

Friday Times

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Thank you volunteers

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Local

The e-learning experiment



Curfew Diaries

By Jamie Etheridge

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One of the biggest debates raging among parents of students in private schools these days is whether to go for e-learning or wait till schools reopen. There are many unanswered questions and it is not an easy decision. E-learning offers many benefits and opportunities, especially for older children who can self-manage and self-direct. But for younger children, families with multiple children, families with newborn babies or parents who work full time, the benefits of e-learning may be outweighed by the stress and challenges it presents. Moreover it's unclear how well younger kids will internalize concepts learned via e-learning.

So we're stuck with two options – neither of them ideal and not much assurance of what to do. Some of us will go for the e-learning rather than wait till schools reopen and do the best we can. That is the option my family will likely choose.



There is value in trying

Like everything else about this pandemic, the e-learning will be an experiment. While I'm pretty sure my sixth grader can manage, I'm not confident my third grader will acquire all the skills and knowledge she needs via e-learning.

At the same time, providing access to learning – even if it's just the core skills needed to progress is invaluable, especially during a time of upheaval. In previous periods of human history, when pandemics and epidemics leveled entire continents, children would have lost all opportunity to study and learn and societies might enter periods of decline.

My kids also do loads of other non-academic learning. They cook and have household chores. They draw, paint, knit and crochet, loom and build legos. They play puzzles and dress up and imaginative games. They play basketball and jump rope. They are, in short, spending a lot of this stay at home time playing and being children. Spending a few hours a day learning math, writing and reading can only supplement all the learning that is taking place and hopefully not add too much stress and anxiety to our days.

Our children may have to repeat in the fall what they should have learned this spring. They may not get everything they need via e-learning and what they do get may not be deep enough or internalized enough to take root. But as with most experiments, there is value simply in the trying. We don't know how well this will work, what challenges it may present, what successes or failures will result. But we won't know unless we embark on the experiment.

Economy today



Local Spotlight

By Muna Al-Fuzai

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Global oil prices have recorded a noticeable decline to levels that haven't been seen since 2002. The fall is due to the collapse in demand as a result of the global pandemic and economic shutdown. At the same time, equity markets around the world have suffered historic losses amid intense selling linked to the coronavirus pandemic. Central banks in many countries decided to cut interest rates on the hope that this move will reduce the cost of borrowing, encouraging spending, and boosting the economy.

Naturally, investors fear that the global pandemic will destroy economic growth, despite government measures to halt the downturn.

The coronavirus, which has spread to more than a hundred countries, has created a state of fear of rapid spread, which led to the collapse of the global economy including oil markets. Also, ambiguity in the effect complicates future estimates and predictions on how and when the disaster will be over. Some analysts have warned that markets may fluctuate until the pandemic is contained because the economic and social implications are many and multiple.

I think the world will not be able to fully understand the impacts of this situation until long into the future. It is only natural for economists today to fear how long this virus will last, especially in the major industrialized countries.

A report published by the American Center for Strategic and International Studies in November 2019, emphasized a

growing recognition of the need for a stronger and coherent approach to health security. It called on the US administration to adopt a preventive policy against epidemics, their protection, and resilience.

The oil sector is not the only field affected. Finance, aviation, retail, service and the food industry as well as many other sectors have had to cancel business, cut staff and wages, and move to emergency measures. Many countries of the world have taken strict measures, including strict ban and closure on countries and capitals, which led to a complete cessation of industrial production giants.

Some have however seen remarkable growth. Some stores and online delivery services recorded significant growth, with consumers staying home and storing goods, with continued warnings about the importance of household isolation and the growing epidemic.

Despite attempts to contain the spread of the virus so far, in addition to tightening quarantine measures, it is necessary to develop scenarios that anticipate the worst scenario with regard to the repercussions of the "corona crisis" on the global economy and the energy market in particular. And this should be especially focused on making sure people can eat, pay rent and survive – not just cutting salaries and laying off staff and leaving them to starve to death.

Some experts considered that the global economy may be subjected to violent shocks due to the effects of the coronavirus on the global economy due to increased travel restrictions, reduced oil demand, decreased production and sales of cars, and reduced spending on tourism. Most governments in the industrialized and Gulf countries also started pumping money. But, there is a limit to the amount of money that governments can allocate, especially whose income depends on exporting oil. Businesses also need to share the burden, to support their employees in hard times just as they benefit from employees in good times.

Rent burden and charity



KAFFEEKLATSCH

By Shakir Reshamwala

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A couple of days ago when I returned from work, I saw a notice from the landlord pasted on the wall near the elevators of the building where I live. It said due to the current situation, tenants of the building have been granted a discount of KD 50 on the rent due for the month of April. This was good news, although some people I know had their rent completely waived for April, while messages circulating online say some real estate companies have waived the rent for the next three months.

Residents of many buildings have been encouraged by these reports and have petitioned their landlords to relieve them of their dues. My neighbor too called me to tell me that although the KD 50 discount was a good gesture, the landlord had earlier promised a tenant that he would waive 50 percent of the rent, so residents of the building will now collectively ask him to completely waive the rent for this month. He added if the landlord doesn't agree, we will settle for the 50 percent discount.

Other landlords though have not been so generous – a colleague said her landlord refused outright to provide any rent relief, retorting that he wasn't running a charity. One can understand that landlords have a lot of overheads – loan repayments, maintenance, electricity and water charges (if included in the

rent), salaries of the haris and cleaners, etc. But these expenses make up a small portion of the rental value, and now that banks have agreed to defer loan repayments for six months, landlords and real estate companies can afford to waive the rent or collect a nominal amount to cover their expenses.

The scale and destruction wrought by the coronavirus outbreak is unprecedented in modern history, with nearly every country affected. Nearly all commercial flights have been grounded, and economies have ground to a halt. Millions have been left jobless or without pay, with no end in sight to this global scourge. Kuwait is a microcosm of what is happening around the world and is no exception.

For many people who haven't been paid yet or won't be paid, the new month has brought a lot of new worries. So although it may seem opportunistic for those who have received full salaries in March to ask for rent relief, my neighbor reasoned that these people may get partial or no salaries at the end of April, which is a possibility given the lengthy shutdown, and it is wise to hold on to the money. This seems like a valid argument, as the future is uncertain, and layoffs are likely.

At the end of it all, we will look back at the coronavirus pandemic – if we live to tell the tale – as a surreal, dystopian era that brought out the best and worst in us. If we cannot control what is happening around us, the least we can do is behave responsibly and charitably, which means staying at home, following instructions, refraining from panic buying and hoarding, and if we happen to be landlords, reducing or waiving the rent. Spreading cheer – and not the virus or worries – is the need of the hour.

Local

Kuwait announces 25 new COVID-19 cases, total at 342

Kuwait confirms recovery of one coronavirus case, count at 81

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Ministry of Health said yesterday that 25 people were infected by the novel coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, in the last 24 hours. This brings the country's tally of confirmed virus cases up to 342, the ministry's spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said in the daily briefing.

Among the new cases are 10 patients who are under investigation to reveal how they contracted the virus, including six Indian nationals, one Bangladeshi and one Egyptian resident. The fresh cases also include four cases of Kuwaiti nationals related to travel to the UK, one case of a Kuwaiti national related to travel to France and one case of a Filipino resident related to travel to France. They also include seven cases of Indian residents in contact with a confirmed case under investigation, one case of a Bangladeshi resident in contact with a confirmed case under investigation, and one case of an Indian resident in contact with a confirmed case travelled to India.

Earlier yesterday, Kuwaiti Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah announced the recovery of one case from the novel coronavirus, raising the country's total recoveries to 81. The minister said lab tests and analyses had shown the recovery of the patient. The already treated case will be admitted to a rehabilitation ward before being dis-



charged from hospital within a couple of days' time, the minister added.

In addition, Dr Sanad said that 261 virus patients are still receiving necessary treatment, while 15 others are in intensive care units; including five in a critical condition. The spokesman, once

again, urged citizens and residents alike to follow the guidelines and instructions of Kuwaiti health authorities and World Health Organization, primarily maintaining social distancing and home quarantine in order to curb the spread of the virus. — KUNA

Expat curfew violators to be deported

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The Interior Ministry issued a stern warning yesterday against violators of the nightly curfew. Col Nasser Buslaib, head of the security media department, said that expats who violate the curfew will be deported while citizens will be referred to authorities for investigation. The Interior Ministry has urged the public to seek special permits available online if they wanted to leave home during curfew for emergency. Nearly 200 people have been arrested during curfew hours since the partial curfew was adopted around two weeks ago.

Meanwhile, MP Safa Al-Hashem said that the country is suffering today because of the wide-scale irregularities in the demographic balance which is severely tilted in favor of expats by 3 to 1. She said on Twitter that the problem is caused by visa traders and expatriate mafia which has infil-

trated into the government and some of them are in important positions and have contributed to the rise of expats.

The lawmaker said she had in the past submitted many proposals and made calls but all of them went unheeded and that is why the country is reeling under the impact of coronavirus. A large number of lawmakers have already pressed the government to resolve the issue of expats with some calling to offer incentives to expats to leave to their countries to reduce the burden on the health system.

In the meantime, a number of MPs warned the government over irregularities in dispensing the aid package by delivering the aid to wealthy merchants and failing to help the needy. MP Riyadh Al-Adasani welcomed with caution the package announced by the government but demanded that the plan should be presented along with legislation to the national assembly.

He however warned that he will grill the prime minister or any minister if the government accepts demands by merchants which could cost state coffers by some 20 percent of gross domestic product and could lead to the state reserve fund being eroded. MP Mohammad Al-Mutair called for the need to preserve the country's finances because no one knows how long this crisis would last, adding that supporting influential wealthy people is a big mistake.

Central bank announces stimulus to support vital sectors, SMEs

KUWAIT: Kuwait's central bank announced a stimulus package yesterday to support vital sectors and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) amid the fallout from the coronavirus epidemic. The Central Bank of Kuwait has reduced liquidity and capital adequacy requirements for banks and cut risk weighting for SMEs, it said in a statement.

The bank cut capital adequacy requirements by 2.5 percent and eased the risk weighting for SMEs to 25 percent from 75 percent. It also raised the maximum lending limit to 100 percent from 90 percent and increased the maximum financing for residential real estate developments to the value of the property or the cost of development. It said the measures would encourage banks to lend more and help vital sectors and SMEs "overcome the current circumstances." CBK said it would closely monitor banks to ensure the package meets its intended purpose "and will not hesitate to take further measures to meet the higher interest of the national economy".

On Wednesday, Kuwait announced measures to shore up its economy against the pandemic, including soft long-term loans from local banks, and the central bank asked banks to ease loan repayments for companies affected. Kuwait, which as of April 1 had registered 317 cases of the new coronavirus, was the first Gulf country to ground all passenger flights and impose a partial curfew to stem the spread of the highly infectious respiratory illness. — Reuters

Commercial flights still suspended

KUWAIT: Commercial flights to and from Kuwait International Airport are still suspended until further notice, said the country's Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) in a press release on yesterday. The reminder came on the backdrop of an international carrier announcing that Kuwait bookings were open; a matter that DGCA deemed "false," including private flights. The suspension had been in effect since March 11. — KUNA

Kuwait volunteers save the day





KUWAIT: Volunteers exerted huge efforts in helping organize work at co-operative societies around Kuwait. Between sanitizing equipment, checking customers' temperatures, providing them with gloves, facemasks and hand sanitizers, and arranging their entry to co-op branches by Civil ID; a practice that largely helped limit crowding, volunteers have played a major role in aiding authorities' efforts to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Kuwait on Wednesday ended volunteers' work at co-ops in order to protect them from contracting the highly contagious virus.

—Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh



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Local

Curfew hair



IN MY VIEW

By Nawara Fattahova

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It's been almost three weeks since salons for both men and women were closed by the government along with many other businesses due to the coronavirus crisis. Many people didn't expect the closure to last this long, and thought they can survive without visiting the salon. But it seems salons will not be opening any time soon.

A lot of men in Kuwait, especially Kuwaitis, get a shave at the salon. Salons are frequented by people for many other services besides cutting hair and shaving the beard, like steam sessions for facial cleansing, different kinds of face masks, head and face massage, hair straightening, hair coloring, and much more. Now all this has stopped, and men are getting desperate.

Some of them arranged to bring a barber to their house to get home service, but definitely this service is not available for everyone. And even if it is, it is expensive and only limited to a certain time or day due to the partial curfew. Also, many customers are afraid of the spread of the coronavirus and do not consider this option safe.

This situation has created a breed of amateur barbers, showing their creativity in shaving and cutting hair at home. Social media celebrities have made videos on creative ways of shaving with different kinds of shavers. One of them shaved his beard wrongly from the side, then covered it with plaster and said he got injured in the kitchen while trying to cook.

Another celebrity posted about his mother complaining of his long hair and beard, calling him a man from the jungle, and decided to cut his hair and shave his beard. But the result wasn't successful, and he said he looks like a student in elementary school. Two celeb brothers decided to cut each other's hair and turned the living room of their house into a barbershop. They did well and result was satisfying for these amateur hairdressers!

This situation has created a good opportunity for many online businesses, including those related to hair products. One of the most popular apps for selling products online that works as a virtual complex of stores for celebrities has shaving machines as well. So most male celebrities are now promoting shavers, which have become one of the most useful tools during the coronavirus crisis. They are said to be useful if someone calls a barber to his house for a haircut or shave, as the client will not share his tools with other customers.

It is also a good opportunity for women to learn how to dye their hair at home, or even train on cutting hair of members of their family. They have also started applying homemade face and hair masks.

PHOTO OF THE DAY



KUWAIT: Vehicles drive along the Fourth Ring Road on a rainy day shortly before curfew hours kicked in. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Get the message through



IN MY VIEW

By Abdellatif Sharaa

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We do not have a cure at present, but you can protect yourself with your behavior - this is what healthcare professionals are saying to minimize the chances of people being infected with the coronavirus.

Every time an official comes on TV for a briefing on the pandemic situation, they start and end with the advice to "stay home". Fortunately, a majority of people are following the necessary procedures in public places, particularly in hospitals, clinics and cooperatives, and other places where people may be present.

Yet, I noticed in the past two days one thing that is really very alarming and scary. People in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh learned that free meals are being distributed, so many residents there rushed to the trucks in massive numbers, and although they stood in line, they were standing very close to each other without gloves, masks or any form of protective gear.

Then hours later, we heard about cases being discovered in areas where certain communities live, followed by instructions that co-operatives must seek the help of volunteers to help bag groceries and send their regular baggers home, as buildings have been isolated because some cases were discovered in them.

I believe that all this has to do with awareness, as many of

these communities rely on hearsay more than anything else, even if they have smartphones and receive messages, instructions and advice. Yet they follow the word of a friend or a close person.

I applaud the Kuwaiti government's efforts that did control the spread of the virus in the country, and these efforts must not be squandered because the message did not reach certain places in time or correctly.

There are many organized volunteers who belong to teams that can be sent to areas such as Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh to spread the word and educate people on the proper preventative measures firsthand for the sake of the health of all of us.

On a totally different subject, and as we are following instructions, I was reading the rules and instructions for employees in various companies, and found a headline saying:

Ten crazy rules flight attendants have to follow on the plane:-

- 1- No alcohol during and after the shift.
- 2- Must cover their acne.
- 3- Hide tattoos.
- 4- Standing with their hands in their pockets is not allowed.
- 5- They cannot ask for help when lifting heavy objects.
- 6- They are not always allowed to use the on-board medical kit.
- 7- They cannot always accept tips from passengers.
- 8- They are not allowed to tie their sweaters around their waists.
- 9- They have to freshen their makeup but in private.
- 10- Hair must be perfect.

Final word: My dear friends, we are all asked to do one thing: Stay home please!

Do not count the days, make the days count. - Anon

Local

Kuwait Amir offers KD 5 million to COVID-19 fund

Premier restates Amir's attention to public health, overseas citizens' return



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets with His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, His Highness Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah as well as Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Ac-saceh. — Amiri Diwan photo

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, on behalf of Al-Sabah Family, donated KD 5 million in contribution to a recently launched fund to mitigate the fallout of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Ali Jarrah Al-Sabah said Wednesday. The minister prayed to Allah the Almighty that this pandemic would end not only in the dear nation but in the entire world as well,

wishing Kuwait perpetual security, safety and prosperity.

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah had met with His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah at Seif Palace on Wednesday. His Highness the Amir also received Speaker of the National Assembly Marzouq Al-Ghanem, His Highness Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled

Al-Hamad Al-Sabah as well as Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Ac-saceh.

After the meeting, His Highness the Prime Minister reiterated His Highness the Amir's interest in public health and his appeal for everyone's compliance with health guidelines, mainly staying indoors and averting gatherings. His Highness the Prime Minister added that His Highness the Amir is also keen on the

home-return of Kuwaiti citizens from abroad, and provision of all basic needs to citizens and residents. He added that he had briefed His Highness the Amir during the encounter on government response to the novel coronavirus. He also reaffirmed His Highness the Amir's call for cooperation with the National Assembly on pieces of legislation needed to complete all required procedures to put a nationwide emergency plan in place. — KUNA

Manufacturing industries the real future: Union chairman

KUWAIT: Chairman of Kuwait Industries Union (KIU) Hussein Al-Kharafi said yesterday that Kuwait's industrial sector was capable of pushing development process and supporting the national economy by exporting to new markets and lessen import. Kharafi underlined the importance of supporting local industries because they would contribute to comprehensive development. Supporting the industrial sector, which he considered the leader of sustainable development, will give the locally-made product the priority in development projects. "Promoting the local product has become an urgent necessity," he added.

Kharafi also called for supporting manufacturing industries because they were capable of transforming raw materials into products that meet consumers' needs. The manufacturing indus-

tries "is the real future that can achieve safe and sustainable operating profits for the state," he said. Kuwait is depending on oil revenues as a major source of income "but this poses a risk to the budget because of fluctuation of international prices," said Kharafi. KIU, he added, submitted many proposals for the government of Kuwait to develop the working mechanism of the industrial sector.

One of the proposals, he explained, was considering decreasing how much the state was charging for electricity consumption in factories. The KIU also urged the government to purchase locally-made products in order to reactivate the economic cycle. Creating industrial zones, said Kharafi, would help in expansion of national industries. Established in 1989, KIU has around 300 industrial entities as members. —KUNA

Cabinet allows 'voluntary' e-learning

KUWAIT: The cabinet has ordered closure of all car maintenance and spare parts shops and reduction of volunteers at consumer cooperative societies nationwide to help curb the spread of novel coronavirus (COVID-19). In a videoconference briefing after the cabinet's extraordinary meeting on Wednesday, Government Spokesman Tareq Al-Mezrem said the cabinet has assigned the Kuwait Municipality to necessary regulatory measures to suspend work at all car maintenance workshops and car spare parts shops across the country. It also instructed the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies to stop recruitment of volunteers to help organize work at cooperative societies.

The move is meant to protect volunteers from contracting the highly contagious virus and make use of their efforts to carry out other tasks, Mezrem clarified. He added the ministry and the union were also asked to get rid of non-core workers at the consumer cooperative societies. The government will allocate special buildings for housing essential cooperative society workers after being checked up teams from the Ministry of Health, Mezrem said. He disclosed that the cabinet has assigned the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Cooperative Societies Union and the Ministry of Education to choose two buildings in each area, one for male and the other for female core cooperative workers, he pointed out.

Mezrem also noted that the cabinet has also assigned the Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education Saud Al-Harbi to take necessary measures to allow voluntary pursuing of the educational process through online and distance learning to

willing students. In a response to a question about the possibility of imposing 24 hours curfew across the country or on certain areas, he said the ministries of health and interior are studying thoroughly all curfew options as a decision in this regard "will have ramifications." But all options are on the table to guarantee safety of all citizens and residents, he concluded. —KUNA

Kuwait mulls virus with India, Korea

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and Indian counterpart Narendra Modi discussed Wednesday mutual efforts to counter the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic. During a phone conversation, the two officials touched on the recent regional and international efforts to curb the spread of the dreadful virus infection. They also explored ways to develop medical and technical collaboration to face coronavirus. Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled and Modi also discussed ways to enhance cooperation on all fields between the two nations.

Meanwhile, Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah on Wednesday called his South Korean counterpart Kang Kyung-wha to discuss the close relations between both friendly countries in various fields. During the phone conversation, both ministers also discussed joint cooperation over response to the novel coronavirus worldwide, the Foreign Ministry said in a press statement. — KUNA

Local

750 Philippine nationals on first day of residency violators amnesty

Interior Minister orders investigation to identify visa traders



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh, Minister of Social Affairs Mariam Al-Aqeel and Interior Ministry officials tour a location to receive people wishing to take advantage of the amnesty. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh



Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh tours a school turned into a location to receive female residency violators.

By A Saleh

KUWAIT: The Interior Ministry began Wednesday receiving residency law violators in a process that will continue until the end of the month. A large number of people showed up at two schools in Farwaniya on the first day, which the ministry had allocated for Philippine nationals, seeking to take advantage of the amnesty through which they are allowed to leave to their home country without having to pay any penalties. “We seek to offer all assistance to facilitate departure of residency law violators,” Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh said during a tour to oversee the first day of operations. He added that requested lists of names of violators’ spon-

sors, including individuals and companies, and ordered an investigation to identify visa traders and hold them accountable.

