity may eventually compare to that seen during World War Two when companies, governments and scientists embarked on projects that had lasting consequences. Technology used to help guide rockets eventually led

to the first satellites and putting men on the moon.

"There's no question that inventors will be coming up with hundreds, if not thousands, of new ideas," said Kane Kramer, inventor and co-founder of the British Inventor's Society. He first conceived the idea of downloading music and data in the late 1970s. "Everyone's downed tools and are only picking them up to fight the virus. It's a global war." Many companies are donating their new wares or selling them at cost price. The CAD Crowd contest designs are free for download and use, for example. For some, though, the extra business could provide a financial cushion as other sources of income evaporate during the pandemic. —Reuters

## Goats in ghost town; animals take over deserted resort

LLANDUDNO: A herd of Kashmir goats have invaded a Welsh seaside resort after the coronavirus lockdown left the streets deserted. The animals, who normally roam free on a nearby headland jutting out into the Irish Sea, have instead wandered into Llandudno where they have spent the past three days feasting on garden hedges and flowers. Like other countries affected by the global coronavirus crisis, the United Kingdom has imposed strict social distancing measures including shop and school closures, and the authorities are asking everyone to stay at home except for essential travel.

With the streets of Llandudno unnaturally quiet, the goats have been free to wander the streets undisturbed. Town councillor Carol Marubbi said the goats didn't normally come into town unless the weather was awful, but on this occasion she said they probably realised something unusual was going on because there were so few people around.

"I think they're probably feeling a bit lonely and they have come down to have a look around," she told Reuters by telephone. Kashmir goats have lived on the Great Orme promontory near Llandudno since the days of Queen Victoria, when the species became popular in Britain due to a fashion for shawls made from their soft cashmere wool. Marubbi said the herd of about 150 goats, some of whom had kids in February, were a well-known local attraction and most residents did not mind having their hedges nibbled by them.

"I'm a big fan," she said. "I love them because they are characters." With millions of people stuck at home sharing light-hearted content online to alleviate the tedium of the lockdown, images and video of the goats roving around the streets were a hit on social media, with #goats and #Llandudno trending on Twitter. "Just love this. Looks like they are definitely in charge," wrote Welsh Twitter user Sue Foster, a former primary school headteacher. "Who we gonna call? Goat busters." —Reuters

## Harry and Meghan embark on new life in Los Angeles

LOS ANGELES: Every starry-eyed ingenue arriving in Los Angeles faces the same question: how to catch that big break in Hollywood? For Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, it's far more complicated. The pair, who formally stepped down as senior members of the British royal family this week, have reportedly already relocated to sunny California. They are currently rumored to be hunkering down at a compound in Malibu, the exclusive beach community outside Los Angeles long favored

## California to release non-violent inmates

LOS ANGELES: The prison system in the largest US state of California plans to release about 3,500 non-violent inmates early to help mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 illness, officials said Tuesday. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) said the first group of inmates released will be those with less than 30 days to serve, followed by those with fewer than 60 days of their sentences left.

Other US jurisdictions, including the state of New Jersey and some cities, have announced similar measures. US Attorney General Bill Barr last week said he told federal prisons to free some inmates to lessen the impact of the pandemic, with possibly 2,000 inmates eligible. "We do not take these new measures lightly," Ralph Diaz, secretary of the California corrections agency, said in a statement.

"Our first commitment at CDCR is ensuring safety — of our staff, of the incarcerated population, of

others inside our institutions, and of the community at large," he added. "However, in the face of a global pandemic, we must consider the risk of COVID-19 infection as a grave threat to safety, too." Authorities said the early releases will increase both capacity and physical space at the state's prisons where 22 employees and four inmates have tested positive for the virus.

The prisons have instituted other measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including mandatory medical screenings for anyone entering the institutions and suspension of visitation. Inmates are being offered additional free phone calls to their loved ones to compensate the loss of their visitation rights. The early release measure has not gone down well with everyone. One prosecutor said it will lead to dangerous criminals back on the streets.

### 'Saving lives'

"This will become the slippery slope for everybody," Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer told local media. "If they're doing it at the state level, they'll do it at the county jails. That's why gun sales are going up." In a bid to limit the spread of new

## US kids stuck at home embrace online classes

HOUSTON: Every afternoon since they started staying in their Texas home due to the coronavirus outbreak, the Canonico sisters—ages two, four and 10—spend some time banging on the floor with kitchen utensils. It's not just idle play: they are taking online classes from a local kids' gym in Houston to burn up some of their pent-up energy—and to learn crucial motor and social skills at the same time. Kinley, Caylee and Riley had already attended baby fitness programs over the years at their local branch of The Little Gym, a chain focused on movement-based learning.

When authorities in Houston-like many other jurisdictions around the United States—issued a stay-at-home order last week, their mother Lauren Soliz said she was all-in for them to pick up some classes online. "We definitely want their mental health to equal their

physical health," Soliz told AFP in an interview. "Yes, they can watch their iPads for a certain amount of time every day. But we're also getting in our physical health too."

### 'Feeling the stress'

Soliz, 37, works as a tax consultant. With three girls to take care of at home and random meetings by phone throughout the day, she says it's virtually impossible to maintain a schedule. Nevertheless, she has figured out how to set up regular exercise breaks—bike rides around their neighborhood after breakfast, YouTube yoga classes. And now, several times a week, Soliz's daughters—dressed in tank tops and shorts or their pastel-colored pajamas—follow along with a video class from The Little Gym.

"The girls love it, and they think it's playing," she said. Riley, the 10-year-old, is just as enthusiastic about the classes as her little sisters, hopping in place or turning in circles. "I think it's fun and it's time-consuming so it helps because we're just stuck inside," she said. Soliz said the classes are a good way to blow off some steam. "We're all feeling the



HOUSTON: This family photo shows (from right) Caylee, Kinley and Riley Canonico following an online Little Gym class from their living room in Houston, Texas. —AFP

stress and the anxiety and the unknown and uncertainty of, you know, how long is this going to be?" she said.

The US government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has published guidelines for parents about how to help children throughout the cri-

sis. "Encourage your child to play outdoors—it's great for physical and mental health. Take a walk with your child or go on a bike ride," the CDC says. But if outdoor play is impossible, it recommends "indoor activity breaks" for stretching and dancing. —AFP

by A-listers and movie moguls.

But how the couple will achieve their ambition of forging a new, "financially independent" life remains to be seen. Meghan's options would appear to be more straightforward. It is a homecoming of sorts - she grew up in Los Angeles, her mother still lives here, and she has extensive contacts from her days as an actress. "I think Meghan will continue to work in the entertainment world one way or another," said celebrity branding expert Jeetendra Sehdev.

"It's their unique selling point — Meghan, at the end of the day, has come from the entertainment industry. They don't want to be denying that DNA." While Sehdev thinks it is "unlikely" she will go back into acting, Meghan "might present documentaries, she might do more voiceover work." Before she left Britain, Meghan had already narrated a wildlife documentary

for Disney - a company that her royal background could make her uniquely suited to. "The fact that she was a princess - people do like that idea," said Los Angeles-based producer and journalist Simon Thompson. "Even though they're no longer part of the royal family, people will still put that brand on her — she's ideal for alignment with things like Disney." Other entertainment giants including Netflix have already voiced interest in working with her. But if she were to act again, Meghan will likely be wary of "stunt casting" and need to be selective in picking more substantive roles, Thompson added. "I think she'll get some big offers," he said. "It really depends on whether she wants to continue to be seen as a celebrity or as an agent of change."

For Harry, the decision to sever family ties and move thousands of miles away is more of a plunge into the unknown. "I don't see a natural fit for somebody like

Harry in Hollywood - but that's not to say that he won't adapt," said Sehdev, bestselling author of "The Kim Kardashian Principle." "The royal family brand was programmed to be opaque. It's so controlled, so contrived and so manufactured that we don't really know who these people are."

Speaking engagements, book deals and interviews - including on Hollywood's famous red carpets - could be options to redress that, said Sehdev. "He's going to have to do a complete 180 and actually take a leaf out of the book of Kim Kardashian, those reality show influencers, and say I'm gonna actually open up my life. Let you in and show who I really am." The pair could also emulate the Obamas by forming a production company, suggested Thompson - a move that would allow both to highlight causes important to them such as veteran care, mental health and the environment. —AFP



# Business

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**11** Japan business sentiment negative for first time since 2013: Survey



## Gulf Bank holds AGM, announces cash dividend of 11 fils per share

Bank ensures necessary health and safety measures, implements social distancing

**KUWAIT:** Gulf Bank concluded its Ordinary Annual General Meeting ("AGM") No 59, held at the JW Marriott, Al-Thuraya Ballroom- Kuwait, on Tuesday, 31 March 2020, with a 76.6 percent quorum.

The bank was keen to take all necessary health and safety measures, implementing social distancing methods by ensuring a two-meter gap between all attendees. Gulf Bank also provided sanitizers, gloves and masks to attendees, and shared a live broadcast of the general assembly to shareholders who wished to attend the meeting virtually.

Gulf Bank's Chairman Jasem Mustafa Boodai commenced the meeting by welcoming the shareholders and highlighting the bank's major business and strategic accomplishments throughout 2019. Boodai then added: "We are extremely happy with our Bank's performance in 2019. We delivered another good set of results as we continued to enhance the Bank's position to achieve sustainable growth for all stakeholders." Boodai continued: "This level of profitability enabled us to recommend distributing 11 fils cash dividend to our shareholders, a 50 percent payout ratio."

Following his opening remarks, Boodai discussed the major key financial highlights of Gulf Bank's performance during 2019. Boodai stated, "Gulf Bank reported an increase of 12 percent in net profit to KD 63.6 million. Earnings per share was up 12 percent to 22 fils and the Board of Directors is recommending a cash dividend of 11 fils per share (50 percent payout ratio). Customer loans reached another all-time high of KD 4.5 billion, an increase of KD 261 million or 6.2 percent vs. the end of 2018. This growth in 2019 was well balanced as roughly half came from the Bank's Corporate segment and the other half came from the Bank's Consumer segment." He continued: "The non-performing loan ratio over the last two years has stabilized near industry norms and stood at 1.1 percent at the end of 2019. Our Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) of 17.1 percent was



**KUWAIT:** Gulf Bank Chairman Jasem Mustafa Boodai addresses the Ordinary Annual General Meeting at the JW Marriott, Kuwait on Tuesday.

roughly 310 basis points above the regulatory minimum of 14 percent."

In addition, Gulf Bank maintained its 'A' ratings from the four major credit rating agencies during 2019; Moody's, Fitch Ratings, S&P Global Ratings and Capital Intelligence.

Subsequently, Boodai went through the rest of the AGM agenda items, including the approval of Gulf Bank's financial statement as on 31 December 2019 and a cash dividend distribution of 11 fils per share. The shareholders approved all the AGM agenda items.

Gulf Bank held its Extraordinary General Assembly Meeting No. 39 to approve increasing the number of Board of Directors from nine to eleven members as per regulatory requirements and

Gulf Bank is currently rated 'A' by the four leading international credit rating agencies

|                         | Long Term Rating | Outlook  |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------|
| Moody's                 | A3               | Positive |
| S&P Global Ratings      | A-               | Stable   |
| Fitch Ratings           | A+               | Stable   |
| CI Capital Intelligence | A+               | Stable   |

amend the related Articles 28, 30 and 33 of the Bank's Articles of Association accordingly. The shareholders approved all of the Extraordinary

General Assembly agenda items. Boodai concluded the meeting by thanking the shareholders for their continuous support and trust in Gulf Bank.

## The rent is due but many Americans can't pay the bills

**NEW YORK:** The coronavirus pandemic took Brittany Brook's job on March 16, two days after it took her husband Matthew Whitfield's, leaving the New York couple scrambling as end-of-the-month bills come due.

On April 1, Brook, an artist who until recently taught music at a preschool school, and Whitfield, a now-former waiter and actor, have to pay the rent and other bills, as do millions of Americans of all social classes who have seen their lives turned upside down by the crisis.

The decisions they make on which bills to pay will provide a clearer picture of the economic damage done by COVID-19 in a country lacking a universal social safety net and where many workers have little savings to fall back on.

"We have, for the first time in our marriage, declined to pay our credit card balances, but only paid the minimum ... and called to ask for interest forgiveness," 31-year-old Brittany told AFP.

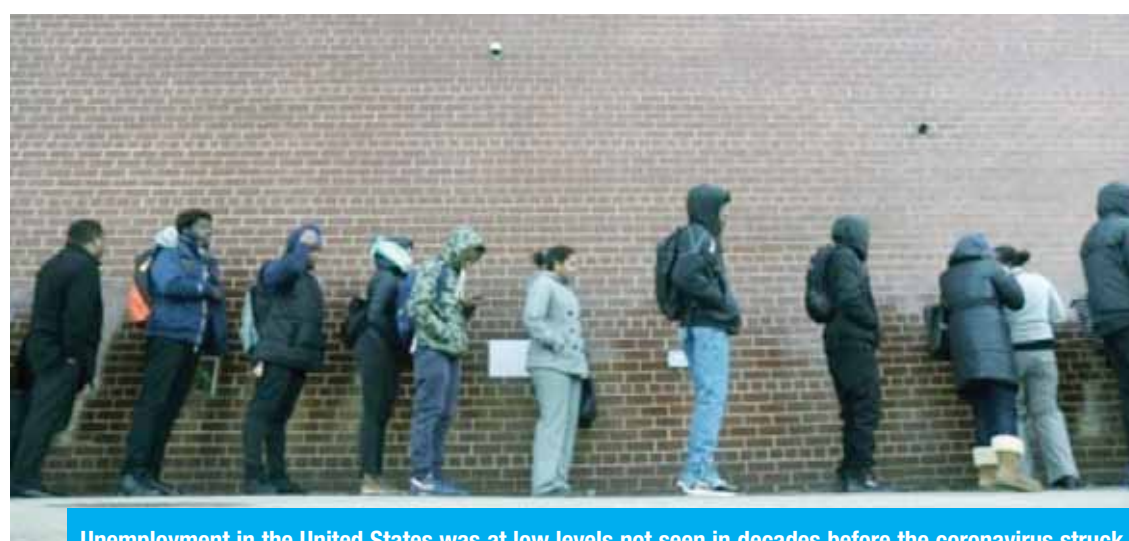
The couple also applied for deferred and reduced payments for their student loans.

"We plan to pay our power bill and anything necessary that we can afford, but we will not be paying rent, as that would deplete our savings and emergency funds within just a few months," says Brittany, who lives with Matthew, 33, in a one-bedroom apartment in New York which they rent for \$1,690 a month.

### Asking for charity

According to Amherst, a real estate analytics and investment firm, 26 percent of US renters could need temporary help to pay their monthly housing bill, which would total about \$12 billion per-month.

The federal government's unprecedented \$2.2 trillion aid package will help ease the economic pain, but



Unemployment in the United States was at low levels not seen in decades before the coronavirus struck, but now jobless benefit claims have increased by millions. — AFP

the \$1,200 checks promised to every American—and \$500 for each child—will not arrive until the second half of April. In the meantime, a record 3.3 million Americans filed for unemployment during the week ended March 21, as thousands of small and large businesses were forced to close their doors.

Tammy Devitoe was laid off March 12 from her restaurant in Albany, New York, and the \$250 to \$300 of weekly unemployment benefits she expects to receive will not be nearly enough to pay for her telephone, electricity, cable, rent and car loan.

She swallowed her pride and asked for donations through GoFundMe, the online fundraising platform, where she had managed to raise \$2,240 by the morning of March 31. "I'm not used to begging," the divorced 39-year-old mother told AFP. "I have negative \$350 in my account—yes negative \$350. I never had a plan B. I couldn't afford one," she said.