On the possibility that the government might lock down areas highly populated with expatriate communities after a number of coronavirus-positive cases appeared among workers that remain under investigation, Minister Saleh noted that the health minister has authority to isolate areas in case a coronavirus spread was detected there. This includes areas highly populated with Kuwaitis or expatriates, the minister explained.

Minister of Social Affairs and State Minister for Economic Affairs Mariam Al-Aqeel, who accompanied Saleh in the tour, said meanwhile that 750 Filipino nationals came forward to leave dur-

ing the first day of the grace period given for violators. “Two airplanes are ready to evacuate the first batch of Philippine labor within days,” she added. Meanwhile, Head of the evacuation task force Major General Abdeen Abdeen said the departure is not limited to residency violators, adding that any expatriate who wishes to leave the country can come forward to concerned authorities in the predetermined locations. He said that there are 12 schools designated to lodge those leaving; six for men and six for women, with two schools in each governorate.

The Interior Ministry had issued an amnesty decision allowing residency violators to leave the country without paying any fines or airfare with a chance to return to Kuwait later. This amnesty

was issued in view of the circumstances the country is currently going through and as part of the precautionary measures taken to fight COVID-19, especially since fines had been accumulating against violators.

Violators are received from 8:00 am to 2:00 pm according to the following dates and nationalities: Philippines (April 1-5, 2020), Egypt (April 6-10), India (April 11-15), Bangladesh (April 16-20), Sri Lanka (April 21-25), other nationalities (April 26-30, 2020).

Individuals desiring to procure valid residencies in Kuwait and are willing to pay the fines without being subjected to investigations will be allowed to pay the fines and legalize their status if they meet the required conditions.

India’s CBSE cancels grade 10, 12 exams for overseas schools

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: India’s Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has decided to cancel remaining examinations for grades 10 and 12 for affiliated schools outside India in view of the crisis situation prevailing across the world in the aftermath of coronavirus outbreak, a statement issued by the Board said on Wednesday.

The decision will have serious implications on hundreds of thousands of students who are studying in schools spread over 25 countries across the world. The CBSE had earlier postponed all the board examinations that were scheduled to be held between March 19 and March 31 in 2020 following the outbreak of COVID-19.

“The situation is totally unpredictable. Nobody knows how long this crisis will persist,” said Dr V. Binumon, Principal, Indian Community School and CBSE Counsellor and NCTE Standing Committee Member. The coronavirus outbreak has paralyzed higher education system all

over the world. Countries including United States, the UK, Canada and Australia have cancelled their examinations, he said.

The CBSE’s decision has brought some relief to the students in Kuwait who have been on the tenterhooks ever since the crisis erupted over COVID-19, leading to lockdowns, school closures and postponements of exams. However, a question mark hangs over CBSE as to how it is going to solve the problem of examinations and announcement of results.

“Each of these countries is also under lockdown and /or has decided to close down the schools for various and differential lengths of time. Under such circumstances, it is felt that the Board will not be in a position to hold differential set of exams for each of these countries. Also, in the present situation, it will be difficult to bring the answer books to India for evaluation purposes. Therefore, the Board has decided not to hold more exams for the students of Class 10 and 12 for schools located outside India. The system of marking/assessment for the purpose of de-

claring results will be worked out by the Board shortly and informed to these schools,” the CBSE statement said.

The statement further said: “It is informed that any decision that the board will take with regard to the conduct of examinations will be taken by undertaking extensive consultations with higher education authorities and by keeping all aspects related to entrance exams, admissions dates, etc. in mind.”

Concerns

Dispelling concerns of the students, the CBSE Board has reportedly communicated to affiliated schools abroad that it would devise some mechanism to declare results of the students studying abroad. “The CBSE would safeguard the interest of the students at highest level. The regional officer, CBSE, Delhi East will soon send a communication to various schools to this effect,” a reliable source revealed.

Meanwhile, students from various Indian schools in Kuwait greeted the news with mixed

responses. Many heaved a sigh of relief as the announcement put an end to the uncertainty regarding the examinations during the time of lockdown. “I am a bit relieved now. We were all worried about our exams in this time of corona,” said Andrea Joseph, a student of an Indian school in Salmiya. Many others also shared Andrea’s sentiment as the decision has brought an end to their long waiting. At the same time, many others appeared worried wondering whether they will lose one academic year if the exams are not held this year. “I am worried. We pray we don’t lose one academic year. But what to do, it is a global situation,” rued Fathima, a student of ICSK.

“I am worried as a parent because I am not sure how my daughter can travel to India now, make it on time for admissions and entrance exams,” said Uday Menon, father of Shruthi, a grade 12 student. But Firoz Khan, another parent sounded more pragmatic. “We all are passing through extraordinary circumstances. There will be disruptions, dislocations and destructions across the world. We will have to face them.”

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Duterte tells police to shoot troublemakers

Death in Holy Land: Coronavirus changes burial for Jews, Muslims

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SECUNDERABAD: Indian police personnel wearing coronavirus-themed helmets ride on horses as they participate in a awareness campaign during a 21-day government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Secunderabad. — AFP

COVID-19: When will it end?

As world battles virus, govts under fire

PARIS: As the world battles the (COVID-19) coronavirus pandemic, the main question for most is simply: “When will it end?” But other, troubling questions are starting to be asked of governments. Why did Western governments not predict the risk of an epidemic in their territories after the novel coronavirus first emerged in China? Were sufficient preparations made to secure masks and test kits? Did lockdowns to slow the spread of the virus start too late?

Such questions have burning importance at a time when the world is at a political crossroads. The United States in November is set to decide if Donald Trump gets another term as president, autocratic and semi-autocratic societies across the world are increasingly challenged, and the EU is seeking to prove its credibility post-Brexit.

Politicians around the world have made statements they may live to regret as they sought to reassure supporters in February and early March that the virus would have little impact on their countries. Trump described concern over the coronavirus in late February as a “hoax” perpetrated by Democrats. British Premier Boris Johnson, who later tested positive for the virus, boasted in early March that he “shook hands with everyone” even at a hospital. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro downplayed the virus as a “little flu”.

‘People weren’t scared’

Carine Milcent, Professor of Health Economics and Econometrics at the Paris School of Economics, said that in February and even in early March some experts doubted the pandemic would reach such magnitude. “When public opinion is not convinced of

the gravity and if scientists themselves were relatively divided, it is difficult for a political decision-maker to create consensus,” she told AFP. “The figures announced by China at the start did not scare people and many asked why so many actions were being taken.” In France, where the government imposed a lockdown on March 17 in a bid to get a grip on soaring cases and deaths, calls for national unity have been mixed with scathing criticism of the government, particularly over a shortage of face masks.

The head of the right-wing opposition Republicans in the Senate, Bruno Retailleau, described the government’s response as “chaotic”. Several criminal complaints have been lodged against members of the French government, accusing them of endangering lives, even of manslaughter. Legal experts do not think they have much chance of succeeding.

‘Waited too long’

Charles Kupchan, professor of international affairs at Georgetown University in Washington, said it would have helped Western leaders if China had been more forthcoming with information at the start of the outbreak late last year. But “even so, democracies on both sides of the Atlantic were slow off the mark... Europe and the United States should have taken more urgent steps.

“They waited way too long when it came to procuring, allocating, and distributing medical equipment and to sharing best practices on testing and isolation.” In Europe and America, there are clear signs of public anger. “We don’t have enough money, we don’t have enough tests and we don’t have enough protective equipment. Everyone in the hospital is extremely exposed,” seethes Andrew

who works as an intern in a New York hospital.

“People we could have saved are dying, as they could not be admitted into intensive care,” said Sara Chinchilla, who works at a Madrid hospital. Some look at relative success stories elsewhere, especially in South Korea where a massive campaign of testing, isolating and identifying potential virus carriers helped flatten the infection curve but also raised questions about civil liberties. “It’s a level of surveillance state that I don’t think any Western country is comfortable with,” said Jeremy Shapiro, research director at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Regimes challenged

Much is also at stake in countries that have been dominated by a single ruler for decades, where the public will expect political stability to deliver some kind of sanctuary from the crisis. The Turkish government under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was boasting in early March that the country had not a single confirmed case. By now it has registered over 200 deaths. President Vladimir Putin said on March 17 that the situation was “under control” in Russia but the increasing number of COVID-19 cases has since forced a lockdown in much of the country.

And an escalating crisis in Iran belies early statements by its leadership that the epidemic would soon end. China, meanwhile is now offering help to Western countries after largely quelling the epidemic within its own borders, leaving a bitter taste for some who accuse Beijing of having withheld information at the start. “It’s like if you shoot somebody and then offer them a discount on dressing the wound,” said Shapiro. —AFP

International

Coronavirus to plunge 8 million into poverty in Arab world: UN

World could face food crisis: UN, WTO

BEIRUT: The coronavirus pandemic will plunge 8.3 million people in the Arab region into poverty, the United Nation's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia said on Wednesday. ESCWA also warned that two million people could become undernourished as a result. "With today's estimates, a total of 101.4 million people in the region would be classified as poor, and 52 million as undernourished," the UN agency said.

Women and young adults working in the informal sector and who have no access to social welfare are among the most vulnerable, said ESCWA executive secretary Rola Dashti. "Arab Governments must ensure a swift emergency response to protect their people from falling into poverty and food insecurity owing to the impact of COVID-19," Dashti added. ESCWA last month warned that the coronavirus pandemic could wipe out more than 1.7 million jobs across the Arab world this year.

Food crisis

Meanwhile, the heads of three global agencies has warned of a potential worldwide food shortage if authorities fail to manage the ongoing coronavirus crisis properly. Many governments



2 million people could become undernourished

around the world have put their populations on lockdown to slow the spread of the virus but that has resulted in severe slow-downs in international trade and food supply chains. Meanwhile panic buying by people going into isolation has already demonstrated the fragility of supply chains as supermarket shelves emptied in many countries.

"Uncertainty about food availability can spark a wave of export restrictions, creating a shortage on the global market," said the joint text signed by Qu Dongyu, head of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO) and Roberto Azevedo, director of the World Trade Organization

(WTO). That is not an idle threat. After the 2007 global financial crisis, rice producing countries India and Vietnam restricted exports to ward off expected price increases. The result: food riots in several developing countries as the price of rice soared.

The warning could be directed at Russia as officials there have mulled restricting wheat exports and have already tapped the nation's reserves to ensure prices don't jump. "In the midst

and forces loyal to eastern-based strongman Khalifa Haftar, who launched his offensive to try to capture the capital on April 4 last year. One year on, and several failed ceasefires later, "we are simply witnessing the decimation of a nation", said analyst Jalel Harchaoui of the Clingendael Institute in The Hague.

The United Nations' envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salame, threw in the towel in early March following the repeated failure of efforts to restore order, although he said his resignation was for health reasons. A Berlin summit in late January saw Moscow, Ankara and other foreign players engaged in Libya pledge to respect an arms embargo and support a truce. But barely 10 days later, Salame was denouncing violations and a continuous influx of foreign arms and mercenaries.

'Existential battle'

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has openly sent military equipment and fighters to the GNA. Russia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates have meanwhile supported what Haftar claims is a campaign against jihadist "terrorists" and "criminals". As Haftar's offensive has so far failed to take Tripoli, said Harchaoui, Erdogan's government has been able "to increase its presence and influence in the Libyan capital". In recent months, Erdogan sent hundreds of pro-Turkish Syrian fighters to battle the pro-Haftar forces, who are supported by Russian mercenaries Moscow denies having sent. — AFP



SHARJAH: An elderly man wearing a protective mask lifts his hands in prayer outside a mosque which has been closed to worshippers amid the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, in Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates. — AFP

of the COVID-19 lockdowns, every effort must be made to ensure that trade flows as freely as possible, specially to avoid food shortage(s)" from developing, the joint statement said. "When acting to protect the health and well-being of their citizens, countries should ensure that any trade-related measures do not disrupt the food supply chain," it added.

Over the longer term, confinement orders and travel restrictions risk causing disruptions in

agricultural production due to the unavailability of agricultural labor and the inability to get food to markets. "Such disruptions including hampering the movement of agricultural and food industry workers and extending border delays for food containers, result in the spoilage of perishables and increasing food waste," the three leaders noted. Closing borders has exposed just how much certain countries are dependant upon foreign workers to bring in crops. — Agencies

Libya marks year of fighting, fears worse to come

TRIPOLI: While the world is gripped by the coronavirus pandemic, war-shattered Libya marks one year Saturday of its latest bloody conflict that is plunging it ever deeper into chaos. Russia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and others have fuelled the fighting in the oil-rich but poverty-stricken North African nation where hundreds have been killed and over 150,000 displaced.

Medical experts warn that Libya is at heightened risk of the fast-spreading COVID-19 illness, given the deteriorated public health system in the gateway country for desperate Europe-bound migrants. As much of the world has hunkered down, militias in the south of the capital Tripoli have kept firing bullets, mortars and grenades at each other, the explosions echoing across the city. Libya has been gripped by chaos for almost a decade, since longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi was brought down and killed in a 2011 uprising backed by several Western powers.

It is now split between the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli

Libya: Strongman's offensive to seize the capital

TRIPOLI: A year ago, Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar began his offensive to seize the capital Tripoli from the UN-recognized government, a conflict which has left hundreds dead and over 150,000 displaced. Here is a recap.

Haftar orders advance

On April 4, 2019, Haftar orders his troops to advance on Tripoli, seat since 2016 of the Government of National Accord (GNA), which he claims is backed by "terrorist" groups. Haftar supports a parallel administration based in the eastern city of Tobruk and his forces already control the country's main southern oil fields. The assault is ordered as United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is in Libya for a visit aiming to cement a political deal on hold-in elections.

The next day, the Security Council calls on Haftar's forces to halt their advance. On April 7, Haftar's forces say they have carried out their first air strike on a suburb of Tripoli, where the

GNA is based. The GNA announces it has launched a "counteroffensive". On April 19, the White House says President Donald Trump recognized Haftar's "significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya's oil resources". Fighting intensifies the next day.

Setbacks for Haftar

On June 26, GNA forces retake the town of Gharyan, the main supply base for Haftar's forces southwest of the capital. In late July, UN envoy Ghassan Salame proposes a three-point plan: a truce, a high-level meeting of concerned countries, and intra-Libyan talks.

International involvement

On November 5, The New York Times reports that Russia has sent some 200 mercenaries to support Haftar. Moscow denies the claim. Ten days later, the United States urges Haftar to end his offensive. On November 27, Turkey and the GNA sign a military and security deal. A UN report on December 10 accuses several countries of breaching a 2011 arms embargo by supplying the opposing camps. While Turkey and Qatar support the GNA, Haftar is backed by Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates among others. - On January 5, 2020, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announces the deployment of Turkish soldiers to Libya, days after getting parliament's approval. — AFP

International

Millions of Nigerians enter lockdown as Africa tries to contain coronavirus

Africa highly vulnerable due to the weak state of health systems: Experts

LAGOS: More than 20 million Nigerians went into lockdown in sub-Saharan Africa's biggest city Lagos and the capital Abuja, as the continent struggles to curb the spread of coronavirus. President Muhammadu Buhari ordered a two-week "cessation of all movements" in key cities to ward off an explosion of cases in Africa's most populous country. Businesses are being closed, non-food shops shut and people required to stay at home as officials look to track down possible carriers of the disease after reporting 131 confirmed cases and two deaths so far.

Enforcing the restrictions in sprawling Lagos will be a mammoth challenge as millions live crammed into slums and rely on daily earnings to survive. In the ramshackle outdoor markets of Lagos Island, anxious locals complained they did not have the money to stock up, while at higher-end supermarkets better-off residents queued to buy supplies.

"Two weeks is too long. I don't know how we will cope," said student Abdul Rahim, 25, as he

helped his sister sell foodstuffs from a stall in Jankarra market. "People are hungry and they won't be able to stock food." City officials have pledged to provide basic provisions to 200,000 households but the central government in Africa's largest oil producing nation is already facing financial strain as the price of crude has collapsed. The streets of Ghana's capital Accra were also empty as most people in two regions appeared to be following a presidential order to stay indoors after it went into force.



For many Africans, lockdown means serious hardships

Zimbabwe locks down

Dozens of African nations have imposed restrictions ranging from night-time curfews to total shutdowns. Zimbabwe, which is already suffering

a recession, began enforcing a three-week lockdown after the disease left one person dead and infected six others. Police mounted checkpoints on routes leading to Harare's central business district, stopping cars and turning away pedestrians who had no authorization to be in the area.

"We don't want to see people here on the



LAGOS: An aerial view shows empty streets in Lagos. Lagos has been 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

streets. We don't want to see people who have no business in town just loitering," a police-woman said through a loud hailer. "Everyone to their homes." Some people were trying to head for villages. "We would rather spend the 21 days at our rural home, where we don't have to buy

everything. I can't afford to feed my family here when I am not working," said Most Jawure. "We have been waiting here for more than two hours but there are no buses," Jawure told AFP while standing with his wife and daughter beside a bulging suitcase. —AFP

Death in Holy Land: Virus changes burial for Jews and Muslims

JERUSALEM: A rising death toll in the coronavirus crisis is forcing a change in Jewish and Muslim burial and mourning traditions in the Holy Land. In Israel, Jewish dead are normally laid to rest in a cloth smock and shroud, without a coffin. Now, the bodies of coronavirus victims are taken for ritual washing - performed in full protective gear - wrapped in impermeable plastic. They are wrapped again in plastic before interment.

"Feelings are very much mixed," said Yakov Kurtz, who works for Chevra Kadisha, the main group overseeing Jewish burials in Israel. "We don't know what to expect, we don't know how many dead we will have to tend to. There are many fears." New decrees for handling the coronavirus dead have been given for Muslim burials, said Sheikh Muhammad Hussein, Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories. "This is a rule of necessity and necessities allow for prohibitions, therefore the deceased is not washed, nor shrouded and is buried in a plastic body-bag," Hussein said.

Israel has reported 29 coronavirus deaths so far. The Palestinians have confirmed one fatality so far. Funerals and mourning rituals have changed for everyone since Israeli and Palestinian authorities imposed stay-at-home directives and restricted the size of public gatherings to try to halt the spread of infection. Funerals in Israel can be attended by no more than 20 people in an open space only. Social distancing rules mean that embracing the bereaved is just not done. — Reuters

Cape Town slum has little to face coronavirus

CAPE TOWN: For the simple act of washing their hands, slum dwellers in Cape Town's Khayelitsha township have to go to a communal tap, fill up a bucket of water and haul it back to their shack. On the way they walk past overflowing public toilets - sewage gushing out onto the narrow alleyways of one of South Africa's biggest informal settlements. Everyday concerns about basic sanitation have been compounded by news that a Khayelitsha resident tested positive for coronavirus late last week.

"We don't have toilets... we don't have water so you must go out," said Irene Tsetse, 55, who shares a one-bedroom shack with her son. With no windows and large rats entering the house, Tsetse explained the struggle of observing a 21-day lockdown imposed by the government last week to curb the spread of coronavirus. "We are trying to stay in the shacks but we can't," she said. "You can't be inside the whole day in a closed dark room. You must open your door and gate and go peek outside."

Ancient sewerage system

Outside groups of children played on the street, desperate to escape the hot corrugated-iron cabins, each estimated to house between three and seven people. Khayelitsha is home to at least 400,000 people, according to the latest national census in 2011. But the sprawling township has grown rapidly over the past decade and locals estimate the population to be closer to one million. Around 65 percent of residents live in make-shift homes with no electricity or running water. The settlement has expanded faster than service provision, and people on the edge of

the township live far from communal taps and toilets.

Lack of urban planning has made it particularly difficult to roll out sanitation facilities. "They made no roads and there is no infrastructure," said Ndithini Tyhido, head of the Khayelitsha development forum. Pointing at the jumble of shacks, Tyhido blamed poor spatial planning by the white-minority government during South Africa's apartheid regime, which ended in 1994. "The sewer system here was made in 1983 for... maximum 250,000 people," said Tyhido.

"That sewer network can no longer cope. The drains here are literally filled with faeces." Since South Africa's first coronavirus case was detected earlier this month, the government has deployed water trucks and distributed soap to townships like Khayelitsha. Numbers have risen to more than 1,350 over the past three weeks and five deaths have been recorded so far, making South Africa the worst-affected country on the continent.

'I don't have a choice'

"We won't be going to all the townships at the same time, but we are targeting those where we want to deal with already identified cases," said Health Minister Zweli Mkhize on Tuesday. "We are scaling up intervention," he added. Overcrowded informal settlements are particularly vulnerable to the deadly respiratory disease. "We promote that people wash their hands and we say this everyday with full knowledge that some people don't even have the water to wash their hands," said Tyhido, exasperated by the situation. "If someone is going to report an incidence of corona they won't be able to say, 'at house number 30' or whatever," he added.