"I'm just going to pray and keep begging."

### Evictions halted

Faced with the massive numbers of layoffs and furloughs, mortgage companies are bracing for a wave

of missed payments on April 1.

Evictions have been temporarily suspended in some areas, and there are growing calls on social media for a rent freeze in April.

Devitoe said her landlord cannot help because they have bills to pay as well.

And Cynthia Ryan, who lives in Dallas, said she was told "full rent is due regardless of the situation right now," as the management said they have lenders too. Bruce McNeillage, a real estate developer with properties in the southeastern US, said he is willing to make a goodwill gesture for his tenants, such as asking for just 70 percent of the rent for two or three months. But beyond that, "if they don't pay I'm going to lose those houses. I have mortgage payments on those houses."

McNeillage, cofounder of Kinloch Partners, said his tenants are mostly executives who earn salaries of \$100,000 to \$200,000 a year, yet even some of them are struggling. "We have already had three or four calls here in the last 24 hours; people have already informed us that they will be late on the rent," he said. — AFP

## Saudi approves IPO stock listings of govt assets

**RIYADH:** Saudi Arabia's government approved in a virtual meeting on Tuesday listing government assets planned for privatization in stock market TADAWUL after an initial public offering (IPO).

"Assets, sectors and services planned for privatization shall be listed in Saudi stock market through direct or indirect initial public offering," said a statement on state news agency SPA.

The privatization drive is part of Vision 2030, a package of reforms led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that is intended to wean the economy off oil and create jobs for young Saudis. Riyadh has struggled over the past few years to attract large investor interest for a slate of planned privatizations aimed at diversity of its oil-driven economy. The most high-profile partial privatization process of state oil giant Aramco IPO late last year was mainly dependent on local investors. "The indirect IPO for such assets will be done through setting up companies that own the government stakes in these projects," the statement added.

The government's aim to attract investment into everything from education to sports has been complicated. Riyadh had previously set a goal of aiming to generate 35 billion to 40 billion riyals (\$9.3 billion to \$10.0 billion) of non-oil state revenues from its privatization program by 2020. Some of that money would come from asset sales, while the rest would come from public-private partnerships. — Reuters



## Business

# Asia's factory activity plunges as coronavirus shock deepens

## China's private survey shows improvement in factory activity

TOKYO: Factory activity contracted sharply across most of Asia in March as the coronavirus pandemic paralyzed economic activity across the globe, with sharp falls in export power-houses Japan and South Korea overshadowing a modest improvement in China.

Manufacturing gauges also tumbled in Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines, Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) surveys showed yesterday, underscoring the widening damage brought by the pandemic that has infected more than 700,000 people, upended



### Pandemic paralyzes economic activity

supply chains and led to city lockdowns worldwide. China's factory activity improved slightly more than expected in March after plunging a month earlier, a private business survey showed, but growth was marginal, highlighting the intense pressure facing businesses as domestic and export demand slumps.

While factories in China gradually restarted operations after lengthy shutdowns and a fall in virus cases allowed the country to start relaxing travel restrictions, activity in South Korea shrank at its fastest pace in 11 years as many of its trading partners imposed dramatic measures to curb the virus' spread.

"If you look at the Korean numbers, they're fairly bad ... They're likely to get worse still because Korea will be dependent on parts from Europe and the

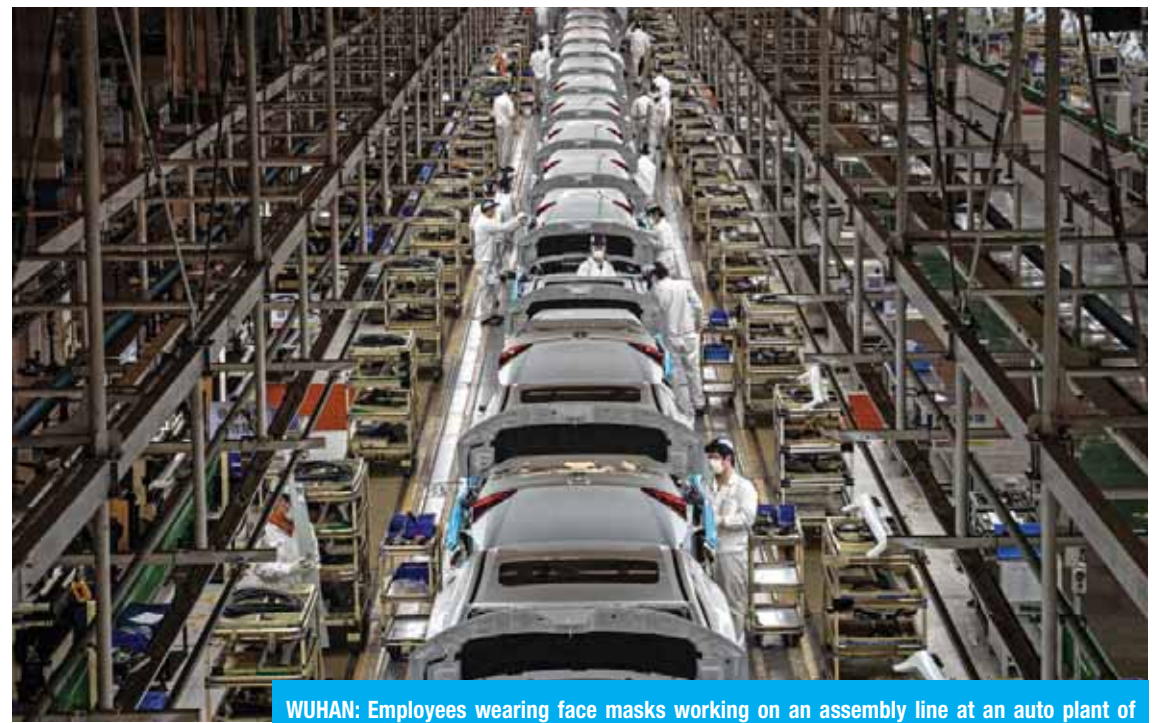
United States," said Rob Carnell, Asia-Pacific chief economist at ING in Singapore. "(Policymakers) have to accept the inevitable that there is a massive global pandemic here, there is an outbreak in almost every country globally and certainly in our region, which is getting to levels that if they don't take very dramatic action, it's going to get much worse," he said.

Japan's factory activity contracted at the fastest pace in about a decade in March, adding to views that the world's third-largest economy is likely already in recession. A separate "tankan" survey by the Bank of Japan showed yesterday that business sentiment soured to a seven-year low in the three months to March, as the outbreak hit sectors from hotels to car-makers.

"The tankan clearly shows a sharp deterioration in business sentiment and confirms the economy is already in recession," said Yasunari Ueno, chief market economist at Mizuho Securities. China's Caixin/Markit Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) rose to 50.1 last month, from February's record low of 40.3, and just a notch above the 50-mark that separates growth from contraction.

South Korea's IHS Markit PMI plunged to 44.2, its lowest since January 2009 when the economy was reeling from the global financial crisis. The index was 48.7 in February. Japan's PMI fell to a seasonally adjusted 44.8 from a reading of 47.8 in February, its lowest since April 2009. The ruling coalition has called on the government to secure a stimulus package worth at least 60 trillion yen (\$553 billion), with 20 trillion yen in direct spending.

"Things are likely to get a lot worse in the months ahead," Alex Holmes at Capital Economics said in a note to clients, nothing the survey period for the PMIs likely didn't capture more recent lockdowns such as



WUHAN: Employees wearing face masks working on an assembly line at an auto plant of Dongfeng Honda in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province. — AFP

those in Malaysia and Thailand. The consultancy expects global gross domestic product (GDP) to fall by more than 3 percent this year.

Policymakers across the globe, including in Asia, have announced massive monetary and fiscal stimulus measures to try to mitigate the economic fallout from the pandemic, keep cash-starved businesses afloat and save jobs. But many measures have been short-gap

steps to deal with the immediate damage to corporate funding and shore up banking systems amid worries of a credit crisis.

The International Monetary Fund has said the pandemic was already driving the global economy into recession, calling on countries to respond with "very massive" spending to avoid bankruptcies and emerging market debt defaults. — Reuters



## Kiwis cheesed off at surging cauliflower costs

WELLINGTON: The coronavirus pandemic has upended life for billions, but New Zealanders tolerating strict lockdown laws have drawn the line at surging cauliflower prices and are demanding the government act.

New Zealand authorities monitoring price gouging amid the global health crisis have been flooded with complaints about the cost of the humble vegetable. Rather than profiteering from soaring demand for facemasks and cleaning products, or even alcohol and cigarettes, Kiwi retailers stand accused of dirty tactics in the veg aisle.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern launched a reporting service called Price Watch on Monday which she said received almost 1,000 emails in its first day of operation. "The most common complaint was... the high price of cauliflower, with some emails quoting NZ\$13 (\$7.70) each," she told reporters yesterday. "Prices of hand sanitiser, bread, meat, facemasks and garlic also featured.

"I want to say to people that we are taking these complaints seriously."

Statistics New Zealand's website has cauliflower pricing information going back more than a decade, showing the vegetable cost about NZ\$4.00 at the end of last year. North Island supermarket owner Sagar Patel last week revealed that officials had questioned him about the price of his cauliflowers, which are a seasonal item.

Patel denied any wrongdoing and said high-volume items such as bread would make more sense for profit gouging. "Our sales for cauliflower represents less than 0.01 percent of our weekly turnover, why would we try to price gouge on an item that is so insignificant to our business?" he told the New Zealand Herald. — AFP

## Trump finalizes rollback of fuel efficiency norms

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump's administration on Tuesday completed a rollback of US vehicle emissions standards adopted under his predecessor Barack Obama and will require 1.5 percent annual increases in efficiency through 2026 - far weaker than the 5 percent increases in the discarded rules.

The announcement - condemned by Democrats and environmentalists while being lauded by Republicans and business interests - sets up a legal battle, with California and 22 other states planning to challenge the rewrite of what had been one of the most ambitious US policies aimed at combating climate change. The Trump administration called the move its largest single deregulatory action and said it would save automakers upwards of \$100 billion in compliance costs. The policy reversal marks the latest step by Trump, a Republican, to erase environmental policies pursued by Obama, a Democrat.

James Owens, acting head of the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, said the plan "strikes the right balance between environmental considerations, health and safety considerations and economic considerations." Writing on Twitter, Trump said his administration was "helping US auto workers by replacing the failed Obama Emissions Rule." Auto-producing states like Michigan could be pivotal in Trump's Nov 3 bid for re-election. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat, said the administration's decision will harm public health and endanger U.S. economic security.

"The Trump administration's anti-science decision to gut fuel standards will unleash massive amounts of pollution into the air at the worst possible time," Pelosi said, alluding to the coronavirus pandemic.

A coalition of states previously challenged the Trump administration's decision to revoke California's authority to set its own stiff vehicle tailpipe emissions rules and require automakers under its Zero-Emission Vehicle Program to sell an increasing number of electric cars and trucks in the most populous US state.

Under the Obama-era rules, automakers were to have averaged about 5 percent per year increases in fuel efficiency through 2026, but the industry lobbied Trump to weaken them. The new requirements mean the US vehicle fleet will average 40.4 miles per gallon rather than 46.7 mpg under the Obama rules. The Trump administration said the new rules will result in about 2 billion additional barrels of oil being consumed and 867 to 923 additional million metric tons of carbon dioxide being emitted and boost average consumer

fuel costs by more than \$1,000 per vehicle over the life of their vehicles.

### Environmental reversal

Obama's environmental policies were intended to cut carbon emissions that drive climate change, while Trump has ditched numerous environmental regulations that his administration deemed harmful to industry and has aimed to increase the use of fossil fuels. Trump also has pulled the United States out of a global climate accord and moved to reverse clean water regulations and pollution standards for coal-burning power plants. California Air Resources Board chief Mary Nichols said her agency will move forward with its zero-emissions program.

"This is a watershed moment marking the death of the old view of cars and emissions tied to petroleum use, and another that looks to vehicle technology driven by innovation," Nichols said.

The Trump administration in August 2018 initially proposed freezing requirements at 2020 levels through 2026. Reuters reported in October automakers expected a 1.5 percent annual increase after talks with administration officials. A trade group that represents General Motors Co, Volkswagen AG, Toyota Motor Corp and others said automakers need policies that support "a customer-friendly shift" toward electrified and other highly efficient technologies. "We are carefully reviewing the full breadth of this final rule to determine the extent to which it supports these priorities," it said.

The US Chamber of Commerce, a business group, said the final rule provides a "workable path forward on a unified national program that provides regulatory certainty while strengthening fuel economy standards and continuing emissions reductions." Auto dealers also praised the revisions.

The administration said the revised rules will cut the future price of new vehicles by around \$1,000 and reduce traffic deaths. Environmentalists dispute that the rule will reduce traffic deaths. The administration said drivers will pay more in increased fuel costs than they will save in lower vehicle prices but concluded they will save more in overall vehicle ownership costs.

The administration has battled with California over auto regulations. Last month, the U.S. Justice Department closed an antitrust investigation into a voluntary agreement between four automakers and California on emissions without taking any action. Ford Motor Co, BMW AG, Honda Motor Co and VW struck the deal last year, prompting the federal investigation. The deal bypassed a White House effort to strip California of the right to fight climate change and drew Trump's ire. Volvo Cars confirmed on Tuesday it was also in talks to reach a California emissions agreement.

Ford said on Tuesday it remains "committed to meeting emission reductions consistent with the California framework." — Reuters

## Some banking systems may need help: IMF

WASHINGTON: Some countries' banking systems might have to be recapitalized or even restructured, if their economies are severely handicapped by prolonged disruption from the coronavirus outbreak, officials at the International Monetary Fund said on Tuesday. Leading regulators and bank chief executives, particularly in the United States, have said lenders are robust enough to withstand the unfolding economic crisis.

Tobias Adrian, the director of the IMF's monetary and capital markets department, told Reuters in an interview that in a 'baseline' scenario that would be a repeat of a 2009-type growth path, banks could withstand the adverse impact. Adrian cautioned, however, that conditions could deteriorate. "(In a) beyond-severely adverse scenario, then it could be that some banks are undercapitalized and at that point policy makers might have to take further actions such as recapitalizing or restructuring banking systems," Adrian said.

Helping countries in times of distress was "bread-and-butter" work for an institution like the IMF, he added. Adrian, in a blog post with Aditya Narain, deputy director in the IMF's Monetary and Capital Markets Department, outlined a number of measures regulators should take to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis on banking systems, including suspending new rulemaking, encouraging loan modifications and urging banks to use their liquidity reserves - measures many regulators are already taking.

"What banks are expected to do now is loan modifications ... look through the loans on their books and say: 'OK, a large fraction of my borrowers are not going to be able to pay interest for some time ... but in a year they will,'" said Adrian. "So (the banks) modify the loan ... and forgo the interest payments and that's a hit to their baseline and that's why the banks stopped paying dividends and repurchases, so they are better prepared to take those hits."

In a bid to bolster banks' capital reserves, the European Central Bank last week ordered lenders to halt all dividend payments until October 2020 at the earliest, while big banks in the United States are also under pressure to halt dividends after suspending share buybacks this month. — Reuters

## German plexiglass firm churns out virus shields

WIESBADEN, Germany: Touted as a simple but effective shield against coronavirus infections, transparent screens have sprung up at supermarket tills and pharmacies across Germany. For plexiglass manufacturer Claus Mueller, business has never been better-but no one is celebrating.

The Plexiglas Riesner processing plant in Wiesbaden is abuzz with activity as owner Mueller and his workers race to get out the next batch of orders, cutting and bending acrylic sheets to size while the phone rings off the hook. It's the busiest time in the small company's 114-year history, with requests coming in faster than the supply chain can handle. "We have endless work but the reason is very sad, so we can't be euphoric about it," Mueller tells AFP.