Tyhido assured that Khayelitsha residents were doing their best to follow lockdown regulations and stay home. "People want to listen. People want to comply and they are trying," he told AFP. "But the conditions are not conducive for that compliance to happen." Water trucks meanwhile have struggled to squeeze into the more densely populated parts of Khayelitsha, where shacks sit almost on top of one another with barely any road access. — AFP

International

Social dis-dance: Clubbing goes online as virus shuts nightspots

Innovative DJs putting their performances online

SINGAPORE: Strobe lights flash across a near-empty dance floor, as a DJ live-streams thumping electronic music from a Singapore nightclub to revelers confined to their homes due to the coronavirus pandemic. The outbreak sweeping the globe has shuttered once lively nightspots from London to New York, but innovative DJs have started putting their performances online so clubbers don't miss out. The trend is another example of how the virus, which has left some 3.6 billion people stuck at home under lockdowns, is upending daily life in ways unthinkable until recently as governments impose social-distancing curbs to stem its spread.

After Singapore ordered the closure of many entertainment venues last week following a steady rise in infections, popular nightclub "Zouk" threw a "cloud-clubbing" party, streaming live performances by six DJs via an app. It took place on a Friday night when the club is often packed with hundreds of partygoers - but only a handful of people were allowed to attend, most of them staff members. DJ Nash D conceded he found it weird at first. "When you play for a dance floor with a room full of people, you can feel the energy come back, and I like to DJ off that energy," the DJ, real name Dhanish Nair, told AFP.

But he quickly got used to it, and said live comments from clubbers scrolling past on his laptop were helpful: "Whatever song requests that they had actually guided me in a certain di-

rection." As well as the comments which came in via live-streaming app Bigo Live, clubbers sent virtual gifts to the DJs such as bells and snowflakes that can later be exchanged for cash. The nightclub partnered with gaming equipment company Razer and the live-streaming app, attracting 200,000 total views for the three-hour event. At its peak, 5,600 people were watching via the app.

'Dancing together, apart'

In China, where the virus first emerged last year, DJs and nightspots started live-streaming performances at the beginning of February when the country's outbreak was at its pinnacle. Shanghai and Beijing venues pioneered live-streamed clubbing on Douyin, China's version of TikTok, which also allows fans to buy gifts which can be swapped for cash. Beijing club One Third attracted over a million viewers and generated nearly two million yuan (\$280,000) in rewards from its fans in a five-hour live-stream, according to news website iFeng. Closed nightclubs and DJs stuck at home are also hosting virtual dance parties in New York, the epicentre of America's worsening outbreak.

Live performance outfit "The Dance Cartel" has started hosting "Social Disdance" parties for "dance nights together, apart" three times a week. Participants dance with one another over the Zoom video chat app, with some donning

placed on a long list of "support units" selected to receive patients who have tested positive for COVID-19. But the move has sparked fear among local residents that the virus could spread in the area and an online petition has been launched.

'Lack of trust'

Since 2007 when Romania joined the EU, more than 14,000 healthcare workers have emigrated in search of better pay and conditions abroad. On Monday alone, 10 nurses and one intensive care unit (ICU) medic from central Hunedoara county quit, blaming a chronic lack of basic medical equipment such as surgical masks and gloves. A day later, the nurses - but not the doctor - were persuaded by officials to change their minds and go back to work.

"We have two medical gowns for 12 employees..." the doctor, Lorena Ehim, told local media, adding they were being forced to face the virus and risk their health "with bare hands". At a hospital in the western city of Timisoara, 13 medical staffers resigned on Tuesday, according to local media. "I can understand my colleagues who step down, but I don't encourage resignation," Gheorghe Borcean, president of Romania's medical association said. "Even more than fear (of infection), there is a lack of trust in the medical system," he said. —AFP



SINGAPORE: A man lies under the art installation 'Horizon' by Muafah binte Amran at Marina Bay in Singapore as his face mask, used a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus, is seen beside him. —AFP

costumes and others setting up colorful disco lights. The parties are free but people are encouraged to make donations to the DJs and hosts. With the death toll from the virus now above 42,000 globally and no sign of the pandemic slowing down, online clubbing only looks set to get more popular.

Singapore's decision to close nightclubs came as authorities slowly tighten restrictions

following a jump in cases, with the city-state so far having reported over 900 infections and three deaths. Despite the challenges, some performers are slowly warming to the idea of online clubbing. "Online, I feel that everybody is more in their natural state," said Singapore DJ LeNERD, real name Patrick Lewis, who played at Friday's event. "They are more themselves and they are more honest." —AFP

'No gloves, no masks': Romania workers fear for lives in virus fight

BUCHAREST: "We don't have gloves, masks, anything," says one of the medical team at southeastern Romania's Ramnicu Sarat hospital, one of those designated to treat COVID-19 patients. "Everything is done on the cheap," protests the staff member, who spoke on condition of anonymity. It's a complaint echoed in other parts of the country, where doctors and nurses have begun speaking out about what they say are life-threatening shortcomings in the fight against the new coronavirus. Feeling ill-equipped and scared, some have taken to social media or public TV to voice their concerns; dozens staged protests in the grounds of two hospitals.

Several felt so strongly that they resigned, leaving an already struggling healthcare system in one of the European Union's poorest countries even more vulnerable. "Nobody instructed us so we're encouraged to learn from videos," the Ramnicu Sarat medical staff member told AFP. "We were promised equipment, but when will it arrive?" The hospital has been

Africans rush for chloroquine as the virus tsunami looms

LIBREVILLE: Despite loud appeals for caution, Africans are rushing to embrace chloroquine, the venerable anti-malaria drug touted as a possible treatment for coronavirus. From hospitals in Senegal to pharmaceutical companies in South Africa and street sellers in Cameroon, chloroquine has fired hopes of a medicinal fix against a virus that is set to scythe through Africa's poorly protected countries.

Chloroquine and derivatives such as hydroxychloroquine have been used for decades as cheap and safe drugs against malaria, although their effectiveness in this field is now undermined by growing parasite resistance. Small-scale tests in China and France - either unpublished or outside the rigorous framework of mainstream drug trials - suggest that chloroquine reduces virus levels in people with coronavirus. On March 24, President Donald Trump

said chloroquine could be a "gift from God" - a comment that sparked strident criticism.

Health watchdogs have issued calls for caution until larger clinical trials are carried out, and there have been several recorded deaths from self-medication because of toxic side effects. Despite this, in many settings across Africa, chloroquine has been placed in the front line against coronavirus. Its rise stems partly from desperation, given Africa's meagre capacity to deal with a pandemic on the scale seen in Europe or the United States. Burkina Faso, Cameroon and South Africa have swiftly authorised hospitals to treat virus patients with the drugs.

Around half of infected people in Senegal are already being prescribed hydroxychloroquine, Moussa Seydi, a professor at Dakar's Fann Hospital, told AFP last Thursday. Every patient who was recommended the drug accepted it, "with no exceptions," he said. In Democratic Republic of Congo, President Felix Tshisekedi last week declared it was "urgent" to produce chloroquine "in industrial quantities". South Africa has already said it will join a large-scale trial, and one of the country's biggest pharmaceutical companies has promised to donate half a million pills to the health authorities. —AFP

International

Onshore quarantine of US aircraft carrier sailors begins on Guam

Navy says 93 personnel have tested positive

HAGATNA, Guam: About 1,000 sailors from the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt - roughly a fifth of its crew - were under quarantine at a US naval base on Guam yesterday as the Navy sought to control a coronavirus outbreak aboard the warship. The evacuation of sailors from the vessel began on Wednesday, a week after the first coronavirus case was reported on the aircraft carrier, and followed public disclosure of a scathing letter to Navy command from the ship's captain urging "decisive action" to control the outbreak.

In his four-page letter, the contents of which were confirmed by US officials to Reuters on Tuesday, Captain Brett Crozier described a bleak situation aboard the nuclear-powered carrier as more sailors tested positive for the virus. The letter put the Pentagon on the defensive about whether it was doing enough to keep the Theodore Roosevelt's 5,000 crew members safe, and alarmed the families of those aboard the vessel, whose home port is in San Diego.

In the letter, the captain called for more than 4,000 sailors to be removed from the ship and isolated, saying the Navy otherwise would be failing to properly safeguard "our most trusted asset - our



Initial group of 1,000 sailors quarantined

sailors." Acting US Navy Secretary Thomas Modly said he disagreed with the captain's assertion that all but 10 percent of the ship's crew could be removed from the vessel if necessary. "This ship has weapons on it. It has munitions on it... It requires a certain number of people on that ship to maintain the safety and security of the ship," Modly said.

Asked whether the captain would face discipline for the letter, he said: "The fact that he wrote the letter up to his chain of command to express his concerns would absolutely not result in any type of retaliation." When questioned repeatedly over the leak, he said: "I don't know who leaked the letter to the media. That would be something that would violate the principles of good order and discipline, if he were responsible for that. But I don't know that." The carrier was in the Pacific when the outbreak started, and has since docked at the US Naval Base Guam, on the southern end of the American island territory in the western Pacific.

Hotel quarantine Guam

An initial group of 1,000 sailors were moved from the ship onto the base on Wednesday, with



AT SEA: File photo shows an F/A-18F Super Hornet assigned to the 'Black Knights' of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 154, launching from the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71) in the Pacific Ocean. —AFP

the Navy saying that 93 personnel had tested positive for the disease so far. Those testing positive or showing flu-like symptoms were placed in isolation for treatment, while the rest were quarantined, the region's U.S. Navy commander, Rear Admiral John Menoni, said during a news conference on the island on Thursday.

Those who remain asymptomatic and test neg-

ative will be transported to vacant hotel space about 8 miles away in Guam's commercial Tumon district, where they will remain quarantined for two weeks, territorial Governor Lourdes Leon Guerrero told Reuters. The quarantined sailors will be moved to hotel quarters in the next 12 to 24 hours in an operation that will be run entirely by the U.S. military, Menoni said. —Reuters

US university tries to resist virus closure, dividing students

LYNCHBURG: While schools and universities across the United States closed their doors to curb the coronavirus pandemic, Liberty University in Virginia welcomed back students from vacation - dividing opinion. Liberty, a private evangelical Christian institution, held classes for about 2,000 students until this week, when it was finally forced to stop lectures due to statewide emergency regulations. The university's president Jerry Falwell, the son of a famous pastor, was accused of putting students' health at risk by staying open in an alleged effort to show support for President Donald Trump - who at first downplayed the virus threat.

"I was very surprised and disappointed to ... learn of President Falwell's most recent decision to allow students back on campus," Treney Tweedy, the mayor of the local town Lynchburg, said last week. "We are in the midst of a public health crisis... I believe it was a reckless decision." Since students returned from "Spring Break" holiday on March 23, the library, restaurants and common areas have remained open, and some students say "social distancing" has been ignored. —AFP

What doctors are learning about the virus 'on the fly'

WASHINGTON: Doctor Daniel Brenner has had a busy week in the emergency department of Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, seeing dozens of presumed COVID-19 patients. As Maryland and other parts of the United States brace for the kind of surges seen in New York and Louisiana, AFP spoke to the fourth-year resident to gain insight into what medical professionals are learning about the disease in real time.

Hard choices

Maryland has thus far seen two dozen deaths and around 2,000 cases-capacity isn't yet stretched, but could soon be. With hundreds of cases now coming in, Brenner said it becomes "very tricky to tease out who needs to be in the hospital, the people who are at high risk for developing severe symptoms and needing supplemental oxygen" versus those who can recover from home.

Making the right call is crucial, but the problem is compounded by a lack of data to help rationalize choices. "Is it older people? Is it people with medical conditions?" asked Brenner, adding that doctors were desperately trying to keep up with the latest medical literature as it gets published to stay better informed. Different physicians have different views, "and there's really no consensus across the country or the medical community which approach is right yet because this disease has only been studied for two months," he said. "We're all trying to learn it on the fly."

The prone position

The most significant complication for coronavirus patients is Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS) in which the lungs stiffen and become inflamed and the body is starved of oxygen. Doctors have found placing patients on the stomach in the "prone" position helps prevent fluid from building up in the relatively more healthy area in the back of the lung, said Brenner. The technique is commonly used on preterm babies requiring ventilators, but for adults it is labor intensive and requires constant monitoring to make sure the breathing tube isn't displaced. COVID patients also seem to require higher levels of air pressure on their ventilators than people who have developed ARDS by other means, added Brenner.

Infection control

While hospitals in overwhelmed regions such as New York are in dire lack of personal protective gear, such shortages haven't yet hit other parts of the country. But the virus is forcing medical staff to change the way they work. In the US, assisted breathing machines called Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAPs) and Bilevel Positive Airway Pressure (BiPAPs) are not being used out of concern that they "might make a giant field of virus" by spraying droplets out of the patient's mouth and nose under pressure, said Brenner.

Ventilators, which place tubes down a patient's air passage, don't have the same problem because the exhaled air is sealed. But this creates its own issues-BiPAP was typically used for heart failure patients in the emergency room, but now these patients must go on ventilators. This is a more invasive procedure which requires making them unconscious and giving them drugs to temporarily paralyze the body. —AFP

International

Privacy-mad Germany turns to app to track virus spread

Germany limits the number of deaths to under 1,000

BERLIN: Personal data protection is a thorny subject in privacy-loving Germany, but the country is nevertheless considering using a smartphone app to help manage the spread of the new coronavirus. Even Chancellor Angela Merkel—who often refers to her youth in surveillance-ridden communist East Germany—said Wednesday that if it turns out to be a helpful way of tracking the spread of the virus “I would... of course be willing to use it for myself”.

In some ways, Germany appears to be faring better than many of its European neighbors in its battle against the coronavirus. Europe’s biggest economy has so far managed to limit the number of deaths from Covid-19 to under 1,000, partly thanks to aggressive testing modeled on the South Korean approach.

It has also avoided a strict lockdown like those in France, Italy or Spain. Merkel and her government are already looking ahead to the next phase, when they hope it will be possible to relax social distancing rules and reopen some public spaces. And according to Health Minister Jens Spahn, “for that to be possible, we need to be able to identify and reach anyone who has had contact with an in-

fecting person very quickly”.

‘Voluntary sharing’

When the government first proposed using mobile phone data to help track the spread of the virus in mid-March, it was forced to back down after a public outcry. Under the proposals, mobile phone operators would have been required to hand over the data of 46 million customers to help the authorities trace the contacts of infected people.

Such non-consensual mass surveillance was a shocking prospect in a country still traumatized by memories of Nazi dictatorship and later the Stasi secret police in the former communist east. The government is now reviewing proposals and will come up with a new plan “in the coming days”, according to Spahn, who is convinced that “the use of mobile phone data will be a key factor against the spread”. Under the new plans, data will be shared “on a voluntary basis”, according to Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht.

A proposed smartphone app will track and record people’s interactions via bluetooth for two weeks, without using geolocation tracking and

with a promise that data will be securely protected. If a person becomes infected, the app will automatically send a push notification to anyone they have crossed paths with in the past two weeks, to warn them of the risk of infection. Only those who have downloaded the app will receive the infection warnings, and the identity of infected people will be kept secret. The idea was inspired by a similar digital tool used in the city-state of Singapore, which has managed to limit the spread of the virus despite being very densely populated.

It was developed by Germany’s Fraunhofer Heinrich Hertz Institute (HHI) telecommunications research institute, in collaboration with the Robert Koch Institute disease control center. “HHI is working on an application that will make it possible to record the proximity and duration of contacts between people on mobile phones over the past two weeks, completely anonymously and without the need to record their location,” a spokeswoman for the company confirmed to AFP. The first tests were carried out at an army barracks in Berlin on Wednesday, according to media reports.

Using people’s data in this way also has the approval of Germany’s federal commissioner for data protection, with certain conditions. “The collection and evaluation of personal data to interrupt chains of infection can only be carried out with the consent of citizens,” commissioner Ulrich Kelber told AFP. “This data should be stored only for a limited and clearly defined period, and with the sole aim of fighting the pandemic. After that, it should be deleted,” he said, predicting a “strong willingness to participate” if these conditions are met.

According to Kelber, implementing wide-spread Chinese-style surveillance would be impossible in Germany. “There is no comparable technological infrastructure for surveillance and, more importantly, Germany has no laws that allow virtually uninterrupted surveillance of citizens using smartphones, apps or other devices,” he said. Meanwhile, the German public seem to be softening to the idea of handing over their mobile phone data. According to a YouGov poll published on Tuesday, half of Germans are in favor of the idea, while only 38 percent consider it inappropriate. —AFP

In supermarket front lines, cashiers fear the worst

ROME: The customers wander around in the stores, touch the food and even lick their fingers while riffling through bills. Any one of them could have the virus, and pass it along. Such are the nagging thoughts of grocery store workers in Italy and beyond: exhausted, underprotected and, many say, overly exposed to the coronavirus.

Around the world, where millions of people are quarantined at home, people can still shop for food at grocery stores, heightening risk for the sector’s employees. A 48-year-old supermarket cashier who tested positive for coronavirus died in March in Brescia in Italy’s hard-hit north, raising questions about whether enough was being done to protect workers. Unions say others employed in the sector may have died without their cases being reported as coronavirus cases. Last week, a 33-year-old supermarket security guard died of the virus in Italy.

Trapped behind checkout counters for hours at a time, or stocking shelves amidst customers on supermarket floor, workers say they are on the front lines - and insufficiently protected. “We’re scared of bringing something back home with us,” said Piera, a 31-year-old part-time cashier. She has worked for over a decade at a superstore in No-

vara, west of Milan, the city where the security guard died. Workers who spoke to AFP asked that their last names not be used.

Shopping daily

The worries are not restricted to Italy. “We can’t compare cashiers and health workers, but let’s say we’re not quite yet all aware that we have to protect both of them,” said Ana, a Spanish cashier in Alcorcon, outside Madrid. Piera, in Italy’s north, has been given disinfectant gel, gloves, and a mask, which she must wash herself for reuse. It was only last week that the store installed Plexiglass shields in front of each checkout counter.

Entire families show up to shop, many get too close to workers, and a few persist in licking their fingers before counting out their bills, said Chiara, a cashier at a superstore in Rome. “They’re buying stuff that I wouldn’t be buying in an emergency,” she added, listing “Sushi, Nutella, beer...” Last month, a man was arrested in Genoa after spitting in the face of a supermarket cashier, local media reported.

Lack of precautions?

Unions in Italy have called for the government to require grocery stores to cut hours in order to relieve the burden on workers. But Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte - hoping to reduce panic and runs on supermarkets - promised Italians on March 21 that stores will stay open. The two hardest-hit regions of Lombardy and Piedmont, in the north of the country, recommended that markets take shoppers’ temperatures before letting them in.

But only some have done so, with others saying they cannot get hold of the thermal scanners they need. In an open letter published on March 24, the



ROME: Supermarket staff feel increasingly vulnerable after the death of a cashier in Brescia last month.—AFP

secretary general of the Fisascat-Cisl union, which represents store cashiers and janitors, deplored the “almost total lack of any precautions” taken by the industry to protect its workers.

The main supermarket association in Italy, Federdistribuzione, has not issued specific coronavirus regulations to members, a spokesman told AFP. Instead, individual chains are taking measures. That includes putting up signs instructing customers to maintain safe distances, equipping staff “as far as possible” with gloves and masks, and limiting the number of people who can enter stores, said the group.

Panicked shoppers

After the government locked down 11 towns in the north in late February to stem the initial spread of the virus, Piera witnessed panicked shoppers storming her store. “It was so strange because we

saw people panicking, freaking out,” she said, calling it a “dystopian” experience. Unlike doctors or police who might be trained in how to deal with high-stress situations, supermarket workers were caught unawares. “We’re just like anyone else, normal people, and so we didn’t even have the psychological preparation to confront a situation like that,” she said.

Workers struggle to control a constant fear of touching something, or someone, contaminated. Ana in Spain said practically all the cashiers at her store were women, with children at home or parents to take care of. “So you’re at the checkout, but at the same time you’re thinking of your mom, who is considered at risk, and you wonder if just in bringing her food, in touching the bags, you’re going to transmit the virus to her,” she said. Stress has provoked meltdowns, and some workers have called in sick to avoid going to work.—AFP

International

Lives behind the grim coronavirus numbers

Death toll mounts as pandemic sweeps the globe

ROME: As the coronavirus death toll spirals in country after country, the sheer scale of the pandemic sweeping the globe can sometimes obscure the individual tragedies. But the more than 43,000 people who have died so far all had their own stories - young and old, men and women, patients and medical staff alike. Here are the cases of five people from around Europe - four who died from COVID-19 and one doctor whose suicide was a 'ricochet' from the outbreak.

Diego Blanco, 46: 'I'm not going to die'

Diego Blanco died at home on March 13 in Italy, the world's worst-hit country. A paramedic, he worked at the biggest hospital in Bergamo, the epicentre of the outbreak. He tested positive for coronavirus at the start of March and self-isolated but his health did not initially give cause for alarm. The day before he died he said to his wife, Maruska Capoferri: "Go to sleep darling, I'm not going to die."

"You reckon you're about to die?" she asked him, half joking, trying to conceal her anxiety. "Don't do that to me." Then she left the bedroom. When Maruska returned two hours later to check on him it was "too late", she told the *Eco di Bergamo* newspaper. Her husband had died of a sudden respiratory crisis and fever, followed by a heart attack. "I gave him heart massage," she recalled. Paramedics then tried to intubate him after they arrived "but there was nothing that could be done for him".