Demand for "sneeze guards" has surged as companies scramble to protect employees

from a deadly virus that is transmitted through droplets from an infected person's mouth or nose, putting at risk those whose jobs don't allow them to keep the recommended two-metre (six-foot) distance.

"It's the sensible thing to do if close contact can't be avoided," says Mueller.

In the space of mere weeks, German shoppers have become used to the sight of plexiglass barriers separating them from cashiers in grocery stores, among the few retailers that remain open. Elsewhere too, supermarket chains are opting for the relatively affordable and easy to install screens, from Carrefour in France to Walmart in the United States. Mueller says his sales have doubled in March compared with pre-virus times, boosted by business from hospitals, pharmacies, hotels, banks, and doctors' offices. The company is also working on a

large order destined for local Aldi supermarkets, with the jovial Mueller regularly rolling up his sleeves to pitch in with the three employees on the workshop floor.

### Running low

But he is fast running out of stock, and estimates he only has enough to keep going for another week or two. "It seems the whole market in Germany is coming to a standstill," Mueller says. While plexiglass is often used as shorthand for any acrylic sheets, Mueller points out that the high-quality Plexiglas (spelled with a single "s") that he mostly works with is a registered trademark.

And his Plexiglas wholesaler has warned that deliveries of raw materials are grinding to a halt as the virus disrupts global production lines, with many factories shutting down or putting workers on reduced hours. — AFP



Workers cut and bend each piece of the clear plastic into the shape needed. — AFP



## Business

# Huawei announces solid business performance in 2019 annual report

## Company reaffirms commitment to creating greater value for customers and society

SHENZHEN, China: Huawei released its 2019 Annual Report yesterday, detailing a solid business performance. The company's global sales revenue in 2019 rounded off at \$123 billion, up 19.1 percent year-on-year; its net profit reached \$9 billion; and its cash flow from operating activities topped \$13.1 billion, up 22.4 percent year-on-year. As part of a long-term, ongoing investment in technological innovation and research,



Global sales  
revenue in 2019  
\$123 billion

Huawei invested 15.3 percent of its 2019 revenue - or approximately \$18.8 billion - back into R&D. Its total R&D spend over the past decade now exceeds \$85.9 billion.

"2019 was an extraordinary year for Huawei," said Eric Xu, Huawei's Rotating Chairman. "Despite enormous outside pressure, our team forged ahead with a singular focus on creating value for our customers. We worked hard to earn their respect and trust, as well as that of our partners around the globe. Business remains solid."

In 2019, Huawei's carrier business led the commercial rollout of 5G networks. To further commercial adoption and promote new innovation in 5G applications, the company established 5G joint innovation centers together with carriers worldwide. Huawei's RuralStar base station solutions can effectively address coverage problems in remote areas. These solutions are being used in over 50 countries and regions, bringing mobile Internet to more than 40 million people living in remote areas. In 2019, sales revenue from Huawei's carrier business reached \$42.5 billion, up 3.8 percent year-on-year.

Huawei's enterprise business continues to support the digital transformation of customers across industries as the company helps lay the foundations for the digital world. Globally, more than 700 cities and 228 Fortune Global 500 companies have chosen Huawei as their digital transformation partner. In 2019, Huawei announced its computing strategy with the aim of cultivating fertile soil for the intelligent world to flourish. As part of this strategy, the company launched the world's fastest AI processor, the Ascend 910, and the AI training cluster Atlas 900. In 2019, sales revenue from Huawei's enterprise business reached \$12.8 billion, up 8.6 percent year-on-year.

Huawei's consumer business continues to see robust growth, with a total of 240 million smartphones shipped throughout the year. The company reports further progress in developing the Seamless AI Life ecosystem across all scenarios and devices, including personal computers, tablets, wearables,



and smart screens. In 2019, sales revenue from Huawei's consumer business reached \$66.9 billion, up 34 percent year-on-year.

"The external environment will only get more complicated going forward," Xu cautioned. "We need to keep enhancing the competitiveness of our

products and services, promoting open innovation, and creating greater value for our customers and society at large. This is the only way we can seize the historic opportunities presented by the digital and intelligent transformation of industries, and maintain robust growth in the long run."

## VelvetSweatshop Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet

By Matthew Gardiner

KUWAIT: Microsoft Excel's standard file encryption capabilities can be used to obfuscate and deliver malware.

Mimecast Threat Center researchers have discovered a rise in the LimeRAT malware delivery using Microsoft Excel spreadsheet's VelvetSweatshop default password. This new research demonstrates that making an Excel file read-only - as opposed to locking it - encrypts the file without the need for an external created password to open it, making it easier to fool a victim into installing the malware.



### How VelvetSweatshop paved the way for malware delivery

Microsoft Office files are some of the most popular file formats for the delivery of email-borne malware. The Microsoft Office applications that can open and run these files are broadly deployed, the files are easy to change to avoid simple file signature-based detection, are macro-enabled to make running custom code easy, and are regularly distributed by consumers and businesspeople via email. Certainly, few are ever surprised to receive invoices or financial spreadsheet attachments via email.

However, ease of use and broad deployment have drawbacks. This popularity means that exploiting Excel files has been a part of cybercriminals' standard attack arsenal for a long time, and receiving password-protected Excel files is also a standard business practice, given the interesting or sensitive content.

Excel files are designed to be easily encrypted prior to being emailed, which helps attackers evade detection by common malware detection systems. When you lock an Excel file with a password, you are encrypting the entire file using the password as the encryption/decryption key. To open the file, the intended victim would need the same password. When a victim receives an encrypted attachment in a social engineered email, the victim is encouraged to use the password included in the phishing email to open the attached file. Just like that, the victim is pwned!

But what if attackers could deliver a malicious, encrypted Excel file without requiring the intended victim to do anything other than open the attached file? Skip the part of needing to encourage them to insert the

password - slipping through all network defenses. Just a simple double-click of the file would do the trick.

To decrypt a given encrypted Excel file, Excel first tries to use the embedded, default password, "VelvetSweatshop," to decrypt and open the file and run any onboard macros or other potentially malicious code, while keeping the file read-only. If it fails to decrypt the file using the "VelvetSweatshop" password, Excel will request that the user insert a password, as shown in Figure 1 below. The advantage of the read-only mode for Excel to the attacker is that it requires no user input, and the Microsoft Office system will not generate any warning dialogs other than noting the file is read-only. Using this read-only technique, the attacker can reap the obfuscation benefits of file encryption without requiring anything further from the user, taking away one step required of the intended victim for exploitation to occur.

### LimeRAT Malware Exploited in the Wild

Recently, Mimecast threat intelligence researchers came across a campaign which used this Excel VelvetSweatshop encryption technique to deliver LimeRAT, a malicious remote access trojan.

In this specific attack, the cybercriminals also used a blend of other techniques in an attempt to fool anti-malware systems by encrypting the content of the spreadsheet hence hiding the exploit and payload. Once LimeRAT has landed, the attacker has many capabilities at his or her fingertips, including delivering ransomware, a cryptominer, a keylogger, or creating a bot client.

Of course, given the general capability inherent with this Excel-based malware delivery technique, any type of malware is a good candidate for delivery, so Mimecast researchers expect to see it used in many more malicious phishing campaigns in the future. Mimecast Threat Center has alerted Microsoft to this campaign.

### How to defend your organization

Due to the popularity and ease of use of Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, the VelvetSweatshop technique that has risen again to deliver LimeRAT malware will likely prove to be especially dangerous. Follow these steps to mitigate your risk.

- Train your users to scrutinize all received emails, particularly those with file attachments. While this attack technique reduced the need for user involvement, it did not eliminate it altogether, as receivers were still required to open the file.
- Use an email security system with advanced malware protection capabilities that are designed to include both static file analysis as well as sandboxing to filter out these malicious emails before delivery.
- Monitor your network traffic for outbound connections to likely command-and-control services.

Continuously update your endpoint security system to increase the likelihood of detecting malicious software loading or running on the host.

Note: Matthew Gardiner is Director of Enterprise Security Campaigns at Mimecast

## LuLu Exchange records 40% growth on its mobile app

KUWAIT: What does it mean to go digital in these times of social distancing? For thousands of residents who remit money home, it would seem the most natural step to take in today's scenario.

With the Covid-19 pandemic leading to restrictions on timings of businesses, LuLu Exchange - one of Kuwait's leading remittances company, has been onboarding existing customers to its digital platform, LuLu Money, to meet their payment needs. In the last two weeks alone, the app has been downloaded over 2500 times in Kuwait, with the count crossing 20,000 globally. The number of transactions too have registered a 40 percent Month-on-Month growth in this period in the country, buoyed by the app's user-friendly and secure features. Overall, the app has registered an annual growth of 106 percent in Kuwait.

"We have been investing heavily in building our IT infrastructure over the last several years, advocating mobile services as the way forward for the remittances industry. In this time of health crisis, we are happy that our efforts have borne fruit, allowing our customers in Kuwait to conduct transactions from the comfort of their homes", said Adeeb Ahamed, MD, LuLu Financial Group.

- Among the app's several benefits are that it allows customers to avail exciting offers, view the best exchange rates in real-time and send money instantly from the comfort of their homes.
- The app also comes with a hybrid function for customers who want the branch experience yet want to avoid rush hours, with the option to block real-time rates for up to 4 hours and then make the payment at the branch within this stipulated timeframe.

Anticipating the demand to increase in the coming days, the team in Kuwait has assigned dedicated customer helpline numbers and a back-end team to maintain continuity of critical processes for a seamless user experience.

### Onboarding new customers

Even as the company aggressively encourages its existing customers to switch to the mobile app, new customers who wish to use the app need to provide their KYC details as a first step, in the physical branches while they are still open. As of going to the press, the company has 20 branches open in Kuwait; adhering to the safety precautions issued by the government. The operational status of these branches is being updated regularly, in line with the directives of the government. The LuLu Money app which is available on both Android & iOS, has over 350,000 downloads worldwide, and counts Kuwait as one of its key user bases.

## Japan business sentiment negative

TOKYO: Confidence among Japan's biggest manufacturers has plunged into negative territory for the first time in seven years, a key survey showed yesterday as the coronavirus pandemic hits demand and disrupts production.

The Bank of Japan's March Tankan business survey - a quarterly poll of about 10,000 companies - showed a reading of minus 8

among major manufacturers, the first negative reading since March 2013. The short-term business sentiment survey reports the difference between the percentage of firms that are upbeat and those that see conditions as unfavorable. A negative reading means more companies are pessimistic than optimistic. It is considered to be the broadest indicator of how Japan Inc. is faring.

The index for non-manufacturers fell to plus 8 from 20 in the December 2019 survey as the virus also hit tourism, entertainment and other service industries. The confidence index for the hotels and restaurant service industry came in at a staggering minus 59.

"Negative impacts are spreading broadly in various sectors," Tsuyoshi Ueno, senior

economist at NLI Research, said in a report ahead of the Tankan release. They range from slower exports and the disruption of parts supply from China, to plunges in foreign visitors, cancellations of sports and other events, and weaker stock prices combined with a higher yen, he said.

The headline index was also at the lowest level since March 2013 just before the central bank embarked on unprecedented massive monetary easing in tandem with then-new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's pro-spending policy, known as Abenomics. Takeshi Minami, chief economist at Norinchukin Research Institute, said the reading was the same in March 2020 and 2013 but the direction was "totally different." —AFP

## Watch out! Scummy scammers target home deliveries

If you're sitting at home right now, sheltering from the coronavirus pandemic - and there's a good chance you are - then you are probably either thinking about a home delivery, or waiting for one. Paul Ducklin, principal research scientist, Sophos warns us on how scammers are targeting home deliveries.

Even people who have no symptoms of the virus, and who haven't been in contact with anyone who's infected, have been instructed to make their shopping outings "as infrequent as possible".

Indeed, many stores considered non-essential have been forced to shut, including electronics shops, so the new HDMI cable or the replacement mouse you need for working from home may only be available online. So, with home delivery companies seriously stretched and long shipment times, we suspect that lots of people will be anxiously watching their phones for text messages like this one:

The URL in this case was a short domain name with a brief coded sequence of letters and numbers at the end - pretty usual for links in text messages, which are typically shortened to fit in the limited length of an SMS.

And given that no one wants to see their lovingly awaited shipment of toilet rolls go astray at the very last step of the way for something as minor as an address glitch, it's tempting to click through to check what's going on. As you can see, the site has a reassuring HTTPS padlock, meaning that transmission to and from the site is secure, but the site itself is just a visual ripoff of the Canada Post/Postes Canada brand (this SMS was received by SophosLabs in Vancouver, BC):

In case you are wondering about that HTTPS certificate, here's what it looks like - we used Firefox on our laptop, where clicking on the padlock in the address bar makes it easy to inspect the details: The server is running on the popular cPanel web hosting service, which provides a web certificate automatically (that's a good thing, because unencrypted web traffic can be snooped on and tampered with far too easily).

Highlighted above is the fact that the certificate was created on 2020-03-24, the very same day that this scam campaign went out. Anyway, your delivery is held up by a mere \$3 shortfall, which is the sort of amount you'd probably consider paying anyway and arguing about later, if the alternative is to lose your delivery slot. If you do proceed, then the

crooks first want you to confirm your address, as stated in the original SMS message...

...and then they want to "process" your \$3 payment by capturing your credit card details to complete the transaction:



Paul Ducklin

### What to do?

- Don't be fooled just because you're expecting a delivery. The crooks don't have to know you are waiting for a delivery to get the timing right. Especially during the coronavirus pandemic, they can simply assume you are and they'll be right for a lot of people a lot of the time.
- Treat delivery SMSes as notifications instead of links. It's a bit more hassle, but avoid clicking on links at all in messages like these. When you order items online, make a note of the right website to use for tracking the item, and go there yourself if there is any problem reported with delivery.
- Check the URL in the address bar. These days, most cybercriminals are using HTTPS websites, because everyone expects a padlock in the address bar. But the padlock doesn't say you are on the correct site, merely that you are on a site with an HTTPS certificate. Consider going to your laptop if you can, and checking out the link from there. It's worth the extra trouble because the address bar is bigger and tells you more.
- Use a third-party security product on your phone. Sophos Intercept X for Mobile adds to the built-in protection in your phone because it helps to keep you away from risky websites to start with.
- Report compromised cards immediately. If you get as far entering any banking data into a "pay page" and then realize it's a scam, call your bank's fraud reporting number at once. (Look on the back of your actual card so you get the right phone number.)



# Italy doctors warn of 'bio bombs' from patients sent to care homes

ROME: Italian doctors and unions have warned that a government policy to send patients discharged from hospital but still positive for coronavirus to care homes is like priming "biological bombs". With over 28,000 people in hospital including more than 4,000 in intensive care, beds need to be freed up as soon as possible, and those unable to convalesce in isolation at home are being moved to care homes or requisitioned hotels.

The virus has already infiltrated assisted living facilities across the nation, in what is being dubbed the "silent massacre". Hundreds of people in care homes are feared to have succumbed to the disease - over 600 in the hard-hit Bergamo region alone - though firm data are impossible to find, with many victims reportedly going untested, experts say. They have voiced serious concerns over the safety of the 300,000 or so residents in Italy's 7,000 care homes.

"In a war like this, we can't expose ourselves to the danger of a recurrence of new outbreaks that risk turning care homes into 'biological bombs' that spread the virus," Raffaele Antonelli Incalzi, head of Italian geriatric society SIGG, told AFP. "Widely using care home beds to ease pressure on hospitals... would put the elderly residents at risk, and they are the weakest link in this pandemic," he said.

### 'Who's checking?'

Some 2,000 patients have already been transferred to care homes in Lombardy, the epicentre of the crisis, while the Marche region in central Italy and Sicily in the south have begun following suit, said SIGG. Figures for the numbers of patients involved nationally had not yet been compiled, it said. Matteo Villa, research fellow at the Italian Institute for Political Studies (ISPI), told the foreign

press association Monday that regional data showed a significant proportion of those discharged from hospital still had the virus.

The government has said strict rules apply to which facilities can be used to ensure no contamination takes place, from physical distancing, to training staff and equipping them with protective gear. "Who's going to be checking the rules are enforced?" Marco Agazzi, president of the Bergamo branch of the national union of Italian doctors, told AFP.

"There are enormous difficulties in accessing protective gear, and if new recruits cannot be found it will mean taking away essential staff at already overstretched facilities," he said, describing the government's decision as "extremely perplexing". Roberto Bernabei, geriatrics professor at Catholic University in Rome, said regulations at care homes were a "grey zone, because they change from local health authority to local health authority, city to city, region to region".

### 'Homemade masks'

Italy's national health institute said 86 percent of care homes surveyed reported difficulties getting hold of protective equipment, while 36 percent said they were struggling due to staff off sick. Worried relatives have been bringing staff homemade masks and non-medical gowns in the hope it will stop them catching the virus and spreading it to loved ones, many of whom are in their 80s and 90s, SIGG said. Pensioner trade unions have been calling for hotels, student housing or military barracks to be used instead.

A national lockdown imposed three weeks ago and affecting 60 million people appears to be working, with the ISS saying Tuesday the virus - which has killed



ROME: Employees of a private company spray disinfectant in a building on Tuesday during the country's lockdown aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19. — AFP

nearly 12,500 since emerging at the end of February - has begun to plateau. But Villa warned coronavirus recovery times meant the pressure on hospitals would only reduce slowly - and could very well rise again

when the punishing lockdown is eased, meaning care home beds would still be in demand. "It's unrealistic to imagine there won't be any other moments of stress on the health system," he said. — AFP

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## Lifestyle | Gossip

Tiger King Star **Joe Exotic** didn't sing on his country songs

**A** "Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness" star Joe Exotic didn't sing on any of his country records. The controversial GW Zoo owner's musical efforts were featured in the hugely popular Netflix docuseries such as the track 'Here Kitty Kitty', which includes lyrics accusing his nemesis, Big Cat Rescue animal sanctuary owner Carole Baskin, of murdering her missing former husband Don Lewis and feeding him to her tigers. The accompanying music video saw a Carole lookalike feeding flesh to Joe's own tigers. Journalist Rick Kirkham - who was filming his own reality series about Joe's life on GW Zoo and is part of the Netflix docuseries has now spilled that all the songs were recorded by country duo The Clinton Johnson Band - which was comprised of Vince Johnson and the late Danny Clinton - and Joe simply lip-synced to them. In an interview with Variety, Rick

said: "One time, Joe got a little bit drunk and high, and we actually coaxed him into singing part of one of the songs. He couldn't even hold a tune. "It was just so ludicrous. It was a big joke within the crew and staff that it wasn't him [singing in the videos] - but he was damned insistent to anyone and everyone, including us and my studio crew, that that was him." Vince and Danny were given the task of writing the songs by Joe, who would give them the subject matter, and were not aware that he was going to perform them without giving them any credit. Vince had said: "It was a couple of months and two or three songs [into the collaboration] when I was on YouTube one night and just happened to look up Joe Exotic." And there he was, lip-syncing and acting like the ghost of Elvis [in these music videos]. "He bamboozled me about his reality show - that it was coming soon and he would make everything right as rain. I just wanted

the proper credit." Vince recently revealed he and his bandmate recorded 20 songs themed around big cats before Danny passed away from a heart-related illness in October. Whilst the producer Eric Goode revealed they had cut a whole scene about the songs. He said: "We cut a really good scene about that. Joe even said, 'Of course not every singer sings all his songs, that's just how it's done.' "His take on it was funny - that you could be a musician and a singer and not sing." Joe - real name Joseph Maldonado-Passage - is currently serving a 22-year jail sentence for two counts of murder-for-hire, relating to his plan to have Carole assassinated, and 17 other wildlife-related charges. Carole has never faced any charges relating to the disappearance of her former husband.

## Clarke auctioning off dinner date for COVID-19 relief fund donations

**E**milia Clarke fans can win a dinner date with the actress if they donate to her charity SameYou's COVID-19 Relief Fund. The 'Game of Thrones' star's charity - which helps those with brain injuries - has set up a relief fund to help battle the coronavirus pandemic, and in exchange for donations to the charitable cause, Emilia is auctioning off the chance to have a virtual dinner date with the beauty. In an Instagram video, Emilia explained: "Hi everyone! I'm coming at you with a little request. Would you help me? Would you like to help me, please, raise £250,000 for SameYou's COVID-19 Relief Fund? "There's a thank you attached, and the thank you goes a little something like this: How would you feel about having dinner with me? Virtually. What we will do is when you donate, you can click on a link, tick a box, and that will be a randomised selection process, and 12 lucky people will join me virtually [for dinner]. We'll put together a store cupboard dinner, together we'll cook it, and then we'll eat it together. And we'll discuss lots of things - isolation, fear, and funny videos, and the fact that I can't really cook. "It's going to be fun! It's going to be interesting." Emilia went on to explain what SameYou's relief fund will do, as she explained that in order to free up hospital beds for coronavirus patients, people who have recently recovered from brain injuries will need to leave hospital early. SameYou will use donations to put together an online clinic for those patients so they don't feel "isolated" in their time of need. The 33-year-old actress added: "We have to create more beds for the NHS to take of all of the COVID-19 sufferers, and when you're doing that, your brain injury survivors are leaving hospital early, as we all have to do at this time. "So they need somewhere to go. And what we've done is we've partnered with out partners in America, Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, and with our partners in England, UCL, we are creating a virtual rehabilitation clinic so that brain injury survivors have somewhere to go and somewhere to feel safe, and somewhere to feel not so alone and isolated. Which I think is a good thing, because we need to do all we can to release as many beds as possible to free up our hardworking NHS."



## Paris Hilton delays YouTube Originals documentary release

**P**aris Hilton has delayed the release of her YouTube Originals documentary. The 38-year-old businesswoman was due to release her documentary, 'This Is Paris', on the video streaming platform in May, but has chosen to postpone the release of the flick because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The documentary was supposed to premiere at Tribeca Film Festival next month before getting a limited theatrical release, but as the festival has been postponed and cinemas have been shut down, Paris has decided to hold off on releasing the film to YouTube until further notice. In



an Instagram Live, Paris confirmed: "We have delayed the release of my film. "It was supposed to debut at [the Tribeca Film Festival] and go into theatres afterwards, but because Tribeca is delayed, and the theatres are not open, we decided it was best to wait, because it's an incredible film and I'm so proud of it." Meanwhile, Paris recently claimed she feels like she's been "playing a character" all of her life, and said it was "hard" to open up for the documentary. She explained: "I've never done anything like this in my life. In this film I discuss things I've never discussed before. I hope that people are going to see who I truly am. It follows me in my real life, everything I've done before was me playing a character. I was talking about things that are very hard to talk about. It was an amazing experience but it was very scary. I was freaking out." And the former 'Simple Life' star also said she wants to live forever, because she thinks she'd be bored if there was "nothing" to do after death. She said: "Death scares me because I don't know what happens. "I just don't want it to be nothing because that would be so boring. "I'm trying to figure out a way - freezing myself or inventing the fountain of youth pill - so people could live forever, like that movie 'Death Becomes Her'."



## Rihanna wants 'three of four' children within the next 10 years

**T**he 'Work' hitmaker can see herself being a mother to multiple children within the next decade, and has said she's even planning on starting a family by herself if she doesn't meet the right partner by the time she's ready to settle down. Asked where she sees herself in 10 years, Rihanna said: "I'll have kids - three or four of 'em." And when asked if she'll have them on her own if she hasn't met the right person, she added: "Hell yeah, I feel like society makes me want to feel like 'Oh you got it wrong ...' They diminish you as a mother, [if] there's not a dad in your kid's lives. But the only thing that matters is happiness, that's the only healthy relationship between a parent and a child. That's the only thing that can raise a child truly, is love." Whilst Rihanna is set in her ways when it comes to her parenting plan, she's less sure about her career goals, as she is keeping her fans in the dark about when they can expect her next studio album. Rihanna insists she's working "aggressively" on new music, but isn't imposing any strict deadlines on herself. She said: "I can't say when I'm going to drop ... but I am very aggressively working on music. "I don't want all my albums to feel like themes. There are no rules, there's no format, there's nothing. There's just good music and if I feel it, I'm putting it out." But the 'Umbrella' singer does want to work on a reggae album specifically, because she doesn't want to limit herself to any "boundaries", and wants to try everything she can. When asked by British Vogue magazine if she's working on any reggae music after previously hinting at exploring the genre, she said: "Oh no, that is happening ... I feel like I have no boundaries. I've done everything - I've done all the hits, I've tried every genre - now I'm just, I'm wide open. I can make anything that I want." Read the full feature in the May issue of British Vogue, available via free digital download and on newsstands Friday 3rd April.

## Lady Gaga had 'no idea' about father's GoFundMe page

**L**ady Gaga reportedly had "no idea" her father was asking the public to pay his restaurant staff. Joe Germanotta was slammed on social media for asking the public for \$50,000 to pay the wages of employees at his New York business Joanne Trattoria, after he revealed on social media he was forced to let 30 of them go due to the coronavirus pandemic. The restaurant owner set up a GoFundMe page to raise money for staff's wages, but he faced criticism from those who pointed out that both he and Gaga - who is part owner of the restaurant - are worth millions. And following the backlash - which saw Joe take down the GoFundMe page - sources have now said Gaga, 34, was not aware of her father's decision to publicly ask for money. One insider said: "She had no idea he was doing that and that idea would have been shot down before he even finished bringing it up - and the worst part is, it's her birthday! Neither she nor [mom] Cynthia would ever let that happen. It was him acting on his own, unfortunately, really bad impulse." The source also claimed Joe was simply "acting on impulse" and knows his actions were a "stupid mistake". Speaking to Page Six, they added: "It was a stupid embarrassing mistake. He saw other people getting into the spirit of giving and generosity and some-



how thought that applied here. It had more to do with the spirit than a belief that he needed or deserved financial help to pass on to his employees. He was acting on impulse." Blogger Perez Hilton was among those to slam Joe for asking for cash, after he pointed out the 'Stupid Love' hitmaker is worth an estimated \$275 million. He tweeted: "Lady GaGa is worth hundreds of millions of dollars AND is part owner in her family's restaurant. "Yet her also wealthy father has just taken to Twitter to ask the public to help financially the workers they have stopped paying."

## Terri says Steve Irwin 'would have worn khaki' to Bindi's wedding

**S**teve Irwin "would have worn khaki" to his daughter Bindi's wedding, according to his wife Terri Irwin. The 'Crocodile Hunter' star tragically passed away in 2006 when he was pierced in the heart by a stingray barb whilst filming a documentary, and so sadly missed his daughter Bindi's wedding to Chandler Powell last week. Reflecting on the loss of Steve, his widow Terri took to social media over the weekend to share a picture of him with their 16-year-old son Robert when he was a baby, which was taken when the youngster first attended a wedding. She wrote alongside the snap: "Remembering @RobertIrwin's first wedding. I love that Steve and Robert both wore khaki. I know Steve would have worn khaki to Bindi & Chandler's wedding, too. I wish he could have been there to see the most special day in his daughter's life. We miss him so

much. (sic)" Terri also posted a picture of Bindi, 21, at a wedding when she was a child, as she gushed over seeing her daughter tie the knot with her "soulmate" Chandler. She tweeted: "My beautiful Bindi has loved everything about weddings since she was a little girl. It seems like I just blinked my eyes and she was celebrating her own wedding with her soulmate, Chandler. I love



you so much. Treasure each day of your happily ever after." Meanwhile, the 55-year-old conservationist previously said she couldn't wait for Bindi and Chandler to marry, as she was excited about the prospects of blending their two families together. Speaking in November, she said: "I love Chandler's family! You forget that when your daughter is getting married, you get this great man as part of your family, but you also get his family. "They are lovely. We are really blessed to get wonderful Chandler and their terrific family." Bindi and Chandler married last week at their home in Australia Zoo, where Bindi's brother Robert walked her down the aisle. The newlyweds, Robert, and Terri were the only people present at the ceremony, which went ahead with no guests because of restrictions against large gatherings due to the coronavirus.

## Prince William wants to return to the air ambulance service amid coronavirus pandemic

**T**he 37-year-old royal spent two years as an air ambulance pilot before stepping down in 2017, and sources have claimed he is considering rejoining the service in order to ease the pressure on current National Health Service (NHS) staff during the ongoing outbreak of coronavirus. A source told The Sun newspaper: "William has been seriously considering returning as an air ambulance pilot to help in the current pandemic. "He knows the whole country is doing its bit and he wants to help. But it's complicated as he was originally grounded from the job so that he could become a senior working royal. But William is very keen to do anything he can to help. "There are all sorts of practicalities to overcome such as fitting in on shift patterns. But he's in the right place now if he wants to do it." The

news comes after William - who has Prince George, six, Princess Charlotte, four, and 21-month-old Prince Louis with his wife Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge - was reported to have said he "misses" working with the NHS during a visit to 111 call-centre staff in Croydon, South London, earlier this month. Tracy Pidgeon, 54, governance lead and call-handler, said: "He was asking about how busy we have been, and what shifts everybody was doing. "We

were saying everybody was working really hard. He misses the helicopter, being on the front line. He just said he misses it." William also became patron of the London Air Ambulance Charity earlier this month, and boss Garrett Emmerson said the royal would be "welcome" to join the service "any time". Garrett said: "As he knows well, we have an air ambulance service here in London. "I know he would be welcome there any time." —Bang Showbiz

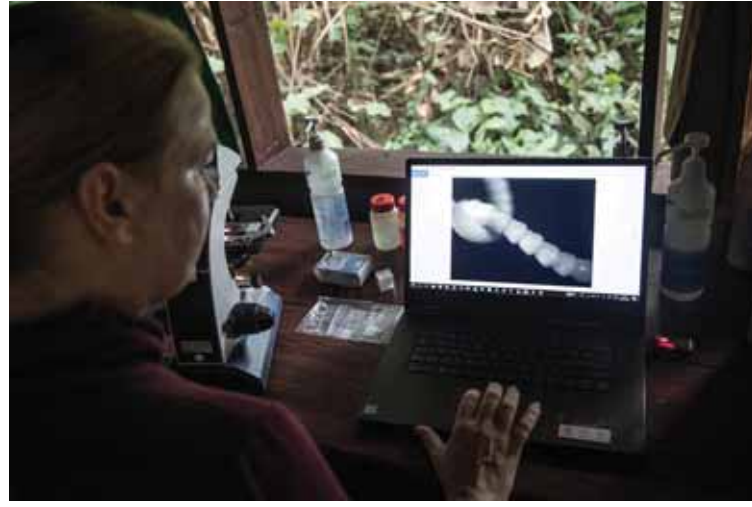




Lifestyle | Features



A pygmy tracker (front) and Maja Gudehus (back), researcher and veterinarian of the "pangolin project", observe trees in search of a pangolin, in the Bayanga Forest.—AFP photos



Maja Gudehus, researcher and veterinarian of the "pangolin project", studies on her computer, a pangolin parasite, in her laboratory, in Bayanga.



Rangers show pangolin scales seized from poachers at the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) office, Bayanga.