"Helping other people was a mission for him," said Maruska, who has a seven-year-old son,

Alessio. The family is one of the first to have received an 20,000 annual state benefit payout for victims of work accidents. Diego Blanco didn't smoke or drink and had no health problems. "I never would have believed it," said Maruska, who tried to console herself with the fact that other coronavirus patients often die alone because the disease is so infectious. "At least he said goodbye," she said.

Julie A, 16: 'We'll never know why'

For 16-year-old Julie A. it all started with a slight cough. A week later, on March 25, she became France's youngest COVID-19 fatality. "We'll never know why," the high school student's mother Sabine told AFP. At first they treated the cough with syrup and steam inhalation treatments but a couple of days later she began feeling tightness in her lungs, followed by coughing fits.

Sabine took her to the doctor, who called the emergency services. They then took her to hospital in Longjumeau in the Essonne department south of Paris. She had a lung scan but doctors said that there was "nothing serious". Yet later that night Julie was again fighting for breath, and she was taken to the Necker children's hospital in Paris. By Tuesday when she was admitted to intensive care Julie was complaining that "my heart hurts", but two coronavirus tests proved negative. Sabine said good night to her daughter and went home. A few hours later, the hospital called: one of the COVID-19 tests was in fact positive, and doctors had had to intubate Julie.

Earlier this week, the largest US newspaper chain, Gannett, announced a combination of pay cuts and temporary furloughs in an effort to ride out the crisis. Another media firm, Lee Enterprises, is asking employees to accept two weeks of unpaid leave during the next three months at its more than 70 newspapers. The Tampa Bay Times said it would cut its print editions to only Sundays and Wednesdays due to the sharp ad revenue drop.

The Times-Picayune and The Advocate, the largest news organization in New Orleans, is to furlough about 10 percent of its staff due to the slump, and C & G Newspapers has suspended publication of its 19 print newspapers in the Detroit area. "While many publishers have seen increases in online traffic and digital subscriptions, the additional revenue has in no way made up for the sharp losses in ad revenue," said a blog post by David Chavern of the News Media Alliance.

A grim outlook

Some analysts offer the grimmest of pictures for an industry that has been shrinking for two decades and struggling for a business model in the digital age. Ken Doctor, a media analyst and



NEW YORK: The sun sets behind the skyline of Manhattan with Calvary Cemetery in the foreground in New York City. —AFP

"From the beginning they told us this virus doesn't affect young people. We believed it, just like everyone else," said Julie's older sister Manon. Shortly after midnight, the hospital called again, telling Sabine to come quickly. She and Manon rushed back to Paris, but Julie had died. "Her skin was still warm," Sabine said.

Tim Galley, 47, is among the younger victims of COVID-19 in Britain, reportedly succumbing despite being fit and healthy. He died at his home in Wrexham, north Wales, last week after self-isolating and not seeking medical care, as

advised by the government, reports said. He was found in bed by a neighbor who had been asked to check on him, according to his girlfriend Donna Cuthbert. "I just can't bear the thought he was all alone," she told local media outlet North Wales Live. Galley had developed symptoms — first a slight cough, then a fever — 10 days earlier, she explained. But he declined to call the state-run health service's helpline because he did not want to divert resources away from more vulnerable people, Cuthbert said. —AFP

Media layoffs grow as industry pleads for urgent relief

WASHINGTON: The ailing news industry, struggling during a pandemic-induced economic slump, is pressing for new government relief as media outlets scramble to keep covering the health crisis. News outlets have begun layoffs, furloughs and pay cuts even as readers increasingly turn to the media for reliable information about the coronavirus outbreak.

Many local news organizations are facing "an existential crisis" with the near collapse of advertising revenues, according to a letter from two industry groups to President Donald Trump and congressional leaders. "We will be engaging with elected representatives in a discussion of options for actions the federal government could take to help sustain our local news ecosystem," said the letter from the News Media Alliance and America's Newspapers, which represent hundreds of media groups.

consultant, highlighted the irony of the situation, with the public needing independent information more than ever. "This has accelerated the timeline for news organizations," Doctor said. "They have been trying to come to grips with being truly digital and most of these outlets have been too slow." Even with spikes in digital readers, advertising has taken a hit from slumping business conditions, and from marketers' reluctance to place ads alongside news of the crisis, the analyst said. Doctor said the news organizations which have been relying more on subscriber revenue, such as The New York Times and Wall Street Journal, may weather the crisis better. But he sees an increase in "ghost newspapers" which have been bought by investors and still make money "but have little or no local content" due to newsroom cuts, Doctor added.

Relief on the way?

Some modest relief efforts are underway. Facebook said it was committing \$100 million to help news organizations confront the crisis including with some "emergency" grants. The National Geographic Society launched an emergency fund for journalists all over the world covering COVID-19 within their own communi-

ties, with grants of between \$1,000 and \$8,000. Some hard-hit outlets like free weeklies have shut down in print or been asking readers for contributions, while the Chicago Reader issued a coloring book to raise funds.

The NewsGuild, which represents about 25,000 journalists at 200 outlets, called Wednesday for a public fund to support newsrooms and media workers to prevent layoffs, along with tax credits and deductions for news subscriptions. "The industry was already suffering and entered this crisis without enough workers to cover this story," the union's president Jon Schleuss said in a message to members. "Now, we're facing a possible extinction."

The question of federal government aid is politically awkward for the media, and comes amid longstanding distrust of journalism outlets and attacks on media by President Donald Trump. Some outlets may be able to obtain tax credits or other relief from the \$2 trillion economic relief package approved by Congress, yet many in the industry say this may not avert a further erosion of the media. The media advocacy group Free Press said a journalism stimulus plan should include "direct, emergency subsidies" for newsrooms and tax credits.—AFP

Coronavirus worst crisis since WWII, death toll crosses 40,000

Nations struggle as pandemic infects more than 840,000 worldwide

WASHINGTON, DC: The global death toll from the coronavirus pandemic continued to worsen yesterday despite unprecedented lockdowns, as the head of the United Nations sounded the alarm on what he said was humanity's worst crisis since World War II. The warning came as Donald Trump told Americans to brace for a "very painful" few weeks after the United States registered its deadliest 24 hours of the crisis. Around half of the planet's population is under some form of lockdown as governments struggle to halt the spread of a disease that has now infected more than 840,000 people.

Well over 40,000 are known to have died, half of them in Italy and Spain, but the death toll continues to rise with new records being logged daily in the US. "This is going to be a very painful—a very, very painful—two weeks," Trump said, describing the pandemic as "a plague." "I want every American to be prepared for the hard days that lie ahead." America's outbreak has mushroomed rapidly. There are now around 190,000 known cases—a figure that has doubled in just five days. On Tuesday, a record 865 people died, according to a tally kept by Johns Hopkins University, taking the national toll so far to more than 4,000.

Members of Trump's coronavirus task force said the country should be ready for between 100,000 and 240,000 deaths in the coming months. "As sobering a number as that is, we should be prepared for it," Anthony Fauci, the na-

tion's top infectious disease expert. America's under-pressure health system is being supplemented by field hospitals sprouting up all over New York, including a tented camp in Central Park, a hospital ship and converted convention centres. 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."

Deep recession feared

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, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Tuesday. The "disease... represents a threat to 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.

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. Deaths shot up again across Europe. While there are hopeful signs that the

spread of infections is slowing in hardest-hit Italy and Spain, which both reported more than 800 new deaths Tuesday. France recorded a one-day record of 499 dead while Britain reported 381 coronavirus deaths, including that of a previously healthy 13-year-old.

That came after a 12-year-old Belgian girl succumbed to an illness that is serious chiefly for older, frailer people with pre-existing health conditions.

'We need help now'

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 three-quarters of a million new cases by delaying the spread of the virus.

"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. While many companies and schools around the globe have shifted to teleworking and teaching over video platforms, huge swathes of the world's workforce cannot and now face a deeply uncertain future. The economic pain of lockdowns is especially acute in the developing world.

In Tunisia several hundred protested a week-old lockdown that has disproportionately impacted the poor. "Nevermind 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 on Wednesday—but with some of the world's biggest slums, home to millions who live hand-to-mouth, containment will be difficult. —AFP



Half of planet's population under lockdown

Toaster-sized ventilator from India helps hospitals in coronavirus fight

NEW DELHI: Originally created by a robot scientist and a neurosurgeon to help India's poor, a toaster-sized ventilator is offering hope in the country's fight against the coronavirus pandemic and demand is booming. The virus at its most lethal attacks the lungs, making ventilators - which pump breathable air into a patient - critical for hospitals around the world as they are swamped with COVID-19 cases.

With the toll rising in India, where a nationwide lockdown is in force, production of AgVa's portable ventilator has shot up from 500 a month to 20,000. "There was no way we could have foreseen something as big as this," said neurosurgeon Deepak Agrawal, who co-developed the device with robot scientist Diwakar Vaish. Priced at around \$2,000, the AgVa ventilator is a fraction of the price of conventional ventilators, which go for more than \$10,000. India, like most countries, has a critical shortage of beds and ventilators for its 1.3 billion people. The South Asian nation has so far reported more than 1,600 cases and 38 deaths from COVID-19. To boost preparedness for a surge in cases, the Indian government has banned the export of coronavirus-linked medical exports, including ventilators. The AgVa plant near the capital New Delhi has been given permission to work flat out to make what could be a key weapon when



UTTAR PRADESH: A ventilator made by AgVa Healthcare is displayed at the research and development (R&D) centre in Noida in Uttar Pradesh state. —AFP

India has to fully confront the pandemic. The makers say the AgVa - which weighs just 3.5 kilos - will help move less critical patients back to their homes as their machine is easy to transport and install, and needs low power. "In case you want to convert a hotel into an ICU, you can simply put this device and start working as it doesn't require other infrastructure," said Vaish. Maruti Suzuki, India's biggest passenger car maker, has pledged to help AgVa ramp up production after the government called on all auto firms to contribute to the anti-coronavirus effort. —AFP

Trump declines nationwide stay-at-home order

LOS ANGELES: Four new states imposed sweeping stay-at-home directives on Wednesday in response to the coronavirus pandemic, putting over 80 percent of Americans under lockdown as the number of deaths in the United States nearly doubled in three days. The governors of Florida, Georgia, Mississippi and Nevada each instituted the strict policies on a day when the death toll from COVID-19 shot up by 925 to more than 4,800 nationwide, with 214,000 confirmed cases, according to a Reuters tally. President Donald Trump said he saw no need for the federal government to issue a nationwide decree, with 39 states and the District of Columbia now requiring residents to stay home except for essential outings to the doctor or grocery store. He also told a White House briefing on Wednesday he was considering a plan to halt flights to coronavirus hot spots.

"We're certainly looking at it, but once you do that you really are clamping down on an industry that is desperately needed," Trump told a White House news briefing. Such a plan might conceivably shut down traffic at airports in hard-hit New York, New Orleans and Detroit. "We're looking at the whole thing," Trump said of curtailing domestic flights already greatly reduced as demand has fallen. —Reuters

International

Philippine's Duterte tells police to shoot dead troublemakers

More than 50 million currently under quarantine

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has told security forces they should shoot dead anyone causing “trouble” in areas locked down due to the coronavirus pandemic. About half the country’s roughly 110 million people are currently under quarantine-including millions in deep poverty, left jobless by tough restrictions on movement. Hours before Duterte gave the order in a speech late Wednesday, nearly two dozen people from a slum community in the capital Manila were arrested for holding a protest that accused the government of failing to provide food aid to the poor.

“My orders are to the police and military, also village officials, that if there is trouble or the situation arises that people fight and your lives are on the line, shoot them dead,” Duterte said. “Instead of causing trouble, I’ll send you to the grave,” he said, adding that the outbreak is getting worse more than two weeks into the lockdown. The Philippines has so far detected 2,311

cases and reported 96 deaths, but the country has only begun ramping up testing and so the number of confirmed infections is expected to keep rising.

Duterte, who came to power in a landslide 2016 election victory, is known internationally for his foul-mouthed tirades and deadly crack-down on drugs, which is overwhelmingly supported by Filipinos. But critics allege that Duterte’s drug war targets the poor and leaves the rich and powerful untouched, while reinforcing a culture of impunity. The president’s latest comments drew immediate rebuke from rights groups who urged the government to provide much-needed relief supplies instead of issuing threats of violence.

“It is deeply alarming that President Duterte has extended a policy of shoot-to-kill... Deadly, unchecked force should never be referred to as a method to respond to an emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic,” Amnesty International Philippines said in a statement. As fre-



MANILA: Police personnel hold up placards reminding people to stay at home amid concerns of the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus in Manila. — AFP

quently happens after Duterte makes an announcement that sparks concern, officials said the president used hyperbole to make a point. Philippine National Police Chief Archie Gamboa said on Thursday that officers would not begin shooting troublemakers dead. “Probably the

president just overemphasized on implementing the law in this time of crisis,” he added. The quarantine, which affects Manila’s 12 million people, has shuttered most businesses and brought nearly all social, religious and business activity to a halt. —AFP

Japan PM offers masks, gets social media roasting

TOKYO: Facing calls to declare a coronavirus state of emergency, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was flamed on social media yesterday for instead offering people free cloth masks, pointing to growing frustration for some over his handling of the crisis. Abe’s offer of masks – two per household – came the day after experts had warned Japan was on the brink of a medical crisis as cases rose around the nation, especially in Tokyo. The prime minister said on Wednesday Japan was “barely holding the line” in its battle against the virus.

The prime minister launched his offer to send cloth masks out while wearing one at a meeting of a government task force late on Wednesday. The masks will be sent to each of Japan’s more than 50 million households starting the week after next, with areas seeing a spike in cases getting priority.

“I am wearing one too, but these cloth masks are not disposable,” Abe said. “You can use soap to wash and re-use them, so this should be a good response to the sudden, huge demand for masks,” he said, noting domestic production of disposable masks would likely rise to 700 million in April from 600 million last month. Twitter users were scathing, with the hashtag “#AbeMask” the top trend early on Thursday. “Is the Japanese government for real? This is a total waste of tax money,” wrote a user with

the handle Usube.

Government ministers including Abe have said it was not yet time to declare a state of emergency that would provide authorities more legal clout to tell residents to stay home, close schools and take other steps, but would not allow penalties in most cases for those who defy the requests.

Though small compared with outbreaks in the United States, Europe and China, coronavirus infections are on the rise in Japan – with some 2,500 confirmed cases as of yesterday morning and 70 deaths – prompting growing expressions of concern among social media users. Abe first appeared in public wearing a mask on Tuesday. He wore a loose cloth mask for parliamentary committee meetings the following day, sitting beside Finance Minister Taro Aso, who appeared visibly uncomfortable in a disposable paper mask and removed it to talk – in contravention of recommended procedures.

After news of the offer, some Twitter users posted doctored photographs of Abe wearing two masks, one over his mouth and another over his eyes. Others listed nations that are distributing subsidies to each household and said they’d rather just get money. The offer of two masks per household also attracted scorn.

“If your family has more than two people, what are you supposed to do – fight over them?” posted user Yosuke. The proposal also came in for caustic satire in yet another subtitled version of the global meme based on the German war film “Downfall”. The clip, which shows a distraught Adolf Hitler being told, “This is not an April Fool’s joke”, had 1 million views as of yesterday morning, and was retweeted by the Japanese Communist Party’s second-in-command, Akira Koike. — Reuters

Trump casts doubt on China virus figures

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump cast doubt Wednesday on the accuracy of official Chinese figures on its coronavirus outbreak after US lawmakers, citing an intelligence report, accused Beijing of a cover up. “How do we know” if they are accurate, Trump asked at a press conference. “Their numbers seem to be a little bit on the light side.”

Trump insisted that “the relationship with China’s a good one” and that he remained close to President Xi Jinping. However, controversy around Beijing’s transparency has strained ties, adding to bad feelings triggered by a conspiracy theory in China that the US military was to blame for the virus.

Republicans in Congress, pointing to a report by Bloomberg citing US intelligence, expressed outrage that Beijing apparently misled the international community on China’s infections and deaths that began in late 2019 in the city of Wuhan. China’s reporting has been intentionally incomplete, with some intelligence officials describing Beijing’s numbers as fake, reported Bloomberg, which highlighted the classified intelligence document sent to the White House last week.

China has publicly reported 82,361 confirmed cases and 3,316 deaths as of Wednesday, according to a rolling tracker by Johns Hopkins University. That compares to 206,207 cases and 4,542 deaths in the United States, the country with the world’s largest reported outbreak. Republican Senator Ben Sasse attacked Beijing’s numbers as “garbage propaganda.”

“The claim that the United States has more coronavirus deaths than China is false,” Sasse said in a statement. “Without commenting on any classified information, this much is painfully obvious: The Chinese Communist Party has lied, is lying, and will continue to lie about coronavirus to protect the regime.” In a statement responding to the report, Michael McCaul, top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said China is “not a trustworthy partner” in the fight against COVID-19.

“They lied to the world about the human-to-human transmission of the virus, silenced doctors and journalists who tried to report the truth, and are now apparently hiding the accurate number of people impacted by this disease,” McCaul said.

He and other lawmakers have called on the State Department to launch an investigation into what he called China’s “cover up” of the pandemic. On Tuesday a member of Trump’s coronavirus task force, doctor Deborah Birx, said the medical community saw China’s outbreak as “serious but smaller than anyone expected because I think probably we were missing a significant amount of the data.” —AFP

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Chinese 'light painter' takes artistic inspiration from virus

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Balcony stars bring joy to self-isolating French

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A man wearing an alternative mask poses for a photograph in Kampala.—AFP

Hungry and in chains, Thailand's tourist elephants face crisis

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Hungry and in chains, **Thailand's** tourist elephants face crisis



This handout photo from the Thai Elephant Alliance Association shows elephants foraging for food near the Patara Elephant Farm near Chiang Mai, where many camps have been shuttered by the government due to fears of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus spreading. —AFP photos



Elephants chained up at an undisclosed camp near Chiang Mai.



A mahout with elephants foraging for food next to the Patara Elephant Farm in an area affected by drought near Chiang Mai.



A mahout venturing outside the park near Chiang Mai to collect grass to feed the elephants in the camp, as a result of insufficient food supplies after the park was affected by dwindling tourist numbers due to fears of the COVID-19 spread.



A mahout with elephants foraging for food next to the Patara Elephant Farm.

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

With global travel paralyzed the animals are unable to pay their way, including the 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of food a day a captive elephant needs to survive. Elephant camps and conservationists warn hunger and the threat of renewed exploitation lie ahead, without an urgent bailout. "My boss is doing what he can but we have no money," Kosin, a mahout — or elephant handler — says of the Chiang Mai camp where his elephant Ekkasit is living on a restricted diet. Chiang Mai is Thailand's northern tourist hub, an area of rolling hills dotted by elephant camps and sanctuaries ranging from the exploitative to the humane. Footage sent to AFP from another camp in the area shows lines of elephants tethered by a foot to wooden poles, some visibly distressed, rocking their heads back and forth.

Lifestyle | Feature

Around 2,000 elephants are currently “unemployed” as the virus eviscerates Thailand’s tourist industry, says Theerapat Trungprakan, president of the Thai Elephant Alliance Association. The lack of cash is limiting the fibrous food available to the elephants “which will have a physical effect”, he added. Wages for the mahouts who look after them have dropped by 70 percent. Theerapat fears the creatures could soon be used in illegal logging activities along the Thai-Myanmar border — in breach of a 30-year-old law banning the use of elephants to transport wood. Others “could be forced (to beg) on the streets,” he said. It is yet another twist in the saga of the exploitation of elephants, which animal rights campaigners have long been fighting to protect from the abusive tourism industry.

‘Crisis point’

For those hawking a once-in-a-lifetime experience with the giant creatures — whether from afar or up close — the slump began in late January. Chinese visitors, who make up the majority of Thailand’s 40 million tourists, plunged by more than 80 percent in February as China locked down cities hard-hit by the virus and banned external travel. By March, the travel restrictions into Thailand — which has 1,388 confirmed cases of the virus — had extended to Western countries.

With elephants increasingly malnourished due to the loss of income, the situation is “at a crisis point,” says Saengduean Chailert, owner of Elephant Nature Park. Her sanctuary for around 80 rescued pachyderms only allows visitors to observe the creatures, a philosophy at odds with venues that have them performing tricks and offering rides. She has organized a fund to feed elephants and help mahouts in almost 50 camps nationwide, fearing the only options will soon be limited to zoos, starvation or logging work. For those restrained by short chains all day, the stress could lead to fights breaking out, says Saengduean, of camps that can no longer afford medical treatment for the creatures.

Calls are mounting for the government to fund stricken camps to ensure the welfare of elephants. “We need 1,000 baht a day (about \$30) for each elephant,” says Apichet Duangdee, who runs the Elephant Rescue Park. Freeing his eight mammals rescued from circuses and loggers into the forests is out of the question as they would likely be killed in territorial fights with wild elephants. He is planning to take out a two million baht (\$61,000) loan soon to keep his elephants fed. “I will not abandon them,” he added. —AFP



Elephants and their mahouts near the Patara Elephant Farm near Chiang Mai.



In this file photo tourists observe elephants rescued from the tourism and logging trade under heavy smog at the Elephant Nature Park in the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai.



In this file photo tourists ride elephants in Chang Siam Park in Pattaya.