# In an African forest, a fight to save the endangered pangolin

The prehistoric shape is hard to make out as it moves slowly through the gloomy forest, so trackers listen for the rustle of scales against the leaves to pick up its trail. Their target is the long-tailed pangolin — a little mammal also called the scaly anteater, which will be lucky to survive to the end of this century. The harmless creature has no defence against predators apart from its small size and a camouflage of brown scales covering its body. Today, the world's pangolin species are listed as either vulnerable or critically endangered.

The pangolin is considered the most-tracked animal on the planet — the victim of mass poaching for bushmeat and sales of its scales, especially to China. According to a study published in 2017 by the Conservation Letters journal, between 400,000 and 2.7 million of the animals are hunted each year in central African forests. Their plight has leapt to worldwide prominence as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The microbe is believed to have leapt the species barrier in markets in China, where pangolins and other wild animals are killed for their meat.

After testing more than 1,000 samples from wild animals, scientists at the South China Agricultural University found the genome sequences of viruses found on pangolins to be 99 percent identical to those on coronavirus patients. Anecdotal evidence from Gabon suggests that the

bushmeat trade in pangolins has plummeted since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic — but wildlife experts say it is too early to say whether this decline will last, and what impact this will have on the creatures' survival.

### 'No data exists'

The Dzanga-Sangha National Park, in the far southwest of the CAR, is the last sanctuary for animal life in a poor country ravaged by civil war. Its dense forest offers one of the world's few refuges for a species facing extinction. In this haven, pangolin trackers have no interest in the creature's meat or taking the scales that sell at phenomenal prices in Chinese traditional medicine for their supposed therapeutic qualities — claims that are scientifically unproven and strongly contested.

Researcher Maja Gudehus is leading a team in Dzanga-Sangha to study pangolins in their natural habitat, the better to understand their ways and to protect them. The project is unique in Africa. While their meat is prized, little is known about pangolins scientifically. Gudehus wants to unlock knowledge about their longevity, territory, food, life habits and reproductive cycle. "Virtually no data exists about the long-tailed pangolin and not much more about the other African species," the Swiss scientist explained while watching her protege clamber in the branches overhead.



The rangers of the dog squad search a motorcycle taxi for pangolin scales or hunting ammunition in the Dzanga-Sangha Park, in Bayanga.

### Helped by Pygmies

The animal is particularly easy to capture. When it senses danger, it curls up into a ball, which humans have but to pick up. But in captivity, it is one of the most difficult creatures to study. "You can't keep them more than a few days. They don't eat, die from stress, gastritis, and other problems we don't know yet," Gudehus said. The only solution is to monitor a few clearly identified specimens, with the help of Pygmies in the region. The

knowledge of the Baka people, fine guides to the forest, is essential in tracking the fragile and fearful animals.

Of three creatures recently under observation, one has vanished and another was the victim of a hitherto unknown parasite. "Normally one can tell when an animal is not well. But pangolins can die in half an hour without giving you time to notice," said Gudehus. Gudehus uses whatever she can to provide necessary treatment. Her laboratory is also her home,

a tiny shack besieged by vegetation, where scientific literature and boxes of medical supplies are packed in between her microscope and a camp bed.

### 'Difficult to follow'

"We used to see many pangolins," said Didon, one of the most respected Baka trackers in the region. "Today, they've become rare." While all four African species of pangolin are present in the CAR and officially protected, the law is very hard to enforce. Two-thirds of the country are still in the hands of armed groups following a succession of conflicts.

"Unlike elephants, pangolins are very difficult to track, and it's rare to be able to arrest poachers in the act," said Luis Arranz, the national park representative of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). "We have to rely on seizures on the road and on our informers." In the park's offices, Arranz opened a metal door to give an idea of the scale of trafficking. Crates on shelves are overflowing with scales that had been destined for the Chinese market. The collection is valued at several hundred thousand euros (dollars). "Here, many people do that," said a local hunter, asking not to be named. "A pot of pangolin scales sells for about 30,000 CFA francs (46 euros / \$50). If there was work here, people wouldn't hunt."—AFP

## Could homemade masks help stop infected people spreading virus?

Is a homemade mask better than nothing at all? With an unknown number of asymptomatic virus carriers, some experts are advising people to fashion their own face coverings to prevent them spreading the disease. As health workers across the world struggle to get protective equipment and stocks dwindle, health organisations have stressed that there is little scientific evidence to show that masks are effective at preventing healthy people catching COVID-19.

But some experts say they could be useful as a barrier to stop those infected — particularly those without symptoms — from contaminating others through the tiny respiratory droplets emitted when they cough, sneeze, talk or even breathe. "It only works if everyone wears (them), and if everyone does, you only need a very basic mask, because a piece of tissue can block it," said KK Cheng, director of the Institute of Applied Health Research at



Belgian fashion designer and sewing teacher Audrey Jacques sews homemade protective masks in Brussels, Belgium.—Reuters

Birmingham University. "It's not perfect, but that's much better than nothing."

There is scant evidence on the effectiveness of do-it-yourself face coverings, however. "It's not clear whether homemade masks would reduce transmission, there has been very little scientific research on this topic," Benjamin Cowling, epidemiologist at the University of Hong Kong, told AFP. One 2013 Cambridge University study looked at a scenario of an influenza pandemic and subsequent shortage of surgical masks.

Volunteers were tasked with making their own masks from cotton t-shirts for the research, which found that improvised masks might reduce the likelihood of infection — but not eliminate the risk. "Our findings suggest that a homemade mask should only be considered as a last resort to prevent droplet transmission from infected individuals, but it would be better than no protection," the study said. Even the doctors who recommend the use of masks, insist they should not be seen as an alternative to the most crucial prevention measures, such as hand washing and social distancing.

### Shortages

Since the start of the coronavirus epidemic, many western countries have stressed that the widespread use of masks is not necessary. This position has surprised many in parts of Asia, where mask-wearing is a common practice. "The big mistake in the US and Europe, in my opinion, is that people aren't wearing masks," said Gao Fu, the head of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention in an interview with Science magazine last week.

Cheng said that mask wearing was not in "Western culture". But he added that the authorities may also have wanted to dissuade panic buying of protective equipment that would leave shortages for key health workers. World Health Organisation guidelines say that only those who are sick and the people caring for them need to wear masks.

"There is no specific evidence to suggest that the wearing of masks by the mass population has any particular benefit," said Mike Ryan, executive director of the WHO's emergencies program, in a briefing on Monday. "In fact there is some evidence to suggest the opposite," he said, adding people often did not know how to wear or remove the mask properly. Ryan said there was also a "massive global shortage" of protective equipment. "Right now the people most at risk from this virus are frontline health workers who are exposed to the virus every second of every day. The thought of them not having masks is horrific," he said.

### Make your own

In recent days, several European countries have updated their position on mask wearing, with the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Austria announcing new rules to compel people to cover their faces in places like supermarkets. Pulmonologist Nicolas Hutt, who works in Alsace, one of the French regions most affected by the epidemic, said people should wear "alternative masks" not produced for medical purposes.

These would act as a barrier in "areas where distancing measures are not properly followed, like shops". Online tutorials for making your own masks have circulated widely. While French authorities have stuck to the WHO guidance that healthy people do not need masks, the industry ministry's standardization board posted a manufacturing blueprint on Friday. Prime Minister Edouard Philippe has also said that textile and paper firms would now be encouraged to make masks.

These would not be for medical personnel but for those who would see a mask as a good way of equipping themselves and "reassuring themselves, protecting themselves and fighting against the epidemic". Some could even be luxury branded. At the weekend, fashion house Chanel said it was mobilizing dozens of its dressmakers to produce masks and gowns and would "start production as soon as the prototypes and raw materials have been approved".—AFP



Wedding dress and evening wear designer Friederike Jorzig adjusts a mannequin wearing a wedding dress with matching protective mask in her store Chiton in Berlin on March 31, 2020 as Germany continues to battle the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. As all weddings and events have been cancelled, the German fashion designer creating fashionable facemasks in her workshop, selling them in her shop in Berlin's Schoeneberg district.—AFP

## Second woman accuses disgraced French writer Matzneff

A second woman has broken her silence about being groomed and controlled by the disgraced French paedophile writer Gabriel Matzneff. Journalist Francesca Gee said she was in a relationship for three years with Matzneff in the 1970s, with the then 37-year-old essayist waiting outside her school every day for her when she was 15. Gee and the often explicit letters the diarist encouraged her to write featured in a number of Matzneff's books against her will, she told the New York Times, including his notorious defense of paedophilia, "Les Moins de Seize Ans", ("The Under 16s").

He even boasted in his diaries, which were regularly published, of having her moved to a prestigious Paris high school so she could be close to him. In a statement seen by AFP, Gee said that she had been a victim of "his predatory behavior" and had tried unsuccessfully for decades to stop one of his publishers, Gallimard, using a picture of her on the cover of his book, "Drunk on Lost Wine". Gallimard has since pulled all Matzneff's books from sale. The 83-year-old has never made any secret of his sexual preference for adolescent girls and boys. It did not stop him winning the Renaudot prize in 2013 and being honored by the French state.

### 'World wasn't ready'

He occupied a privilege niche in the French literary world until January when attitudes toward the writer changed radically after publisher Vanessa Springora revealed her own tortured under-age relationship with him in her bestseller, "Consent". Matzneff — who fled to Italy after the scandal broke — is to stand trial next year on a charge of justifying paedophilia, and prosecutors launched a rape investigation into him the day after Springora's book was published.

Gee, now 63, told the New York Times in an article

published Tuesday that she had exposed Matzneff in a book she had written in 2004 but which no French publisher would print. "He never stopped using me to justify his sexual exploitation of children and teenagers," she wrote. A number of editors who had read the manuscript at the time praised its quality but told the newspaper that "clearly it was 15 years too early. The world wasn't ready yet." An editor at Grasset, which published Springora's "Consent" but turned down Gee's earlier book, said the subject was "sensitive" and Matzneff had influential friends at the publishing house.

Gee, a former journalist, told the New York Times that Matzneff took her to see gynaecologist Michele Barzach half a dozen times in the 1970s to get contraceptive pills while she was a minor. Barzach went on to become a French health minister and head of the country's arm of UN's child protection agency, UNICEF. She also later helped draft a law tightening French child abuse laws in 1985. The Matzneff controversy has shone a light on what many see as an overly permissive attitude towards sexual harassment and abuse in France. —AFP



French writer Gabriel Matzneff



# Pandemic pranks off the table on April Fools' Day

TAIPEI: It may be the global day for pranks but with the world under assault from the deadly coronavirus pandemic many governments yesterday were warning against virus-themed April Fools' jokes - some even threatening jail. The April 1 tradition sees families, web users and corporations embrace practical jokes. But few are in the mood as the global death toll mounts and billions remain under some form of lockdown.

One K-pop star who joked on Instagram that he had tested positive for coronavirus faced a backlash at home and abroad. Jaejoong, a member of popular band JYJ — formerly TVXQ - said he had been infected and hospitalized. Worried fans left countless messages wishing him a speedy recovery. But about an hour later he updated the post, revealing it was a prank and adding he wanted to "raise awareness".

"Although it may have been too much as an April Fools' joke, a lot of people worried for me," he wrote. "I'll receive any punishment due to this post." Many, including his own fans, lambasted the post, calling it inappropriate and not funny. "Please have some respect. People out there are suffering," wrote one fan.

The coronavirus outbreak has already been accompanied by a deluge of online misinformation, making it harder for governments to keep their citizens safe. Some are now threatening jail for virus pranks. Taiwan, which has been held up as a model for how to tackle an outbreak, warned people who spread false rumors that they faced up to three years in jail and a TWS\$3 million fine (\$100,000).

"On April Fools' Day we can exercise our sense of humour if we have to but we can't make jokes on the pandemic to avoid breaking the law," President Tsai Ing-wen posted on Facebook alongside a photo of one of her cats. "I wish everybody not only a humorous but also healthy and safe April Fools' Day."

Thailand was taking a similarly hard line, threatening up to five years in jail. "It's against the law to fake having COVID-19 this April Fools' Day," the government said on Twitter. "There may be people who do not have good intentions... who may use April 1 or April Fools' Day and assume they will not face legal



TEHRAN: Iran's Azadi (Freedom) Tower is lit up with flags and messages of hope in solidarity with all the countries affected by the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic on Tuesday. — AFP

action," Krissana Pattanacharoen, deputy national police spokesman, told reporters on Tuesday.

In India, where disinformation - especially on WhatsApp - remains a pervasive problem, politicians made similar appeals. "The state govt won't allow anyone to spread rumours/panic on #Corona," tweeted Maharashtra state's home minister Anil Deshmukh. "We urge citizens to verify information

and only share messages from trusted sources and not fall for fake news," Pranay Ashok, a spokesman for Mumbai Police, told AFP, adding that anyone found spreading fake news would be prosecuted.

Many well-known brands with a prior track record of jumping on the annual bandwagon were steering clear of the tradition this year. Google, a company renowned for its elaborate annual stunts,

told its employees it would "take the year off from that tradition out of respect for all those fighting the Covid-19 pandemic," according to an internal email obtained by Business Insider. James Herring, from London-based PR agency Taylor Herring, had the following warning. "Tip for any PR agencies planning an April Fools' Day stunt," he wrote last week on Twitter. "Just. Don't." — AFP

## Hundreds apply to leave on first...

Continued from Page 1

both the Philippine and Kuwait airports. "They will be sent on special chartered flights. So we are in close coordination with authorities both in Kuwait and the Philippines, because even back home, no commercial flights are allowed," he said.

"Kuwait wants an immediate flight to Manila. What will happen today is that we will receive the applications filed with the Kuwaiti ministry of interior or personnel. Undocumented Filipinos were instructed to come to the venue with their documents and luggage, because if their application is approved, they will be immediately taken to a holding place, where they have to wait for their scheduled flight to Manila," he said.

"Amnesty applicants must bring their valid passports, along with two pieces of luggage (20 kg each plus 7 kg hand carry bag). Those who have no valid passports should bring three passport-size photos with a blue background," the Philippine Embassy advisory reads. Hermosura had called upon all

undocumented Filipinos in Kuwait 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."

Luz from Binan Laguna was among the hundreds in the queue at the venue to take advantage of the amnesty. "I am here because I want to go home to my children in this time of a pandemic. If they die, I will die with them. I just want to see them and be with them and assure them that I am their mother and protect them," she said.

She had been living in Kuwait for the last five years without a visa. "I stayed with my employer for a year, then ran away because she was very harsh and wasn't giving me enough food. My agency then sent me to another employer, but my residency couldn't be transferred because the earlier sponsor wouldn't cooperate. So I ran away again and looked for part-time jobs. I rented a flat and worked illegally, and have been hiding from the police for the last four years," she said.

"Now the time has come to go home, I don't have part-time jobs anymore, plus I am very much concerned about my five kids. I need to be with them because I have heard so much about this virus - I am scared for them," Luz said.

Saudi Arabia's hajj minister asked Muslims on Tuesday to temporarily defer preparations for the annual pilgrimage amid uncertainty over the coronavirus pandemic. Earlier this month, Saudi Arabia suspended the year-round umrah pilgrimage over fears of the new coronavirus spreading to Islam's holiest cities, an unprecedented move that raised uncertainty over the annual hajj.

"Saudi Arabia is fully ready to serve pilgrims and umrah seekers," hajj minister Mohammad Benteen told the state-run Al-Ekhbariya television. "But under the current circumstances, as we are talking about the global pandemic... the kingdom is keen to protect the health of Muslims and citizens and so we have asked our brother Muslims in all countries to wait before doing (hajj) contracts until the situation is clear."

Saudi authorities are yet to announce whether they will proceed with this year's hajj, scheduled for the end of July. The pilgrimage - which last year attracted 2.5 million people - is a key revenue earner for the kingdom. But it could be a major source of contagion as it packs pilgrims closely in religious sites.

The coronavirus pandemic has claimed more than 30,000 lives in Europe alone, a global tally showed yesterday, in what the head of the United Nations has described as humanity's worst crisis since World War II. Italy and Spain bore the brunt of the crisis, accounting for three in every four deaths on the continent, as the grim tally hit another milestone even though half of the planet's population is already under some form of lockdown in a battle to halt contagion.

Across the Atlantic, President Donald Trump warned of a "very, very painful two weeks" as the United States registered its deadliest 24 hours of what he called a "plague". America's outbreak has mushroomed rapidly. There are now around 190,000 known cases - a figure that has doubled in just five days. Some 41,000 deaths have been recorded worldwide from more than 830,000 infections since the pandemic emerged in China in December.

For UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the extraordinary economic and political upheaval spurred by the virus presents a real danger to the relative peace the world has seen over the last few decades. The "disease... represents a threat to

## Isolation proves tall order for Morocco's poor

RABAT: Isolation to keep coronavirus at bay is a tall order for Moroccans like Abdullah, who is supposed to spend days cooped up indoors without sunlight in an impoverished neighborhood of the capital Rabat. So he stays out in the street. "I know social isolation is a must. But it's just not possible to stay home all day," says the 49-year-old street trader who lives with his wife and three children. Ever since a March 20 lockdown, flats in densely-populated areas like Takadom, which is packed with concrete buildings up to four floors high with tiny windows, can feel like virtual prisons.

Those who respect the stay-at-home rules gather inside the gates of the buildings just to kill time. Many venture out. "We're just overcrowded and it's not easy," said Soufiane, 32, who lives in a two-bedroom flat with his parents and five siblings, although he is aware of "the seriousness of

the illness and importance of quarantine". Soufiane made a living by selling clothes at a local market, which is closed and whose neighborhood is hemmed in by checkpoints.

Neighbour Abdelkhalek, 52, said his five-member family could put up with living "on top of each other in 40 square meters but how can we do that without an income?" He continued: "Conditions to live a decent life just don't exist in many homes." Moroccan authorities have deployed police, soldiers and even armored cars in some towns to enforce the lockdown, as the country's death toll from the coronavirus pandemic rose to 33 on Tuesday out of 574 declared cases.

Apart from isolation measures, which have been imposed around the world, Morocco has also adopted economic and social measures to assist companies, workers and those dependent on social services. State aid of between 800 and 1,200 dirhams (\$80 to \$120) is to be allocated for needy families to weather the crisis, from a \$3.2-billion emergency package also funded by corporate and private donations. But you need to be registered, and the bulk of the North African country's workforce is made up of "informal workers". "I've got nothing at all. How am I going to buy my food? I really don't know, I'm lost," said Soufiane. — AFP

## 27 expats among 28 new virus cases...

Continued from Page 1

officials from both the public and private sectors. It said the stimulus is based on safeguarding public funds and using it to serve the national economy and is not intended to compensate companies and individuals. The package aims to ensure that citizens working in sectors impacted by the crisis are not affected, and that subsidies are maintained to preserve the prices of food and medical materials in the domestic market.

It calls for adopting the mechanisms that will ensure a minimum limit of income capable of meeting the cost of living of workers affected by the crisis and which are linked to employment contracts. It did not single out Kuwaiti citizens in this category, which could mean providing this service to expatriates too. The stimulus also provides help to small- and medium-sized projects, in addition to agricultural and industrial projects by delaying payment of installments of loans they had received from the development fund.

It also provides long-term easy loans to small and medium enterprises, jointly by local banks and the development fund, and also provides easy long-term loans from national banks to companies and customers affected by the crisis. It also calls for delaying the payment of monthly social security contributions for six months by private and oil companies to help them face the current cash crunch. The package also pledges to exempt productive sectors and cooperative societies from government fees, provided customers benefit from these breaks.

The Cabinet set up a committee presided by the governor of the Central Bank and the membership of ministry of finance undersecretary and managing director of Kuwait Investment Authority to implement the stimulus package. It also set up a higher committee, assisted by a strategic team, to supervise the implementation of the support program. But Boursa Kuwait welcomed the government aid with a drop, apparently not very pleased over the extent of the incentives.

everybody in the world and... an economic impact that will bring a recession that probably has no parallel in the recent past. "The combination of the two facts and the risk that it contributes to enhanced instability, enhanced unrest, and enhanced conflict are things that make us believe that this is the most challenging crisis we have faced since the Second World War," he said.

As companies shut down for undetermined periods and entire workforces are forced to stay home to halt the spread of COVID-19, scenes of economic desperation and unrest were emerging across the globe. In Italy, queues were lengthening at soup kitchens while some supermarkets were reportedly pillaged. Half a million more people now need help to afford meals, Italy's biggest union for the agriculture sector Coldiretti said, adding to the 2.7 million already in need last year.

"Usually we serve 152,525 people. But now we've 70,000 more requests," confirmed Roberto Tuorto, who runs a food bank association. It was crucial to "ensure that the economic crisis unleashed by the virus don't become a security crisis," he warned. The economic pain of lockdowns is especially acute in the developing world.

In Tunisia several hundred protested a week-old lockdown that has disproportionately hit the poor. "Never mind coronavirus, we're going to die anyway! Let us work!" shouted one protester in the demonstration on the outskirts of the capital Tunis. Africa's biggest city Lagos was set for its second full day of lockdown yesterday - but with some of the world's biggest slums, home to millions who live hand-to-mouth, containment will be difficult.

Wary of a collapse of the world's economy with shops shuttered and millions forced into shorter working hours or losing their jobs completely, the globe's leading central bankers have pumped billions of liquidity into the system. Last week, G20 leaders said they were injecting \$5 trillion into the global economy to head off a feared deep recession. In the European Union, however, battle lines have been drawn over the terms of a rescue plan.

Worst-hit Italy and Spain are leading a push for a shared debt instrument - dubbed "coronabonds". But talk of shared debt is a red line for Germany and other northern countries, threatening to divide the bloc. The tone sharpened this week, with Italian

politicians even taking out an advertisement in a major German newspaper to remind Europe's biggest economy of WWII debts in a bid to jolt it into action.

The economic cost of the crisis could still worsen as lockdowns remain at the forefront of official disease-stopping arsenals - a strategy increasingly borne out by science. Researchers said China's decision to shutter Wuhan, ground zero for the global COVID-19 pandemic, may have prevented hundreds of thousands of new cases. "Our analysis suggests that without the Wuhan travel ban and the national emergency response there would have been more than 700,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases outside of Wuhan" by mid-February, said Oxford University's Christopher Dye.

At the same time, focus is now turning to how asymptomatic cases may be fuelling the spread. China yesterday said it has more than 1,300 asymptomatic coronavirus cases, the first time it has released such data following public concern over people who have tested positive but are not showing symptoms. Experts agree that asymptomatic patients are likely to be infectious, but it remains unknown how responsible they are for spreading the deadly virus.

Chinese respiratory expert Zhong Nanshan said in a state media interview last week that asymptomatic carriers could potentially infect "3 to 3.5 people each". Germany and France were also ramping up testing of the population to establish how many already have immunity.

The inundation of patients has sent health facilities worldwide into overdrive. Emergency hospitals are popping up in event spaces while distressed medical staff make grim decisions about how to distribute limited protective gear, beds and life-saving respirators. In scenes previously unimaginable in peacetime, around a dozen white tents were erected to serve as a field hospital in New York's Central Park.

But even with the extended capacity, doctors say they are still having to make painful choices. "If you get a surge of patients coming in, and you only have a limited number of ventilators, you can't necessarily ventilate patients," Shomit Patel of the Beth Israel hospital said. "And then you have to start picking and choosing."



Stars

Daily SuDoku

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easy

Yesterday's Solution

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| 7 | 9 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 6 | 8 | 4 |
| 2 | 4 | 1 | 7 | 8 | 6 | 3 | 9 | 5 |
| 6 | 8 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 9 | 2 | 7 | 1 |

hard

STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

Your attitude is calm and matter-of-fact when talking to others, Aries. You tell it like it is while omitting the frills and fantasies. You have no reason to hide the truth, so you're happy to disclose information to any willing listener. Be careful, because you could get into someone else's private business uninvited. If you hear some secret information, you could tell it to others who definitely shouldn't hear it.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

You're likely to be feeling a bit lonely, perhaps even isolated, Libra. Maybe you think no one else has your same wild thoughts running through their heads. You'd be surprised to learn how many people do. It's unlikely, however, that you'll share these thoughts with anyone, especially now. Don't feel like you have to. Just know that you aren't alone and that you have a network of support at all times.



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

You're likely to have tremendous concentration that seems to have materialized out of nowhere. Use this to your advantage, Taurus, because it may not last long. You're usually blown from one thing to another like a leaf in the wind, and it's hard for you to settle on one project or issue for an extended time. You may have to shut a few people out in order to finish some tasks, but that's fine.



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

If you have the opportunity to teach someone a lesson, Scorpio, feel free to do so. There's probably someone in your world who could use a bit of instruction now. You'll have the patience and clarity of words to straighten things out and make the correct path obvious. Don't be stingy with your knowledge. The situation will improve for you and everyone else when you selflessly spread your wisdom to others.



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

Be careful about shutting yourself off from the rest of the world, Gemini. You might hesitate to talk to people. You could have the feeling that they're unworthy of your time. Perhaps you feel that your problems are more important and that others are too concerned with superficial things to understand the true depth of your nature.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

You could hesitate to take the initiative, Sagittarius. Instead, you'd rather wait and see how things pan out before you make a major move. Your movements are hindered in some way, although you may not be sure why. It's best to go with your intuition and not question too much. Just know that you're better off taking the safer route rather than walking too far out on the thin ice.



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

You might talk as if you possess many lifetimes of wisdom, Cancer. Perhaps you do, but that doesn't mean you should be arrogant about it. Your words might have the tone of a sage schooled in every subject. As a result, you could grow frustrated with others who act immature or uneducated. It isn't your job to judge. Help others understand the bigger picture instead of assume they're unworthy or unwilling to learn.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

You could feel increasingly uncomfortable as the day goes on, Capricorn. Perhaps you're tongue-tied in conversations - quite rare for you. The problem is that you simply don't know what to say, or if you do, you don't feel comfortable saying it in front of these people. Perhaps you feel you've lost your edge. Don't despair. This is only a passing phase.



Leo (July 23-August 22)

Once you've made up your mind, Leo, it's doubtful that anyone can change it. You're set in your ways and your plans are set in stone. Having this solid base to stand on will let others support you effectively. You're trustworthy and predictable. Others can depend on you and know where they stand in relation to you. Don't let self-doubt slip in. This is your time to stand tall and proud.



Aquarius (January 20-February 18)

You could lapse into pessimism, Aquarius. Suddenly the glass appears half empty and everything looks bleak. You feel like you're going around in circles. You might ask yourself what you're doing it all for anyway. You can talk yourself out of this mood as easily as you talked yourself into it. It might not seem possible, but you must trust that it's necessary in order to see the glass as half full again.



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

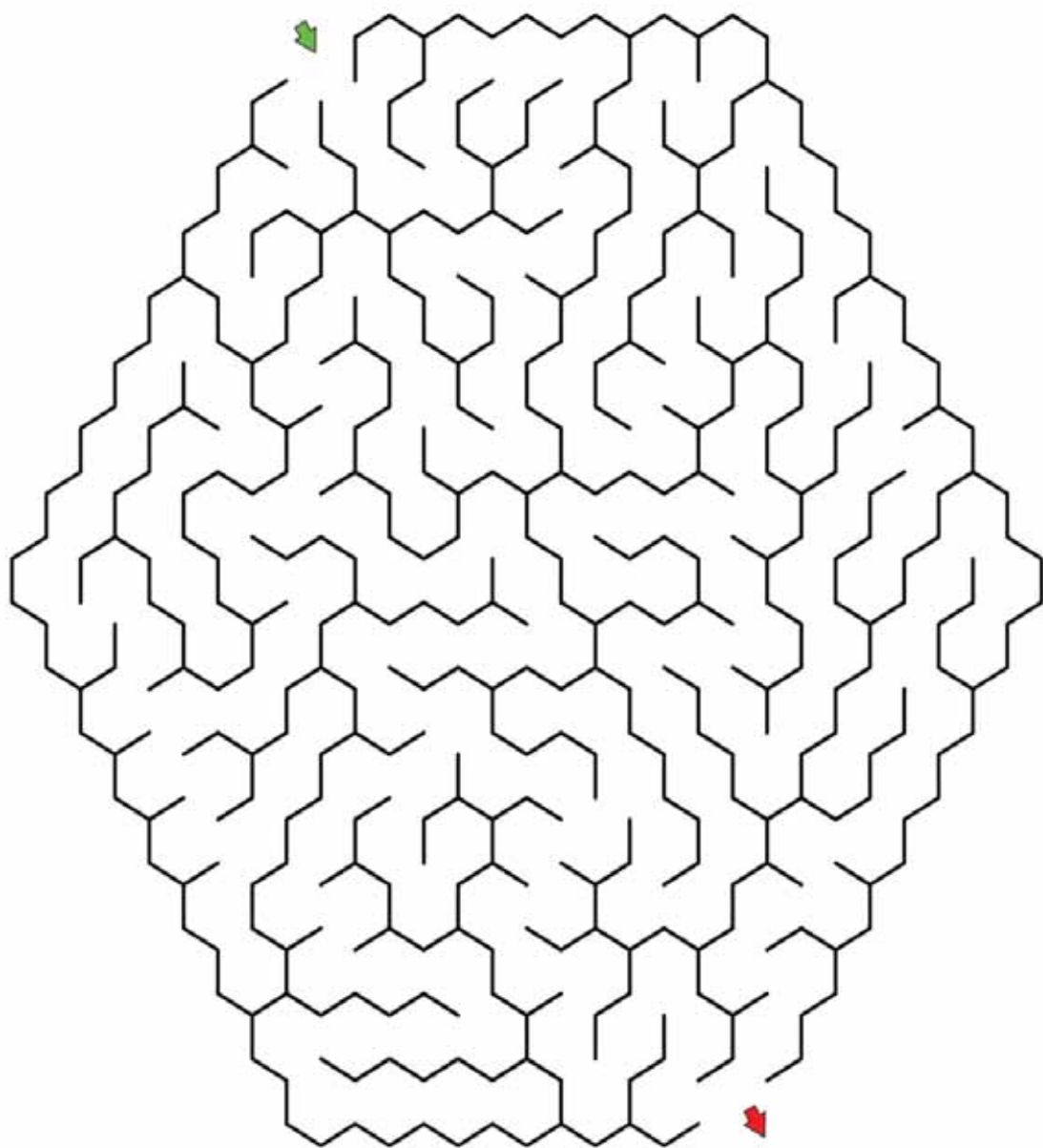
You might be hard and cold when it comes to the facts, Virgo, and you could come across as tough and rather harsh. In reality, this often just masks your sensitive interior. Perhaps you're insecure about your feelings and how you express yourself. People might never know this because you're so good at showing only the strong-willed, electric side of your personality.