In this file photo mahouts feed elephants rescued from the tourism and logging trade at the Elephant Nature Park in the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai.

Lifestyle | Feature

Stir crazy chef serves up soup for health workers

When Belgium's coronavirus lockdown order forced star chef Isabelle Arpin to shut her fine dining establishment she could have retired to the kitchen to devise dishes for bored gourmets. Instead she decided to whip up tasty soups — smoked eel and potato, asparagus and liquorice, Thai red curry — for hundreds of health workers at one of Brussels' busiest hospitals. "Good nourishing food, full of vitamins, boost your mood and your health" she declared, plunging her "bazooka" — a powerful food mixer — into a vat of water-cress veloute.

Today's menu will be loaded into 10 12-litre crates lined with sacks designed to withstand temperatures up to 80 degrees Celsius (175 F) and be loaded into an insulated truck loaned by catering giant Sodexo. From the elegant open plan restaurant on chic Avenue Louise, they will be taken to the Erasmus teaching hospital to feed 350 famished nurses and doctors battling the deadly pandemic. It's a change of pace for Arpin, more used to cooking up refined dishes at 80 euros (\$88) a head in a restaurant bearing her well-known name along with a photo of her levitating over a wheel of cheese.

When Belgium began shutting down non-essential services and large-scale public gatherings on March 13, the restaurant was forced to close, but Arpin and restaurant manager Dominika had other plans. They would become caterers, but as Dominika explained: "We weren't going to use up masks that could have gone to health care workers, just to produce trays of *vol aux vents*," a chicken pastry dish. A plan formed to help out Erasmus and within a few days they had contacted their suppliers, notably a farm just outside the capital that employs handicapped workers.

By March 21 their supplies had been supplemented by gifts from loyal customers, food banks that collect surplus food, and unsold stocks from the Carrefour and Metro supermarket



Chef Isabelle Arpin prepares meals for medical staff in the kitchen of the "Isabelle Arpin" restaurant in Brussels. —AFP photos

chains. She chose a simple menu because "soup is nourishing. It's all but a meal in itself. It's quick and easy to eat," Dominika told AFP. "Watercress is rich in trace elements. It's a vitamin bomb."

'Act of citizenship'

One day this week, Arpin blended peppers, mushrooms, courgettes, onions, poultry, citronella and coconut milk into a red curry concoction that worked as another standalone meal for hungry nurses. "I'm really not used to cooking for so many people, but on the other hand I'm discovering myself back at the base of our profession, which is to sustain people," she said through a hygienic face mask. Trained at the Dunkirk cooking

school in neighboring France, the 50-something chef won a Michelin star at her former restaurant before launching her eponymous venture. "I've been living in Belgium for more than 20 years. In a situation like this, without knowing how it's going to go, you have to help the society you're living in. It's an act of citizenship," she said. At Erasmus, staff are grateful for the twice weekly treat. Head of pathology Isabelle Salmon sighs: "What a joy to be able to take a breather, with the team, and take a trip to Thailand with the smell of anise and cress, amid the brutal and harsh daily grind." —AFP



Chef Isabelle Arpin prepares meals for medical staff in the kitchen of the "Isabelle Arpin" restaurant in Brussels.



An employee of the Sodexo company carries lunch boxes for medical staff prepared by the chef Isabelle Arpin.

Chinese light painter takes artistic inspiration from virus

A Chinese artist has paid tribute to doctors and nurses and their months-long battle to treat virus-stricken patients in his latest light painting creations. Roy Wang and his team used the photographic technique of light painting to “draw” white wings on the back of a model posing in a white hazmat suit, the protective gear that has come to symbolize medical workers fighting the virus worldwide.

The model stood frozen as the camera shutter was opened, with Wang darting around her in the dark, using an electric light held aloft to draw in the air. “The medical workers, in Chinese we call them ‘the angels in white’ — they are saving the human, saving us,” he told AFP. “So I feel like I should create some light paintings to show respect for them. Since the virus first emerged late last year, at least 34 medical workers have died in China, according to official figures. Wang also created a visual depiction of the virus, which has killed more than 40,000 around the world, using a neon green light.

As the coronavirus has developed into a global pandemic, Wang’s next project is called “Light the world up”, in which he collects the most inspiring words from his friends overseas and tries to light paint them in different languages. “This is not just a problem of China, but a problem of the whole world,” he said. “We will get through the hard times, and the Earth will become better and better.”—AFP

These long-exposure handout images show photographic image depicting a medical worker created by light-painting artist Roy Wang in Beijing.
— AFP photos



Burning love: ‘Glasgow Elvis’ in virus lockdown gig

An Elvis impersonator in Scotland gave an impromptu gig to lift lockdown spirits, earning a rapturous reception from his neighbors — but a visit from the police about the noise. Dean Allsopp donned a white jumpsuit and put speakers on the balcony of his flat in Coatbridge, east of Glasgow, on Monday, crooning the 1972 hit

“Burning Love”. Mobile phone footage of the concert has been seen thousands of times online, showing neighbours cheering and applauding the singer.

But it also showed uniformed police turning up at his door — to boos from locals. Allsopp, 47, was quoted as saying by the Glasgow Live website: “It was all for the NHS (National Health Service) and police. I wanted to do it professionally. “No one in the street knew what was going on. I set the speakers up. I was really nervous — more than it would be if I was going on stage.”

Police turned up after receiving a single complaint, he said, but added that officers, who took his name and date of

birth, “saw the funny side of it”. “They said people could hear it three streets down. They didn’t even say turn it down — they let me finish,” he said. Allsopp, who began his Elvis schtick 14 years ago, said he had a charity gig planned in Glasgow once the coronavirus crisis is over. “My mum is really proud of me. For me to see the smile on the people’s faces at these dark times and to see the kids dancing in their gardens, it was amazing,” he said. “I’m overwhelmed by all the lovely comments.”—AFP

Lifestyle | Feature



French opera tenor singer Stephane Senechal performs the song *O sole mio* from his window in Paris on the evening of the tenth day of a strict lockdown in France aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19, caused by the novel coronavirus.—AFP photos

Balcony stars bring joy to self-isolating French

Faced with the fear and boredom of the coronavirus lockdown, music is playing a small but important part in making life more bearable for some French people who are being treated to nightly balcony performances. Every evening at 7pm, tenor Stephane Senechal throws open the window of his apartment in Paris's 9th arrondissement and lets fly with an aria. "When I see the smile that I bring each evening with my song, that gives me great pleasure," he tells AFP.

"All day long, we are told of tragic things, of the dead. When I see smiles, I see hope. It's a little moment of freedom, of escape," he says. Senechal says he lives in a neighborhood where "there are a lot of elderly people" and it was a moment of reflection from an 80-year-old neighbor at the beginning of the lockdown that pushed him to sing at his window.



Celebrate life

"She told me 'we will feel even more isolated'. I was rehearsing the role of Don Jose in 'Carmen' at the time and after this remark I decided to sing at the window," he said. Senechal starts by singing the "Marseillaise". Then he links each nightly recital with arias as varied as "I gave you my heart" from Franz Lehar's operetta "The Land of Smiles", the 1935 Mexican song "Piensa en mi" — sung by Luz Casal in Pedro Almodovar's *High Heels* — as well as the song "Caruso", Edith Piaf's "The Hymn to Love" and an "Ave Maria" dedicated "to all the suffering".

Senechal also likes to let go with "E lucevan le stelle" from Puccini's opera *Tosca*. He consid-

ers this especially apt because of its last sentence: "E non ho amato mai tanto la vita! (I have never loved life so much)" We understand the importance of life. And we can't give up now," he says. His balcony recitals appear to have drifted far across the rooftops of the 9th. "A patient with COVID-19 and hospitalized in Bichat (a hospital in the north of Paris) saw one of my videos and said 'keep going'. For me, that makes it all worthwhile."

Since the start of self-isolation in France, as in Italy and Spain, initiatives like this have flourished. Montreuil, in the eastern suburbs of the capital, has been particularly active, regularly sharing videos of a violinist, a guitarist or a singer on their balconies. The "BachDesBalcons" online initiative, launched by Classical Revolution France, a movement imported from the United States, encourages musicians to play Bach at their windows.

Across the nation

"There are dozens of us playing every week from Montpellier to Paris, via Nantes, Strasbourg or Lille," Sarah Niblack, director of Classical Revolution France, told AFP. "Bach is the greatest of companions, you are never alone with your music." An American who has lived in France for several years, Niblack has been based in Prades, in the south-west, since the beginning of confinement, and says she is happy to bring "comfort and a little moment when people come together" in these times of isolation.

"People recognize me now, even when I do my shopping with mask and gloves, I am told in the street 'you are the girl who plays Bach'," laughs Niblack, a violist who has played in several national orchestras. Like many freelance workers she has suffered professionally from the lockdown, having seen six contracts cancelled since the outbreak, but she remains upbeat about the power of music. "We are not useful in a hospital but we can make a little difference in people's lives. They appreciate that we are thinking of them."—AFP

THE YOUNG BRAZILIANS FIGHTING FOR THE AMAZON

Maria dreams of being the next Greta Thunberg. Kelita is studying in the first-ever university program in the Amazon. Fabio is helping his family do its part to fight climate change through sustainable agriculture. A new generation of young Brazilians from the Amazon region are seeking to reshape the fight for the world's largest rainforest, which is shrinking before their eyes.

The first Youth of the Forest Conference recently brought together 287 of them to discuss what they can do to fight rampant wildfires, deforestation from logging, farming and mining, and apathy about the rapid loss of one of Earth's most important natural resources. AFP profiles three of them.

Amazonian Greta

Maria Cunha, 26, is from Sao Raimundo, a small village in a protected reserve whose residents live off fishing and gathering. A volunteer forest ranger with a degree in sustainable production techniques, she says saving the Amazon will require working with the people who know it best: its inhabitants. "We are the guardians of the forest. We live here and depend on the rainforest for practically everything. If we don't protect our forests, how will we live?" she added.

She is already seeing the impact of climate change at home, she said: hotter weather, lower water levels on the rivers, fewer fish. Animals are feeling the impact, too. "They come into our yard looking for food because they can't find enough, because of fires and deforestation," she said. She fears it could "all disappear in the near future" if others her age don't act. She sees Thunberg, the 17-year-old Swedish climate activist, as a role model. "I dream of being the next Greta, an empowered girl fighting for her rights," she said.

Prodigal daughter

Kelita do Carmo left the rainforest at 13 years old, moving to the city of Manaus, to work as a nanny. Eight months later, she was back home in Bauana, a village of stilt houses on the banks of

the Jurua River. "I learned to appreciate things here," she said. Now 22, she is studying to become a teacher, part of the first-ever degree program offered in the rainforest.

The program aims to supply teachers to flourishing rainforest villages. It is a joint project by the Amazonas Sustainable Foundation — which sponsored the Youth of the Forest Conference



Twenty-six-year-old Maria Cunha, who lives in Sao Raimundo, municipality of Carauari, in the heart of the Brazilian Amazon Forest, poses for picture.

— and Amazonas State University in Manaus. It includes coursework on sustainable agriculture and the environment.

Farmer, math whizz

Fabio Gondim dreams of becoming a math teacher one day. At 16 years old, he is already an expert farmer. He helps his family harvest acai, a fruit in high demand for its health properties, and cassava, which they use to make flour. A natural athlete, he can scale a 10-meter (33-foot) acai palm in a flash. "It never crossed my mind to leave" the rainforest, he said. "I wouldn't want to live in the city. Everything is easier here. The forest provides our food and our income." He is helping his family adopt more sustainable farming techniques, such as clearing fewer trees to farm cassava. "We have to keep fighting for the Amazon," he said. "It's what's sustaining the world."—AFP



Twenty-two-year-old Kelita do Carmo (right) is pictured on her way to class in the small faculty built by the Sustainable Amazon Foundation.—AFP photos

Take a virtual vacation to these 6 destinations



Portugal

By Maya Stanton

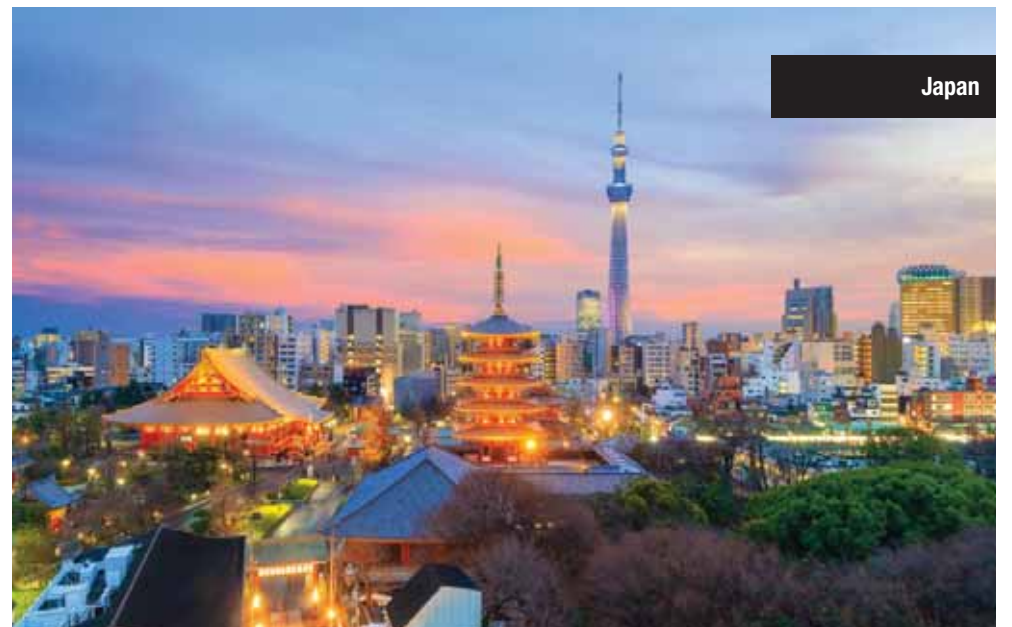
At home and dreaming of all the trips you'll take when you have the chance? To satisfy that sense of longing for the wider world, a handful of tourism boards have launched initiatives to keep globetrotters connected while they're stuck on the ground – and though they might not earn you a new passport stamp right away, they're sure to fuel your wanderlust for future travels. Here are six destinations to visit from afar – at least until you can get there in person.

1. Portugal

As most European countries have at this particular juncture, Portugal is hitting pause on all nonessential travel and asking its residents to shelter in place. But the tourism board doesn't want that to be cause for despair, and it's putting its money where its mouth is with a new video called "Can't Skip Hope," made totally by teams working from home. Featuring archival footage and a smartphone-recorded voiceover, the video ties imagery from across the nation – landscapes, monuments, people, and attractions – in with what the board is calling a message of hope: "It is time to reflect. It is time to take a break, for the good of the world. For now, we can dream of those incredible days to come. We are in this together."

2. Japan

The 2020 Olympic Games might be postponed until next summer, but in the meantime, Japan is rolling out the red carpet for virtual visitors from around the world. A 360° VR movie hits the country's highlights, from the 333-meter-high Tokyo Tower to Kyoto's Bamboo Forest Road to Shibuya's fast-paced nightlife. Don't blink, or you'll miss Yayoi Kusama's Red Pumpkin sculpture in Naoshima, scenes from the Kawaii Monster Café in Harajuku, a restaurant where a conveyor belt whisks plates of sushi to and fro, practitioners of the arts of kabuki and sumo, and much, much more. To feel like you're on the ground, check out the Shibuya Crossing livecam, head for Niseko Village, in the shadow of Mt. Fuji, or take a zen view of Hirono Park in the Shizuoka prefecture. For



Japan

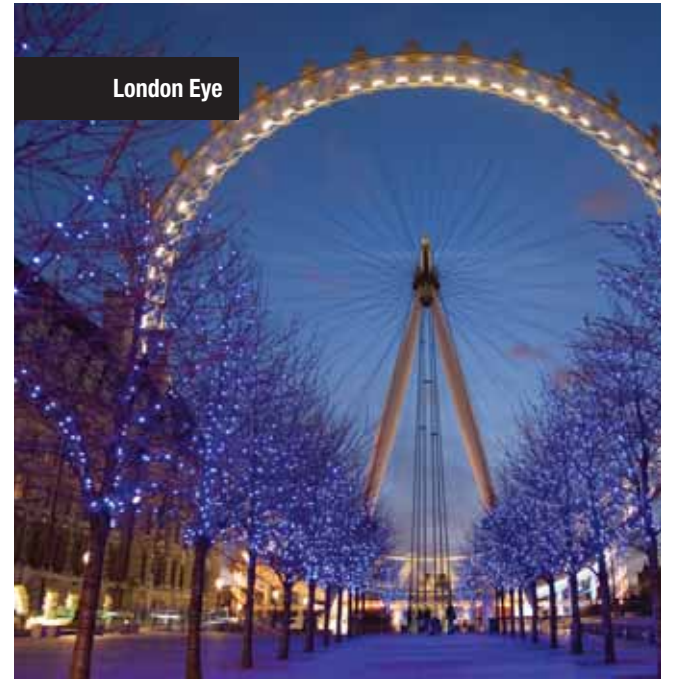


Harry Potter wallpaper

something a bit more down to earth, try the YouTube livestream from Toyooka City's Hyogo Park of the Oriental White Stork, where a pair of oriental white storks is currently in nesting mode, looking after two chicks that recently hatched.

3. South Africa

Last week, South Africa became the continent's first nation to go into lockdown, prohibiting all domestic and international flights going forward. In response, the country's tourism board has launched an initiative to urge visitors and locals alike to stay at home – and provide them with plenty of eye-candy-style inspiration in the process. Titled “Don't travel now, so you can travel later,” South African Tourism's videos focus on the people, places, and experiences that make the destination such a draw – and underscore just how wonderful it will be when everyone can move about freely again. “Just you wait till we can travel again,” the narrator intones. “Boy, we're going to travel.”



London Eye



South Africa



4. Britain

The UK might be on lockdown, but Visit Britain is doing its best to share the island nation's pleasures, from bingeable movies and TV series to dance party-worthy playlists to pub quizzes that will keep those gray cells sharp. Try a deep dive into the shooting locations of the eight Harry Potter films, channel the Great British Bake Off and learn to make traditional scones for your afternoon tea, explore the flora and fauna of England's famed gardens, or just settle in with some classic literature – it might not be the same as experiencing it all in person, but it's a pretty good substitute.

5. Chile

If Easter Island is on your bucket list, Imagen de Chile's new app will give you a whole new perspective on Rapa Nui's world-famous moai. Available via free download for iPhone and Android, Chile 360° offers a VR view of Ahu Tongariki – the largest ahu ever built – and its 15 statues, as well as stunning scenery from the rest of the country, from Parque Nacional Torres del Paine in southern Patagonia to northern Chile's remote Atacama Desert. Away from the app, you can also pull out the VR glasses for tours of the European Southern Observatory, a much-lauded astronomy organization, and the Museo Histórico Nacional, both in Santiago.

6. St. Lucia

St Lucia has closed its ports to international and private flights until April, but the tiny Caribbean island's twin Pitons, lush greenery, and silver beaches are the stuff of travel fantasies, even if they're temporarily out of reach. To give would-be visitors a taste of the local action, the social media series "7 Minutes in Saint Lucia" is airing twice a week on Instagram Live, Facebook, and Twitter with yoga classes, mediation sessions, cooking lessons, dance parties, and more, all under the hashtag #7Minutesin-SaintLucia.— www.lonelyplanet.com



Kids Page

Daily SuDoku

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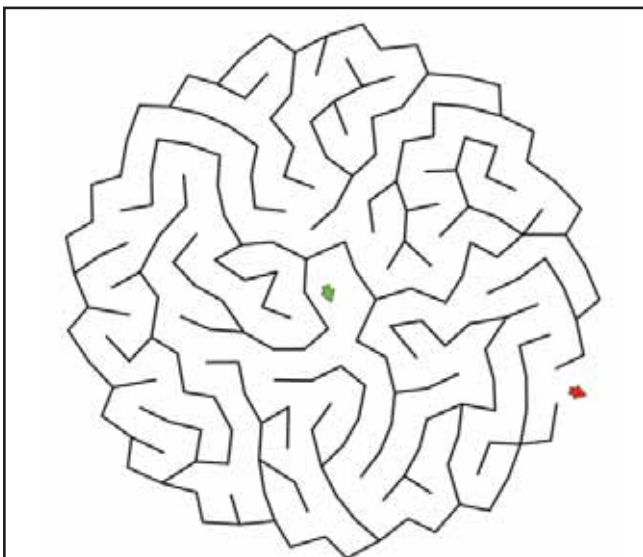
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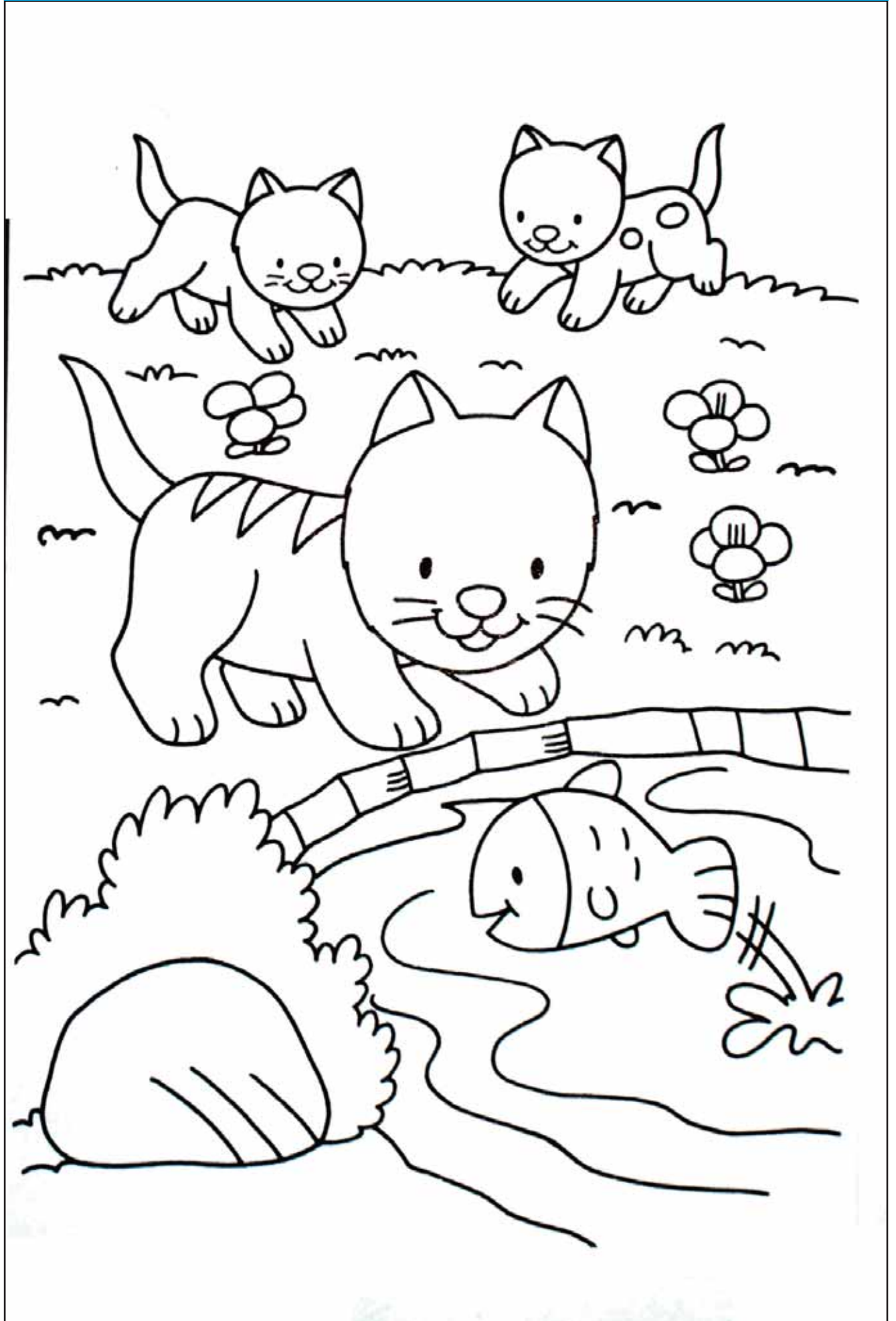
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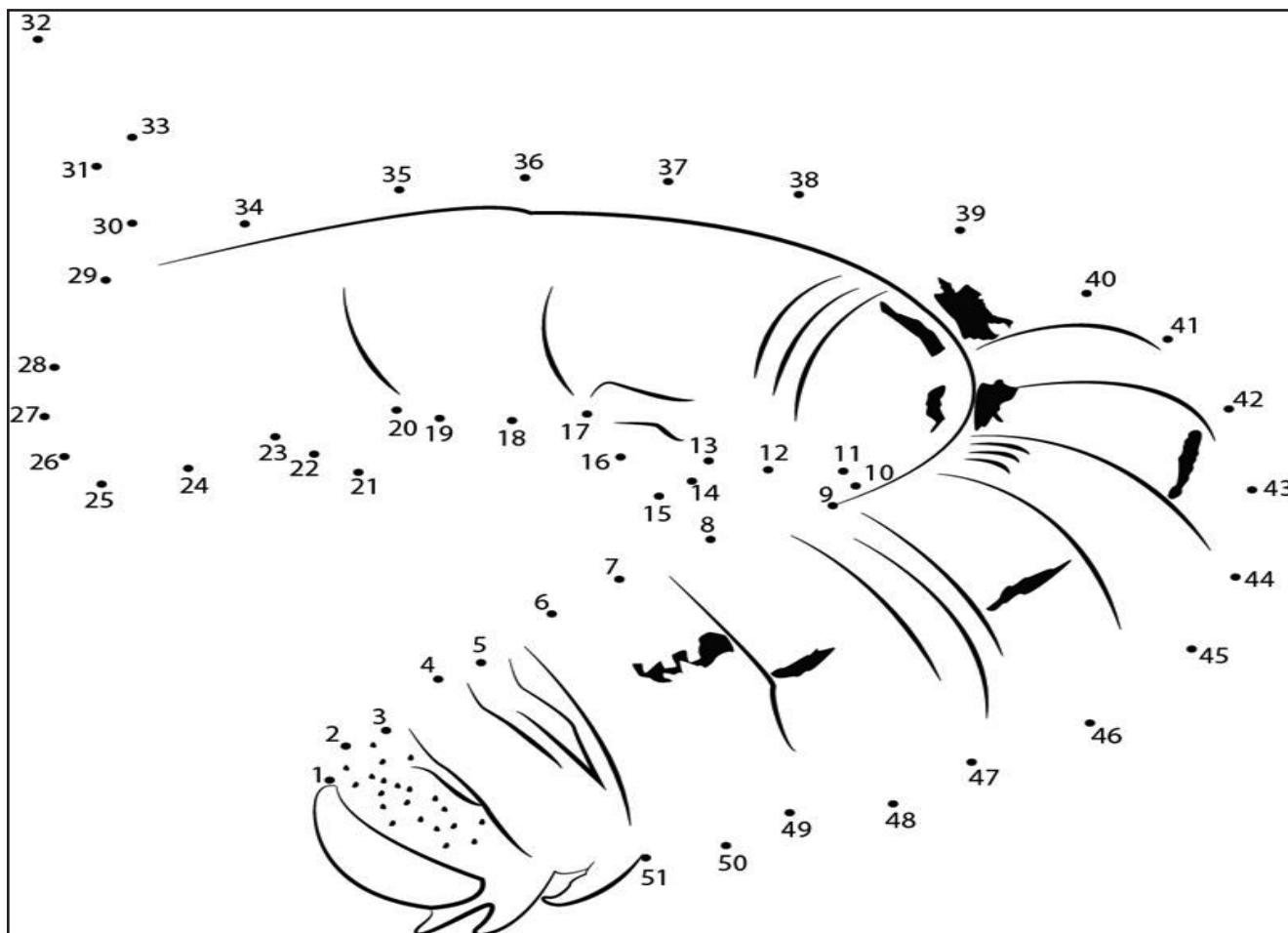
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Kids Mazes



Color It





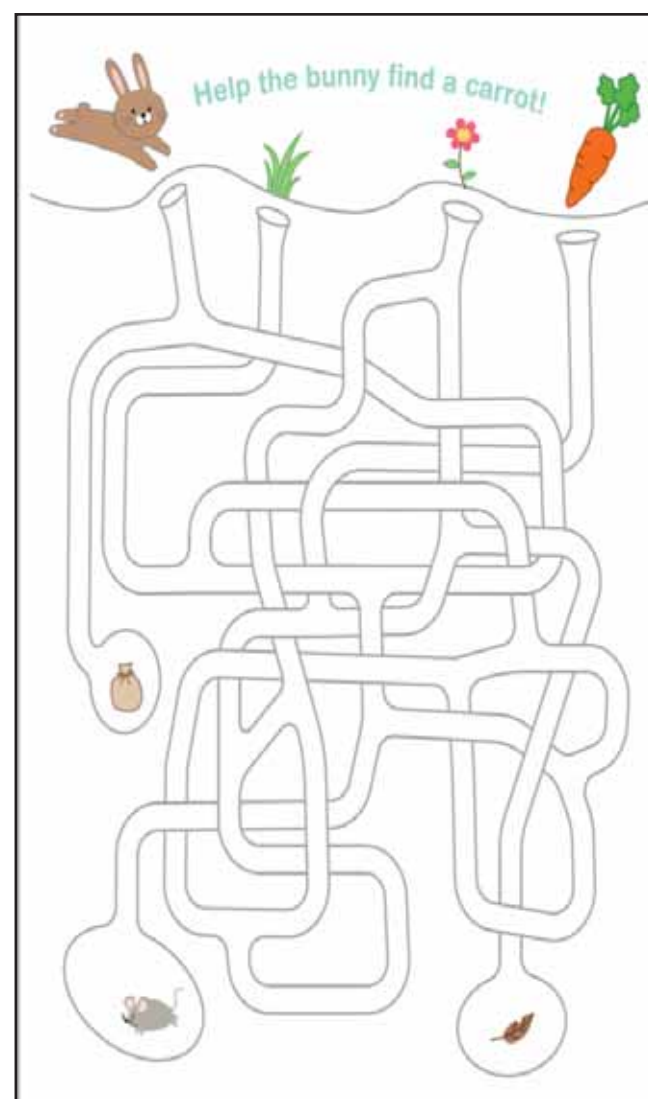
Egyptian Crossword

Across

4. Process of embalming and wrapping a body
5. River that runs through Egypt
6. Decorated coffin
9. Stone structure used to house dead pharaoh
10. Married Mark Antony and was last pharaoh of Ancient Egypt
13. Material Egyptians used to write on
14. Great Egyptian pharaoh known for his peace making
16. The Great Pyramid was built here
17. Goddess of motherhood, magic and fertility
18. Protector of the dead and embalming

Down

1. Boy pharaoh
2. Used to wrap a mummy
3. God of war, sky and protection
7. Symbols used for writing
8. Head of a human body of a lion
11. Key of life often seen being held by gods
12. Sun god
14. Stone that helped to decipher hieroglyphics
15. Egyptian beetle



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Stars

STAR TRACK

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

Take care of your friends by supporting their ideas, Aries. Be careful that you don't automatically encourage a plan or viewpoint that you know is wrong or doomed to fail. Even though you might want to make them feel good by saying exactly what they want to hear, this isn't really doing them any favors. People come up with some wild schemes, so it's important to bring a levelheaded perspective to the table.

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

You could be teetering between the real world and a fantasy realm, Taurus. The fantasy world is more than likely the one that wins out, but that doesn't mean you should lose all touch with reality. If anyone can bridge these two worlds, it's you. You'll probably find yourself drawn to art, which can wonderfully bridge the two. Indeed, your creative juices are gushing like a waterfall today.

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

Nurture your loved ones, Gemini. Tonight feel free to escape into a fantasy world with the object of your desire. Make plans to set your wildest fantasy into motion. Let your imagination lead the way. You'll never get where you want to go until you head in that direction. Have confidence that you can turn your dreams into reality. Don't waste another day doing things that don't contribute to your long-term plans.

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

Regardless of your situation, Cancer, you'll want to take the easy way out. There's a laziness sweeping over you, and you could be trying to find a way to sneak out of some responsibilities. Even if this idea seems terrific now, it's likely to get you into some trouble later. Be wary of cheating the system and then expecting the full benefits of hard work in return. You'll earn exactly what you deserve.

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

You might be frustrated with romance because it seems to be causing more tension than relaxation, Leo. No one said love was easy, but it doesn't have to be miserable. The key is to not get too stressed out about the little things. Know and expect that some things aren't going to match your expectations. You simply have no control over some aspects of a relationship - the other person, for example.

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

Your imagination is your best friend, Virgo. You aren't about to let anyone disturb your fantasy world. You have fit love and romance perfectly into this place, and everything is wonderful in your head. Implementing this plan and making it work in the real world are two different things, so try not to get too tied to this idea. Definitely aim to manifest your vision, but don't be unrealistic about it.

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

Aggression in your world of romance is likely, Libra. Whether coming from you or your close partner, the tension is there and can't be ignored. Keep in mind, however, that it's possible that much of it stems from something that isn't even true. Perhaps there was a mis-spoken word or misunderstanding of some sort that's now causing confusion. Do your best to clear the air of any misconceptions.

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

You're anxious to make a bold move toward the love of your life, Scorpio. Love and romance are most certainly in your favor right now. It isn't surprising that you feel brave. Be careful, however, about getting so carried away with your self-assurance that you distort the truth of the situation. There's an element of fantasy operating that's making it difficult for you to see the whole picture.

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

Although you generally like to keep both feet on the ground and proceed in a stable, organized manner, Sagittarius, there's a strong force encouraging you to spread your wings. Incorporate more fantasy into your day, and practice the art of dreaming. Liberate yourself from reality for a while and feel the weight lifted from your shoulders. Let your imagination run wild. This will bring a greater sense of balance to your life.

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

You might be pegged as the wise guy who's unable to take anything seriously, Capricorn. Regardless of the situation, you can turn it into a joke of some sort. Your humor likely lifts the spirits of everyone around you. Be careful of taking this too far, however. There could be some people who are uncomfortable with your constant jesting. Let them know that you do have a serious side, too.

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

One whiff of a familiar scent is likely to send your imagination running wild, Aquarius. Perhaps you're suddenly transported back to when you were dating someone you adored. Once your imagination starts running, it could be difficult to slow it down. Your fantasy world is likely to be the safest place to hide, so don't worry about avoiding reality. Keep playing in the past if that's where you'd rather be today.

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

You could come into conflict with someone who has a very inclusive attitude, Pisces. Perhaps he or she encourages a humanistic approach that you find unrealistic and even a bit offputting. State exactly how you feel, but make sure you have the facts to back up your point and prepare for a counter argument. A great deal of fantasy is tossed around as truth, so it's important that you not add to it.

Country Codes

| | | | |
|--------------------------|---------|-----------------------|--------|
| Afghanistan | 0093 | Iran | 0098 |
| Albania | 00355 | Iraq | 00964 |
| Algeria | 00213 | Ireland | 00353 |
| Andorra | 00376 | Italy | 0039 |
| Angola | 00244 | Ivory Coast | 00225 |
| Anguilla | 001264 | Jamaica | 001876 |
| Antigua | 001268 | Japan | 0081 |
| Argentina | 0054 | Jordan | 00962 |
| Armenia | 00374 | Kazakhstan | 007 |
| Australia | 0061 | Kenya | 00254 |
| Austria | 0043 | Kiribati | 00686 |
| Bahamas | 001242 | Kuwait | 00965 |
| Bahrain | 00973 | Kyrgyzstan | 00996 |
| Bangladesh | 00880 | Laos | 00856 |
| Barbados | 001246 | Latvia | 00371 |
| Belarus | 00375 | Lebanon | 00961 |
| Belgium | 0032 | Liberia | 00231 |
| Belize | 00501 | Libya | 00218 |
| Benin | 00229 | Lithuania | 00370 |
| Bermuda | 001441 | Luxembourg | 00352 |
| Bhutan | 00975 | Macau | 00853 |
| Bolivia | 00591 | Macedonia | 00389 |
| Bosnia | 00387 | Madagascar | 00261 |
| Botswana | 00267 | Majorca | 0034 |
| Brazil | 0055 | Malawi | 00265 |
| Brunei | 00673 | Malaysia | 0060 |
| Bulgaria | 00359 | Maldives | 00960 |
| Burkina | 00226 | Mali | 00223 |
| Burundi | 00257 | Malta | 00356 |
| Cambodia | 00855 | Marshall Islands | 00692 |
| Cameroon | 00237 | Martinique | 00596 |
| Canada | 001 | Mauritania | 00222 |
| Cape Verde | 00238 | Mauritius | 00230 |
| Cayman Islands | 001345 | Mayotte | 00269 |
| Central African Republic | 00236 | Mexico | 0052 |
| Chad | 00235 | Micronesia | 00691 |
| Chile | 0056 | Moldova | 00373 |
| China | 0086 | Monaco | 00377 |
| Colombia | 0057 | Mongolia | 00976 |
| Comoros | 00269 | Montserrat | 001664 |
| Congo | 00242 | Morocco | 00212 |
| Cook Islands | 00682 | Mozambique | 00258 |
| Costa Rica | 00506 | Myanmar (Burma) | 0095 |
| Croatia | 00385 | Namibia | 00264 |
| Cuba | 0053 | Nepal | 00977 |
| Cyprus | 00357 | Netherlands (Holland) | 0031 |
| Cyprus (Northern) | 0090392 | Netherlands Antilles | 00599 |
| Czech Republic | 00420 | New Caledonia | 00687 |
| Denmark | 0045 | New Zealand | 0064 |
| Diego Garcia | 00246 | Nicaragua | 00505 |
| Djibouti | 00253 | Niger | 00227 |
| Dominica | 001767 | Nigeria | 00234 |
| Dominican Republic | 001809 | Niue | 00683 |
| Ecuador | 00593 | Norfolk Island | 00672 |
| Egypt | 0020 | Northern Ireland (UK) | 0044 |
| El Salvador | 00503 | North Korea | 00850 |
| England (UK) | 0044 | Norway | 0047 |
| Equatorial Guinea | 00240 | Oman | 00968 |
| Eritrea | 00291 | Pakistan | 0092 |
| Estonia | 00372 | Palau | 00680 |
| Ethiopia | 00251 | Panama | 00507 |
| Falkland Islands | 00500 | Papua New Guinea | 00675 |
| Faroe Islands | 00298 | Paraguay | 00595 |
| Fiji | 00679 | Peru | 0051 |
| Finland | 00358 | Philippines | 0063 |
| France | 0033 | Poland | 0048 |
| French Guiana | 00594 | Portugal | 00351 |
| French Polynesia | 00689 | Puerto Rico | 001787 |
| Gabon | 00241 | Qatar | 00974 |
| Gambia | 00220 | Romania | 0040 |
| Georgia | 00995 | Russian Federation | 007 |
| Germany | 0049 | Rwanda | 00250 |
| Ghana | 00233 | Saint Helena | 00290 |
| Gibraltar | 00350 | Saint Kitts | 001869 |
| Greece | 0030 | Saint Lucia | 001758 |
| Greenland | 00299 | Saint Pierre | 00508 |
| Grenada | 001473 | Saint Vincent | 001784 |
| Guadeloupe | 00590 | Samoa US | 00684 |
| Guam | 001671 | Samoa West | 00685 |
| Guatemala | 00502 | San Marino | 00378 |
| Guinea | 00224 | Sao Tome | 00239 |
| Guyana | 00592 | Saudi Arabia | 00966 |
| Haiti | 00509 | Scotland (UK) | 0044 |
| Holland (Netherlands) | 0031 | Senegal | 00221 |
| Honduras | 00504 | Seychelles | 00284 |
| Hong Kong | 00852 | Sierra Leone | 00232 |
| Hungary | 0036 | Singapore | 0065 |
| Ibiza (Spain) | 0034 | Slovakia | 00421 |
| Iceland | 00354 | Slovenia | 00386 |
| India | 0091 | Solomon Islands | 00677 |
| Indian Ocean | 00873 | Somalia | 00252 |
| Indonesia | 0062 | South Africa | 0027 |

Business

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35 Coronavirus threatens revival of Japan's deflationary nemesis



36 Morocco's \$65 million real-estate scandal generates political waves



This file photo shows an Iraqi national flag flying front of excess gas being burnt off, at a pipeline in the newly opened section of the oil refinery of Zubair, southwest of Basra in southern Iraq. As crude prices plunge, Iraq's oil sector is facing a triple threat that has slashed revenues, risks denting production and may spell trouble for future exports. — AFP

Iraq's oil earnings plunge in March

As prices fall, oil giant Iraq faces new threats

BAGHDAD: Iraq's revenues from crude sales dropped by nearly half in March, its oil ministry said Wednesday, as a global price crash stokes fears of collapse for the petrol giant. The second-biggest crude producer in the OPEC oil cartel, Iraq sold 105 million barrels in March, earning \$2.99 billion, according to an oil ministry statement.

In February, it sold fewer barrels — 98.3 million—but earned nearly twice as much at \$5.5 billion.

The difference is due to plummeting prices, with Brent North Sea crude sinking to \$25.11 on Wednesday, the lowest price in 18 years. The slump is due to a price war between major producers Saudi Arabia and Russia, as well as a drop in demand caused by the spread of the

novel coronavirus.

Iraqi oil trades at about \$4 less than the benchmark price, with Oil Minister Thamer Ghadban telling local media this week that his country's crude was selling for \$21 a barrel.

That is worrisome for Iraq, where oil revenues make up more than 90 percent of the state budget in the absence of significant alternative industries. Officials had drafted a 2020 budget based on estimates Iraqi crude would sell for \$56 per barrel. At that rate, Iraq would face a monthly deficit of \$4 billion just to keep the government running and pay salaries to its bloated public sector, the International Energy Agency estimated last month.

Iraqi officials have told AFP they are considering a range of cost-cutting measures to trim

the budget but have yet to finalize their plans.