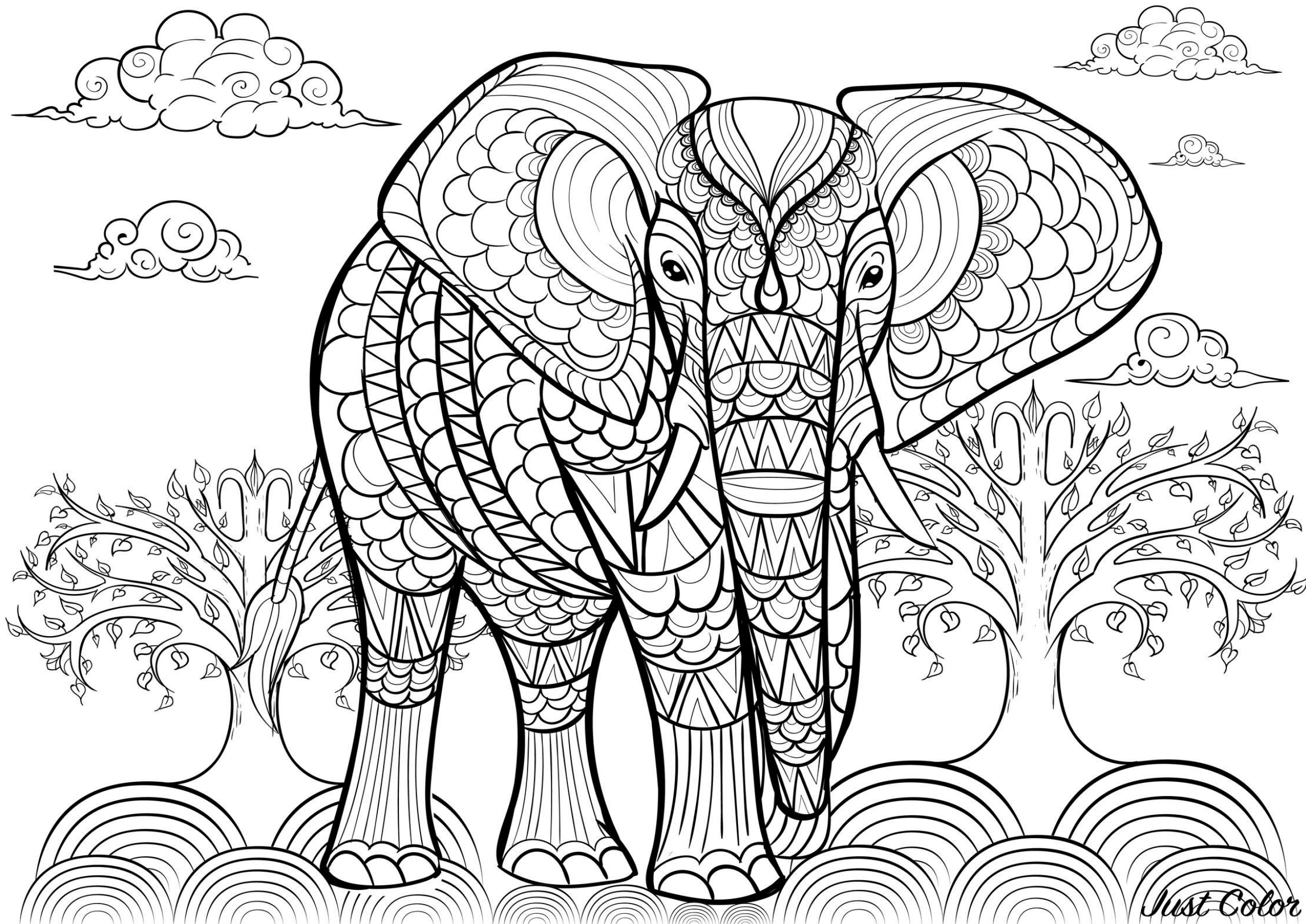
Pisces (February 19-March 20)

You might be much more aware of yourself than usual and hyper-alert to every move you make today, especially around others, Pisces. You're feeling self-conscious about your words, and you could be constantly wondering if you're saying the right thing to the right person at the right time. Too much self-analysis could drive you completely insane if you aren't careful.

Find the way



Color It





## Sports

Photo of the day



OMAN: Red Bull Sailing Team at the GC32 Oman Cup in Muscat, Oman. Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

## MLB games in empty parks under discussion: Heaney

LOS ANGELES: Los Angeles Angels pitcher Andrew Heaney said Tuesday he'd be willing to open the Major League Baseball season playing in empty ballparks — something the MLB players' union has discussed.

Heaney, who is the Angels' union representative, said on a conference call with reporters that playing without fans in attendance in a bid to get the season underway was a possible option under consideration, even though "no player wants to play in an empty stadium." Major League Baseball's 2020 season had been set to start on March 26, but it's on indefinite hold along with the rest of the sports world amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Heaney said televised games might be a relief even if continued bans on large gatherings mean fans can't get to the ballpark. "Baseball shows why it's the national pastime in situations like this, difficult times for our country," Heaney said from his home in Oklahoma. "It seems to me that's when the sport flexes its muscles.

"As players, we understand that too. Maybe (the word) therapeutic is overboard, but it can be helpful for people in tough times, tough situations, to flip on a game and see their team play."

Currently the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have recommended no gatherings of 50 or more people through mid-May, but Heaney said he's still trying to prepare himself for a full 162-game season. "That's everybody's goal," he said. "It may seem far-fetched, but that's everybody's goal." But he wouldn't reject the idea of changes to the playoff format later in the year.

"It's definitely not a normal season, so I can see the benefit of having an abnormal playoff system that would be exciting and intriguing," he said.

"I think there's a movement within baseball to start being a little bit more outside-the-box and not quite so traditional. It's a very slow movement, but I think it's getting there." —AFP

# Australian rugby staring into abyss as coronavirus shutdown takes toll

'We know rugby was sick a long time before coronavirus came along'

SYDNEY: More than 100 staff cleared their desks at Rugby Australia's shiny offices near Sydney Cricket Ground yesterday in a troubling portent of an uncertain future for the game in the wake of the coronavirus shutdown.

Already cash-strapped after five years of only modest success on the field and ructions off it, the suspension of all professional sport to help contain the pandemic has come as a perfect storm for rugby union's governing body in Australia.

While other unions around the world have been forced to cut costs, and USA Rugby are making the tactical move of filing for chapter 11 bankruptcy, few face a future as bleak. Twice world champions and World Cup finalists as recently as 2015, the Wallabies are undoubtedly one of the powers of the international game.

In response to the crisis, Rugby Australia Chief Executive Raelene Castle agreed to a 50% pay cut before announcing on Tuesday that 75% of RA staff would be laid off for three months with those remaining working shorter hours on reduced wages.

RA's 2019 accounts have yet to be signed off because of the uncertainty but Castle said in announcing the layoffs that they faced a "worst case scenario" of A\$120 million (\$73.54 million) losses in revenue, a devastating amount for a body of its size.

Former Wallaby Rod Kafer, now a television pundit, said yesterday the roots of the crisis predated the coronavirus pandemic and called for wholesale changes at the top. "This concept for the rugby community that 'everything's okay, just trust us' when the CEO says we're staring down a A\$120 million hole? How did the board allow the game to get into that position?" he told Fox Sports TV.

"We know rugby was sick a long time before the coronavirus came along. Rugby's been sick for years, people have been calling for change

and it hasn't occurred. And yet, the same people who've taken us off the cliff are still in charge."

## LEGAL BATTLE

This year was already going to be tough financially for RA due to the usual reductions of revenue following a World Cup year being compounded by the financial fallout from the lengthy battle over Israel Folau's sacking last May.

The decision to spurn the offer of an extended broadcast deal from long-term partners Fox Sports and take the rights to market has also left them potentially exposed when the current four-year, \$285 million contract expires at the end of 2020.

The next job for Castle and her team is to start negotiations over what are now inevitable player salary cuts with the Rugby Union Player's

Association (RUPA) and their chief executive, Justin Harrison.

Former Wallabies lock Harrison says Rugby Australia were being nowhere near as transparent as they should be about the extent of the crisis facing the game.

"Australia's professional rugby union players are still waiting on detailed financial information from Rugby Australia after talks in Sydney today, still not provided after three weeks of requests," he said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Although RA provided no assurances, RUPA looks forward to the opportunity to assess that information in the near future." Kafer said he thought that even after halving her A\$800,000 salary, Castle would still be earning more than 95% of players.

"Taking the game to the point of insolvency is what this management team and board have done," he added. "It is time for drastic change, the rugby community ... has watched this train smash over the last few years and has called for change. Now's the time to demand it." —Reuters



## Uncertain future for the game

## NZ Rugby slashes salaries as sport reels from virus

WELLINGTON: New Zealand Rugby slashed wages for all staff and warned of up to NZ\$100 million (US\$60 million) in lost revenue yesterday as leading governing bodies scrambled to absorb the blows of the coronavirus pandemic.

New Zealand's emergency measures come after England, Scotland and Wales all cut pay for top officials, and follow Rugby Australia's decision to temporarily lay off three-quarters of its workers.

NZR chief executive Mark Robinson said that in a worst-case scenario the All Blacks — the top-ranked Test team and three-time world champions — and the country's five Super Rugby teams would not play again this year.

He said NZR needed to staunch cash outflows and staff had agreed to a 40 percent pay cut for the next three months, with talks underway with players. "It's an incredibly challenging time, we have fantastic rugby people all around the country at the moment dealing with difficult financial circumstances," Robinson told reporters.

The southern hemisphere's Super Rugby season has been suspended and July internationals are also in doubt after the coronavirus prompted tough containment measures and curbed international travel.

The annual Rugby Championship, featuring New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and Argentina, is scheduled to start in August. Robinson said he had been in contact with the global governing body World Rugby about the prospect of receiving financial support. "They're going through a process of gathering as much information as they can, once they digest that I'd imagine they'll come back to us with some ideas," he said.

NZR said it had made emergency grants of NZ\$250,000 to each of New Zealand's Super Rugby clubs to tide them over for the next three months.

"These decisions are about protecting the core capability of the Super Rugby clubs so that they are ready to hit the ground running if Super Rugby resumes later this year," he said.



TOKYO: In this file photo taken on November 1, 2019 New Zealand's players perform the haka prior to the Japan 2019 Rugby World Cup bronze final match between N Zealand and Wales at the Tokyo Stadium in Tokyo. New Zealand Rugby slashed wages for all staff and warned of up to 60 million USD in lost revenue yesterday. —AFP

## 'TOUGHEST DECISION'

New Zealand's cuts came after Scotland announced a 25 percent salary deferral for their coach, Gregor Townsend, and Wales's Wayne Pivac reduced his wages by the same figure. Townsend's deferral, covering April 1 to September 1, will also apply to Edinburgh boss Richard Cockerill and Glasgow counterpart Dave Rennie, as well as Scottish Rugby Union performance director Jim Mallinder.

Rennie, however, is set to leave in June to become the coach of Australia. SRU chief executive Mark Dodson, one of the highest paid administrators in the game, will have a salary deferral of 30 percent from April 1 to September 1.

Scottish Rugby Board chairman Colin Grassie said: "We are working extremely hard to navigate the sport of

rugby in Scotland through these extremely challenging times. "We will leave no stone left unturned to ensure the long-term sustainability of Scottish Rugby."

Just hours after the Scottish announcement, Pivac and Welsh Rugby Union chief executive Martyn Phillips said they would take 25 per cent salary reductions from April 1. The WRU had already cancelled all league and cup competitions in Wales for the rest of the season, and later on Tuesday the SRU announced its 2019/20 domestic season had been annulled.

Last week, England's Eddie Jones — the highest paid coach in international rugby — and other top officials took a 25 percent pay cut for up to three months. And on Tuesday, Rugby Australia put 75 percent of its staff on unpaid leave, in what chief executive Raelene Castle called "the toughest decision in the game's history". —AFP

## Kiwi rugby stars share lockdown tips in new show

WELLINGTON: New Zealand's top rugby players will share homemade videos on how they are coping during COVID-19 lockdown and keeping fit in a new show airing yesterday called "Isolation Nation". With the Super Rugby season in limbo, pay-TV broadcaster Sky Sport is desperate to provide fresh content for subscribers and worked on the concept with New Zealand Rugby and the players' association.

The programme, co-hosted by former All Black Israel Dagg, features gags, inspiring stories and fitness tips from players, who are in the midst of New Zealand's four-week lockdown. Sky's chief content officer Tex Teixeira said the twice-weekly show demonstrated the players were "born entertainers".

"We've all seen how talented these players are on the field and now we will get to see what makes them tick off it," he said. "Like everyone else in Aotearoa (New Zealand) they are keen to stay fit, healthy and motivated to get back in action as soon as we have COVID-19 licked, and they're letting us in on how they are trying to do it."

While the programme gives Sky Sport an alternative to endless reruns of old matches, those involved said it was also a way to lift spirits and stay connected to fans. "(It's) trying to keep a fair amount of normality to this isolation period," said All Blacks fly-half Beauden Barrett, who appears in the first show drop-kicking a rugby ball from his balcony into a distant basketball hoop.

Broadcast rights to Super Rugby and All Blacks internationals were the jewel in the crown for Sky Network Television, which signed a lucrative deal last year to retain them until 2025. But shares in Sky — which is not linked to the European media group of the same name — have halved to 28 NZ cents this month as the prospect of matches in the near to medium term looks increasingly remote. —AFP



## Sports

# Could coronavirus kill off German football fan power?

## For most fans, 50+1 rule remains an unassailable doctrine

**BERLIN:** German football is famed for its vibrant fan culture and member-owned clubs, but as the Bundesliga braces itself for a major financial hit in the coming months, could the coronavirus put an end to fan power?

Many clubs are fearing for their financial futures in the crisis, prompting fresh calls to reform the long-disputed "50+1" rule, which guarantees supporter influence and limits the power of wealthy investors.

"Other leagues are more flexible because they are more open to investors...which could put German football at a disadvantage," sports economist Christoph Breuer told DPA news agency. The "50+1" rule is fiercely defended by German football fans, who see it as a bulwark against the commercialisation of football. The rule ensures that a club's members — usually its supporters — hold majority voting rights, meaning that no individual person or company can gain full control.

Its detractors claim that it scares away potential investors, whose spending power would provide a lifeline for clubs starved of matchday and TV revenues in the current crisis. "Of course I can look for investors even with the 50+1 rule...but there would be many more possibilities without it," said Breuer.

### 'CRISIS AS OPPORTUNITY'

As iconic clubs such as Schalke and Werder Bremen warn of an "existential" threat to their financial security, calls for reform are growing louder. "I think it's sensible to learn and to question the entire system in a

crisis like this," Cologne sporting director Horst Heldt told Sport1.

Hanover president Martin Kind, who has long campaigned for the rule to be revoked, took a similar view in a talk show last Sunday. "Football will change dramatically. It is always important to see a crisis as an opportunity and develop structures which facilitate sporting success with economic stability," he said.

Clubs like Wolfsburg, Bayer Leverkusen, Hoffenheim and RB Leipzig would emerge unscathed from the crisis due to their major financial backers, he argued. Unlike Kind, who has repeatedly failed in his attempts to gain full control of Hanover, those clubs have managed to circumvent the 50+1 rule.

Red Bull-backed Leipzig have bent the rule by admitting only 17 club members since their founding a decade ago, while the other three have been granted an exception due to the long-standing involvement of a single, local investor.

All four clubs are widely despised by other German fans, and ultra groups across the country hold regular protests against both Red Bull and Hoffenheim investor Dietmar Hopp.

### 'POPULIST DEMANDS'

For most fans, the 50+1 rule remains an unassailable doctrine, to be defended at all costs. In a statement on the coronavirus crisis last week, supporter advocacy group "Unsere Kurve" warned against "kneejerk" and "populist" demands to overturn the rule.

"Collectively built foundations such as the 50+1 rule



### Clubs fearing for financial futures



**BERLIN:** Spectators seen waving flags against the long disputed "50+1" rule, which guarantees supporter influence and limits the power of wealthy investors.

will bring advantages in the crisis, not disadvantages," said the group. They added that "long-term solutions" were called for, and pointed out that they had for years campaigned for "sustainable economic policies in the clubs and a more fair distribution of TV income".

Yet with the league suspended until the end of April, many clubs are facing short-term cash-flow problems which could prove decisive. If the season is ultimately cancelled, clubs would lose a significant chunk of their

TV rights revenues, against which the league as a whole has no insurance.

In that case, opening the doors to investors may prove the "only chance of survival", as one player agent put it, speaking anonymously to Sport1. Most clubs, he claimed, would not be able to survive more than four to five weeks under the current circumstances. "In the end, the 50+1 rule will fall as a result of the coronavirus." — AFP

## ECB launches £61m aid package for English Cricket

**LONDON:** The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) announced on Tuesday a £61 million (\$76 million) aid package in response to the "once in a generation" challenge of the coronavirus outbreak.

The 18 first-class counties and their boards, as well as the MCC, will immediately each receive a share of some £40m in their respective bank accounts today, with a further £20m available in interest free loans and grants. "It's no exaggeration to say that this is the biggest challenge the ECB have faced in the history of the game, the modern era certainly," said ECB chief executive Tom Harrison in a conference call.

"We won't know the full impact for a few months... We are trying to work around the clock to understand that impact and take some short term steps to help counties and recreational clubs to get through the immediate impact.

"Preparing yourselves for something like this is incredibly difficult, it is a once in a generation scenario."

### 'MORE PAIN'

All domestic cricket in England has been postponed until at least May 28, raising questions about whether a full campaign featuring several competi-

tions, including the new Hundred tournament, as well as tours by West Indies, Pakistan, Australia and Ireland is possible as officials contemplate the nightmare prospect of scrapping the season completely.

"There are a number of different scenarios — we don't want to make decisions too early," said Harrison. "There are huge implications in bringing international players and teams over (to the UK).

"In our modelling there is no cricket at all... There is more pain ahead if we lose a substantial portion of the season. We are building scenarios where we can take further steps as needed."

Meanwhile Harrison said there were no plans to cut the pay of centrally contracted England players. But Harrison, who earns an annual salary of some £720,000, said he would be joining administrators in other sports by taking a wage reduction.

"Of course I will," he said without specifying the extent of the cut. Harrison made it clear priority would be given to the most lucrative matches — internationals, the Twenty20 Blast and the inaugural Hundred.

A new format franchise competition, the Hundred has been promoted by the ECB as a way of attracting a fresh au-



**LONDON:** The MCC will receive a share of £40 million from the ECB.

dience to the game. But if fans cannot attend for health reasons, it could be delayed until 2021 rather than deny a lot of its purpose by being played behind closed doors this season.

"It is not just about being behind closed doors for The Hundred, (but) it is one of the issues we are grappling with," said Harrison. Meanwhile Harri-

son said he hoped cricket could bolster national morale should some part of the season go ahead despite the pandemic.

"We are thinking creatively about what this moment might be like when the nation comes back out and to have cricket be part of that," he said. "Cricket can be part of that healing process." — AFP

## NBA negotiating player-pay plan

**NEW YORK:** The NBA and the players association are in discussions regarding withholding player pay in the event regular-season games are canceled. ESPN reported Tuesday night. According to the report, the sides are discussing withholding up to 25 percent of players' remaining salaries in a league escrow, allowing for the players and owners to share in some of the financial loss should the league not complete a full, 82-game regular season.

The NBA suspended play indefinitely on the night of March 11, shortly after it was learned Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert had tested positive for COVID-19. The current collective bargaining agreement calls for players to lose roughly 1 percent of their salary for every game canceled per a force majeure provision — triggered when a contract cannot be fulfilled by an unforeseen circumstance. A pandemic is among those circumstances in the NBA's CBA.

According to ESPN, the force majeure is triggered automatically upon the cancellation of games. The report stated that NBA commissioner Adam Silver, National Basketball Players Association executive director Michele Roberts and a group of attorneys have discussed plans for preparing players should they lose money over lost games.

The report also stated that if there is no plan in place by April 15, players will receive their full game checks, but they would have to pay the money back later should games be canceled, with the amount owed determined by a formula based on each player's team and his own salary.

The league is trying to avoid a scenario in which it would be forced to pursue payment from players, an

impetus behind the sides trying to come to an agreement now. Wojnarowski reported Thursday that NBA executives, including Silver, received a 20 percent pay cut in response to the shutdown.

Meanwhile, NBA fans starved for action amid the shut-down forced by the coronavirus pandemic will get a taste of competition in an NBA 2K Players Tournament starting tomorrow. Kevin Durant may have been sidelined all season as he recovers from a torn Achilles tendon, but the Brooklyn Nets star is the top seed in the 16-man field of current NBA players taking on the virtual challenge.

The NBA, the NBA Players Association and game maker 2K announced the tournament, which will be aired in the United States on ESPN over 10 days. "The winner will be crowned the ultimate NBA 2K20 champion and select a charity beneficiary to receive a \$100,000 donation from 2K, the NBA and the NBPA in support of ongoing coronavirus relief efforts," the league said. Rising Atlanta Hawks star Trae Young is the second seed in a field that also features Portland's Hassan Whiteside, Utah's Donovan Mitchell and Washington Wizards rookie Rui Hachimura of Japan.

The seedings are determined by a player's NBA 2K rating — Durant is a 96 — and by tenure in the league. After single-elimination first and second rounds the semi-finals and final will be best-of-three series. As shelter-in-place orders and quarantines in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought actual sports to a standstill, the popular NASCAR stock car series showed that eSports can help fill the void for sports broadcasters and fans.

Over the past two weeks NASCAR drivers have competed in iRacing events that were aired on Fox Sports, drawing hundreds of thousands of viewers. The NBA put its season on indefinite hold on March 11 after Utah Jazz big man Rudy Gobert tested positive for the novel coronavirus. Teammate Mitchell is also among the NBA players who have tested positive, as is Durant. — Agencies

## No 2020 Wimbledon would be 'tough pill to swallow': Isner

**NEW YORK:** John Isner, who won the longest-ever tennis match over three days at Wimbledon in 2010, says it will be a "tough pill to swallow" if this year's event is canceled. A decision is expected soon by tournament officials about whether or not they can stage the classic event at the All England Club as planned starting June 29, postpone it or cancel it outright due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"We're hoping that they're going to be somewhat optimistic about playing the event this year," Isner told ESPN on Tuesday. "I'd love to hear some optimism from them." But with tournament timing crucial due to grass condition and weather, Isner has already started to ponder a year without Wimbledon.

"We may have to come to grips with the fact that we may not be playing Wimbledon this year," Isner said. "It's going to be a tough pill to swallow." Isner, the top-rated US player at 21st in the ATP rankings, defeated Frenchman Nicolas Mahut after more than 11 hours of playing time spread over three days in the epic first-round affair, taking the marathon fifth set 70-68.

"Wimbledon sort of has to be played (same) time of year," Isner said. "With that surface, the event, it seems, has to be played this time and there's a good chance it won't be." The French Open has been postponed from its original May 24 start and has been scheduled for the red clay of Paris from September 20-October 4.

That puts the start only one week after the planned date of the US Open men's final. — AFP

## Tottenham cut non-playing staff wages

**LONDON:** Tottenham chairman Daniel Levy announced 550 non-playing staff at the club will see their wages cut by 20 percent for the next two months on the same day it was revealed he was paid £7 million (\$8.7 million) last season.

Spurs accounts to June 30, 2019 revealed Levy was paid a £3 million bonus, which was due on completion of Tottenham's new 62,000 stadium, on top of his £4 million salary. The new Tottenham Hotspur stadium opened in April last year, eight months later than scheduled and well over budget at a cost of £1 billion.

Levy is among the staff members taking a 20 percent wage cut, but called on Tottenham's players to also do so to ease the financial crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Players at Barcelona, Juventus and Bayern Munich are among those to have taken either a significant wage cut or deferred payments.

Football in England is suspended until at least April 30 and a meeting of Premier League clubs on Friday is expected to push that date further back. "Having already taken steps to reduce costs, we ourselves made the difficult decision, in order to protect jobs, to reduce the remuneration of all 550 non-playing directors and employees for April and May by 20 percent," Levy said in a statement on the Spurs website.

"We hope the current discussions between the Premier League, PFA (Professional Footballers' Association) and LMA (League Managers Association) will result in players and coaches doing their bit for the football eco system."

Tottenham earlier this month posted profits of £68.6 million for the year to June 2019 on the back of a run to the Champions League final and the stadium move. However, Levy said those numbers bore little relevance, with the club facing a difficult period and uncertainty among sponsors and media partners.

"When I read or hear stories about player transfers this summer like nothing has happened, people need to wake up to the enormity of what is happening around us," he added. "We maybe the eighth-largest Club in the world by revenue according to the Deloitte survey but all that historical data is totally irrelevant as this virus has no boundaries."

Tottenham sit eighth in the Premier League table and would therefore miss out on the riches of Champions League football for the first time in five years next season if the league were to be curtailed as it stands.

However, economic factors are behind the desire of Premier League clubs to finish the campaign, even if it means doing so behind closed doors. According to reports, the clubs would have to reimburse broadcasters to the tune of £762 million if the season is not completed. —AFP



**18** NZ Rugby slashes salaries as sport reels from virus



**19** Could coronavirus kill off German football fan power?



**19** ECB launches £61m aid package for English cricket



## Secrecy over Tour de France's fate



**BAGNERES-DE-LUCHON:** File photograph taken on July 25, 2018, France's Julian Alaphilippe, wearing the best climber's polka dot jersey (R) seizes the fork of Tour de France fan Didi Senft (L) during the 17th stage of the 105th edition of the Tour de France cycling race, between Bagneres-de-Luchon and Saint-Lary-Soulan Col du Portet. French sports minister Roxana Maracineanu says this year's Tour de France could be staged without spectators in a bid to combat the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

**PARIS:** Less than three months before the Tour de France's scheduled start, the possibility of cycling's greatest show taking place remains shrouded in doubt, while the organisers have thrown up a wall of silence.

The highlight of the French sporting calendar is due to embark from Nice on June 27 and end on the Champs-Elysees in Paris on July 19. But with France entering its third week of coronavirus lockdown and more than 3,000 deaths in the country, organisers ASO are refusing to comment on their plans, other than to say they will act in the best interests of the general public.

"There will be a huge hunger for sports when this is over," ASO chief Christian Prudhomme said in early March. With the cycling world desperate to keep the 2020 Tour alive, AFP looks at three potential outcomes:

### CANCELLATION

This seems to be the least likely scenario. Keeping the Tour on track is the key to cycling's economic wellbeing. Unless the lockdown continues well into the summer, it would be hard to imagine the Tour being cancelled.

"The Tour represents around 60 percent of earnings in a season," French team AG2R boss Vincent Lavenu

said. The 2018 champion Geraint Thomas agrees, telling the Daily Telegraph this week he feared for people's jobs if the Tour was cancelled.

"When you look back through the history books in 20 years' time, if in 2020 there was no Tour, that doesn't matter.

"But, on the other hand, there are 20-odd teams, and companies invested in those teams, and if it went, there would be quite a few people left unemployed. "While the result itself doesn't matter, the event does, because there are a lot of livelihoods wrapped up in it," he said.

### POSTPONEMENT

Unless the health crisis takes a turn for the better in the weeks to come, a postponement is increasingly likely. Most of the potential competitors are in lockdown and unable to train normally, and would clearly prefer to be in full training before taking on the gruelling Tour.

Unlike all other races, almost every contender likes

to arrive at the Tour in peak form, and that requires intensive training. Ineos star Thomas says the uncertainty is demotivating.

"If you knew that the Tour de Suisse (in June) was going to be your next race, you could just work towards that and devise a training programme. But at the moment it's all up in the air," he said. Others agree with Thomas.

"At the latest we'd need the guys out on the roads training by May 10," the boss of French team Arkea-Samsic, Emmanuel Hubert, told AFP. May 10 appears worryingly close given the current lockdown in France.

The International Cycling Union held a video conference meeting on the matter last Friday. The postponement of the Tokyo Olympics was a huge relief for cycling, as it clears the whole autumn period for rescheduled events. Add in the postponement of the Giro d'Italia in May, and it means everyone will want to be at the Tour.

"If the Tour de France does go ahead in full, it'll be the best field ever," said Matt White of Australian team

Mitchelton-Scott. "With the Olympics off the cards, it does leave a window for later in July and even early August," White added.

Given there is little visibility on the potential length of the lockdown from the authorities, it is impossible to say, but August would be a fairly popular decision.

### THE ORIGINAL PLAN

There appears to be solid support for sticking to the original dates, even if riders show up below top form. After Euro 2020 and the Tokyo Games were postponed, the Tour is one of the year's last sporting landmarks left standing.

Running the Tour without fans, as French sports minister Roxana Maracineanu has suggested is possible, would be fine for those watching on television. But it would be financially damaging for the economies of the small towns banking on it. ASO want the fans there.

"It's too early to tell if it's possible but it would be a great sign if the Tour went ahead on schedule," top French rider Romain Bardet said. Julian Alaphilippe, France's hero of the 2019 Tour after wearing the leader's jersey for 14 days, isn't so sure he would want a race without fans at the roadside. — AFP



**It's too early to tell if it's possible**

## Cooler tone in new US Soccer women's equal pay filings

**LOS ANGELES:** Women players suing US Soccer say in court documents filed Tuesday that the federation has acknowledged the jobs of men and women footballers require equal skill.

The language seemed to signal a decrease in tension between the parties after language in documents filed by federation lawyers earlier in March provoked widespread outrage in saying that playing on the men's national team required a higher level of skill based on speed and strength and carried greater responsibility.

The fierce backlash, not only from the women players but from sponsors such as Coca-Cola, ultimately forced Carlos Cordeiro to resign as president of the federation, to be replaced by vice president Cindy Parlow Cone — a former US international. US Soccer brought in new legal counsel, which has focused in court filings on refuting the plaintiffs' claims that the feder-

ation violated the US Equal Pay Act and other anti-discrimination legislation.

"The parties have significantly narrowed the issues to be tried by way of discovery and briefing," Tuesday's filing from the players' lawyers said. "USSF no longer disputes that the jobs of the WNT and MNT players require equal skill, effort and responsibility — and therefore have necessarily conceded that they perform equal work."

The documents filed by the federation outlining the case they plan to make said the women players had not identified comparable male counterparts under the law — which requires equal payment for men and women working "in the same establishment."

"The undisputed facts show that the WNT and MNT are both geographically and operationally distinct," the US Soccer filing said. "The WNT and MNT play in different venues in different cities (and often different countries), and participate in sep-

arate competitions against completely different pools of opponents."

The federation again stated that apparent pay discrepancies are due to a different pay structure negotiated by the women's union. The case is set to go to trial May 5. Parlow Cone told reporters in a conference call last week that she would like to settle the case sooner.

"I don't think a trial is good for either party or for soccer, both in this country or internationally," she said. "Obviously our women's team is the best team in the world, and I am hopeful that we can find a resolution before this goes to trial."

Tuesday's filings also included potential witnesses for both sides. The lists included all four class representatives in the lawsuit: Carli Lloyd, Alex Morgan, Megan Rapinoe and Becky Sauerbrunn. Former US coach Jill Ellis, Cordeiro and another former federation chief, Sunil Gulati, could also appear. —AFP



**NEW YORK:** File photo taken on July 10, 2019, USA women's soccer player Megan Rapinoe (C) and teammates celebrate with the trophy in front of the City Hall after the ticker tape parade for the women's World Cup champions, in New York. —AFP