As crude prices plunge, Iraq's oil sector is facing a triple threat that has slashed revenues, risks denting production and may spell trouble for future exports. So what are the challenges facing the only significant industry in Iraq, as global oil prices fall to around \$25 a barrel?

How will Iraq pay the bills?

The price crash means Iraq's monthly crude revenues were slashed by nearly half from February to just \$2.99 billion in March. The second-biggest crude producer in the OPEC oil cartel, Iraq pays international oil companies (IOCs) about \$3 billion quarterly to extract its crude. With oil so cheap, the government is desperately looking to cut costs and delay payments. Last week, the

Basra Oil Company—the state-owned firm coordinating production in the oil-rich southern province—asked IOCs to accept a delay in six months' worth of payments and cut work budgets by 30 percent, according to letters seen by AFP.

"A delay in first quarter payments is necessary, and we asked for the second quarter just in case," said Khaled Hamza Abbas, BOC's assistant director and a signatory to the letter, telling AFP that oil companies had yet to respond.

But IOCs are already taking independent action, according to internal letters seen by AFP.

Oil superpower ExxonMobil immediately asked sub-contractors to "reduce overall cost" with other firms asking suppliers for discounts. "IOCs are cash-strapped," a source at the main operator in the south told AFP. — AFP

Business

Spain sheds nearly 900,000 jobs since virus lockdown

Number officially registered unemployed in Spain rose to 3.5m in March

MADRID: Spain has shed close to 900,000 jobs, more than half of them temporary, since it went into lockdown in mid-March to fight the coronavirus outbreak, social security data showed yesterday. Spain, which has the world's second highest death toll from the disease after Italy, has banned all but essential outings since March 14. This week it further tightened the lockdown with a ban on all but essential workers leaving home to go to work.

The data showed 898,822 Spaniards have now lost their jobs since the start of the lockdown, including around 550,000 temporary workers. The number of people officially registered as unemployed

in Spain rose to 3.5 million in March, the highest level since April 2017. That data does not include all the new job losses as not all workers officially registered as unemployed. Neither the social security nor the unemployment data include the so-called "ERTE" temporary layoffs, under which companies that face financial difficulties can temporarily suspend a worker's contract.



Many companies, including car plants and other major businesses, have implemented such temporary layoff measures over the past weeks. "It is always a big problem and it is the double challenge we have: to fight the epidemic and to avoid the economic activity being swept away. We will have to work on relaunching the economy once we can get control of the epidemic,"

Transport Minister Jose Luis Abalos told RNE radio.

March is usually a good month for employment in Spain because it marks the start of the holiday season, with many temporary workers finding jobs in particular in the hospitality sector. However hotels,

restaurants and bars are currently shut because of the coronavirus lockdown.

Meanwhile, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said Rome would not nationalize businesses during the coronavirus crisis yesterday as the European Commission's head promised affected countries up to 100 billion euros (\$110 billion), starting with Italy. Conte's pledge in an



TOKYO: SoftBank cited the existence of 'multiple, new, and significant pending criminal and civil investigations' surrounding WeWork and its co-founder Adam Neumann. — AFP

interview with *Il Fatto Quotidiano* newspaper reflects concerns in his ruling coalition government that investors could try to take advantage of collapsing share prices to snap up assets such as banks or insurers.



MADRID: A driver checks a DHL truck parked at an industrial park in Madrid, during a national lockdown to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus. — AFP

Rome has the option of using "golden powers" which give the government the right to veto stake

building in strategic industries and Conte reiterated he would use such instruments, which should also "be strengthened at the European level". At the moment the golden powers apply to companies in the infrastructure, defence, energy and telecoms industries, but Rome is considering extending them to other sectors. — Reuters

SoftBank Group drops \$3bn WeWork tender

TOKYO: Japanese global tech investor SoftBank Group said yesterday it had terminated a tender offer worth up to \$3 billion to acquire shares in US firm WeWork. The company said "certain conditions to the tender offer were not satisfied", but added the decision would have "no impact on WeWork's operations, customers, five-year business and strategic plan, or the vast majority of WeWork's current employees."

The announcement came after reports of a nagging rift between SoftBank Group and WeWork board members over the rescue package for the US-based office-sharing start-up. Among a list of unmet conditions, SoftBank cited "the existence of multiple, new, and significant pending criminal and civil investigations" surrounding WeWork and its co-founder Adam Neumann.

The Japanese conglomerate also pointed to the global impact of the pandemic which is restricting WeWork's operations as well as a lack of the necessary antitrust approvals. On the Tokyo Stock Exchange, SoftBank Group reversed earlier losses to end up 2.53 percent at 3,768 yen.

Rob Townsend, SoftBank Group's senior vice president and chief legal officer,

stressed the company's continued commitment to WeWork. "The tender offer closing was conditioned on the satisfaction of certain closing conditions... Several of those conditions were not met, leaving SoftBank no choice but to terminate the tender offer," he said in a statement.

The decision was yet another dramatic turn of events at troubled WeWork, once hailed as a shining unicorn valued at \$47 billion. The firm quickly lost cash, cancelled its IPO and Neumann was pushed out-albeit with a generous package. The tender offer would have most benefited Neumann, his family, and major institutional stockholders like Benchmark Capital, SoftBank Group said. SoftBank Group has been try-

ing to restore its financial health after booking massive losses related to the performance of some investments including WeWork and Uber.

The company and its Vision Fund have been aggressively buying the world's top tech start-ups, but some have ended up disappointing. They have already committed more than \$14.25 billion to WeWork. Meanwhile, WeWork's office locations have been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic which has triggered lockdowns of major urban districts, including business hubs in New York and California.

Public health measures have kept many workers at home, leaving many of WeWork's office spaces empty. —AFP

Oil rebounds on hopes of US intervention

SINGAPORE: Oil rebounded strongly in Asian trade yesterday on hopes for a US intervention to end a Saudi-Russia price war amid the escalating coronavirus pandemic. Analysts said however the market remained hobbled by low demand because of business shutdowns, the grounding of air travel and other social distancing measures put in place to contain the outbreak.

In afternoon Asian trade, US benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) was trading 7.14 percent higher at \$21.76 a barrel. International benchmark Brent crude advanced 8.21 percent to \$26.77 a barrel. Both benchmarks fell to their lowest levels in 18 years on Monday, with WTI briefly dipping below \$20 a barrel. "Oil prices are higher on news that President (Donald) Trump will hold a round table discussion with the country's top oil executives," said AxiCorp global market strategist Stephen Innes.

The meeting is "presumably to discuss possible coordinated production curtailment measures in an attempt to buy some time for the struggling US shale industry," he said in a note. Innes said that Trump's "acknowledging of the problems in the oil patch is critical" as he could be instrumental in resolving the price war that has led to the supply glut.

Phillip Futures in Singapore said oil prices were also supported by "reports that Russia does not want to boost its crude oil production in the current environment" and traders expecting US shale producers to "come under pressure to cut production". —AFP

Business

Coronavirus threatens revival of Japan's deflationary nemesis

Slumping oil costs, weak demand seen weighing on prices

TOKYO: Years after Japan made a cautious recovery from its long deflationary spell, the world's third-largest economy may be headed back into a cycle of falling prices as the coronavirus threatens a deep downturn and policymakers struggle for options. A return to deflation would be a blow to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has touted an end to stagnation as a key success of his "Abenomics" stimulus policies deployed in December 2012.

Analysts say the threat is real with recent sharp falls in oil costs weighing on inflation, and the pandemic hitting an economy already on the cusp of recession. Yoshiki Shinke, chief economist at Dai-ichi Life Research Institute, expects core consumer prices to start falling from April and quicken the pace of declines toward year-end.

"The immediate hit to inflation will be from slumping oil costs. But prices of other goods could also fall on weak demand as the pandemic hurts wage growth and jobs," he said.

"It's clear the pandemic will lead to a severe economic downturn. That's not good for the price outlook."

Core consumer prices will rise just 0.1 percent year-on-year in the second and third quarters of this year, before sliding 0.4 percent in the

October-December period, a Reuters poll of analysts showed.

Japan's long and troubled relationship with deflation set in after its banking crisis and recession of the 1990s. Decades of weak demand and falling prices entrenched stubborn consumer expectations that made it impossible for businesses to raise costs and forced many into painful discounting, even during later periods of economic growth.

Those price cuts mean firms have less money to spend on wages and equipment, which in turn discourages household consumption. Japan's consumer prices only began to perk up in early 2013 after Abe reinvigorated the economy with radical stimulus that boosted sentiment and jobs. Annual core consumer inflation hit 0.6 percent in February.

But now the pandemic threatens to derail the benefits of those policies by hurting wages, cooling consumption and forcing retailers to consider job cuts. Already, prices of goods such as beef and flowers are sliding as companies are forced to cancel banquets held at the April start of Japan's fiscal year, analysts say. Japan's Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index also showed early signs of deflation. Input prices contracted in March for the first time since 2016

ing, even during later periods of economic growth.

Those price cuts mean firms have less money to spend on wages and equipment, which in turn discourages household consumption. Japan's consumer prices only began to perk up in early 2013 after Abe reinvigorated the economy with radical stimulus that boosted sentiment and jobs. Annual core consumer inflation hit 0.6 percent in February.

Return to deflation will be blow to 'Abenomics'



TOKYO: People walk along a shopping precinct in Tokyo's Ueno district. The world's third-largest economy may be headed back into a cycle of falling prices as the coronavirus threatens a deep downturn and policymakers struggle for options. —AFP

while output charges fell the most in three-and-a-half years, as firms passed through lower raw material costs to clients. Policymakers, who up until now had debated when to officially declare victory in the war against deflation, now privately fret over the risk of a return to sustained price falls.

"Our concern is that Japan may return to deflation. We can't count on wage growth because the question now is how to prevent job losses," a government official said. "Consumer prices may

start to fall. It's not definite but there's a risk." That view was echoed by a person familiar with central bank thinking, who warned of the risk of cooling business and household sentiment. Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak publicly. Unlike during the global financial crisis, Japanese policymakers must combat the risks with an almost empty tool-kit. Abe said on Wednesday the government would take necessary steps to ensure the country did not return to deflation. —Reuters

Coronavirus halts UK's housing market recovery

LONDON: Britain's housing market is grinding to a halt after the government's shutdown of much of the economy, cutting short a nascent recovery that saw prices rise at their strongest pace in more than two years in March, mortgage lender Nationwide said.

Prices grew by 3.0 percent compared with March 2019, Nationwide said, their biggest rise since January 2018 and stronger than a median forecast for a 2.0 percent increase in a Reuters poll of economists. "It is important to note that, while we use a full month's worth of data to generate the index, the cut-off point is slightly before the end of the month," said Robert Gardner, Nationwide's chief economist. "This means that developments following the UK government's lockdown will not be reflected in these figures."

As well ordering many companies to shut to slow the spread of coronavirus, the government has urged people to avoid moving house during the outbreak. "A lack of transactions will make gauging house price trends difficult in the coming months," Gardner said. "The medium-term outlook for the housing market is also highly uncertain, where much will depend on the performance of the wider economy." —Reuters

US trade watchdog sues over \$13bn Altria-Juul vaping deal

NEW YORK: The US trade watchdog said Wednesday it had sued Altria and Juul over a \$12.8 billion e-cigarette deal which allegedly breached antitrust laws. According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the companies made a string of agreements that eliminated competition surrounding tobacco giant Altria's acquisition of a 35 percent stake in Juul, the once high-flying vaping brand.

"For several years, Altria and Juul were competitors in the market for closed-system e-cigarettes," the FTC said in a statement announcing it had filed an administrative complaint against the pair.

"By the end of 2018, Altria orchestrated its exit from the e-cigarette market and became Juul's largest investor," added Ian Conner, from the FTC's bureau of competition.

"Altria and Juul turned from competitors to collaborators by eliminating competition and sharing in Juul's profits." In late January, Altria, the owner of Marlboro and other leading cigarette brands, slashed the value of its stake in Juul as the e-cigarette company faced lawsuits and a regulatory crackdown.

Altria announced the \$4.1 billion write-down on its Juul investment, which followed a similar move in October that whacked \$4.5 billion off the value on its books.

The tobacco giant announced the \$12.8 billion deal for a 35 percent stake in Juul in December 2018, a time when Juul's e-cigarette business was seen as a promising venture to counter weak demand for traditional tobacco products. But last year, Washington DC and the state governments of California and New York all sued Juul for targeting youngsters with its marketing campaigns.

Vaping came under additional scrutiny last year because of a health scare over cases of severe and sometimes deadly lung ailments, although that was later linked to a substance used in cannabis products. The FTC alleged that as competitors, Altria and Juul monitored each other's e-cigarette prices closely and raced to innovate.

According to the watchdog, Altria also leveraged its ownership of leading brands across tobacco categories to secure favorable shelf space at retailers throughout the United States.

Altria said it would defend the Juul deal. "We believe that our investment in Juul does not harm competition and that the FTC misunderstood the facts," Murray Garnick, Altria's Executive Vice President and General Counsel, said in a statement on the company's website.

"We are disappointed with the FTC's decision, believe we have a strong defense and will vigorously defend our investment." —AFP

Business

Morocco's \$65 million real-estate scandal generates political waves

New twist to property scam as home-buyers demand money back



CASABLANCA: A man wearing a vest and hat showing the Moroccan national flag and with the Arabic slogan "long live the King, down with the real estate mafia", holds up a sign reading "you are associates not victims", while attending a demonstration on a plot of land against the "Bab Darna" real estate group in Casablanca. —AFP



CASABLANCA: A woman wearing a vest with the Arabic slogan "long live the King, down with the real estate mafia", chants slogans during a demonstration on a plot of land against the "Bab Darna" real estate group in Casablanca. —AFP

CASABLANCA: "Give us our money!", demands a group of home buyers, standing on land that should by now be finished condos—one of many fictitious projects that together comprise what is described as Morocco's biggest-ever property scam. Adverts on state television had promised dream homes at three for the price of two, while brochures boasted of ornately carved wood finishings and copious marble.

But it was all a fantasy—more than 600 million dirhams (about 57 million euros, \$65 million) allegedly disappeared, leaving more than 1,000 buyers out-of-pocket, according to one of the lawyers representing them.

In a country where corruption is endemic, the unprecedented scale of the alleged fraud has generated political waves. Called upon by deputies to address the issue in parliament, Prime Minister Saad Eddine El Othmani said the government was absolved of any blame, provoking indignation among defrauded investors who have appealed to King Mohammed VI.

The man accused of being at the forefront of the scheme has been charged and is in detention awaiting trial.

But the vast scam has prompted major questions about alleged negligence and complicity of some Moroccan institutions. Mohamed el Ouardi, as head of the Bab Darna group, allegedly received advances for apartments that never made it beyond the paper they were drawn on.

"The swimming pool would have been just over there," scoffs would-be apartment owner Soufiane, aged in his 40s, as he points across a building site in the commercial capital Casablanca.

Bab Darna consists of a group of firms that cashed advances from "at least 1,000 victims" who invested in around 15 fictitious real-estate projects in and around Casablanca over a decade, Mourad el Ajouti, one of the lawyers for

the investors, told AFP.

The money was allegedly embezzled by cashing "advances ranging from 20 percent" to the full cost of the apartment, he added.

'Who protected him?'

Houria, 49, who works in e-commerce, said "highly persuasive sales agents" proffered a golden opportunity and swayed her into advancing 400,000 dirhams; 20 percent of the cost of a villa. But the vendor "had neither the title deed nor construction permit", el Ajouti said; basic requirements lacking in all contracts signed by the investors.

Such practices did not prevent Bab Darna from exhibiting with great fanfare at real-estate shows in Casablanca, Paris and Brussels.

"The authorities were not aware (of el Ouardi's activities)?" asked Houria, dumbfounded.

"Who protected him?"

She, like other victims that AFP spoke to, did not want their full names published. El Ouardi, 59, is described as a smooth salesman who carved a path through the real-estate jungle.

But in November, with nothing to show for their investments, angry customers went round to his home. When cheques for reimbursements that they say he penned personally bounced, their patience finally ran out and they hauled him to the police station.

He is currently awaiting trial with six alleged accomplices—his finance manager, the notary and sales agents. A trial date has not yet been set, but the suspects face between 10 and 20 years in prison for fraud or complicity in fraud.

'Persuasive'

Many of the victims come from Morocco's diaspora, who number several million and often invest in property back home. "I left Morocco to escape corruption and nepotism, but these things have entrapped me once more," lamented another victim Youssef, 36, who lives in Japan and is self-employed.

Sifeddine, an entrepreneur living in Argentina, reserved an apartment thanks to a brochure promoting modern buildings covered in ivy, alongside elegant palm trees shading a turquoise pool. The TV adverts, broadcast during primetime hours and using famous actors, reassured him. "El Ouardi received me at his villa and was very persuasive, in front of a notary and agent," he said.

"It was 10:00 pm, the sub-municipality's office was opened specially at his request to sign the contract; he must have greased a lot of palms," Sifeddine alleged. Jalal, a salesman in his 40s of dual French-Moroccan nationality, took the plunge in 2018 when he visited a Moroccan real-estate show in Paris.

Bab Darna "had one of the best stands" at the show, known as Smap Immo, he said. He came back to Morocco to sign the deal, and took the presence of a notary and registration of the contract at a sub-municipality office as guarantees of legitimacy.

'Hotbed of corruption'

El Ajouti views the scandal as a collective failure of multiple institutions. "Authorities within the planning ministry, the town council, the urban agency" should all shoulder shares of the blame, he said.

He also criticized officials from the real-estate show, who, he said, should have scrutinized ex-

hibitors' credibility. Smap Immo, which rejects it is in any way responsible for the scandal, has itself filed a complaint against Bab Darna for fraud and harming the exhibition's reputation.

Real estate is among the sectors most affected by corruption in Morocco, according to the head of Transparency Maroc, a local anti-graft advocacy group. The sector is "a hotbed of corruption, conflicts of interest and insider trading between landowners, local authorities and urban agencies", Ahmed Bernoussi said. One Moroccan architect, who did not want to give his name, said "agents work hand-in-hand with elected officials, who often themselves become real-estate developers."

Bernoussi points to the recent sentencing of a former head of a southern Marrakesh urban planning department to 10 years in prison for demanding bribes in return for speeding up the granting of permits. Nevertheless, the Bab Darna affair has "dealt a strong blow to the credibility of the sector", Anis Benjelloun, vice-president of Morocco's federation of real-estate agents, said.

"The federation has repeatedly deplored this sort of practice," he added, describing the affair as "a scam permitted by a flawed system." So will it lead to change to give more protection to home buyers in future? Contacted by AFP, Nezha Bouchareb, Morocco's minister of urban planning and housing, acknowledged "dysfunctions and illegal practices".

"We must strengthen our efforts to correct them," she said. Sales based solely on paper plans regularly give rise to scandal in Morocco, ranging from apartments that do not match brochures' promises to major delays in construction.

The sector is regulated by a 2002 law, which was amended in 2016 — but a decree needed to implement that overhaul is still pending. That decree is "in the process of being finalized", Bouchareb said. —AFP



More than 1,000 buyers rendered out-of-pocket

Wimbledon cancelled for the first time since WWII

Tennis stars left devastated

LONDON: Roger Federer and Serena Williams were among the tennis stars left devastated on Wednesday as Wimbledon was cancelled for the first time since World War II due to the coronavirus. The cancellation of the oldest Grand Slam tournament at London's All England Club leaves the season in disarray, with no tennis set to be played until mid-July.

"Devastated," tweeted eight-time champion Federer, while Serena, who has won the tournament seven times, said she was shocked by the momentous decision. Wimbledon was due to run for two weeks from June 29, with Novak Djokovic and Simona Halep set to defend their singles titles. But tournament chiefs bowed to the inevitable on Wednesday, saying in a statement that they had made the decision with "great regret".

US tennis chiefs responded by saying the US Open, due to finish a week before the controversially rearranged French Open, was still due to take place as planned. All England Club chairman Ian Hewitt said the decision to cancel Wimbledon had not been taken lightly. "It has weighed heavily on our minds that the staging of The Championships has only been interrupted previously by world wars," he said.

"But, following thorough and extensive consideration of all scenarios, we believe that it is a measure of this global crisis that it is ultimately

the right decision to cancel this year's Championships." Halep tweeted her disappointment. "So sad to hear @Wimbledon won't take place this year," she said. "Last year's final will forever be one of the happiest days of my life! But we are going through something bigger than tennis and Wimbledon will be back! And it means I have even longer to look forward to defending my title." Two-time Wimbledon champion Andy Murray added: "Very sad that Wimbledon has been cancelled this year but with all that is going on in the world right now, everyone's health is definitely the most important thing!" The decision to cancel Wimbledon was widely expected, with the world struggling to contain the spread of COVID-19, which has claimed more than 43,000 lives and infected more than 860,000 people, according to an AFP tally.

'I'm going to miss it'

Organizers had earlier ruled out playing the event behind closed doors while postponing it would also have created its own problems, with shorter days later in the English summer. The ATP and WTA have also cancelled the grass-court swing in the build-up to the tournament, meaning the tennis season will not now restart until July 13 at the earliest. The US Tennis Association said it was sticking to its August 31 to September 13 dates for the US Open in New



LONDON: In this file photo, a Wimbledon logo is seen at The All England Tennis Club in Wimbledon, southwest London. The 2020 Wimbledon Championships has been cancelled for the first time since World War II due to the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

York. "At this time the USTA still plans to host the US Open as scheduled, and we continue to hone plans to stage the tournament," it said in a statement. "The USTA is carefully monitoring the rapidly changing environment surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, and is preparing for all contingencies." American legend Billie-Jean King, a six-time Wimbledon women's singles

champion, said cancelling the tournament was the only option in the circumstances.

"I fully understand and support the decision of the committee and it is vital we keep our focus on those most impacted by this pandemic," she said. "I have been fortunate to go to Wimbledon every year since 1961 and I am certainly going to miss it this year.—AFP

Indian cricketers face backlash for supporting Pakistan Covid-19 fund

NEW DELHI: Indian cricketers Yuvraj Singh and Harbhajan Singh have unleashed a social media storm by backing former Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi's foundation in its fight against the coronavirus pandemic. The two countries are bitter rivals and the move touched a raw nerve in India. Afridi's appeal for donations to help people affected by the deadly virus in Pakistan has had overwhelming support from leading cricketers. Harbhajan urged people to contribute in a video message, and called on other cricketers in the two countries to make similar appeals. "These are testing times, it's time to look out for each other," Yuvraj wrote on Twitter in a call for funds.

While Afridi thanked the two, Indian Twitter users reacted with fury at the support for a rival player who has been a vocal critic of India's handling of the Kashmir dispute. "Do you have any sense?" wrote one Twitter user. "Lost respect" for Harbhajan Singh, added another. "Sorry guys you lost it." World Cup-winning batsman Yuvraj, who made a return from cancer before finally retiring last year,

hit back at his trolls with a message. "I really don't understand how a message to help the most vulnerable gets blown out of proportion!," he wrote.

"All I tried to achieve via that message was to help people in our respective countries by providing healthcare, my intention was not to hurt anyone's feelings. I'm an Indian and will always bleed blue and will always stand for humanity." India and Pakistan have not played a bilateral cricket series since 2012-2013 and have seen a new peak in tensions over Kashmir, which has been at the centre of two wars between the neighbors since 1947.

Kashmir has been divided between the two since their independence seven decades ago and India frequently accuses Pakistan of organizing "terrorism" on its side of the border. The 38-year-old Yuvraj has also raised money to fight coronavirus through his 'YouWeCan' foundation. India, which has been under a 21-day lockdown since March 24, has so far confirmed more than 1,600 coronavirus cases and 38 deaths.—AFP

English cricket chief takes 25 percent pay cut in virus response

LONDON: England and Wales Cricket Board chief executive Tom Harrison "volunteered" on Wednesday to take the same 25 per cent pay cut as other employees in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. On Tuesday, when Harrison unveiled the ECB's £61 million (\$76 million) aid package in response to the "once in a generation" challenge of COVID-19 he said he would take a pay cut. On Wednesday, the ECB unveiled the details.

"Proposed cuts will vary according to the employee's job grade, ranging from 25 percent to 10 percent," said an ECB statement that added they would consult staff on plans to reduce all employees' salaries for two months. "The executive management team and board will receive a salary reduction of 20 percent, while chief executive officer Tom Harrison has volunteered a 25 percent reduction." Harrison an annual salary of some £720,000 (\$892,000).

Some staff will be "asked to consent" to being placed on the furlough scheme that will see the UK government pay as much as 80 percent of their salary up to £2,500 per month, with the ECB paying the additional 20 percent of the reduced salary. Meanwhile the ECB will freeze recruitment in 2020 for all but "critical roles" should an employee leave the board. "Yesterday

(Tuesday), we rolled out an interim financial package which is fundamental to ensuring the short-term survival of the professional and recreational cricket network," said Harrison.

"Today, we have made a difficult but important announcement to cut central costs through a number of measures — all with a desire to protect jobs in the long-term and ensure we are better prepared to weather the storm ahead." Harrison said Tuesday there were no plans to enforce a pay cut on leading England players, with the start of the domestic season delayed until at least May 28 and doubt over the future of lucrative tours by the West Indies, Pakistan and Australia.

But the ESPNcricinfo website reported he had written to the chief executive of England's Professional Cricketers Association to suggest centrally contracted stars such as Test skipper Joe Root and all-rounder Ben Stokes volunteer to accept a cut of some 20 percent. It appears the players have yet to be contacted directly. World Cup-winning captain Eoin Morgan, asked earlier on Wednesday if he would accept a pay cut, said: "I'm extremely willing to help where I know it will make a difference...I'm open to absolutely everything."—AFP

Sports

Olympic sports fret over lost Games income amid pandemic

Coronavirus to hit international sports federations hard

LAUSANNE: The postponement of the Tokyo Olympics and the shutdown of the sporting calendar because of the coronavirus pandemic are going to hit international sports federations hard financially. Many sports that are part of the Games depend heavily on the payouts every four years from the International Olympic Committee (IOC). "The situation is tense and very gloomy. An assessment will be made, but clearly some posts are under threat," said an official of a major international federation. The 28 international federations (IF) of the sports that were due to be present at the Tokyo Olympics, would have received substantial sums from the IOC.

However, the postponement of the Games until 2021 could lead to a freeze of their payment. "We have a lot of IF with substantial reserves, but others work on a different business model, they have income from major events which are suspended, which can be a problem for the cashflow if they don't have enough re-

serves," said Andrew Ryan, director general of the Association of International Olympic Summer Sports Federations (ASOIF), which is responsible for distributing this money.

The five additions to the Tokyo Games program - karate, surfing, skateboarding, climbing and baseball/softball - are not eligible. The Olympic payout totaled \$520 million after the Rio Games, four years ago. "The Olympic money could be less than for Rio 2016," Ryan warned before adding: "My advice is to budget the same as in Rio".

The federations receive money on a sliding scale determined by their audience and size. The three largest (athletics, swimming and gymnastics) can expect approximately \$40 million. For the second tier, made up of cycling, basketball, volleyball, football and tennis, the sum is \$25 million. For group three, which contains eight sports, including boxing, rowing, judo and table tennis, it is \$17 million. The nine sports in the next level (including sailing,

canoeing and fencing) receive \$12 million. For the three in the last category (rugby, golf, modern pentathlon) the payout is \$7 million.

For the largest associations, such as football's FIFA which has a \$1.5 billion nest egg, or basketball body FIBA which has CHF 44.4 million (42 million euros) in reserves, IOC aid represents a small proportion of their income. For others, it is vital. "Some IF probably don't have the cashflow to survive one year," said Ryan. For most federations, the postponement of the Olympic Games has a domino effect, forcing them to reschedule their own money-earning competitions. "The revenues from these events will eventually come in," said Ryan. "But this impacts the cashflow." World Athletics has already postponed the 2021 World Championships in Eugene, Oregon to 2022. The International Swimming Federation (FINA) will have to do the same for its World Championships scheduled for next summer in Fukuoka, Japan, when they would probably clash with the Tokyo Games.—AFP



NARAHANA: The Olympic Flame is displayed at the J-Village National Training Centre in Naraha, Fukushima Prefecture yesterday. —AFP

NBA Lakers, Nets symptom free after 14-day isolations

NEW YORK: The Brooklyn Nets and Los Angeles Lakers have completed 14-day home isolations without any players showing symptoms of coronavirus, the NBA clubs said on Wednesday. The clubs intend to continue to follow safety guidelines set by health and government officials regarding social distance and sheltering in place.

Nets general manager Sean Marks, the first New Zealand-born player in the NBA, said the four Nets players who had tested positive for the virus, reportedly including superstar forward Kevin Durant, now show no symptoms of COVID-19. The entire travel group for the Nets has completed isolation after learning March

17 that a player was showing coronavirus symptoms. Durant has not played a game for the Nets due to a ruptured Achilles tendon suffered in last June's NBA Finals while with Golden State.

Kyrie Irving played only 20 games for Brooklyn before calling it quits for the season due to a shoulder injury. But with the NBA season shut down and playoffs potentially pushed back into August, they might both be recovered enough to play in post-season games if they are played. "I don't think it's fair to those athletes nor the performance team to put a timeline on it," Marks said. "I think everyone is dealing with bigger, far more pressing things." All team practice facilities have been closed due to the outbreak.

"Just by getting time off, yes, does that make your body heal and so forth? But there were several of our players that need the facilities, need game reps, need to be playing," Marks said. "You could take the other side of this and say that this hiatus has set their rehabilitation back and it has slowed them." Marks and other Nets personnel are only seeing players from a distance. "They know their bodies better than anyone else, so at the right time and when they are 100% and they are up for it, I'm sure they will be making those decisions."—AFP

continental championship, which was expanded to 24 teams for the 2019 edition in the United Arab Emirates. In the light of the coronavirus pandemic, however, the AFC has decided to extend the deadline for expressions of interest from March 31 to June 30.

"The decision was taken in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic to allow member associations, many of whom have been affected by the global outbreak, sufficient time to meet their internal processes and timelines," the AFC said in a statement. Saudi Arabia, who have won the continental title three times but never hosted the tournament, are the only nation to have publicly announced their intention to launch a bid for 2027. The next Asian Cup in 2023 will be staged in 10 cities in China, the second time the East Asian nation has hosted the tournament after 2004.—Reuters

Potential bidders for 2027 Asian Cup get more time

KUALA LUMPUR: Nations considering bids to host the 2027 Asian Cup have been given an extra three months to lodge expressions of interest due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said yesterday. The AFC had hoped to announce the tournament hosts as soon as possible to give them more time to prepare for the quadrennial

No games, no cash: French broadcaster tells league

PARIS: A second French broadcaster, BeIN has suspended the payment of TV rights for French league because it has no games to air due to the coronavirus pandemic. BeIN made clear it was not going to pay the next instalment of its contract in a letter to the French league (LFP) seen by AFP on Wednesday. Canal+, which pays more to show more matches, had already said it would not pay its next instalment.

BeIN and league leaders Paris Saint-Germain are both Qatari-owned and are run by the same man, Nasser Al-Khelaifi. "Our group has taken the decision to suspend the next payments provided for in our agreement until Ligue 1 and Ligue 2 can resume according to a schedule that allows their normal broadcasting to our subscribers," the BeIN director general Yousef Al-Obaidly wrote in the letter to the LFP.

The league told AFP that it "confirms BeIN's letter" but would make "no further comment". Al-Obaidly told AFP that he was available to discuss "safeguards put in place by the League for the continuation of the current league and the resumption of next season". BeIN was due to make a payment of 42 million euros on April 5. Canal+ told AFP on Monday that it would not honor the next payment of the TV rights.

"When matches are no longer delivered, payments are suspended," an executive at Canal+ told AFP. "Canal+ is not a bank." The next payments from Canal+ and BeIN are due in June. The LFP says Canal+ was already 43 million euros behind in payments. TV rights made up 36 percent of the total income of Ligue 1 clubs in 2018-2019. From next season, Spanish group Mediapro will take over the bulk of the LFP rights. BeIN has sold its smaller slice to Canal+, which missed out in the original bidding.—AFP

Sports

COVID-19 pause could force global football to change

Sudden interruption exposes deficiencies of the system

PARIS: Football has ground to a halt due to the (COVID-19) coronavirus pandemic, and the immediate concern is the simple survival of many clubs because of the financial impact, but there is hope that the global game could ultimately emerge better from this crisis. “We are living through something none of us were used to and which will change us profoundly,” Everton manager Carlo Ancelotti told *Corriere dello Sport*.

Not since World War II has the sport been forced to stop across Europe. The sudden interruption has exposed the deficiencies of a system intoxicated by huge sums of money. Cutbacks are inevitable in the short term. “TV money will go down, players and coaches will earn less. Tickets will cost less because people will have less money. The economy will be different and so will football. Maybe it will be better,” said Ancelotti. “As with most things, crisis is an opportunity,” football historian and aca-

dem David Goldblatt, author of recent book *The Age of Football*, told AFP, before sounding a warning.

“It could actually get worse. For there to be real change there has to be a change in the way power and ownership is distributed in the game.” At the moment the financial power belongs to the lucky few at the top, but even they are being hurt. That is likely to affect the transfer market, and huge spending sprees on players could become a thing of the past.

“In two or three years, it will not be possible to spend the sums we have been seeing because every country will be affected. In all likelihood a new footballing world will emerge from this,” insisted former Bayern Munich president Uli Hoeness. Already players at Barcelona - the richest club in the world - have agreed a 70 percent pay cut. Clubs across Europe are taking similar measures.

It is evidence that clubs, even in the elite,

have been living on the edge, and it raises the question of whether salary caps could finally be seen as a way forward, despite the difficulties presented by EU rules. In Germany, the Bundesliga’s four Champions League representatives this season have pledged 20 million euros (\$22 million) to help crisis-hit clubs in an encouraging sign of solidarity. Meanwhile, lessons may also be learned about how TV revenue is distributed in future.

Fewer games

It may also be time to rework the fixture calendar. The fashion for expanding existing tournaments - like staging a 48-team World Cup and 24-team Club World Cup - is surely not sustainable. “It is now high time that we find some rules to say ok, let’s get out of this crisis as well as we can, but let’s also put safeguards in that manage player loads successfully moving forward,” warned Jonas Baer-Hoffmann,

general secretary of global players’ union FIF-Pro, as he called for “a much healthier set-up than we what have had lately.”

FIFA president Gianni Infantino has acknowledged the calls for change, telling *La Gazzetta dello Sport* that “we can perhaps reform world football by taking a step back. With different formats. Fewer tournaments, maybe fewer teams, but more balanced.” Goldblatt, meanwhile, believes FIFA need to look again at plans to stage a 48-team World Cup in 2026 all across North America.

That, and the European Championship that UEFA intend to stage in 12 cities across the continent, are being planned in ways which appear at odds with the need to face up to another imminent threat: climate change. “If we have learned anything from the last couple of months it is that we should listen to the scientists,” Goldblatt says. “We need to hit the pause button on all of this and have a massive rethink.”—AFP

Sports icon’s death awakens Senegal to coronavirus threat

DAKAR: Senegal is in mourning following the death of one of its foremost sporting icons from coronavirus, as the government struggles to impose health restrictions in the West African state. Former Olympique de Marseille president Pape Diouf died late Tuesday aged 68 in the capital Dakar after contracting COVID-19.

The first ever black president of a top European football club, a onetime journalist, was idolised in his native Senegal. Diouf was the first to die from coronavirus in the country. His death was a wake-up call. Adama Ndioune, vice president of an Olympique de Marseille fan club in Senegal, said he had “spilled a lot of tears” over his hero’s death. “He was a Senegalese, a perfect example of success in everything he did, an example for us,” Ndioune said.

Tributes have poured in for Diouf from Senegalese dignitaries, with President Macky Sall calling him an “eminence grise of football” and the singer Youssou Ndiour saying he was a “formidable and multi-dimensional man”. Diouf’s death has put a human face on what has tended to be a distant concern in Senegal. The former French colony has recorded 190 coronavirus infections to date, and as in other poor African states, there are fears that the government is ill-equipped for a large outbreak.

Last week, Sall announced a state of emergency in order to curb coronavirus, imposing a dusk-to-dawn curfew. He has also banned large gatherings, mosque prayers and shut schools. But the government has struggled to enforce some of these measures, with police sometimes having to disperse



MARSEILLE: This file photo shows former president of Marseille football club ‘l’Olympique de Marseille’ Pape Diouf. Pape Diouf, 68-year-old died after contracting the COVID-19 disease, his family announced on March 31, 2020. — AFP

crowds of worshippers. Senegalese are debating whether the government should impose stricter measures as the virus spreads, even though many workers in the informal sector are suffering as sales plummet.

Local government officials, such as the mayor of Dakar’s working-class Medina district, complain about widespread disregard for the anti-virus measures. “Pape’s death raises awareness through its strong resonance,” psychologist Serigne Mor Mbaye was quoted as saying in local media. “We saw him as omnipotent, at an inaccessible level,” he added. Adama Ndioune, of the Marseille fan club, said people had not wanted to believe in the threat posed by coronavirus, but would now start to fear it.—AFP

Premier League accused of ‘moral vacuum’ as clubs cut staff wages

LONDON: Premier League clubs have been accused of living in a “moral vacuum”, with players urged to take their share of the financial hit from the coronavirus pandemic as non-playing staff begin to feel the pinch. Last year’s Champions League finalists Tottenham, as well as Newcastle and Norwich, have faced a backlash for using the British government’s furlough scheme, which will guarantee 80 percent of employees’ income up to a maximum of £2,500 (\$3,000) a month.

“It sticks in the throat,” said lawmaker Julian Knight, who chairs the Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, referring to the use of public funds to prop up wage bills. “This exposes the crazy economics in English football and the moral vacuum at its centre.”

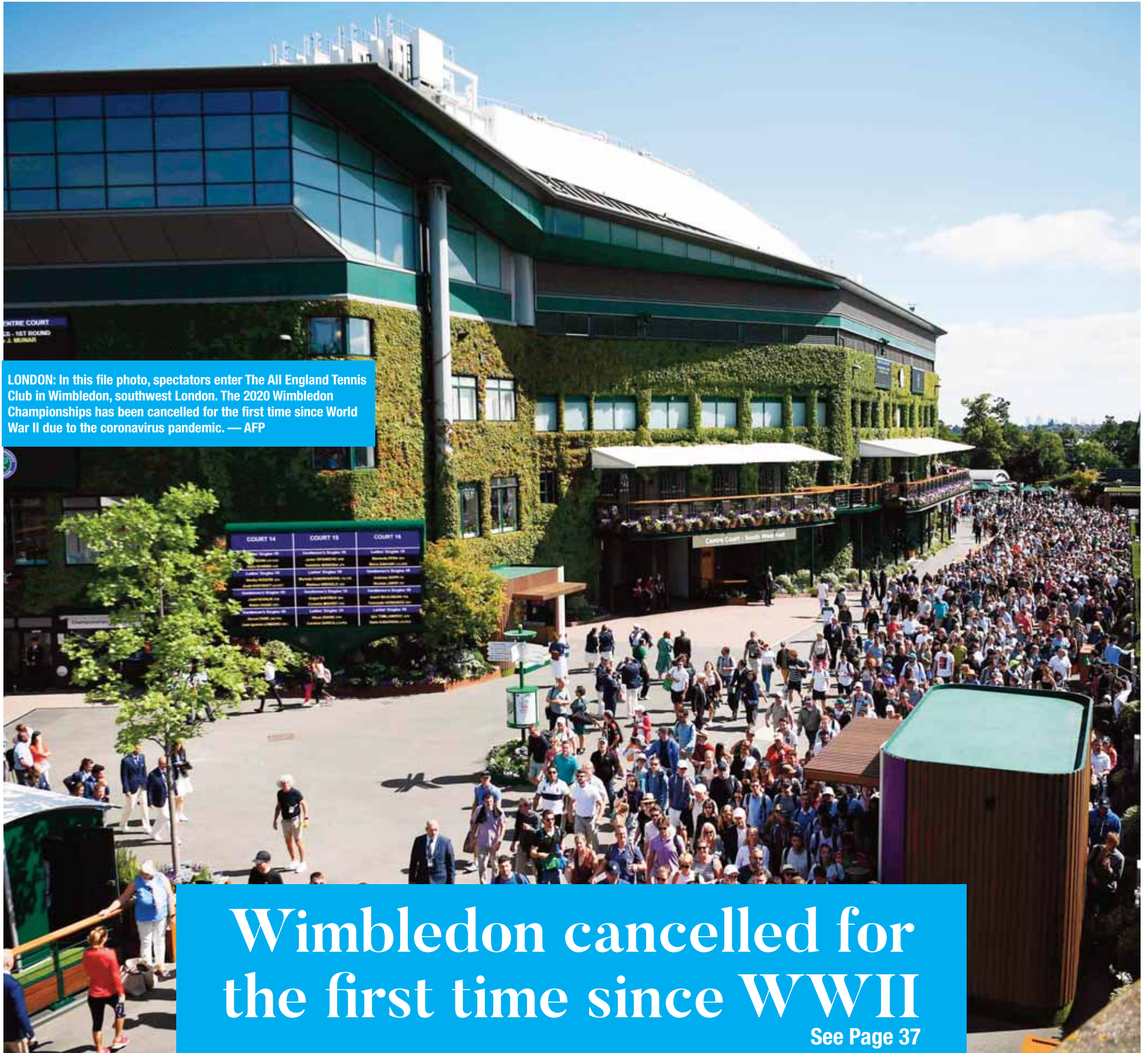
That £2,500 sum would be a drop in the ocean for many Premier League stars, yet there has so far been no agreement on wage cuts or deferrals for players, unlike the situation at other top European clubs such as Juventus and Barcelona. Tottenham chairman Daniel Levy said he hoped discussions between the Premier League and players’ and managers’ representatives would “result in players and coaches doing their bit for the football eco-system”.

However, a joint meeting between the Premier League, English Football League, Professional Footballers’ Association and League Managers Association on Wednesday failed to reach an agreement.—AFP

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LONDON: In this file photo, spectators enter The All England Tennis Club in Wimbledon, southwest London. The 2020 Wimbledon Championships has been cancelled for the first time since World War II due to the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

Wimbledon cancelled for the first time since WWII
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